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LIFE AND DEATH IN THE MAZAHUA WORLDVIEW IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

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ABSTRACT
In response to the confinement measures enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic, a series of narratives emerged in the Mazahua ethnic region of central Mexico that were deeply connected to the Mesoamerican worldview of this people. This research aims to analyse the reasons why such narratives gained greater prominence in this context and to examine how these narratives manifest in situations of heightened morbidity and mortality. Through ethnographic fieldwork, including testimonial and in-depth interviews conducted immediately after the pandemic, narratives about the experience of confinement in several Mazahua communities were produced and uncovered. These narratives reveal that the Mesoamerican beliefs of the Mazahua people are often collectively kept in the background during times of harmony but resurface with intensity during periods of morbidity and mortality. The study particularly found that Mazahua beliefs are not centred on an affirmative search for truth but rather on a thought process oriented toward existential being.

KEYWORDS: worldview • COVID-19 pandemic • death • Mazahua ethnic group

INTRODUCTION

This paper* explores the beliefs surrounding life and death among the Mazahua people, an indigenous people of central Mexico, as reflected in post-pandemic narratives of covid 19. In this work, narrative will be understood as a discourse that orders experience through cultural devices. However, the Mazahua culture although strong, was hidden, expressed in silence. Why do these narratives emerge with greater intensity in contexts of increased morbidity and mortality? The anthropological interest lies in analysing mentality and culture and how it causes ethnic thought to emerge as a sur-

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vival response strategy in the face of fear and pain. Additionally, group thinking is identified as a civilising proposal, revealing a structured system of thought that helps the Mazahuas interact with their environment and contemporaries. To address these questions, this research compares the narrative put forward by both the state and the media (which disputed the truth about the cause, isolation, contagion, death statistics, importance of COVID-19 tests, use of vaccines, and vaccination strategy, among others; a narrative that wishes to possess affirmatively the truth about the COVID-19 pandemic), with the vernacular Mazahua narrative. As will be demonstrated, Mazahua popular thought is sacrificial and existential, rather than affirmative. This sacrificial and existential thought articulates death and life in a continuum defined by concrete ritual actions and cosmological animist beliefs, leading the Mazahua to take responsibility for themselves and to address their illness using their own cultural tools.

In Mexico, confinement due to the COVID-19 pandemic occurred from March to June 2020. Many inhabitants of the Mazahua ethnic region took refuge for as long as their household income allowed. According to testimonies, particularly from Mazahuas living in Mexico City who returned to their communities (FM 2021: WEPG; MSAH; MSAM),[1] deaths related to COVID-19 were witnessed during the early stages of confinement. As a result of the restrictions on social gatherings imposed by the conditions of confinement, mortuary rituals for these deaths were austere or non-existent, leading to a kind of cultural consciousness that manifested socially as conflict. The incomplete performance of ceremonial rituals for the dead was carried out with fear and great caution, generating emotional crises, as illustrated by the following account (FM 2021: MEPG).

On the occasion of the death of a 56-year-old man, his family and neighbours, gripped by fear, did not gather to perform the mortuary rites, and a godparent for the crucifix was not chosen,[2] leaving all the responsibilities in the hands of the deceased's wife and children. The fact that the children carried the coffin – an act that is forbidden –, the limited presence of relatives or close friends, and the absence of the cross triggered, in the Mazahua worldview, a 'bad death', meaning a suffering soul. According to Mazahua animist beliefs, these souls cannot rest because they are unable to reach their final resting place, keeping them in the world of the living until they "take someone else with them" (FM 2021: WEPG). This consequence manifested mentally in the distressing nocturnal somnambulism experienced by a first cousin of the deceased, who had not attended the funeral ceremony. The cousin loudly and alarmingly advised relatives and neighbours not to participate in the mortuary ritual to avoid further contagion. When the deceased's siblings realised the symbolic effects of this lack of mortuary ritual, they reorganised the act without the body present, allowing the soul of the deceased to reach its final resting place. After this ritual act, the cousin's anguish and sleepwalking ceased.

This article examines the Mazahua worldview in the context of COVID-19 confinement during its early stages in early 2020. The fieldwork was conducted in the second half of 2021 following two questions. How did the Mazahua inhabitants respond to the narratives constructed by the state and the media around the COVID-19 pandemic, disease, and confinement? How did the Mesoamerican[3] cultural matrix regarding death and disease manifest itself during the COVID-19 pandemic? The aim of this work is to articulate the cosmological conception of life and death held by the Mazahua ethnic group in the context of the pandemic. I argue that periods of disruption in everyday

life allow for creative emergences, with the recovery of cosmological narratives being a significant aspect among the inhabitants of Mazahua communities.

METHODOLOGY

The territorial context in which the Mazahua people live is subjected to intense processes, including pendulum migrations to the Valley of Mexico for work, integration into goods and labour markets, and constant exposure to the world of images through social networks. Additionally, this region is undergoing gradual and continuous urbanisation, which supports the hypothesis of cultural erosion. A hypothesis said this cultural group did not belong to the ancient Mesoamerican tradition, but rather was a product of colonialism (Arizpe 1978: 203). However, institutions such as the neighbourhood or family oratory (Cortés 1990: 87; 2016: 177), the Day of the Dead celebration (November 1 and 2), and beliefs in mythical beings support a discourse of cultural unity grounded in Mesoamerican cosmology (Galinier 1990: 251). This idea is supported by Cristina Oehchimen (2002: 123), who recognises the Mazahua self-ascription among emigrants, noting that their beliefs travel with them and take root in new territories where they settle. The migratory process and the integration of Mazahua people into the labour market have led them to undertake occupations such as masonry, commerce, and domestic work, turning them into pendulum migrant workers who work during the weekdays in one place and return home for the weekends (González 2017: 191). In terms of political relations, they engage with all three levels of government through political parties (González 2019: 18). Despite these changes, they maintain a coherent cosmological structure that explains the semantic content of social practices, beliefs collective solidarities, and forms of body care, which were especially emphasised during the pandemic. The starting point for this research is the hypothesis that a hard core of Mesoamerican thought persists (López Austin 2003).

I conducted my fieldwork between March and December 2021, during what was considered the third wave of the pandemic, which coincided with the second round of vaccinations for adults over the age of 40. The social environment was marked by a pervasive fear of the disease. In this context, I carried out testimonial and in-depth interviews, adhering to social distancing and face mask protocols. The interviews focused on residents from the communities of Emilio Portes Gil, San Agustín Mextepec, and San Antonio de las Huertas. These interviews were possible due to my close friendships with the interviewees, who are acquaintances from previous research stays in the area, as well as my efforts to benefit their communities. These relationships were crucial, necessitating constant communication via WhatsApp or phone calls during the confinement while staying attentive to my interlocutors' communication needs.

This research is limited to the narratives of adult Mazahua generations. This limitation, arising from the selection of participants, can be justified by the fact that fieldwork was restricted to my acquaintances given the context of widespread fear. However, considering that confinement forced different generations to live together as families, the narratives, existential conflicts, and challenging mortuary rituals involved everyone. Thus, I argue that the pandemic period extended cosmological narratives to the broader society, making the narratives produced here a sample of the collective cultural sentiment.

THE MAZAHUA CULTURAL REGION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE MESOAMERICAN AREA

The region where the Mazahua language is spoken extends into the westernmost part of the State of Mexico (ten municipalities) and the easternmost part of Michoacan (four municipalities) (Image 1). Mazahua settlements are distributed among communities located around municipal capitals that centralise regional, political, and economic power.[4]

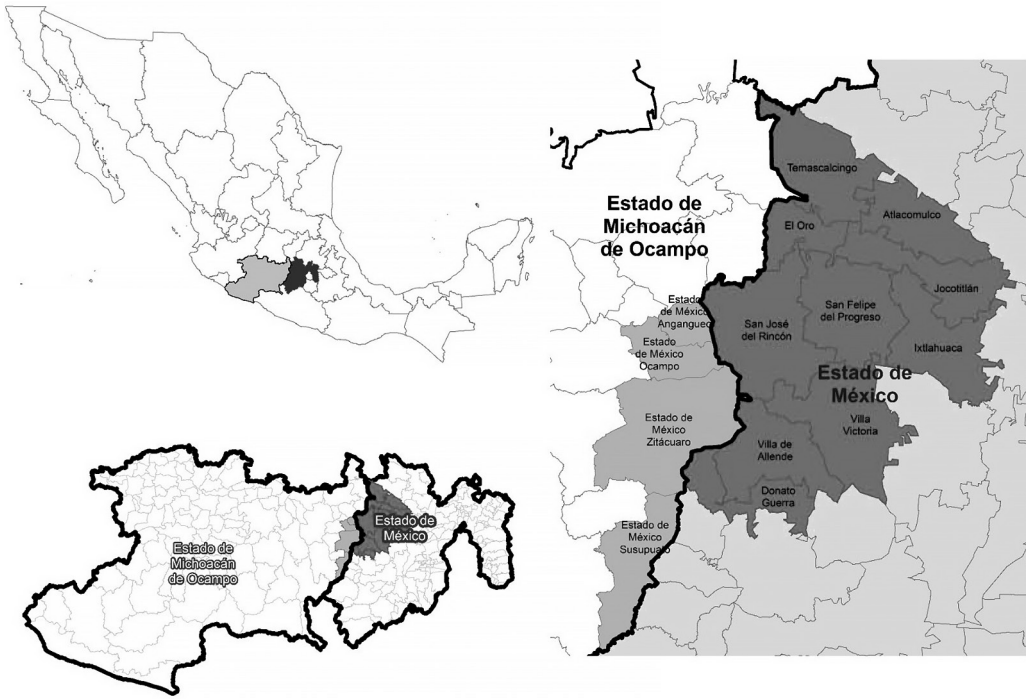

Figure 1. Mazahua area in Mexico and Michoacan states. Author's elaboration based on INEGI 2020.

In 2020, the total number of Mazahua speakers was 121,972, according to INEGI,[5] which is considered an indicator of ethnicity. Other indicators include the historical trajectory, supported by sources that indicate ancient power centres – referred to as *altepetls* in Nahuatl, the city-states before the arrival of the Spanish – in the region (García 1999: 128–129). Additionally, social and cultural practices that articulate primary or community attachments echo the functioning of the old *calpulli* (territorial neighbourhoods of lineages) (González 2005: 217). There is also a shared worldview with relative unity within the region (Galinier 1990: 251; Segundo 2014: 32) and the experience of the Spanish Conquest and colonisation, which configured a dual or bicultural culture (Gallardo Salazar 2007: 54).

Defining the Mazahua ethnic cultural region presents some complications, as it is a culturally and territorially heterogeneous area with people who do not always identify

with the ethnic group. Furthermore, processes of urbanisation and integration into markets for goods, money, and labour add to this complexity, creating a region of intense flux comprising individuals' largely bilingual, bicultural, and multicultural characteristics. However, the most accurate definition considers the Mazahua people as a cultural group that maintains its Mesoamerican ethnic identity in a deep and relatively discrete dimension, despite being overshadowed by these processes of intense integration into the capitalist market and urbanisation. Biculturalism is the most characteristic quality of this ethnic group.

Here I observe how death is integrated into Mazahua beliefs about life, an aspect that compels individuals to relate the planting and cultivation of corn with death, both viewed as sacrificial elements essential for generating life. This sacrificial sense serves as an integrating matrix of life and death (Matos 1994: 59). The concept of psychic substances housed in the body with territorial and cosmic expression (López Austin 2000: 40) is another aspect intertwined with the cultural matrix of the region. These resonances of Mazahua culture will be illustrated within the context of the pandemic.

RESULTS: CONTEXT AND DISPUTE IN THE NARRATIVES SURROUNDING THE PANDEMIC

The continuous and significant flow of COVID-19 cases in Mazahua communities resonated narratively when relating the deaths of those neighbours who originally came from Mexico City. This distinction generated a notable collective murmur and intensified general rumours around this type of mortality. As a woman from the community of San Antonio de las Huertas remarked: "There were a few from here, but some came from Mexico City … that did happen, as if they died there and were buried here in the cemetery. Of those, there were many! My God!" (FM 2021: WSAH)

This account reflects a fragmented Mazahua community, where inhabitants distinguish between those living locally and those who have migrated. The tragedy experienced in such communities, which spans multiple territories, was felt in a fragmented manner, as rural areas experienced the disease less intensely than urban centres. Nonetheless, the collective sentiment expressed a profound suffering due to the arrival of neighbours and relatives from the Valley of Mexico metropolis. This was experienced in two ways: many bodies of the deceased were brought back to their places of origin, and many individuals carried the virus. A resident from Emilio Portes Gil said: "No, brother! X's wife arrived here and didn't realise she had the virus … she was asymptomatic, she was infected … they intended to quarantine here, in the countryside, in the community … and it got worse." (FM 2021: MEPG)

Can these informants' accounts be interpreted as a form of negation of the animism associated to the bodies susceptible to transmission? Although regional hospitals were not overwhelmed by the care associated with this morbidity, the phenomenological intensity with which the disease and mortality were experienced is evident. Many people died or convalesced at home. This situation connects with the widely held belief in the Mazahua area that hospitalisation equates to imminent death, a topic I will revisit.

The COVID-19 pandemic, a global emergency caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, disrupted the usual course of actions and redefined the sense of reality. It altered the

social, temporal, and spatial parameters that provide emotional and cognitive stability to social groups. Life during the pandemic generated a new form of disorientation, exacerbating the feeling of living in an unstable world.[6]

In response, the Mazahua people faced a choice between constructing their own narrative or adhering to those created by the media (market) and government (state). The Mazahua narrative emerged as a reinforcement of the Mesoamerican worldview in contrast to the limited symbolic effectiveness of competing narratives.

The state's narrative surrounding the pandemic and the construction of a new reality was based on public isolation measures, though allowing free movement in public spaces (especially for those without fixed incomes), science-based criteria, validated by the academic prestige of journals reporting on SARS-CoV-2 morbidity, and an open-ended information approach showing daily disease frequency and mortality. Conversely, the media's narrative often challenged the state's account, presenting alternative experts and spectacularly highlighting tragedies in other countries. It compared government strategies, minimising government achievements, emphasised the impending economic crisis, and consistently reported higher numbers of deaths and illnesses than those provided by the government. These contradictory and confusing narratives from both the state and the market (i.e. media) influenced social subjectivity, personal opinions, and perceptions of the new reality.

Both narratives lacked local semantic relevance. They competed for affirmative truth, imposing themselves on local semiotics as it experienced the effects of COVID-19 firsthand. Consequently, the narratives developed by the Mazahua people regarding life and death gained significant coherence compared to the ambiguous and contentious discourses of the pandemic. Thus, while dominant narratives contended over the truth of pandemic experiences, local Mazahua semantics necessitated the formation of its own narrative rooted in their worldview. This approach contributed to the cognitive and emotional management of the pandemic and allowed the Mazahua people to experience it within their own semantic framework, oriented not towards an affirmative determination of truth, but rather towards a cosmological and existential perspective.

POPULAR EXISTENTIAL THOUGHT AND AFFIRMATIVE THOUGHT

Rudolf Kusch (2008: 50) argues that the negation of popular thought in favour of scientific thought, as endorsed by both the state and Western markets, reflects the opposition between the logic used by colonisers and that used by the colonised. Consequently, a sovereign Mazahua indigenous thinking positioned itself outside the bounds of scientific thought. This form of deep thought among the Mazahua people aimed at survival or the discovery of a new cultural horizon, one less inclined toward power and more aligned with collective solidarity. This possibility arose within a bicultural framework, expressed in times of crisis as a double-bind relationship (Ugazio 2001: 115).

Mazahua thought represents a worldview comprising a set of collective beliefs and opinions – expressed in stories, legends, and myths – that serve to give meaning to the world, to people's lives within their organisational environment, and to each individual's body (López Austin 2000: 209). As Kusch (2008) noted, this type of thinking does

not focus on distinguishing between true and false but instead exists as an existential thought rooted in being. It is not about knowing for the sake of knowing, but about knowing to give existential meaning to the act of being in the world. The existential formula is "know to live, not live to know" (ibid.: 39).

In the example mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the mother of the sleepwalking cousin decides to attend the funeral, fully aware of the dangers of contagion, illness, and even death. Her decision was based on the belief that if she did not attend, the absence of participation in the mortuary ritual would result in the deceased's soul becoming an afflicted, suffering one, a situation that could then affect her "when it is her turn to leave" (FM 2021: MEPG) or cause the afflicted soul to torment her until she fell ill and died. This belief indicates that deaths, including those by COVID-19, are events integrated into the actions and expectations of the rules of reciprocity: if someone dies today, the living are expected to accompany them to the grave so that, when their turn to die comes, other living will accompany them. Such a sense of reciprocity in death is rooted in the Mazahua culture's sacrificial matrix, where the violence inherent to death is mitigated by incorporating sacrifice into the rules of reciprocity between people. Traditional rationality within the Mazahua ethnic group faced a decision: whether to avoid attending the wake of the recently deceased, or to conform to the official narrative.

The double-bind or bicultural nature of the narratives this woman was exposed to include those from affirmative science (encouraged by some of her relatives, including her son, who tried to prevent her from attending the event) and those from cosmological consciousness (which compelled her to attend the event to prevent the deceased's soul from becoming a suffering soul). This combination constituted the basis for her decision to attend the ritual mortuary act while maintaining social distance and wearing a mask. The outcome of this decision was the creation of a suffering soul that troubled the neighbours who adhered to the dominant scientific discourse (including the deceased's cousin, the woman's son, who suddenly developed somnambulism), thereby confirming that failing to follow traditional practices surrounding death leads to consequences that can be interpreted within the Mazahua worldview. The substance of the soul is integral to Mazahua thought, as all individuals possess a vital substance that changes form and consistency with death but remains ever-present.

Denying the official narrative of the state and the market does not imply rejecting their existence, rather it projects the validity of Mazahua thought as an original social group and civilisation in this part of the world. To follow the official narrative would mean denying one's own thought and, with it, authenticity, effectively abandoning the dispute for history and surrendering in the arena of multiple ways of thinking. It is not that the narrative that seeks to articulate the truth, as advocated by the state and the market, is denied, but rather that its invasive quality is measured, and its colonising intention is limited through the deployment of the Mazahua narrative within the framework of their worldview.

This is the empirical characteristic of biculturalism. Mazahua thought possesses a quality of indeterminacy, representing a zone of disturbance in the face of the hegemonic current of thought that defines itself as the champion of truth (Botey 2014: 37). In this context, Mazahua thought rises with its own disruptive aesthetics, subtly but openly questioning the dominant semantics. The organising principle of Mazahua and Mesoamerican thought is dualistic, not unitary as Western thought purports to be.

Hence, the possibility of presenting one's own thought in the social or public arena as opposed to the unitary or affirmative thought of a single truth. Consequently, Mazahua thought, in collective secrecy, denies the truths that the state and the market intend to produce as absolute. This denial generates a narrative dispute, which became particularly visible during the pandemic.

Kusch (2008) asserts that in the thinking of the American peoples (beginning with the Andean peoples, though the approach is applicable to Mesoamericans), the existential structure is based more on staying than on being. Thus, negation refers more to the existential than the ontological; this thought is not concerned with definitions per se, but with what exists (ibid.: 102). This type of existentialism does not commit to rationality or the future (Láscaris Comneno 2009: 2), a stance held in Western affirmative thought. On the contrary, within the dual position of this thought, one part remains in a state of permanence (perpetuity), not as irrational or vegetative, as Constantino Láscaris Comneno (ibid.: 3) suggests, but as the emergence of Mesoamerican being in the face of the incapacity of the rational being of Western affirmative thought.

In the case of the Mazahua, cultural duality is experienced through Western affirmative thinking, in which they are inevitably subsumed, and through the worldview, which structures a type of thinking that seeks to give meaning to the existential being. Following and interpreting Kusch's framework, the cosmological narratives of the Mazahuas during the pandemic can be read as a denial of the affirmation (the 'truth') that the state and the market sought to impose.

This is a worldview that uses narrative denial to establish its own truth, or is it a narrative that denies, precisely because of the impossibility of searching for truths? Mazahua thought, as an existential thought, declares itself to be in perpetuity, that is, being permanently transformed by its quality of being, without ceasing to be. Miguel Bartolomé (2006: 103) referred to this process as cultural transfiguration, a continuous reinvention in response to external cultural events that, due to their inevitability, come to affect existence, being. External phenomena become part of the Mazahua existential world, reinforcing its dual cultural quality. Death and illness can surprise anyone existentially. From the perspective of being, the world is understood through the cognitive framework provided by beliefs. This existential approach predisposes a sacrificial device: the assimilation of the Western Other, modern institutions, the knowledge that the Other claims to be universal (and true), the history written by the foreigner (Kusch 2008: 125–126), and the insertion into the market of goods, labour, and money, which reduces agriculture to a complement. One becomes both the object and the subject of this existential sacrifice. This is the essence of bicultural existentialism.

THE PREDISPOSITION TOWARDS A SACRIFICIAL LIFE ENTAILS MAKING OFFERINGS

The sacrificial device is evident in the practice of offerings to the gods and ancestors to ensure continued existence. This act of sacrifice also involves making an offering of oneself. Sacrifice, in this context, projects reciprocity with the earth. Death, in this existential dimension, compels one to become nourishment for the earth, an object of digestion, which characterises the concept of Mictlán[7] (Matos 1994: 48). The predisposition

towards sacrifice is a fundamental component of Mazahua thought, as noted by Jacques Galinier (1990: 254). This sacrificial device constitutes a foundation for the existential thought of this people. What may initially seem like a loss or deprivation of an object or body should be understood as a gain. In Mazahua thought, to sacrifice is not to eliminate but to separate a catalytic element from a living whole, reactivating cosmic energy. Galinier (ibid.) argues that sacrifice is crucial for understanding Mazahua culture, as it represents a collective symbol that constructs the sense of reality within the world order, integrating both natural and supernatural dimensions. Consequently, death is not viewed as a loss but as a necessary sacrifice for the continuation of life. Life and death are seen as distinct transcendent states that enhance and sustain existential being. The practice of sacrifice ensures continuity in life despite death. The notion of death as a transition from one state to another is illustrated in the myth of the first Mazahua peasant, as described by Esteban Segundo Romero (2014: 237–238):

> In ancient times, food was abundant, but as the population grew, it became scarce. The first Mazahua man needed to plant corn and sought a way to do so. On the first day, he went to the field, cleared it of weeds and stones, ploughed the land, and prepared it for sowing the next day. He returned home. On the second day, he rose very early, prepared his food, and took his coa, shovel, and corn seed to the field. To his surprise, he found the prepared land had become level again, as if he had done nothing the previous day. He cleared the land once more to prepare it for planting the next day and then returned home to rest. On the third day, he arrived early, armed with his coa, seed, and water, only to find the field level again. At that moment, he heard a voice from the earth asking, "Do you really want to plant corn?" "Yes", he replied. "I want to plant so that my family will not lack food." The earth responded, "If so, let's make a deal. I will allow you to sow corn and harvest enough to eat, in exchange for you becoming my food when you die." The man agreed to the deal. Henceforth, the Mazahua people have sown and harvested corn.

The planting of maize is framed as a sacrificial act, symbolising the return of the dead body to the earth to facilitate the birth of new beings, both maize and humans.[8] This myth represents the establishment of a transcendental pact between the earth and Mazahua humanity, a pact of reciprocity. This idea of sacrifice organises the universe of this covenant: to live, one must become an offering to the earth. Sacrifice involves descending into darkness, immersing oneself in residuality, and transforming into an offering. For the Mazahua people, both life and death are sacrifices, as they are parts of a continuum where being is transformed. Offering oneself to the earth represents a transcendental act, recycling humanity itself. However, there are varying ways to die. A Mazahua woman from Emilio Portes Gil, who experienced illness, said: "Dying of COVID is a bad death; it is dreadful. The cold penetrates to the bone, and the inability to breathe is horrible. You have nightmares, and sometimes the dead come for you, only to let you go." (FM 2021: WEPG)

In Mazahua culture, bad deaths are those resulting from drowning, asphyxiation, or murder. Drowning and suffocation impede breathing, akin to the experience of COVID-19. Additionally, a bad death is associated with the failure of close relatives to participate in mortuary rites, which can be interpreted as not adequately preparing the deceased as an offering for the earth. During the early months of the pandemic, fear

influenced collective behaviour to the extent that a debate arose between adhering to tradition or setting it aside during the period of illness. The Mazahua people, having a dual culture, faced a paradox of double linkage (Ugazio 2001: 215), resolving it by adhering to their Mesoamerican cultural practices. The same woman recounts:

> When X died, I immediately prepared an omelette and left the house to offer my condolences to Y (the wife), but my children wouldn't let me go. They said, "How can we not attend? Who will be present at our funeral when we die? We need to be there!" My children worried that I would get infected and die. It was very difficult. In the end, we went, but from a distance – without greeting, almost without making eye contact. It wasn't the same; X died very alone. That was the most painful thing. (FM 2021: WEPG)

Younger generations may be more aligned with Western perspectives, contrasting with older generations. Nevertheless, this narrative, from the woman's perspective within the Mazahua worldview, reflects an act of symbolic reciprocity with relatives, neighbours, and the Earth: if one does not attend to the death rites of another, there will be no one to attend one's own. Failing to prepare the deceased as an offering signifies abandonment, resulting in a bad death since the person dies without the protection of primary affections. Ritual mediation is required for the deceased to achieve the status of offering.

Segundo Romero (2016: 37) notes that offering involves reverence to the venerable lords, including ancestors. In the Mazahua language, reverence is termed *s'engua yo ts'sita*; the first part of the term phonetically resembles *zengua*, meaning to greet or offer. To offer entails a cycle of giving–receiving–giving (reciprocity), as depicted in the myth of the first Mazahua peasant who made a pact with the earth. Performing a ritual offering of the body ensures that the deceased's soul does not influence others by attempting to "take away" the bodies of the living. The ritual transforms the deceased into an offering for the earth. Failure to execute this act breaks the pact outlined in the myth of the first Mazahua peasant. The same woman describes the consequences of neglecting mortuary rituals:

> Poor X had no cross to accompany him, no godfather or godmother, no novena, no prayers, nothing. That's why I saw my son wandering around at night, unable to sleep, getting out of bed and walking around talking to himself. Poor child! He said his cousin X was there, unsure how he would enter his world, that he was lost. My poor son suffered greatly. I told him to let go of his cousin if he didn't want to be taken, reminding him of his duty to care for his little girl. Let him go! It was very hard, every night … his face was decomposed, his eyes were tired, and his hands trembled. (FM 2021: WEPG)

The failure to prepare the recently deceased as an offering, according to the logic of sacrifice that purifies the deceased, implies that their soul cannot reach the realm of the dead. Consequently, the deceased can influence the living, attempting to possess them to accompany him to his new abode. The Mazahua worldview does not distinguish between the natural and the supernatural; these realms are not separate but intertwined. Thus, life and death are complementary aspects of being and existential experience. The celebration of the Day of the Dead reinforces this existential understanding,

as offerings for the deceased or ancestors represent an act of remembrance. A deceased person is not forgotten because they remain an offering to the earth. Neglecting participation in funerals or mortuary rituals is an act of forgetting. The dead do not depart but transition to another dimension with an intense presence. Animistic entities are not abstract but concretely existent. Failure to fulfil the act of transforming the deceased into an offering can result in relatives being seized by the deceased, becoming trapped, possessed, or even killed (Segundo Romero 2016: 38).

TO GIVE TO THE DEAD IS TO GIVE TO THE LIVING

The Day of the Dead holds significant importance among the Mazahuas, not only as an agricultural marker that signifies the beginning of the dry season and a period of rest for the land but also as a time that integrates the animistic and cosmological dimensions of existential being. It is a period when the dead coexist with the living, embodying a moment of remembrance and active memory that ensures the ancestors feel secure in the afterlife.

The mythological narrative of the first Mazahua peasant establishes the hierarchical relationship between life and death within the sacrificial or offering principle of the Mazahua worldview. According to this principle, death is not an end but a process of fertilisation, which reflects the profound significance of sacrifice encoded in the residuality of the Mazahua human body. When a person dies, the earth metaphorically opens its jaws to consume and transform him or her into a fruitful entity, essentially converting the person into corn, which serves as a foundation for generating new life (Segundo Romero 2014: 237).

The narratives surrounding deaths due to COVID-19 highlighted the absence of traditional ritual elements, such as the godmother or godfather of the cross. This absence relates to the Mazahua cosmological concept that views the cross as the intersection of horizontal and vertical planes, representing the centre of the cosmos and harmony (López Austin 2000: 85; Medina 2000: 217). The failure to perform this ritual results in universal imbalances and chaos. According to Mazahua beliefs, death is considered good when it maintains balance and bad when it induces disorder (Segundo Romero 2014: 252).

COVID-19 caused imbalances in the body, exacerbating coldness that "reaches the bones" (FM 2021: MSAM) and increasing with the absence of the cross in mortuary rituals. This explains why the souls of the deceased are perceived as needing to be remembered through the proper elaboration and renewal of their cross, as they represent negative influences if not properly honoured. Failure to make these offerings leads to suffering from their unresolved influences (ibid.). A woman from San Agustín Mextepec expressed this concern:

> I used to say, poor people, now when it is All Souls' Day, how are they going to wait for their people if they have not given them a proper burial? There was no cross, there were no friends or family to come to pray, there was nothing. (FM 2021: WSAM)

Thus, the participation in rituals that provide warmth and the selection of a godmother or godfather of the cross are crucial for achieving balance in the afterlife and restoring the lost warmth to the cold dead body. These practices are also evident in the custom of tying red, pink, or orange ribbons to the left hand or foot of children, the elderly, and the sick before the Day of the Dead. This symbolic act is intended to prevent the souls of the deceased from taking the living away and causing sudden death. Similarly, hot food should not be consumed before placing it on the offerings, as these times are associated with "evil winds" or the cold of the dead (Segundo Romero 2014: 257).

Although the official narrative suggests that COVID-19 disproportionately affected the elderly and the sick, the Mazahuas perceived the virus as attacking everyone equally. A man from San Antonio de las Huertas remarked:

> It doesn't matter how old you are; if the cold gets into your body, age or pre-existing conditions don't make a difference. The cold comes in, and that's it. Look, the 85-year-old lady had COVID and survived, but the 40-year-old – the son of the previous prosecutor – succumbed quickly. (FM 2021: MSAH)

When asked about the nature of the virus, people described it as an epidemic affecting the entire world, with collective prudence being the most appropriate response. This view reflects Western affirmative reasoning. However, deeper exploration into people's dreams revealed:

> Pure nightmares! Oh my God. I couldn't believe it. They were like heavy tires coming to collide with my body, causing shivers and shocks. It felt as if they grabbed me and then let me go. It was unbearable! Then, as if I wandered off and couldn't see my house anymore … oh my God! I was alone without knowing where I was … oh my God! (FM 2021: WEPG)

In the Mazahua worldview, a bad death is thought to occur if one dies outside the home and without familial support. The presence of the living is essential to transform the deceased into an offering. Thus, there is fear associated with dying in hospitals, as it is believed that people will experience a bad death there, leading to the emergence of a banshee – a restless soul that will not find peace until it takes a living person with it. The case of the cousin who neglected the mortuary rituals illustrates the transcendence of the banshee, evident in the insomnia, nightmares, and somnambulism that followed. Dreams play a crucial role in linking life and death within the Mazahua worldview.

TO GIVE TO THE LIVING IS TO GIVE TO THE DEAD

In Mazahua thought, life and death are viewed as continuous transcendental states, intricately connected within existential being. This continuity necessitates ritual actions of passage to ensure that those entering the state of death transition smoothly into the afterlife. Following Galinier's (1990: 256) assertion that sacrifice is central to a series of symbolic codes constituting a hidden discourse among the Mazahuas, death is perceived as a demand for sacrifice. According to the myth of the first Mazahua peasant, the act of sacrifice involves a dual role: the sacrificed entity is both a sacrificial numen and a sacrificial desire. It self-consumes as an offering to the earth while simultaneously

organising and providing offerings for both the dead, particularly on November 1 and 2, and the earth[9] in mortuary rituals such as raising the cross.

Galinier's (1990: 258) recounting of the Mazahua flood myth integrates sacrifice as an object and also as a subject:

> A man was cultivating his cornfield when a badger warned him of an impending flood that would destroy the world. The badger advised him to take refuge in a canoe with other men and to carry tortillas. The floodwaters rose, lifting the canoe to the sky, and persisted for six months. Once the waters receded, the land was covered in fish, which the men cooked over a fire. The smoke from the fire darkened the sky, prompting God to send an emissary to confront the people who had made the fire. The vulture sent by God was fed but never returned. Subsequently, God sent an eagle to seize the vulture and plunge it into boiling water, resulting in the vulture's featherless head. The eagle then led the people to God, who punished them by decapitating them and placing their heads in their anuses, transforming them into dogs. These people became the ancestors whose bones are found in the ground.

Galinier (ibid.: 259) notes that these sacrificed beings, now transformed into dogs, possess unique psychopomp qualities, guiding the deceased to the afterlife. Thus, the realms of the living and the dead are intertwined as distinct yet consistent states. Ritual acts are essential for harmonising these realms, as they warm the cold bones of the deceased and ensure their proper transition to the afterlife. Without these rituals, a soul in pain could wander, lacking the guidance of ancestral psychopomps.

The case of the woman who insisted on attending her nephew's funeral despite the risks of COVID-19 illustrates the importance of human solidarity and ritual participation. She emphasised that not being present for the deceased means there will be no one to accompany her at her own death. This distinction between the human and supernatural worlds reflects the Mazahua view that ritual participation ensures the deceased is embraced and properly received, facilitating their transition to the world of the ancestors. This ritual act, known as *O d'es'i* (deceased who was embraced), guarantees that the deceased is received or embraced (Segundo Romero 2014: 188), thereby enabling their journey to the ancestral realm.

The flood myth is also relevant to the May 3 celebration, dedicated to the *quicunce*, or the four directions of the wind (Medina 2000: 145). In the community of San Agustín Mextepec, Mazahua people traditionally made bonfires in each house, extinguished with large pieces of palm to generate smoke that rose to the sky. This practice aimed to create clouds and disperse potential rainstorms that could damage young corn crops. This festival, associated with the Holy Cross, highlighted its agricultural significance while recalling the myth of the flood, where humans, interpreting Galinier (1990) "pollute the purity of heaven", provoking divine displeasure. Despite the discontinuation of this festival, the community expressed a desire to revive it during the pandemic.

During the pandemic, sightings of snakes, particularly the Alicante species, were reported, often around the palm roots used for making the ceremonial smoke. The Mazahua worldview might link these occurrences with cosmic relationships. Similarly, rattlesnakes are associated with clouds and the sky. In Mazahua language, *K'ijmi* denotes reptiles or vipers, sharing phonetic similarities with the morning greet-

ing *Kjimi*, which conveys a sense of the sacred. The word *Kijmi* also refers to pleasure and sexual pleasure, suggesting a hedonistic dimension in these phonetic connections. Thus, the Alicante viper might symbolise lovers outside marriage, seducing and generating pleasure. The word *Xijmi*, related to the previous terms, means lover and connects pleasure with social fabric (Segundo Romero 2014: 42).

HOSPITAL OR HOME CARE: THE MAZAHUA DILEMMA

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Mazahua community faced a critical choice between hospital care and home care that was deeply influenced by their cultural beliefs and fears. Many preferred staying at home to avoid the risk of a bad death, a concept rooted in their cosmological worldview. According to a resident of San Agustín Mextepec (FM 2021: MSAM), hospitals were seen as places where death could be both uncertain and undesirable, whereas dying at home with family was considered preferable.

In the Mazahua view, hospitals are associated with the possibility of a bad death, where a person might become a wandering soul due to improper care or ritual. This belief was highlighted by a local man who noted the risks of not being able to return home from hospital. Instead, some sought alternative care, such as doctors who made house calls, demonstrating the community's preference for home-based treatment despite logistical challenges.

A notable aspect of Mazahua health practices involves the use of a girdle, symbolising balance and protection, worn at the level of the navel. The loss of the navel or a 'fallen navel' due to illness, particularly COVID-19, was described as a critical issue, as it signifies a disruption in the body's energy balance. This concept correlates with traditional Mesoamerican cosmogonic myths in which serpents play a crucial role in the creation and balance of the world. The girdle, therefore, is seen as a bodily representation of cosmic forces, reflecting a balance that must be maintained to prevent illness and death.

The narrative of the fallen navel and its connection to cosmic serpents illustrates how Mazahua cosmology integrates body, health, and the universe. This perspective emphasises the importance of maintaining harmony to avoid catastrophic outcomes, such as those observed during the pandemic.

CONCLUSIONS

The Mazahua cosmological narrative is part of the cultural region known as Mesoamerica. Mesoamerican culture is dualistic, encompassing both Western truths and its own worldview. The pandemic highlighted the interplay between these two narratives within Mazahua communities, presenting dilemmas relating to how to address deaths from this disease.

The study did not uncover narratives attributing COVID-19 deaths to supernatural causes.[10] Rather, there was a collective agreement that COVID-19 was a virus. It was noted that bad deaths are typically attributed to accidents, murders, drowning, suicide,

poisoning, alcohol poisoning, or deaths of unbaptised children. Consequently, death by COVID-19, which involves asphyxiation, was viewed as a bad death, particularly if traditional mortuary rituals were not performed. Ritual acts are crucial, as they transform the deceased into sacred offerings for the earth.

The significance of these rituals is supported by the myths discussed in the study. Death from COVID-19 is considered even more negative when traditional rituals are not followed. Rituals serve to connect the living with their ancestors, who then guide the deceased to their final resting place as offerings for the earth. The continuity between life and death reflects a single cosmological cultural dimension, where the dead remain part of the living world.

The decision to avoid hospitals in favour of home care during the pandemic reflects the belief that dying outside the home leads to a bad death. This explains why many people preferred to manage their illnesses at home. Migrants who returned to their places of origin to die further intensified the tragic narrative of the pandemic in the area, fuelling fears of widespread contagion.

Despite the ongoing urbanisation, beliefs about cosmological events persist and become particularly pronounced during health emergencies. This underscores the bicultural nature of the Mazahua, integrating both Western and Mesoamerican cultural and civilisational matrices.

In conclusion, Mesoamerican thought among the Mazahuas becomes especially prominent during social crises. The hypothesis of this paper is that the Mazahuas, like other Mesoamericans, navigate a dual cultural existence. Amid the ambiguity of the pandemic, they relied on their symbolic and cognitive resources rooted in Mesoamerican traditions. This crisis revealed the resilience of Mazahua cosmological beliefs and their relevance in times of tragedy and upheaval. The emergence of these beliefs highlights the importance of ritual practices in maintaining cosmic balance and ensuring the continuity of life and death. The sacrificial principle central to Mazahua thought underscores the belief that death transforms into an offering, thus sustaining the cycle of life.

NOTES

1 The proximity of the Mazahua area to urban centres in the valleys of Toluca and Mexico allows permanent migration, so many Mazahua inhabitants have residence in the communities and nearby cities in the centre of the country.

2 In Mazahua rituals for the dead, there is always a person who is in charge of actions such as prayers, wakes and burial, who is outside the lines of the kinship lineage. This person is named *madrina* ('godmother') or *padrino* ('godfather').

3 The concept of the Mesoamerican cultural area proposed by Kirchhoff in 1943 (2000: 18) has been very useful academically in framing a civilizational matrix that groups cultural groups from north-central Mexico to Central America. Mesoamerican studies address issues of archaeology, ethnography, linguistics, physical anthropology, cultural anthropology, history, and ethnohistory into this cultural area.

4 The pattern of such types of settlement was called regions of refuge. In them, the central areas of the municipalities functioned as agglutinators of the power relations, and the communities as satellites around them. Class structure was articulated with ethnic difference (Aguirre 1987: 38).

5 In Mexico there are 7,364,645 indigenous language speakers, which represents 5.8% of the population (INEGI 2021).

6 The experience of the unstable world of the pandemic added to problems such as climate change, recurrent economic crises, violence by criminal groups, partisan political strife, the intensification of gender-based violence, the widespread feeling of a contradiction between the demographic rate and the environment, the lack of social networks and media as a quality, and the confusing dispute over the narrative of truth about the pandemic.

7 The Mictlán is the underworld in the Mexica worldview, that is, the place where the dead arrive.

8 The *Popol Vuh* manifests this relationship between the underworld, bones, and corn, all icons of the production of life through sacrifice (Montejo and Garay 1999: 56).

9 Olivier (2015: 608) says that in the pre-Hispanic world the sovereign had the power to kill, but at the same time was willing to die for the people. She is a sacrificial figure because she has the legitimacy to sacrifice others and to give herself in sacrifice for others, for the governed.

10 There are deaths caused by supernatural presences such as the aquatic deity known as Menye, a figure who drowns people when they do not treat water well.

SOURCES

FM = Author's fieldwork materials, kept in the author's personal collection. Conversation partners were informed about the research objectives. The following interviewees provided consent for their narratives to be transcribed and shared in this work:

FM 2021: MEPG. A 65-year-old man from Emilio Portes Gil.

FM 2021: MSAH. A 59-year-old man from San Antonio de las Huertas.

FM 2021: MSAM. A 60-year-old man from San Agustín Mextepec.

FM 2021: WEPG. An 84-year-old woman from Emilio Portes Gil.

FM 2021: WSAH. A 56-year-old woman from San Antonio de las Huertas.

FM 2021: WSAM. A 56-year-old woman from San Agustín Mextepec.

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