Seasons of Ceremonies

RITES AND RITUALS IN GUATEMALA AND MEXICO

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Ted,
Many, many thanks
for your exceptional contributions
to this book. The essay you
co-authored with Frine was
exceptional and added greatly
to this book. I can't thank
you enough!! All the best,
Bill & Anne
01.01.2022

Museum of New Mexico Press
Santa Fe

The Holy Week of Puáaxku jitsé in Santa Teresa

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The spectacular and mysterious festivals of the Indigenous peoples of Mexico and Guatemala have drawn observers for centuries, as they also attract participants themselves, who come in from their homes, outlying hamlets, and even distant cities to celebrate and reconnect. Masked dancers appear out of the mountain mists. The sound of their jingling costumes echoes off courtyard walls. Clacking wooden rattles add earthy undertones. Fireworks explode over enticing food stands. Wooden images of saints appear and disappear, one minute hidden alone in the darkest recesses of the church, the next paraded together into the full light of day. Anthropologists or documentary photographers may also be there, trying to capture an angle, a moment of insight.

But the fiesta keeps moving, circling, adding groups from side streets or shifting its center of gravity from one part of town to the next. The music and drinks thicken with the night. A giant copper cauldron of *atole* (a corn-based beverage) may be stirred by torchlight, while masked dancers hover on the edges of darkness. Every festival is different, but all depend on the spirit and willingness of the local people who make the festivals their own, and use them to move forward from year to year and from one generation to the next.

Among the Náayeri people—also commonly called the Cora people—a mind-bending and visually stunning Easter-time festival has drawn the interest of photographers, journalists, anthropologists, tourists, and many other observers for generations. Interest in the festival by outsiders and by the Náayeri people themselves shows no sign of waning. Despite all this attention, however, the significance of it for the Náayeri people has too often been diluted by imposed agendas and points of view, often having more to do with popular cultural trends than with the festival as it is lived. The haunting and evocative photographs presented here give us an opportunity to move beyond the edge of the plaza—where most observers gather—and to glimpse its heart.

The celebration is referred to by the Náayeri people of Santa Teresa as Puáaxku jitsé (which means "at Easter"). The term is an old loan from the Spanish word for Easter (Pascua), but refers to all the culminating Náayeri ceremonies of the period corresponding with Holy Week. The event is known regionally, nationally, and even internationally as La Judea Cora. This name refers to the Judíos, or Jews, who are

principle characters of the festival, which is often considered a kind of Passion Play like those performed worldwide during Catholic Holy Week. They are also referred to as the Borrados (the Erased) or the Tiznados (the Ash-Covered) in Spanish. In the Náayeri language they are called the Xumuávika (the Blackened) for the dramatic black body paint that seems to transform them from humans into otherworldly creatures.

Although ceremonies of the Puáaxku jitsé are related to what might be considered the death and resurrection of Christ, as understood locally, this is only part of the story. They are also linked to all aspects of ritual and social life in the town and very much require the participation of Náayeri women, who often have been omitted in descriptions, giving a false impression that the ceremonies are oriented entirely to the boys and men who are its most obvious participants as the black-and-white-painted Xumuávika. Indeed, the significance of these ceremonies goes far beyond the analytical categories typically used by anthropologists and others to describe them—and even undermines European colonialist assumptions about reality more generally.

The assumed distinction between nature and culture, for example, and all the corresponding oppositional categories related to it (e.g., body/mind, ritual/belief, earth/heaven) are not helpful for understanding Náayeri ceremonialism, which is not considered by Náayeri people to be any more or less supernatural than their day-to-day existence as people in the world. The Puáaxku jitsé festival of the Náayeri, then, should be understood on its own terms and not as an example of a Mexican folk Catholic Holy Week. A brief summary of Náayeri history and ethnographic writing on the Puáaxku jitsé provides some context for what we hope will be an understanding of its meaning and significance that more closely approximates explanations provided by Náayeri people themselves.

The homeland of the Náayeri people is located in what is now the Mexican state of Nayarit, which is named for the Náayeri people. Most of the inhabitants speak their own ancient Náayeri language, which belongs to the Uto-Nahua linguistic family and has eight dialects. It is closely related to the Uto-Nahua language of the better-known Wixárika (Huichol) people, famed for their peyote pilgrimages. The dialect of the Náayeri language spoken in Santa Teresa is called *ḵwéimarusa'ana*, which is also the name of the people from the town.

The Náayeri region is unique in the history of Mexico for its late conquest at the hands of Spanish colonial forces and their Indigenous allies in 1722, nearly two hundred years after the fall of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán. The narratives of this late conquest were written by participating Spanish captains, soldiers, and missionaries, and they all have a triumphalist tone. One example is the work of Joséph Antonio de Ortega, a Jesuit priest who spent time in Nayarit from 1727 to 1754. He wrote of the "general history of the conquest" as a completed fact.[1] Nonetheless, after the conquest was supposedly complete, missionaries, soldiers, Spanish authorities, and (later) Mexican officials all found it very difficult to maintain an active presence in the area, which is characterized by very rough terrain. Indigenous uprisings and rebellions continued, even as many Náayeri people were also eager to relate to the colonial world, "which, despite the reports of missionaries and civil authorities—that spoke of the ruggedness of the sierra—was well-known to regional Spanish or mestizo Vecinos, who were able enter and establish contact with its inhabitants without apparent conflict."[2]

Despite Spanish historical discourses that portrayed the Indigenous groups of the region as isolated, static, and unchanging, the Náayeri people incorporated many Spanish

cultural elements into their ongoing way of life. It should also be pointed out that even though the missions lasted only a relatively short time—because the Jesuits were expelled from New Spain in 1767—the entry of Spanish Catholic evangelizing missions, starting in 1722, did bring about important changes, including the veneration of Catholic-derived saints in ceremonies like the Puáaxku jitsé. As the Mexican scholar Raquel Eréndira Güereca Durán points out, "conversion to Christianity and incorporation into the colonial world can be resisted even as Hispanic technological elements, food, and ideas are accepted with ease and enthusiasm, without implying the loss of cultural identity, but rather its reformulation and re-articulation."[3]

Given the ethnocentric blindness of Spanish chroniclers, little is learned from Spanish colonial sources about Náayeri rituals and belief systems prior to Spanish attempts at Catholic missionization in the area. Rosa H. Yañez, a Mexican academic and scholar in the use of Indigenous language during evangelization, mentions reports that say that the Náayeri,"had the sun as the most important deity or *tecuat*, to whom they offered arrows with beads and feathers."[4] Ortega describes the existence of Indigenous ceremonies and sacred places and glorifies in their destruction at the hands of Spanish soldiers, but even the close descriptions that he might have provided were at that time considered a kind of diabolical threat to Catholicism. What is certain, however, is that the Náayeri people actively and enthusiastically participated in the ancient Mesoamerican worldview and religion.

Even though their dispersed mountain settlements lacked the large cities and monumental architecture common to the lowlands, they were never isolated from contact with larger Mesoamericans civilizations like the Teuchitlán tradition, the Aztatlán complex, and the Chalchihuites culture. The eradication of such ancient belief systems by the Spanish was not easily accomplished, if—as we argue here—it was accomplished at all. For example, baptism with holy oil or water was considered by the Spanish to be proof that the group in question was under control. But it also seems likely that a leader may have offered his children for baptism, as was the case with the Náayeri king once the surrender of his group was negotiated, because this sacrament removed the parents as a probable cause of diseases, and not because of an actual religious conversion to Catholicism.[5] In other words, the ancient religion of the Indigenous people of the region was maintained through the Catholic-seeming cult of the saints, and it continued to function for Náayeri people not as an acceptance of Catholic belief, but rather as protection against adversity and illness, as it presumably had for centuries—if not millennia—before.

Currently in Santa Teresa, Náayeri practice of their ceremonies during the Puáaxku jitsé focuses on a church built by the Franciscans during the nineteenth century, which houses their saints from the previous Jesuit era: Saint Anthony, Saint Joseph, the Virgin of Dolores, Saint Teresa, the Virgin of Guadalupe, and Saint Michael the Archangel. Another important building is the courthouse across the plaza from that church, where part of the celebrations of Puáaxku jitsé take place. The ruins of a never-completed Jesuit-era colonial church are also located on the town's plaza. After the Jesuits were expelled from what was then New Spain, in 1767, the elaborately carved altar and entrance arch were left exposed to the elements. Local Náayeri emphasize that it was their own fasting and prayers that drove out those colonial-era missionaries, leaving them relatively free to continue their ancestral religion. A bronze bell from the time still hangs in the unfinished bell tower, and it is decorated with flowers in what is now a reference to the pre-Lenten Pachitas festival that leads toward the Puáaxku jitsé each year.

A number of Náayeri people have abandoned their difficult and time-consuming ancestral religion—also referred to as *costumbre* because of the many customs, or ceremonial practices, required for its successful completion—for versions of evangelical Christianity promoted by outside missionaries. These evangelical Protestant missionaries from the United States began visiting the town in small airplanes after the construction of an airstrip by the Mexican government in the 1970s. Mestizos in the town, some of whom married local Náayeri women, are predominantly Catholic and attend mass in a small chapel that was added to the visiting Catholic priest's parsonage in a corner of the plaza, leaving the larger Franciscan-era church for Náayeri costumbre-oriented ceremonialism.

The Náayeri ceremonialism of which the Puáaxku jitsé is a part is connected to the two dramatically distinct seasons of the year: the dry season, which extends from November to April, and the wet season, which begins in May and continues until October. The Puáaxku jitsé can be seen as a culmination of the dry season, which also includes the cycles of ritual office transfers (cargos) that occur over the previous months. The yearly ceremonial calendar also includes a series of maize-oriented ritual dances, commonly called *mitotes* in Spanish, that are held during the wet growing season in family compounds and in a larger dance patio on the slopes of the town's principle mountain, called Tayaxuri in the Náayeri language (Our Grandfather). The sets of ceremonies for transferring cargo offices constitute two smaller cycles within the larger, yearlong cycle of ceremonies that take place in Santa Teresa's ceremonial plaza. The first of these cycles begins its rotation during the Festival of the Birth of Our Mother, on September 8, and concludes during the Festival of Santa Teresa, on October 15, when lower-level incoming officeholders formally accept their offices during an elaborate ceremony called *la entrega de los bancos* (passing on the seats of office). The higher church-based offices, as well as all of the courthouse-based offices, are transferred during the subsequent cycle that begins immediately following the Festival of Santa Teresa. During the Day of the Dead (November 1–2) and the Festival of Guadalupe (December 12), the courthouse- and higher church-based officers are publicly presented at their own installments.

Recent ethnographic approaches provide deeper insights for understanding the Puáaxku jitsé specifically and Náayeri ceremonialism more generally. They build on the rediscovered work of Konrad Teodor Preuss, which is also connected to the recent ontological turn in global scholarship that is finally able to comprehend Indigenous understandings of a much more complex being-world than envisioned by previous generations of anthropologists. From the point of view of this ontological approach, it is not only people who are recognized as subjects with agency in the world. Ritual objects, costumes, and beings (like flowers) also have their own perspectives with the capacity to bring health or harm. Preuss documented such Náayeri understanding of an ontologically complex being-world, but because of the loss of his main manuscripts and the difficulty of comprehending the significance of his ethnographic data at the time, it was slow to be fully appreciated.

Preuss' fieldwork among the Náayeri people at the beginning of the twentieth century was sponsored by eminent Mesoamericanist Eduard Seler, who was seeking ongoing remnants of Mesoamerican religion among the j54 peoples of Mexico.[6] Preuss recorded ritual songs and myths, and witnessed many Náayeri ceremonies, including the Puáaxku jitsé, which he not inaccurately described as a kind of cosmic battle between day and night, such as was also described by Seler for the Aztecs. The blackened Xumuávika

men and boys were "white stars of the dark night that allow themselves to fall to earth as spring-time spirits of renewal, fertilizing the earth through their sexual acts and so making the plants and animals grow."[7] Afterward, these "demonic stars"[8] are defeated by the resurgent sun, much as played out on the grander stage that was the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán. Mexican anthropologist Jesús Jáuregui, who republished Preuss' work along with Johannes Neurath, also wrote about such ancient Mesoamerican connections, comparing the Náayeri worldview to that of the Aztecs and describing the Puáaxku jitsé as a violent spring-equinox "astral drama" between the sun and the moon.[9] Johannes Neurath similarly describes the Puáaxku jitsé of the Náayeri town of Mesa del Nayar as such a "cosmic battle" between day and night, as well as other dualistic forces of the universe.[10]

Importantly, Preuss also recognized a fundamental underlying Mesoamerican metaphysical logic that motivated Náayeri people to continue ceremonies like the Puáaxku jitsé, and that, we argue, continues to motivate them today. As Preuss put it, Náayeri people feel that there are "natural forces" that are condensed into "clouds and animals, and particularly into deceased elders and 'the ancient ones' and that, as a result, these beings have a certain 'magical power.'"[11] Even a young boy casually playing a reed flute as he fishes in the river in anticipation of becoming a Xumuávika during the Puáaxku jitsé—a moment that seems like nothing more than "playful fun"—is in fact carrying out "an important religious ceremony."[12]

The magical natural forces that Preuss describes among the Náayeri people have also been documented throughout Mesoamerica. For the Aztecs, the concept was referred to as *teotl*, or the "process, movement, and change" of a "world-in-motion."[13] Among the Maya the concept is referred to as *ḳinh*, "primordial reality, divine and without limit."[14] As the ancient

Ritual battles during Puáaxku jitsé, 2019

Aztecs saw it, these forces have cyclical and twisting characteristics because earthbound reality also has such characteristics. The sun rises at a marked point on the horizon and then moves on its eternal back-and-forth path each sunrise of the year. Smoke swirls upward from a pipe of tobacco and then seems to form into clouds. A twisting umbilical cord takes shape out of the cycles of menstruation and gestation, and a child emerges into the world.

Similarly, Náayeri people in Santa Teresa would speak of a kind of *fuerza* (force) or *electricidad* (electricity) that their ceremonial traditions—like the Puáaxku jitsé—are meant to harness and use for their own benefit, and for the benefit of the world as a whole. Ritual actors like the Xumuávika

in Santa Teresa are assemblages or manifestations of these actually existing, universally pervasive magical forces, not just symbolic representations. Their power derives from their ceremonially arranged concentration of natural energy. Similarly, for Náayeri people, offerings left at churches and caves are not simply memorials or personal expressions of faith but magical acts that build up energy, even as it is borrowed away for use by people.

Anthropologist Maria Benciolini comes to similar conclusions, arguing that Náayeri ceremonial cycles create a flowering world in which teotl-like magical forces re-energize ceremonial places, like the town and people of Santa Teresa during the Puáaxku jitsé, or like beautiful flowers blooming on a hillside. For Benciolini, this magical force should be "conceptualized as the regenerative capacity of things and of the world, the same as is seen more strikingly in the case of flowers."[15] Thus, ancestors and other "gods" are not given at once in some distant past or far-off "supernatural" realm, "rather they are beings that exist and are refreshed in relation to humans."[16] Indeed, flowers are very similar to the Xumuávika—and other Náayari ritual actors and objects—in that they "appear in relation to the vital force that makes all things be born, as well as the gods themselves."[17]

Flowers are fundamental for understanding the Náayeri people, and in each of the ceremonies and in all of these cycles, a number of flowers are used. Their ongoing use throughout the year also shows that the Puáaxku jitsé cannot be understood outside of those larger cycles, which are themselves connected to the cycles of life and growth, as they exist in what is considered to be a flowering world of cyclical change.[18] This flowering world is built through relationships that combine realms that have been too often separated as either "natural" or "cultural." For the Náayeri people, flowers are not simply decorations or passive aspects of nature that are somehow separate from the world of humans; they are themselves animate beings with their own human-like subjectivity and agency whose appearance in the world indicates and manifests its ongoing life-force. The Puáaxku jitsé is one part of that living and flowering Náayeri world that combines nature and culture into a reality of emerging connections that, when they hold, maintain the health and well-being of people within a world of fruitfulness and abundance.

The much-photographed Xumuávika (the Borrados or Erased Ones) of the Puáaxku jitsé, then, are important because they are momentary emergences—or *seje'ereh* (appearances) of this moving, creative energy force field.[19] Their effect in the ritual is to remind participants of the existing presence of one's own life at a certain point in the ongoing fabric of being. Continuing to participate in Santa Teresa's Puáaxku jitsé provides metaphysical coherence and energetic force that protects a participant from disorder, decay, and, ultimately, illness and early death. All Náayeri ceremonies, including the Puáaxku jitsé, are attempts to harmonize people with reality—the natural forces of the universe—and so to connect people (who are themselves manifestations of them) in a beneficial way with those forces.

For Náayeri people, fasting is the basic way to harmonize people with reality and initiate and sustain any ritual period. This mental and physical preparation, along with the bringing together of the force-filled special elements needed for a ritual, are crucial for manifesting natural forces and so making them appear in the world of living people. As Margarita Valdovinos says, "a large part of the festival is spent in preparations."[20] These preparations take place "with the gourd bowl" (*nyatuxa'ara*) during five or more days prior to the culminating dances and rituals. The ritual period is activated, and the magical connection is launched by sprinkling a special variety of pure white maize into a gourd bowl

of water collected from distant springs that are known for their energetic power and that mark the landscape corners of the wider Santa Teresa world. This is done by the main elder leading the ritual, who may be accompanied by others. This elder recites a prayer to the various beings who are called to attend and protect the ritual: the Sun, Nyitatáata, or "our father"; the Morning Star, Nyajá'ah xú'ura'abeh, or "our older brother"; the Maize, Nyitanáana, or "our mother"; and the impressive sacred lake of Santa Teresa, Nyiyáakwari, or "our grandmother." During this ritual period, people fast by not eating until noon (or longer), avoiding any kind of strong emotion, and denying themselves salt, alcohol, and sex, among other things. The goal is to focus people's hearts and minds into a purified and refined thought that acts as a kind of thread around which twisting energy manifests into a maize plant-like column of sacred connection with deceased ancestors—and, ultimately, with the ancient, foundational beings who continue to appear as stars, the moon, and the sun.

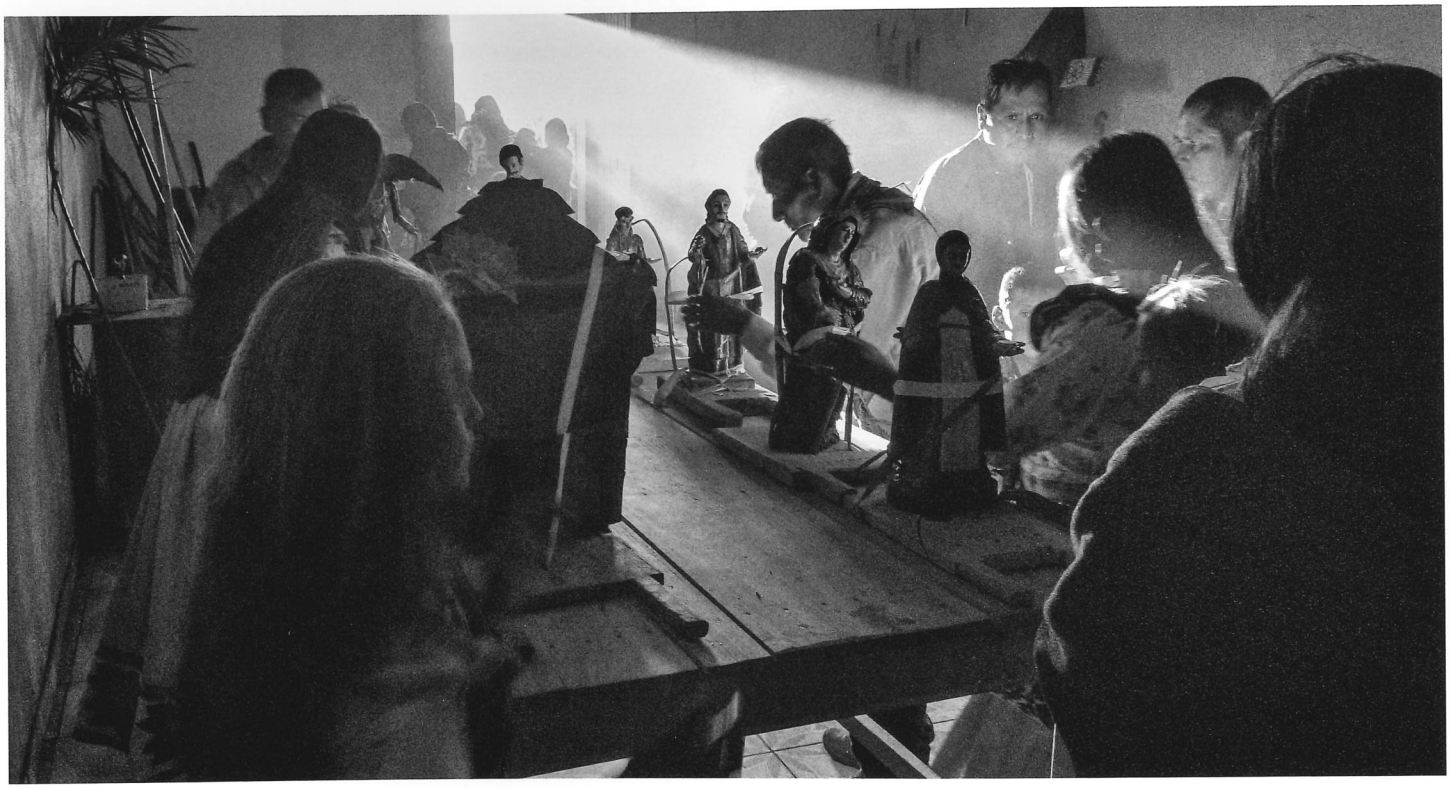
Fasting during ritual periods is directly related to the Náayeri concept of illness and "being well." The words *guá´ira´* and *tébi* both refer to the body, the former in its physical quality as "meat" and the latter to the person itself. During the period of gestation, the fetus is not properly considered the body of a person, but rather guá´ira´, so a series of ritual actions are required to protect it and assure it develops a well-formed personal constitution.[21] Throughout the year, visits to sacred sites are connected to the well-being of people as individuals and as members of the community. When Náayeri people feel something outside what they would consider "being well," it is an indication of disease, which they argue cannot be seen. Rather it is "like an air that reaches you" and manifests in some part of the body. The heart (*juúrikame*) is considered a key point in the body from which thoughts and emotions originate, and these can cause illness.

Offerings serve as intermediaries in this process of connecting the body to sacred sites and, therefore, to the magical, natural forces of the universe. They also establish ties of kinship with other Náayeri people and with the saints themselves. Indeed, saints are considered to be relatives who can perform favors and intercede on behalf of people with yet higher divinities. As Eduardo Viveiros de Castro points out in his article, "Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation,"[22] genealogical kinship among many Indigenous peoples is a result of these ritual acts, not the basis for them.

Each of the saints is guarded by a Mayordomo and a Tenanchi, who are responsible for cleaning them, decorating the church where they stay, and preparing special foods, while at the same time fasting. Through these acts, the saints hear the gratitude of the Mayordomos and Tenanchis. According to Náayeri people, the saints do not eat human food; they fast all the time. Similarly, the act of staying awake for long hours on various saint's days—as during any other special ceremonial period—is important for good health. It is an honest and irreducible effort that people must make in exchange for what they seek. It also is a way of expressing respect and even making their bodies analogous to the bodies of the saints. Alfred Gell refers to relationships like those that the Náayeri have with the saints as a kind of intersubjectivity in his book *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*.[23] Images of the gods are human and humans also see themselves in the images of the saints; all are manifestations of the natural world of force. In other words, the relationship is comparable to relationships between human persons. Like human family, the saints must be protected, cared for, and fed. People say, "We are caught up with each other." If not cared for, the saint will release them "little by little," and consequently they will remain unprotected, causing illness in the

family, starting with infants. Thus, this relationship must be maintained and recreated like any other social bond, all of which bring good health and community well-being.[24] During Holy Week, for example, people approach the Catholic images, particularly the image of Christ in his tomb, called the Santo Entierro. They ask for good health among the large family of saints that includes that image, really an intersubjective being that is part of an ancestral line of descent that expands back to the origins of the world. Recognizing this Náayeri understanding of themselves as part of reality helps us to appreciate the images of the Puáaxku jitsé rituals as they appear in the photographs presented here.

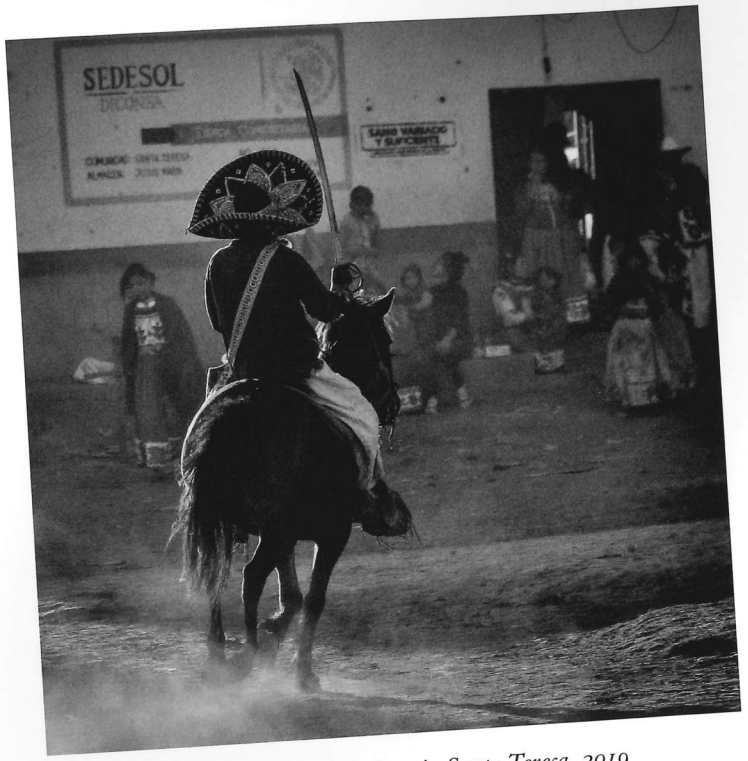
The Puáaxku jitsé celebration starts after a long series of pre-Lenten ceremonies called Las Pachitas. During this ceremonial season, a group of elders and musicians accompany a young girl called La Malinche as she visits houses around the cardinal points of the town, dancing exuberantly and providing a forum for young men and women to flirt. The Pachitas season ends with a final ceremony that involves literal bursts of color, as dyes are tossed over the participants who surround the young girl, whose costume accumulates more and more flowers and brightly colored decorations as the weeks go on. As the ceremony concludes, the Centurions, who will lead the black-and-white Xumuávika, make their first appearance. The Centurions are given ground maize,



and they then begin to run inside the main plaza of the town. In the background, the Xumuávika begin to play their flutes. At the same time, La Malinche formally addresses the First Centurion: "Here I don't know if I did evil or good. But now you have been given over to us, so that you can fulfill what we attempted, so that you can move forward. I was wrong ... I couldn't do it. Now if you comply, it is your part to do the costumbre. Now you will comply." The First Centurion gravely replies, "Now I will follow."

During the ritual period of the Puáaxku jitsé celebration, men fill the following positions in a military-like organization: First Centurion, Second Centurion, Captains, Corporals, Dogs, Nazarene, Apostles, Pharisees, and Judíos. There are also male-female pairs of Mayordomos and Tenanchis, who perform various tasks for the ceremony, and throughout the ritual year as part of their cargo-service. Minors also take part, with young boys assuming the role of "the good boy," taking care of the Centurions' horses, and young girls assisting the female Tenanchis in various tasks. The Centurion—along with his junior partner, the Second Centurion, and other men who serve as Captains—places pinches of ground maize inside a gourd bowl filled with water brought from sacred springs. The Centurion makes a prayer to carry out the celebration in a satisfactory way during Holy Week. To make the prayer effective, these men all fast until the conclusion of the ceremony. During their fasts, the Centurion visits the important cosmologically oriented cardinal points immediately encircling the town until the forty days of Lent have concluded. As he does so, a different, alternate geography is superimposed on the everyday geography of the town, connecting it to unseen divinities and the magical forces of the universe.

The Centurions are dualistically opposed manifestations of the deceased ancestors of the town's living cargo-office-



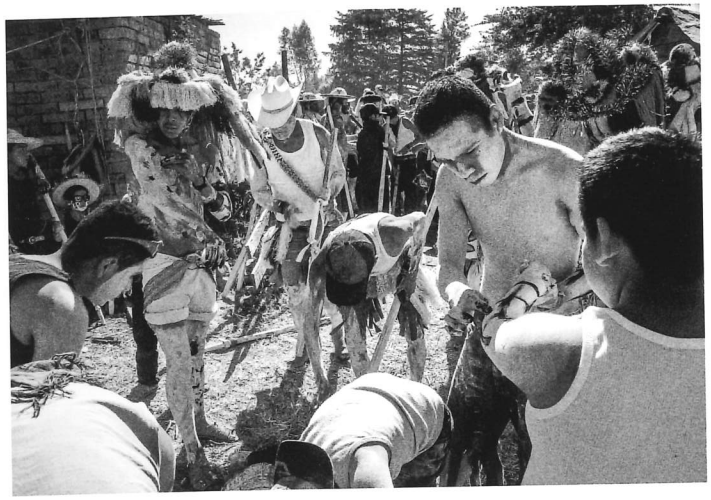
The Centurion riding out of the plaza in Santa Teresa, 2019

holding authorities. The horses that they ride connect them with the rainy season Santiago festival, when large groups of men ride horses around town making offerings at the cardinal points. These horsemen refer to the rain clouds of this season as their deceased ancestors (Tawósimua, literally "our elders"), and the dust raised by the horses' thundering hooves is a kind of cloud akin to tobacco smoke, which is crucial in Náayeri ceremonialism. A special homegrown type of very strong tobacco is smoked in special clay pipes similar to those excavated from ancient Mesoamerican archaeological sites on the adjacent coastal plains. The blowing of tobacco smoke from these pipes towards the cardinal points and onto people and ritual objects occurs in all ceremonies, as well as

in private healing rituals for therapeutic purposes. It cleans and purifies spaces, objects, and participants, while protecting them from adversity.

Florentino, a resident of Santa Teresa who actively participates in the Puáaxku jitsé, explained that tobacco smoke is "like fog." He continued, "When there is fog you stop at thirty or forty meters, because you don't really see through it. That is protection. It hides you. That is what tobacco is for. You are in a mist; that tobacco becomes like a mist. That is its meaning." This protective cloudiness also emerges from the hoof beats of the horses ridden by the Centurions as they race through town, raising ocher dust from Santa Teresa's red earth. The dances and battles of the Xumuávika also raise clouds of this ocher dust, which surround the processions of saints as they are carried around the town, keeping them just slightly hidden and safe from the seen and unseen beings that prowl the place during Holy Week.

Early on Holy Thursday, men and boys go to the house of the Centurion, who provides them with the raw materials they will need to paint their bodies and "erase" themselves to become Xumuávika. These include white earth, taken from nearby streams, and dry grass, which is burned to make the black-colored body paint. Designs consist of horizontal and vertical stripes and circles that are painted on their arms, legs, abdomen, back, and face. On Good Friday, the black color is used to cover almost the entire body. On Saturday, they add red-colored aniline dye to the existing black and white pigments. The attire of the Xumuávika consists of white underwear or shorts with a *cotensia* (embroidered waist belt), along with a hat to which strips of crepe paper or brightly colored cloth are attached. According to the Náayeri, the hat has to be made by men, because a woman's touch would bring bad luck. They each carry a phallic wooden saber, which is used not only for battle during the ceremony



Men and boys applying white and black paint to become "erased," 2019

but also as a musical instrument that is struck on the ground to accompany the sound of the drums and phallic flutes. They also sing sexually oriented songs.

Body painting among the Xumuávika is a way of hiding or erasing their humanness, thus transforming them into other beings. They must comply with a series of proscriptions related to their altered mental and physical state. Fasting is fundamental, and this act of abstention is basic not only to this ceremony but to all Náayeri ceremonialism and ritual healing. Ricardo Ávila and Igor de la Garine point out that the purpose of such prohibitions is to demonstrate and enact the sanctity of the episodes and the purity of those who take part in them.[25] In other words, fasting harmonizes ritual participants with magical natural forces, bringing protection and healing. The men who participate should also not shower or go to streams, because, they say, water symbolizes the blood of Christ. They also do not eat red meat or salt, and they must obey the Centurion. Such orders are not always followed by the more disorderly rank-and-file Xumuávika

or even by higher officers, like the Captains. However, if a Centurion is seen to break his fast by eating early in the day or drinking alcohol, it is considered a danger to everyone involved. Some years have seen a great deal of violence and chaos in the festival, which is attributed to the failure of the Centurions to maintain their fasts in the face of the chaotic Xumuávika, who engage in a series of dramatic and often injurious saber combats with each other in the plaza throughout the course of the festival.

An "erased" Náayeri boy's or man's intersubjective relationship with his Xumuávika alter ego is similar to that of a Mayordomo's or Tenanchi's with their saint. As one participant put it, "The three days of Holy Week are a way of acknowledging and thanking Christ. By participating in the festival, I feel very happy because I feel that we are honoring him. If you are protected by all the customs it is like it slows down the illness. It does not reach you as strongly. I do believe that the customs help me. They protect me a lot."

There is no set age for when a boy or man may begin the relationship, and many start young, either of their own free will or because they are easy prey for other participants who seek to recruit them into the group. This is how one Náayeri mother described it: "Jaimito asked me for permission to go see 'la Judea' in the plaza where they give out food. The Captains are in charge of inviting people to join, so that more people or children are part of them, but it could be said that they use a trap. They mainly offer a banana to the children, and since they don't know anything—because in this case, since Jaimito didn't know, he ate the banana and they painted it for me to indicate his commitment. Those who eat bananas must only participate by 'erasing' for five years. If they want to follow the Centurions later, then it is their own decision." The celebration ends on Easter Sunday, at which time all the black-and-white-painted Xumuávika head towards the nearest stream and remove their body paint—or, more precisely, return to their daily lives as people.

Women also follow restrictions during the Puáaxku jitsé. Like men, if women fail to adhere to their fasts, they also risk becoming ill or even dying because of their failure to live up to the intersubjective relationships with the family-like beings who manifest within the context of the festival. The restrictions for women during the festival include not eating red meat, not going to streams, not weaving or doing embroidery, and not braiding their hair. Some women even allow the Xumuávika to cut their braids as an offering to the Santo Entierro, which they consider a way of giving thanks or protecting themselves from adversity. The loose hair of the women is particularly striking during the processions in which the saints are carried around the cardinal points of the town on the heads of Mayordomos and Tenanchis. Surrounded by the Xumuávika, who carry long reed lances, the women huddle together behind the saints, their unbraided hair symbolizing the wild electricity in the air.

Women also do most of the crucial preparatory work for the festival and make the special foods that are necessary for its successful completion. As one resident of Santa Teresa put it, "It is impossible to think that women do not participate, because imagine a situation in which no woman takes on a vow to help, and no woman goes! They are the ones who fix up the church. That is a lot work, and it is always the Tenanchis who are asked to do more." Thus, on Holy Wednesday from early on, the Mayordomos and Tenanchis gather inside the church to create the elaborate Puáaxku jitsé decorations. Women from nearby ranches also join in this activity, coming of their own free will or for personal reasons.

Inside the church, a large staircase-like structure is constructed with an altar at the top that is covered with plants and flowers. Mayordomos and Tenanchis search throughout

Flowers, palm fronds, and disks made from leaves of the sotol plant inside the church, 2019

the region for banana leaves, palms, and wild flowers, among them corpus leaves, and the saw-toothed sotol from which circular disks are woven that look like the sun. The effect is of the miraculous appearance of a stepped mountain, or even a Mesoamerican-style pyramid, inside the old Catholic church, which for the Náayeri people is also a womb-like cavern. The steps are built and decorated to manifest an ancestral line of connection and healing through the generations of life and death that extends upward to the east towards the Morning Star, and so to the rising sun. On Good Friday the Xumuávika penetrate the church and destroy the altar, its flowers, and woven sotol disks—along with the woven palm branches that people have brought with them. These palm branches are believed to be charged with renewed life-force energy, and are kept in homes for protection and good health. Many people also hang them in fruit trees to protect against a solar eclipse.

Within the overall annual ceremonial cycle, the figure of Jesus Christ in the church is opposed as the eastern Morning Star half of the dualistic star Venus. His younger brother, the western Evening Star—who is referred to as Sótari (the flower-cutter)—manifests along with the black-painted

Xumuávika. The fundamental drama of the festival is the regeneration of life through the reviving energy of the rising sun as it ascends its step-like pathway upward from the Morning Star–brightened horizon. That this renewal of life and refertilization of earth is activated by Xumuávika sexual energy in the context of a sacrificial, fratricidal murder—of even a dualistic self-immolation—taps into powerfully awesome and unknowable mysteries at the origins of reality itself.

Xúuxu'u (flowers) are undeniably a fundamental part of this continually manifesting reality, as Náayeri people understand it, and xúuxu'u may be used to refer to any offering that is deposited throughout the year at various sacred sites or in the church. When given to the saints, flowers also act as a kind of energizing non-human food. There is no specific flower for offerings, nor are some considered better than others, but their blooming across the landscape at distinct elevations and in ecologically distinct growing conditions varies based on time of year and their location in the mountainous region. During Holy Week, it is more difficult to find fresh flowers, which compels people to go deep into the mountains in search of them.

These remarkable efforts to find fresh, wild flowers show that making things pretty has a deeper meaning. Their presence implies a transformation of things.[26] Through decoration and delimitations, not only are territories transformed, but "other spaces" are also built.[27] We can see this change occur when the stepped altar is built within the church and also when the crosses that encircle the town are decorated with flowers. They mark limits while also indicating a special kind of interaction between humans and divinities as part of a connected flowering world of magical, natural forces. The Puáaxku jitsé is one key moment in a ceremonial year—and in the hundreds of ceremonial years that came before and should continue into the future—linking people through time with that emergent, flowering world in motion.

The role of flowers is not limited to their appearance across the landscape and in opening ritual spaces; they also have an essential place in the female mind. The Náayeri people have an appreciation for flowers as key elements in their ritual and daily life, and women, through their weaving and sewing, as well as through their decoration of ritual spaces, have special connections with these flowers. In fact, flowers are everywhere because people wear them as part of their clothing every day. In every instance they act as intermediaries, allowing people, especially women, to establish relationships of different types, which are themselves related to the different fields of their social, economic, and parental life with others, as well as to the natural forces of the universe, of which flowers are a particularly striking manifestation and access point for connection. Flower-covered clothing made by women circulates and transforms people at the individual level—marking the uniqueness of each person—while also protecting and healing them as members of a sacred lineage that goes back to the origins of the world. Through their clear thinking and dedicated work, Náayeri women are considered as crucial to ceremonies like the Puáaxku jitsé as they are to public life in the town more generally. The idea that they are constrained to the private domestic domain completely misrepresents the interdependence and interconnectedness of women and men in Náayeri life.

Weeks before the celebrations of Puáaxku jitsé, women make their own personal outfits: a *siiku'ri* (blouse), a *yuchi* (skirt), and *ka'ny* (shoulder bags), and design the waist belts worn by the Xumuávika. Women who are noted for their mental focus have developed the art of creating impressive floral designs, which are reflected in their outfits and in the distinctive shoulder bags that both women and men wear. The concentration required to make these weavings and

clothes is analogous to the mental clarity that is considered a requirement for general wellness and good health. Indeed, at one of their first ceremonies as Náayeri people, young girls are given a spindle tied with twisted black and white wool threads. Boys, in contrast, are given a bow, referring to their roles as hunters and ritual singers. Both require fasting—and the resultant mental focus—to be successful. As with male hunters and ritual specialists, not everyone can bear the rigors of the difficult fasts that provide the powers of concentration required for connection to divine energy, and only a few women are able to successfully create the more complicated and innovative flower patterns for their weavings or embroidery.

The shoulder bags are an ethnically distinctive accessory for Náayeri men as well as women. The bags are created with embroidery with needle and thread on squared fabric, which has a weft of smaller squares whereon the stitch is worked. It takes six months to a year to make a single bag, and many different Náayeri women may work on a single bag. Men who will "erase" themselves as Xumuávika also pick designs and colors of the bag that they will wear, showing their desire to carry a bag with a unique and special floral design.

Women are also crucial in the Puáaxku jitsé celebration (as they are in every Náayeri celebration), because they are responsible for preparing, cooking, and offering food. These foods, like flowers, are gathered from different places across the Náayeri landscape. Foods from Santa Teresa, in the mountains, where corn and beans are grown, are combined with items from the lowland Náayeri areas, where the climate is warm and fish and bananas are found. Honey and eggs are also stockpiled in Náayeri villages over days and months for use in this festival. These foods have special importance because of their unique qualities of color, texture, sound, and taste. Ordinary foods are also combined with these ritual foods, with the overall result a complex logical system based on elements derived from the common Náayeri experience in their ancient homeland.

Obtaining the food also implies an interdependent division of labor between men and women. Men are usually the ones who get the foods, and the women are responsible for transforming them into Náayeri cuisine. These social functions highlight the Náayeri ideal of gender-based complementary and collaborative relationships within family groups. During a workshop on the Naayeri language from August 14 to October 24, 2020, Alicia Muñoz from Santa Teresa recounted to Frine Castillo, "My grandfather prepared for the festival in advance. We would bring fish and shrimp from the river. Eggs were collected when the hens laid them. I did get to go fishing with my grandfather. We fished at night. We stayed about eight days. I remember that my grandfather put a net in a place where the water looked deep, because that is where there are more fish, and he left the net down there all night. In the morning, we would go to see how many fish were stuck, at times there were about twenty. Sometimes my grandfather got up at night to go fishing. They were different fish. Any ones we happened to get!" All such excursions to obtain food end up returning to the hearth, where women prepare the ingredients and make the dishes ready for exchange with other community households in the festival.

At noon on Thursday of Holy Week, the families of the Mayordomos and Tenanchis, along with other families in the community, distribute various dishes to the Twelve Apostles, older men who fast in the church during the festival and who provide another complementary opposition to the Centurions as manifestations of the still-active deceased ancestors of living Náayeri people. These foods are fish broth, rice with cheese, beans, corn tortillas, eggs (which

must be painted similarly to the bodies of the Xumuávika and which according to the Náayeri, bring special good luck), and bananas in honey. The giving and exchanging of these various dishes is often overlooked during the celebration, because it takes place as the Xumuávika stage spectacular battles that draw the attention of most spectators.

Women prepare these special dishes in their homes, taking extra care not to cook any red meat there at the same time. These foods are then exchanged with other women who come to the celebration from nearby ranches and towns. In addition, the Xumuávika ask for food in the houses arranged along the pathway connecting the cardinal points around the town, and it is an obligation to provide it. If the family refuses to do so, a family member could become ill. Providing food for them will in turn bring good health and luck. On Friday, the *guarache del Nazareno* (a sandal-shaped thick maize tortilla) is made in each home, and the Captains collect them from the women in each of the houses.

We can thus begin to imagine the complexity of all the gears in motion that revolve around the giving and sharing of food during this elaborate festival, which is only one of many during the ceremonial year. For example, between Saturday and Sunday, the Centurion distributes various dishes that his family has prepared to all of the Náayeri people of the town. These foods are then eaten in each of the different festivals during the year. In this way, they condense an entire annual festival cycle through a locally understood culinary code, which in turn relates to the sacred landscape from which the foods are obtained.

These foods include guá´ira´(meat), and through their consumption a bond is established with the landscape and with a kind of cosmological space and time that is literally incorporated into Náayeri bodies. They believe that without these rituals and eating the foods associated with them a person will become ill and die, their body rotting like uncooked meat. That is why there must be an order, a protection from adversity. It is for the well-being of the people, because food establishes social ties between individuals and with the world, based on offerings, sacrifices, and the ritual consumption of these special foods.[28] Náayeri celebrations (in this case, the Puáaxku jitsé) demonstrate successful communication with beings both seen and unseen and affirm in the participants a sense of belonging to the group. This only happens when the person actually takes part in these rituals with seriousness and purpose. Participants are reminded that the ceremonies are not a game, and few feel they are free to forget such heartfelt and wise advice.

It is difficult to capture the depth and meaning of Náayeri ceremonialism, but one thing is for sure: The Náayeri of Santa Teresa must be understood on their own staggeringly complicated and profound terms. That means that the Puáaxku jitsé celebration, as appealing and heavily documented as it has been, cannot be understood in isolation from the rest of Náayeri ceremonialism and their understanding of its importance for maintaining the flow of beneficial forces in and through their lives. William Frej's photographs, which were taken with permission by the traditional Náayeri authorities in Santa Teresa, help us to recognize that there are other ways of thinking and being in the world. They provide a window into the sense of profundity that comes from existing within a metaphysical reality that has been lost to most.

As anthropologists who have worked with the Náayeri people for years, and who have spent time with them at ceremonies and sacred sites across the landscape—while still only scratching the surface of understanding the depth and significance of those rituals and places—we see the photographs in this book as reflecting moments of connection.

They show people using ancient ceremonial traditions to weave their communities together and activate wellsprings of health and vitality for themselves, their families, and their world. It is about health and well-being in a world of abundance, taking responsibility, and working for the benefit of generations to come.

All people need connection to the natural forces of our earthbound reality. The Náayeri people believe they were given the tools to make these magical connections thousands of years ago. Only now are far too few of us learning to recognize and respect them. Let us, then, concentrate our thoughts and focus our minds on the images in this book, that we might open our hearts to the flowering world that is all around us, if only we can see it through the darkness.

NOTES

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