

Sierra Otomí Religious Symbolism: Mankind Responding to the Natural World

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My goal is to view the symbolic world of the Sierra Otomí. I will look at the most public symbols in their religion and then examine the native concepts that lie behind them. These interpretations were developed during more than 30 years studying and writing about their culture.

The Sierra Otomí are a cultural group of Mesoamerican Indians who live in the mountains to the northeast of Mexico City. Although not often stated, the difficulty that Euro-Mexicans have with the Otomí language has inhibited the understanding of the group. This situation is now being corrected by a more intense effort to study the language and culture (e.g., Bernard and Salinas Pedraza 1989, Lastra 2001). As an illustration of the problems created by the language one can cite the issue of pronouncing the correct name of the linguistic group. The proper name is "Ñähñu." In the International Phonetic Alphabet Ñähñu is written as *nanu* and is derived from "na" meaning "word" or "speech" and *nu* meaning "nose." Thus Ñähñu means "nasal word" or "the nasal language." European language speakers have difficulty recognizing and pronouncing the voiceless palatal nasal *n* in this word. It is pronounced by putting the tongue to the roof of the mouth and expelling air without sounding the vocal chords.

The Ñähñu people have a very old culture that predates the Aztecs. Most of the speakers of Ñähñu live in the highlands. The culture there was changed most radically by the Spanish because it was a region of haciendas during the colonial period. The haciendas lasted through the

19th century. However, the hacienda system did not reach into the mountains to the east where the sierra branch of this group lives. Figure 1 shows the location of the Sierra Ñähñu in 1990.¹ There were approximately 49,300 speakers of Ñähñu there in 2001.

The Sierra Ñähñu population is located in the states of Hidalgo (28,300) and in adjacent regions of the states of Puebla (5,900) and Veracruz (15,100).² Although the Indians are the largest ethnic group in some *municipios*, the *municipio* governments are usually controlled by smaller Spanish-speaking elites.³ Profits to be made from trade, cattle ranching, and coffee production have attracted such elites into the sierra. The Indians are the poorest segment of this multi-ethnic society. *Municipio* government usually represents the interests of a town-dwelling *mestizo* elite.

In the 16th century, Augustinian monks brought the Holy Catholic Church to the area and attempted to evangelize the Indians. The Augustinian chronicler Esteban García (1918) reported that the Sierra Ñähñu were still worshiping their own idols in the 17th century after considerable effort by the Augustinians to convert them. When I first went to study the area in 1967, the Catholic Church in Tutotepec was still unable to attract the Indian population. The Catholics had offended the Ñähñu by deprecating some of their most sacred idols. Even today Catholic ideas and customs are only part of the native religion. Although the Augustinian monks left in the 18th century, leaving behind many buildings, only a

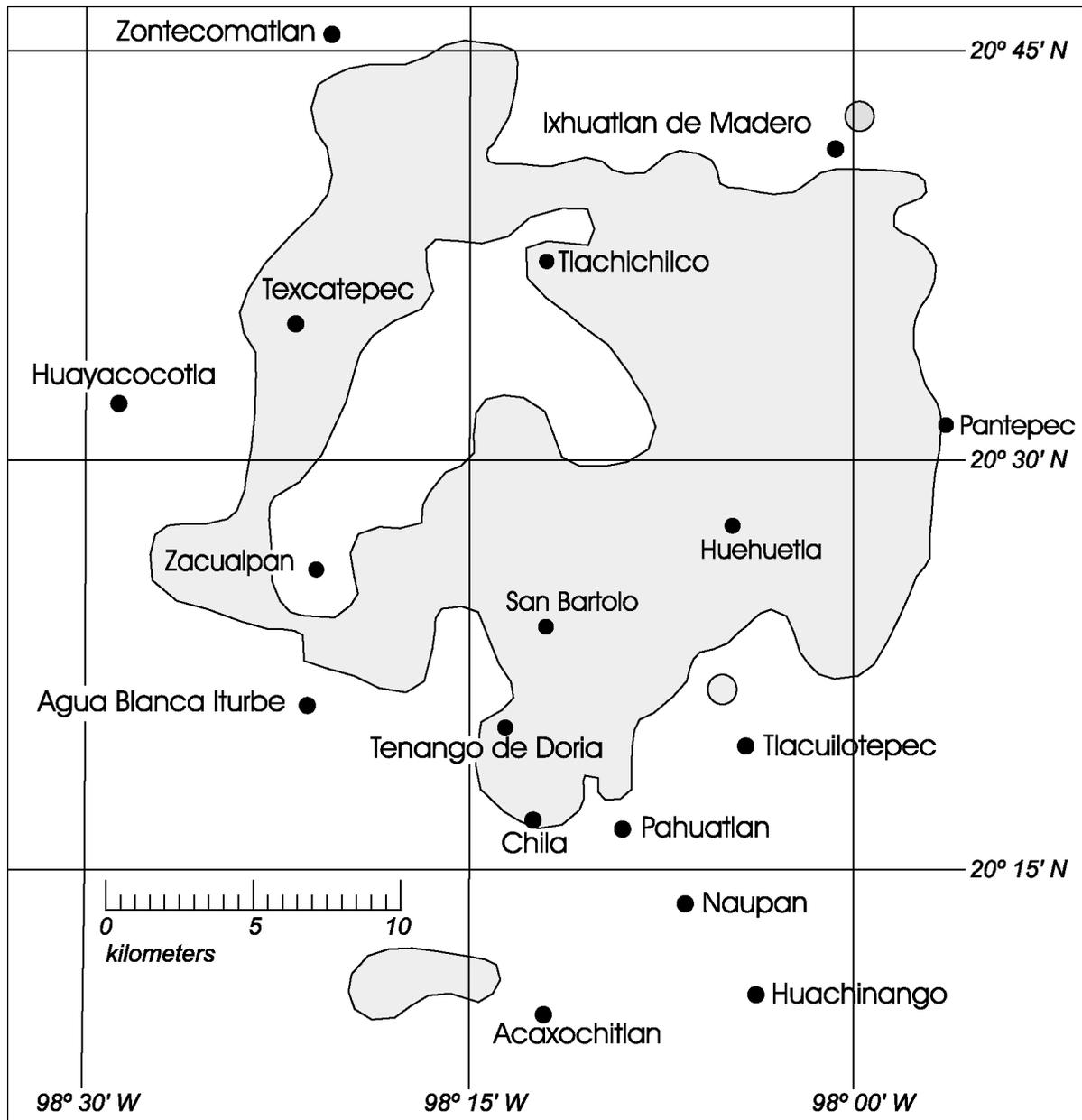


Figure 1. The area occupied by the Sierra Nāhñu

partial impression of Roman Catholicism remained. Today, because it is the religion of the powerful classes and, hence, the most politically correct religion, Catholicism in the region is more visible to outsiders. This makes it an excellent entry point for our view of Sierra Nāhñu religion.

Each *municipio* has a parish church with a resident priest. The church is located in the capital town (*cabecera*) of the *municipio*. Sometimes the Bishop will visit the parish church to baptize infants and in general show support by the priestly hierarchy. People, especially the townsfolk, appreciate his presence because it lends status to their

municipio. But the Bishop never—and the priest seldom—visits the other communities in the *municipio*, the *pueblos* and *rancherías*. However, the *pueblos* do have churches left over from the evangelizing work of the Augustinians. For example, the *pueblo* of San Pablo El Grande in the *municipio* of Tenango de Doria, Hidalgo, has an old church, the origins of which seem to be in the 17th century. During the annual *fiesta* of Saint Paul (*San Pablo*) the doorway of the church is festooned with leaves and flower images. An image of Saint Paul is kept inside and is paraded around the village with other images in the evenings of the *fiesta*

days. There is a cross associated with this church, but it is not inside. It is outside the church and is decorated with a large flower design made of palm leaves (see Figure 2) during *fiestas*. Crosses are important symbols for the Sierra Náhñu, but they always are covered with flowers and foliage during rituals, so much so, that they look more like the pre-Columbian foliated cross than the Christian cross. The cross with its flower decorations actually symbolizes Jesus and God Sun together. Every holy building, church and oratory (*oratorio*), has a cross associated with it. A small private *oratorio* may have its cross inside on the wall opposite the altar, but a larger *oratorio* or church will display its cross more prominently, outside and in front, on its own altar. So stands the cross of the San Pablo church.



Figure 2. The Cross and Sun-Flower in front of the San Pablo church.

Appointed officials, *mayordomos*, care for the images that belong to the *pueblo* as a whole. Every image also has a *padrino* (godfather), but if the image is owned by a family, no *mayordomo* is necessary, because the owners and the *padrino* share the leadership of the *fiesta*. I have been told that the *padrino* is the most important steward of an

image. However, the prestige created by the conspicuous public spending of *mayordomos* sometimes overshadows that of the *padrinos* in larger communities. The San Pablo church has three images on the main altar: the Virgin of Guadalupe, Saint Paul (*San Pablo*), and Saint Peter (*San Pedro*). Two Christ (*Cristo*) images in niches on opposite walls flank the main altar.

In 1990, the village elders appointed only three *mayordomos*, one each for the images on the main altar. They promised to make the offerings and to hold feasts to honor their saints. The rituals for the *Cristos* were supported by public contributions, not by a single *mayordomo*. This situation illustrates a change in religion that is taking place throughout the Sierra Náhñu area. Men are no longer willing to bear all the expenses of sponsoring a *pueblo* image as a *mayordomo*. In the past, each image had several ranked *mayordomos*, and men vied to be allowed to accept this honor of sponsorship. But the economy has changed and along with it the religion. Wages are coming into the communities from migrants who go as far away as the United States to earn money. At home, this largess can be well invested in houses or land, so the urge to capture prestige by sponsoring a public image has diminished. San Pablo has solved this problem by opening up *mayordomo* sponsorship to ambitious young men who have earned enough excess wealth that they can afford to spend some of it on public displays. In previous years, *mayordomships* only went to the older and respected conservative members of the community. In the background, however, today the older men watch over the *fiesta* to make sure that the village saints are well treated, hence, the community support for rituals for the two *Cristos* who would otherwise be neglected. In other Sierra Náhñu *pueblos*, the changing economy and the pressure to spend all one's wealth on religious *fiestas* has encouraged the growth of Protestant sects that have reduced expenditures on *fiestas* (Dow 2001).

Mobile altars on which the three saints are carried stand at the back of the church. They are decorated with flower fans and stalks of corn. The *fiesta* takes place each year when the corn is just beginning to ripen and when the fresh ears (*elotes*) can be eaten. It is a festive time. In the evening, the images are taken from the church on their mobile altars to enjoy the fireworks outside with the people. They are lit by candlelight on the hill next to the plaza and wait with their supporters

to see the fireworks ordered by the *mayordomos*. A tower of fireworks (*castillo*) bursts with an ascending fumarole of sparks, smoke, and noise to reach a crowning pinwheel that sails off into the night sky.

This public view of religion appears somewhat Catholic; however, when one looks at what people believe and practice in their homes, something different emerges. One sees an animistic view of the world that is closely attuned to nature. For example, away from the church in San Pablo another scene takes place. Men sit in front of a oratory all day, drinking, chatting, and meticulously making flower offerings to be laid in front of the images in the church. It is a particularly auspicious place for men to gather, for inside the oratory are other images belonging to an old family in the *pueblo*.

Oratories are small buildings built very carefully to be the homes of religious images. Of all cultural features beyond language, this is the one that most closely links the Sierra Nāhñu to their Nāhñu brethren in the rest of the highlands. Otherwise, the current religion of the Sierra Nāhñu bears a closer resemblance to the religions of the Tepehua and Nahua than it does to the religion of the highland Nāhñu, who have assimilated more of the post-colonial Spanish-speaking culture.

A well-off Sierra Nāhñu family will build an oratory to house its most precious images. They may be of Catholic saints, but they may also be images of non-Catholic beings. These other precious images are called *antiguas* or ancients, an appropriate name because some of them are pre-Columbian in origin. These *antiguas* have their own myths of power. Shamans are able to identify them and pass on their names. The Catholic priest in Tutotepec in the 1960s failed to recognize people's belief in these images thus causing many people to become angry with him and the Catholic Church in general. In the Indian language, all the beings whose images are kept in oratories and churches are known as *zidāhmu*, "respected great lords." The images are the points in space to which the life force of the beings are called by ritual.

The concept of life force (*zaki*) is probably the most important idea in Sierra Nāhñu religion. *Zaki* is an animating force that brings all living things to life. Without *zaki* the world would be a dead place. Nothing would change. The sun would not move in the sky. Plants would not

grow. Animals would not move. Sierra Nāhñu shamans are experts who study and understand this other dimension, the dimension of *zaki*.

Shamans study the hidden nature of *zaki* and are respected for their work, which may involve visionary contact with unseen beings. Not all that happens in the world of *zaki* is good. Sorcerers are the incompetent fools who try to manipulate these forces for selfish ends. Shamans say that sorcerers outnumber good folk. I have not met any sorcerers, but they are not likely to reveal themselves. One must seek out sorcerers secretly, because if other members of the community found one doing this there would be serious repercussions. They are not an easy group to study. I know that sorcery exists because I have found sorcery figures by the Tenango graveyard. Figure 3 shows one of these figures. It has been burned and the eye and feet have been mutilated. The intent here was to destroy the *zaki* of the person by attracting it and mutilating it near the graveyard where the souls of those who have died a bad death would attack it.

Shamans have to fight these evil forces. Don Antonio is a shaman who works in the *municipio* of Tenango de Doria (Dow 1986). The following items for the fight can be found on his altar.

(1) Paper figures representing the *zaki* of a patient (see Figure 4). Around the edges of the human figure are the figures of the patient's animal companions, his *rogi*.

(2) Plant and flower offerings.

(3) Long candles to illuminate the evening offering to the gods.

(4) Votive candles for the altar.

(5) The shaman's wands covered with ribbons and paper figures. These attract the *zaki* of tutelary beings that help the shaman in his visions.

(6) A chest containing *antiguas*, two of which are the special teachers of the shaman.

(7) A censer used to activate the figures and offerings and to divine solutions for problems.

A shaman, too has his or her oratory. Here, he or she conducts healing rituals on a daily basis and, from time to time, rituals for the adoration of the traditional deities, the non-Catholic ones. Before a ritual of adoration, called a *costumbre*, the shaman will divine how many offerings are required. Many unseen beings participate as well. Don Antonio puts it this way:

When you make a *costumbre* there in your land, and as you remember your friends, call

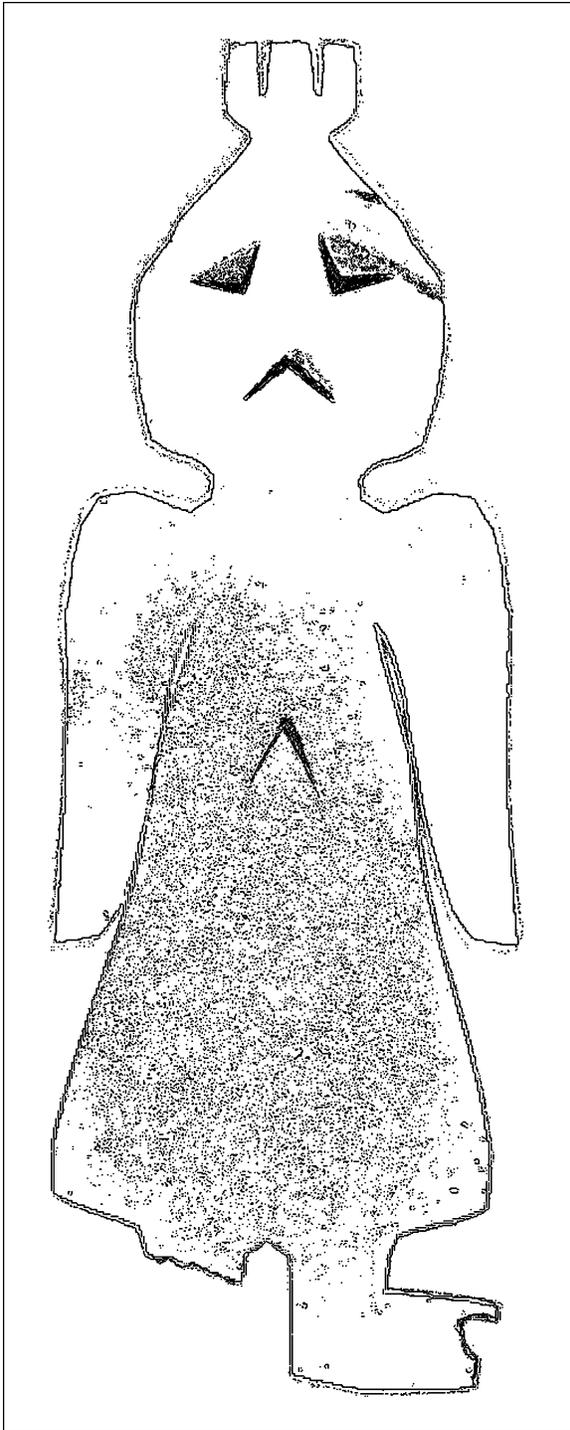


Figure 3. A Sorcery Figure.

them to the meal with the censer. Put incense in the embers four times, and the spirits of your friends will arrive. Even though they're sleeping and far away, they'll come. The spirit of someone does not sleep. They'll not delay in arriving. Just think of them and they'll come. My friends number 60. I've se-

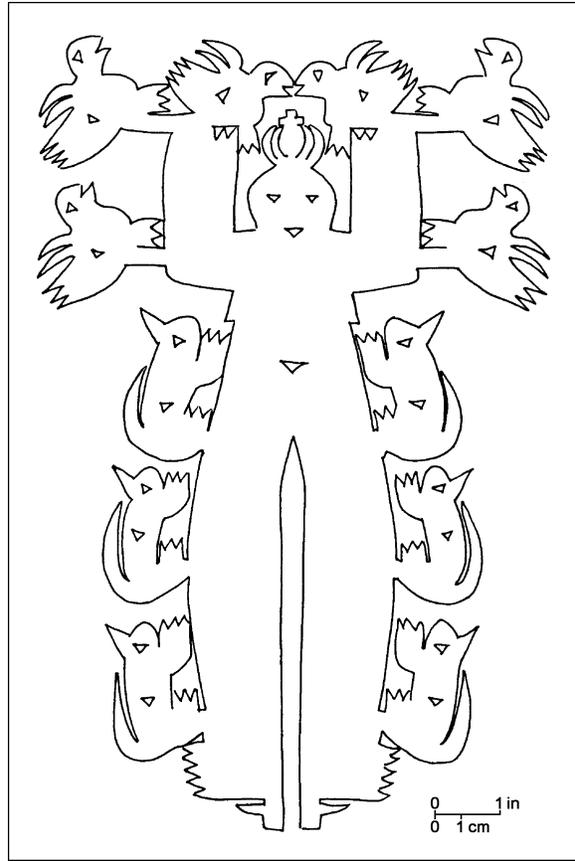


Figure 4. A Figure of the *zaki* of a Patient with Animal Protectors.

lected those who are good. I call only upon them and not on bad friends. So, all will come to the *costumbre*, and all will share with me [Dow 1986:73].

The ritual of adoration is just one of the many traditional rituals. The Sierra Nāhñu are noted for their use of paper figures in these rituals (Sandstrom and Sandstrom 1986). The paper figures represent the *zaki* of the beings that are addressed. The shaman gains some power over the beings by manipulating the figures. Let us take a particular case, the healing of a sick patient. The patient can be healed magically at a distance, but usually he or she comes to the oratory of the shaman. He or she sits in the oratory for a while to personally pray to the shaman's *zidāhmu*, whose images are on the altar. Then, the shaman comes in for a consultation not just with the patient but with other unseen beings. Don Antonio puts it this way:

A shaman never has to ask someone else about a illness. The little virgin (an *antigua* called Delfina) I have here tells me everything about an illness. No matter what time

of day it is, she informs me that patients will be coming. She gives me the information as if it were a dream. When I look like I'm resting or catnapping, she's telling me how to do one thing or another. So everything is detailed. So always remember there is nothing to worry about. There in your consciousness everything will be left [Dow 1986:55].

Inside a chest on the altar, Don Antonio has an image of Delfina, one of his two most important *antiguas*. The image has a tiny porcelain female face, which seems to have come from an antique doll. A patient may be allowed to hold this image with the hope of receiving some of the healing power of this miraculous tutelary being.

After the consultation, a paper figure representing the *zaki* of the patient may be left on the altar to receive the protection of the beings that arrive there. If the patient has been attacked by evil winds (*dahi*), a cleaning (*hokwi*) is required. The shaman cuts figures of the evil winds from tissue paper and lays them out on a bed of tissue paper and newspaper. If the sickness is particularly bad, the shaman may see that the evil winds have been commanded by a higher evil being who was bribed by a sorcerer. In this case, an appeal also needs to be made to this being. A *hokwi* that makes an additional appeal to higher evil beings is called the "large" *hokwi*. Otherwise it is just the "regular" *hokwi*.

Santa Catarina is one of these beings. I was never able to determine where its name came from. It is a male monster that is aided by evil companion animals. In a large *hokwi* involving *Santa Catarina*, the figures of the evil animal companions are then tied to the figure of *Santa Catarina*. The "altar" on which these figures are placed is the dirt floor of the house. They would never be placed on the raised altar, for that is for good beings. They are surrounded by candles and threads with magical powers that prevent the *zaki* from escaping the encirclement. They are offered money, rum, and cigarettes to attract the *zaki* into the circle. After the offerings have been made, the bundle is wrapped and passed over the patient, other persons present, the house, and its furnishings. Because the *zaki* of these beings are dangerous, the bundle is thrown away after the patients and house have been swept clean with it. I was able to photograph the figures before the ceremony began, because they had not started to attract *zaki* at that time. They have to be bathed in

the smoke of the censer and sprinkled with the blood of a sacrificial chicken before they begin their work.

There are many other evil beings that can command the evil winds such as Lightning Bolt and The Devil. Traditional bark paper is used for the worst beings. The tradition of making bark paper has continued among the Sierra Náhñu in order to supply shamans with the material they need to cut figures of evil beings. Plain writing paper and tiseled paper are used for the *zaki* of the good beings. The Sierra Náhñu of San Pablito have also started a business selling the paper to outsiders through handicraft markets. Outsiders evaluate the paper in a reverse fashion. They believe the handmade bark paper, closely resembling pre-Columbian paper, to be the most valuable. Yet these beliefs in evil beings provide a rationale and a means for psychologically escaping some of the hardships of life, a very valuable cultural trait in itself. If shamans did not have the bark paper, they would not be able to do their good work.

An animistic view of the world underlies all the rituals and symbolism of the Sierra Náhñu religion. Everything that has *zaki* is a being, and beings are ranked by the power of their *zaki*. The most powerful being of all is *Maka Hyādi* (God Sun) who transmits his powerful *zaki* to all living beings below him. On the top of a nearby sacred mountain, *Maka Hyādi* is worshiped at a shrine of crosses. *Maka Hyādi* and Jesus are regarded as the same, and the foliated cross is his symbol. Thus Christianity has entered the religion at the top. However it is the historical *Maka Hyādi* who governs the cosmology not the historical Jesus. This religion is very ecological, for according to modern science, the sun is the primary source of energy for all life on earth. Another life-giving god is *Maka Sumpe Dehe* (Goddess Lady Water). Again, Sierra Náhñu cosmology recognizes the fundamental sources of life in the biosphere.

Animals have a lesser *zaki* than humans with one exception, the animal companions called *rogi*. These are thought to be real animals with supernatural protective power to help other beings, especially humans, to whom they belong. They are born at the same time as their human companions and they protect them throughout their lives.

Thus, the religion relates people to nature. It evolved from centuries of living close to nature

in a subsistence-based agricultural economy. Although it is a profound expression of the relationship between humans and the natural world, it would be a mistake to equate it with modernistic Euro-American environmental concepts. It does not contain an ethic of technological conservation or sustainability. It is a religious rather than technical solution. It sees humans as part of a web of life with moral imperatives that are different from those being generated by scientific biological ecology. It tries to solve ecological problems through ritual rather than through technological change.

The Sierra Nāhñu rituals do have some material consequences that help to regulate the human environmental ecosystem such as those discovered by Rappaport in New Guinea (Rappaport 1967). For example, only the best seeds are selected to present to *Maka Hyādi* in the spring fertility ritual.⁴ Thus ritual supports good plant breeding. However, it has failed to control human population. The area is now overpopulated relative to the agricultural resources and consequently suffers from high rates of poverty. So although we as humans build these spiritual links to nature and to ourselves, modern science still has something to tell us about our actions and our fate.

End Notes

1. This map was produced by the author with the help of the bilingual school teachers who live and work in the region.

2. Note that the speakers do not include children less than five years of age, so the actual Nāhñu population is larger.

3. In these states, the executive power of the state is divided into *municipios*, each of which is governed by a president (*presidente*). The territory

of most sierra *municipios* is smaller than an American county.

4. Seeds contain the *zaki* of plants. The paper figures representing the *zaki* of plants are called "seeds."

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