

THE CORN "FIESTA"

We are in Mexico, in the northern sierra in the state of Puebla.

The Totonac people of Tepetzintla live on corn. Each year, to insure good crops, a corn "fiesta" lasting several days must be celebrated.

As in every "fiesta" food is consumed in vast amounts; and, of course, the food is first prepared in the kitchen.

In the meantime, small ritual figures are also made.

Four wise old women, healers and soothsayers, will be in charge of most of the ceremonies.

In the church, conversation with God comes first, He who gives us light and the warmth from the sun, and also with St. James, the leader of His armies.

Permission is asked from them to take out the two sacred drums kept in the church.

The figures are arranged on the floor facing the Altar; they will receive the offerings and will be in charge of transmitting the petitions.

The smoke from the incense is gratifying to the good spirits.

Each participant carries an offering, which can be a chick, a hen or a turkey, whose blood will be sprinkled over the figures.

But the offering will not be accepted unless the donor is previously purified; to that end, she is subjected to a cleansing ritual with her own bird, which will absorb all her impurities.

The spirits of nature above all demand blood, which is the source of life.

The two sacred drums, male and female, are dressed with a cloth and receive offerings before being taken to the site of the "fiesta".

Then begins the dancing, which is as essential as the prayers and offerings.

Small bundles are made with the bloodied figures, which later on are buried around the church.

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All participants partake of a ritual meal.

After the last dance, long prayers in Totonac are conducted in front of the Altar.

The Corn "fiesta" will last for another three days and a night.

(Second day)

The following day the house and hearth of the "mayordomo", the person in charge of the "fiesta", must be hallowed before the two sacred drums are taken there. The "mayordomo" himself prepares the flower bouquets of marigolds and corn husks.

More ritual figures are made from ^{small} pieces of pine wood to fashion the body.

Their hearts are made with a grain of copal resin, and the lot is tied with strips of "amate", wild fig tree bark, representing the limbs.

An offering is first presented to the fire in the hearth, which is the soul of the house.

Libations with spirits are made to the fire in the hearth.

Libations are then also made to the embers in the incense burner.

The figures, which must be well counted because they only have power when they are in groups, are placed close to the hearth.

Also a large fragment of ceramic, or sherd, containing flowers and pieces of dried bark is brought in.

Divination takes place by observing grains of incense thrown into water. Thus the spirits of nature are questioned, who reply by accepting the offering.

Little by little, the participants are filling up two big baskets with corn cobs.

This corn, that will be sprinkled with blood, will make the next crop very plentiful.

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Blood is also sprinkled in the water that will be offered to the town's spring.

Before gathering up the offering, the last dance takes place. During the dance a small bundle is discreetly buried in the same place where the big sacred drum will be placed later on. The small bundle contains various figures and a sacrificed chick.

The four old women exit dancing, carrying ritual objects in their hands.

The bark ⁱⁿ on the potsherd is burnt, and the smoke produced rises to heaven with the prayers for the corn.. Meanwhile, they warm their hands with this sacred fire, which will give them strength and skill.

All participants leave on their way to the church, where they will fetch the two drums which now can be installed in the house.

(Night of the second day and third...)

Crisanto tightens the drumhead of the large male drum, that represents the spirit of the village and is the lord of the "fiesta".

The small female drum is a "teponaztli".

The large drum is dressed first, then the two baskets with the corn. On top of the corn designated female, a "quechquemetl", which is a feminine piece of clothing, is placed.

Libations with "tepache", a fermented sugar cane juice, are made to the corn and to the drums.

The two women who initiate the ceremony dance together for a long time; each one holding the ends of a ritual cloth specially woven for such occasions.

A red bandana, a typical element of the male dress, is placed over the basket of male corn.

The figures are placed on the floor again, but this time they should not be less than two hundred.

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The fecundity of all live beings is stimulated by the noise of a rattle.

The spirits of the mountains are called by the sound made by hitting an iron plaque.

Now is the time to find out whether the spirits from the supernatural world are accepting the ceremony.

Patient consultation is undertaken again by throwing incense grains in the clean water of a lacquered bowl.

The two soothsayers deliberate, and finally arrive at the conclusion that the spirits are favorable.

Crisanto talks to the mountains by playing the large male drum.

The molten copal incense runs flaming over the figures.

The blood of the birds is sprinkled over the corn, and then over the two drums.

The female drum, or "teponaztli", is raised to be better sprinkled over.

The bloodied corn is going to be planted and is going to yield a good crop.

The most important rites have now been complied with.

Small bundles are made with the two hundred figures which are then buried in the corn fields. Thus the earth will be more fertile.

The big ceremony ends with the last dance at dawn.

(THE SACRED PYRAMIDS IN THE AFTERNOON OF THE THIRD DAY)

Each native village is identified with its protective mountain. But in Tepetzintla instead of a mountain there are two ruined ancient pyramids, and the lord of these pyramids is the large drum.

Rituals and dances take place at the foot of these artificial mountains, but without bloodshed.

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The female drum, or "teponaztli" is brought on , because it represents the feminine mountains, which are the wives of the lord of the pyramids.

After the meal offered to the pyramids, everybody has to dance, even the "teponaztli", as well as the corn, which is carried in its baskets on their shoulders.

At sunset, dancing goes on all the way home.

(THE FOURTH DAY)

On the last day of the corn "fiesta", everybody eats well in a friendly and joyful atmosphere.

People dance carrying bouquets of flowers and leaves in their hands; a succulent meal is prepared with the sacrificed birds.

On this last day, in deference to the old tradition, the sugar cane spirits are brought in an ancient glazed clay Spanish flagon, ritually used for almost three hundred years.

The men are served a real banquet by the women who have already eaten.

Everybody joins the feast. They dance with the incense burners, with the spirits flagon, with the large potsherd. The hallowed corn also dances to partake of the joyfulness of the whole village.

Alcohol is
The spirits are distributed in lacquered bowls, so that all may partake in the drinking and be happy, like in the time of their ancestors.)

At the end everybody climbs a neighboring mountain named "Tlaloc" to leave the ritual objects, which are still dangerously sacred. (*Indian version*)