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TONAL AND NAGUAL IN COASTAL OAXACA, MEXICO¹

BY LUCILLE N. KAPLAN

THERE has been much confusion on the part of workers in Middle America because of the often interchangeable use of the terms *nagual* or *tonal* and their variants by the peoples under study, and the application of either term in a generic sense by investigators to the observed beliefs. Furthermore, as Foster (1944) has shown, the term *nagual*, originally referring to a transforming witch (*naualli* means transforming witch in Nahuatl, according to Sahagun) came to be applied in Southern Mexico and Guatemala to the belief in a personal guardian or companion spirit. Foster derives the term *tonal* with its variants *tona* or *tono* from the use of horoscopes to determine the fate or fortune of each individual born, from *tonal-amatl*, the book of fate, and *tonalmatl*, the cycle of the Aztec calendar. Later, sometime between 1650 and the mid-nineteenth century, the term *tonal* had become fixed to cover the intimately linked animal companion.

I follow Foster's distinction in the generic sense, while also indicating which terms are in use in this region. *Tonal*, then, is the relationship between a human individual and an animal or natural phenomenon which is his counterpart. *Nagual* is used in the original sense of the concept of a transforming witch, i.e., the temporary use of an animal or other form for the purposes of sorcery or harmful intent. The individual assumes the animal form for a few hours or a night, for disguise, or to enable the performance of a magical feat impossible to humans.

Among other Indian groups in the state of Oaxaca, Beals (1945) reports *tono* (*tonal*, in the generic sense) for the Western Mixe. De la Fuente (1949) reports *nagualism* as an attribute of witches, and that in the past the *brujos* (witches) used divination to determine the *suerte general* (fortune or fate), and animal companion of the individual (*tonal*), among the Zapotecs of Yalálag. Apparently neither term, *nagual* nor *tonal*, was known for these concepts. Parsons (1936), by the time of her work in Mitla, found belief in the animal companion (which she calls "guardian spirit") and the term *tono* almost obsolete, while belief in the transforming powers of witches was widespread, for which she does not report the term *nagual*.

We will consider the role of these concepts in the lowland Mixteca of the Pacific Coast region of Oaxaca where a few commercial centers (ca. 3000-6000 in population) having communication with national cities such as Mexico City and Puebla, dominated by a mestizo or ladino population, together with a numerically predominant population of lowland Mixtecs who live for the most part in their own villages, and a third group of Negro Mexicans, much mixed biologically, descended from African slaves brought to Mexico during the Colonial Period, live in lowland villages on the coastal plain. This latter group comprises a peasant class, which shares language and culture with the Euro-mestizo group which is dominant economically and socially in the region. Excepting for the few large commercial towns, they live in distinct villages.

1. *Mixtecs*. Among the Mixtecs of Jamiltepec and Jicaltepec, it is believed that

every individual, Indian or mestizo, has a personal animal counterpart that lives its own existence in the bush. The animal may be born about the same time as its human counterpart, and their lives are linked throughout their life spans. According to one description, the animal in the bush does not have an animal mother, but is created by an animal in the sky, and this creature rears the animal until it is full grown. Although the animal is believed to lead an independent life in the bush, the relationship between the individual and his counterpart is personal and constant. However, it is an individual matter, and a child's animal need not be the same as either of his parents or other members of his family.

In fact, neither the individual nor his family knows which animal is the *tonal* until some event occurs which makes it necessary to query a specialist to divine which animal is involved. Thus, should a person fall ill, the *curendero*, the *ra cuehe*² (he who cures), determines through divination which animal is involved, diagnoses what has befallen the animal by viewing the human patient, and prescribes appropriate treatment.

In one case the diagnosis was made that a child was ill because his *tonal* had been bitten by a snake in the bush, and it followed that appropriate treatment for the child was a snake bite remedy. In another case a twelve-year-old boy suffered partial paralysis, was unable to swallow, and found no relief until the curer reported that he had gone into the forest and found the boy's animal caught and strangling in the tangled vegetation and had set him free.

Under ordinary circumstances, then, the individual does not know which animal is his counterpart. It is said that all *curenderos* (all males) know how to determine which animals were involved because of their power to go high into the sky and look down upon the earth and thus determine relationships of its creatures. In the more conservative towns such as Xicayan and San Juan Colorado, those famous for their curers, the inhabitants were said to know more of which animals were related to whom.

In Jicaltepec, where little Spanish is spoken, the *tonal* is called *sana nduii* 'this animal which you own,' and in Spanish was spoken of simply as *el animal*. In Jamiltepec, where a higher proportion of Mixtecs is bilingual, the terms *tono* or, rarely, *nagual* are used. The Mixtec roster of animals which can be *tonales* includes deer, rabbit, jaguar (*tigre*), *tigrillo*, *gato del monte*, racoon, badger, but no domesticated animals. Other natural phenomena such as thunderbolts and a rain cloud known as *culebra de agua* can also be *tonales*. The region in which one lives has the animals that are the counterparts of the persons who live there. The dark people, the Negroes, are said by some to have *puros animales horribles* as their *tonos*; all agree that alligators are *tonos* of the Negroes.

Evidence for the existence of such animals are reports of encountering dead burros with only the liver and heart eaten, from which it is inferred that an animal that would eat only these parts must assuredly be the counterpart of a person. One man, while hunting, encountered the tracks of a huge jaguar that could fly. Another man encountered a huge buck leading other deer in the forest. Such occurrences are frightening, and are interpreted as visual evidence of *tonales*.

If the animal has been killed by a hunter, the family of the corresponding human immediately knows that something grave has occurred. Family members who know where to find the hunter go to his home and attempt to obtain, usually by purchase at any price, the skin of the dead beast. If it has already been salted it is of no value, and

the victim dies. If it is obtained unsalted, and untreated, the fresh skin is taken to the human victim and wrapped about his body, which effects recovery.

The ramifications of this concept can be illustrated by the following. A Mixtec woman killed a snake which she found eating a chicken in her kitchen yard. Angry, she burned the snake. A short time later a man came to ask if she had seen a snake, and said that his wife was very ill. The woman lied to him and denied even seeing the snake, let alone knowing what had happened to it. She had immediately realized that the snake was the *tonal* of the man's wife. As a result, the woman who had killed the snake went insane, and the story came out when she was taken to a *curendero* for treatment.

The *tonal* has other functions. It is said by some that if an antagonism (*muina*) exists between persons, the animal of one may kill the burro or horse of the enemy.

2. *Negro Mestizos*. Among the Negro Mestizos of the coastal villages, particularly of Collantes, both the terms *tono* and *nagual* are used, and equated in meaning, though the latter term is preferred.

Nagualismo as a phenomenon is a part of witchcraft, *hechicería*, or *brujería*, and it is not believed a natural and inevitable condition to have an animal counterpart, as among the Mixtecs. It is held that *hechicería* exists among all classes and groups of people everywhere, not just among Indians, and Negroes and other *gente de razón*. More than in other phases of *brujería*, however, for *nagual*, belief is of cardinal importance. If a person does not believe, he is thought to be effectively outside the range of its control and does not have one. In other aspects of *brujería*, a different view is taken; credence is important, since many instances are related in which persons have died as a result of not having the proper confidence in the necessary cures when bewitched.

The animals which serve as *naguales* for humans include jaguar, deer, birds, *gato del monte*, snakes, *leones*, *onza*, alligator, and other bush animals, and cattle, but not horses or burros. The sex of the *nagual* corresponds to that of the individual. *Nagual* is spoken of as being done or performed upon a person (*asi se hace un nagual a uno*). The most elaborate account recorded came from a Negro canoe-maker and wood-worker, highly respected for his knowledge of the forest and bush, and a local authority on forest creatures.

The *brujo* or *bruja* notices a pregnant woman; after the infant is born he sends an animal, which is a *nagual*, in the night to carry the as yet unbaptised child from the side of its sleeping mother to the fields. The child is carried along a trail to a place where it is crossed by another trail, and laid on the ground. The animals which are *naguales* come down the cross trail. All are small, dwarf, perhaps six inches high. They pass over the body of the infant. The animal that stops and cleans the child all over with its tongue becomes the *nagual* of the child. If more than one stops and licks the infant, then all animals, even if different, may become the *naguales* of the child. Three seem to be the limit of *naguales* so obtained.

After the process of selection, a whirlwind comes and takes the *nagual* of the child away. Throughout the lifetime of the individual his *nagual* (though not he himself) is protected by several defenses or magic arts: these are the ability to transform from the animal form into a termite nest, into a stream of ants, or into a rough forest vine with sharp spines. If pursued by a hunter and his dogs, the *nagual* may change into each of these in turn; if these transformations are unsuccessful, a whirlwind may come and carry the *nagual* far away, as far as the next small village, for example.

The *nagual* can, however, be killed. For instance, a jaguar that was a *nagual* killed a burro. The owner of the burro discovered this and shot and killed the animal when it returned to eat the burro. The person to whom the *nagual* belonged fell dead. It is known among the Negroes that Indians look for the fresh skins of the animal, and are believed to clean both the animal and its skin, then carefully wrap the skin about the animal so that the animal will recover, and then the person. This account differs from that given by the Mixtecs. To explain the fact that Negroes do not follow this practice, it was stated not to be an effective operation in Collantes.

Naguales live free in the bush, but they have a chief who calls them together. They are under their chief, who in turn is commanded by the *brujo*. The individual knows which animal is his *nagual*; communication between the individual and his *nagual* is possible; and it is believed that the individual can transform himself into the *animal* at will. It is also said that some families prefer that their members have the same *nagual*. There is a story to the effect that a father took his small child to the forest in the night, and after they were hidden they observed a group of *tigres* gather together. The old male jaguar was described to the child as his father's *nagual*, the female as the mother, two cubs as his brother and sister, and the smallest cub as the child himself.

Among the Negroes there is a belief that animal counterparts exist among the Mixtecs. Hunters acknowledge that there are certain deer in the forest that one cannot kill; these are spoken of as Indians (*inditos*) in animal form. It is also believed that Indians who live higher up in the hills and mountains take the forms of such natural phenomena as *rayos* 'thunderbolts' and rain clouds. Since it is natural for the latter to seek the sea, unusually heavy rain storms during the rainy season are attributed to Indian men or women whose counterparts are going down to the ocean. Some malevolent intent is ascribed to this act, and since the Negro villages are located in the low, poorly drained coastal plain, and fields are often planted near rivers, flooded and ruined fields are the result of the behavior of malevolent *culebras de agua*.

During the last two years much crop loss has been suffered because of excessive rains, and the following story was in circulation: Both Afro- and Euro-mestizos said that there was much talk in several Negro villages of murdering a Mixtec woman of the town of Huasolotitlan. This woman is unusual in appearance in that she is described as tall, obese (characteristics rare among Mixtec women) and has an unusual occupation: she sells *aguardiente* (distilled cane brandy). She retains Mixtec dress but is well known, because of her occupation, to mestizos. She is believed to have gone to the priest of Jamiltepec to confess her problem—that her counterpart is a *culebra de agua* and wants to find its way to the sea. The priest was unable to help her, and it was her counterpart that caused the destructive rains during the past two years. The only remedy, then, is thought to be by effecting her death.

A shooting star can also be the *nagual* of a human, as in the case of *gente blanca* 'white people' in the Negro town of Rio Grande. In this town a large-headed child was both born and later died on nights when meteors were seen in the sky.

Euro-mestizos in this region, particularly those who have lands producing cotton or copra, or who have business dealings in the coastal plain, are fond of relating *nagual* stories based on their experiences with Negroes. A Negro will ask a companion on the road if he can be frightened; the companion will surely reply that he cannot be. The Negro will then leave him at some point in the trail on some pretext and return in the form of a huge jaguar that leaps upon the traveler from the bush. A similar story is

that of a Negro woman harvesting cotton, along with a group of women, who resisted the advances of a man who was in the fields. He was ridiculed by her in the presence of the other women, and therefore became angry. When the women were on the way home a huge jaguar with human hands leaped on them to frighten them. It was the man, of course, seeking his revenge.

Within the last twenty-five years alligators have been extensively hunted for their skins, and are now largely confined to certain lagoons and swamps. Several accounts are in circulation concerning the behavior of Negro men who were employed to hunt the alligators. A German planter, owner of a coffee plantation higher up in the hills, is fond of relating the unwillingness of hunters to kill alligators because they were believed to be *naguales* of humans.

A rancher reports that the Negro servant on his ranch in the lowlands has a jaguar for a *nagual*, and therefore they were not surprised when a jaguar visited the ranch house twice in the preceding year. Moreover, it is stated by Euro-mestizos that since *nagual* is done to a person, if Euro-mestizos live among *gente morena* (Negroes) it can be done to their children also. It is thus apparent that Euro-mestizos know a great deal about this belief, and, in trying to use behavior of the other groups to illustrate their modern, urban notions, end by giving evidence that they more than half believe it themselves.

Some of the outstanding differences between the two concepts as held by the Mixtecs and Negroes are: the Mixtec animal is a natural, inevitable counterpart, regardless of baptism, for each individual. The Negro *nagual* is secretly imposed upon some children, usually without their parents' consent, and it is possible only before the religious rite of baptism which would have protected the child from this act. Baptism of the Mixtec child, which is always celebrated, in no way affects its *tonal*. Although the relationship between the individual and his *tonal* among the Mixtecs is constant and binding, he cannot transform himself into the animal; it is a separate being. Furthermore, he cannot know his animal without the aid of a specialist. The Negro mestizo knows his animal in a mystical manner, is believed to communicate with him and other *naguales*, and can transform himself at will. The Mixtec cannot consciously use his *tonal*, although *tonales* may work on his behalf. The Negro may use his animal form, often for evil intent. The actual beings involved between the two groups differ in that the Negroes include bull and cow, domesticated animals. These are rather significant animals for a group whose members have served traditionally as cowhands for Spanish, and later, Euro-mestizo cattle ranches.

One basic similarity characterizes the belief of both groups: that a human being has a counterpart, for life, of an animal or natural phenomenon. It is apparent that there is recognition by the total population of this region of the phenomena of *tonal* and *nagual*. Mixtecs exhibit the operation of the concept of *tonal*, the natural animal companion or counterpart; the Negroes have a fused concept of *tonal* with a greater component of *nagual*. The Euro-mestizos are cognizant of the latter, and when pressed take some credence in this. (Other aspects of *brujeria* have remained less challenged, or still find relatively more acceptance among the Euro-mestizos.)

The question arises as to the sources of these concepts. The Euro- and Afro-mestizos, for example, know almost nothing of the concept of *tonal* as actually held by the Mixtecs. Since both these groups inhabit the same region, and the Mixtec group constitutes the aboriginal population, and since we know that both concepts of "nagualism" and

"tonalism" are indigenous, at first glance one may ascribe the spread of the idea from the Mixtecs to the Europeans and Africans who entered the area, and state that "nagualism" took root in the mestizo population while "tonalism" remained dominant in the Indian group. It seems to me, however, that a more fruitful approach might be investigation of mestizo notions of *nagual* in other parts of Mexico before any facile generalizations are made. Also, it is apparent that there is at least compatibility with Old World (and here, of course, both European and African concepts are alluded to) belief in transforming witches, and this must be taken into account.

NOTES

¹ [This article was selected by the Central States Anthropological Society as the outstanding paper presented at its annual meeting in April, 1956, at the State University of Iowa. Ed.] The information reported here is based on field work carried out in 1954-55 in the district of Jamiltepec, Oaxaca, with the aid of fellowships from Northwestern University and the American Association of University Women. My husband, Lawrence Kaplan, at the time a Fellow of the Chicago Natural History Museum, helped with the collecting. I refer to the following works: Ralph L. Beals, *Ethnology of the Western Mixe*, Univ. of Cal. Publ. in Amer. Archaeology and Ethnology (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1945), XLII:1, 1-176; Julio de la Fuente, *Yalálag una Villa Zapoteca Serrana*, Serie Científica Museo Nacional de Antropología (Mexico, 1949), I; George M. Foster, "Nagualism in Mexico and Guatemala," *Acta Americana*, II (1944), 85-103; Foster, *Sierra Popoluca Folklore and Beliefs*, Univ. of Cal. Publ. in Amer. Arch. and Ethnol. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1945), XLII:2, 177-250; Foster, "Mexican and Central American Indian Folklore," *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend*, ed. Maria Leach (New York, 1950), II, 711-716; Elsie Clews Parsons, *Mitla Town of the Souls* (Chicago, 1936).

² Mixtec terms are transcribed according to Howard Klassen of the Summer Institute of Linguistics; the writer would like to acknowledge his help.

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