Double Personality: The Relationship between Human and Animal Tono in Chautengo, Guerrero, Mexico in 2005

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ABSTRACT

After reading the research of Mexican anthropologists concerning the possible retention of traditional indigenous African beliefs in contemporary Mexican communities of African descent, I interviewed women of the region who migrated to Atlanta, Georgia about their spiritual beliefs and practices. I was surprised by the similarities in their reports to those recorded by Gonzalo Aguirre Beltran, who worked in Mexico over 60 years ago. I traveled to the town of Chautengo in coastal Guerrero state in 2005 to talk with women about their beliefs, especially those that relate to the existence of a relationship between humans and animal-tonos. The human–animal-tono relationship exemplifies a belief in an intimate relationship between humans and totem animals. The well-being of the human partner depends upon the well-being of the animal. Keeping the human–animal relationship balanced is key in the conceptualization of illness and informs related healing practices. I present an interview with a woman from Chautengo with an interpretation that exemplifies the persistence of ideas related to human–animal relationships that are possibly informed by traditional indigenous African cosmologies, brought by enslaved Africans over 500 years ago, and have been archetypally preserved in isolated communities along the Pacific coast of Mexico.

KEYWORDS: traditional healing, Indigenous African, cosmology, totem animals, Mexico
Along “La Costa Chica,” on the Pacific coast of Guerrero and Oaxaca states in Mexico, live communities of persons of African and North American indigenous descent. In the region, the descendents of enslaved Africans have shared space with people of indigenous groups including the Amusgos, Mixtecs, Tlapanecos, and Chatitos (Alvarez Santiago N.d.) since the middle 1500s when the arriving Spanish colonists first began to import African slaves. Since that time, the cultural traditions of the African and indigenous groups have blended and evolved, creating what anthropologist and researcher Gonzalo Aguirre Beltran has called Mexico’s Third Root, also referred to as Mexican Afromestizo culture (Aguirre Beltran 1989a,b:7–12).

Members of the communities of the contemporary coastal region of Oaxaca and Guerrero states, La Costa Chica, call themselves Costenos. They identify themselves foremost as Mexicans. Secondarily, the term Moreno is used as a self-descriptor. Moreno refers to the dark color of the Costenos’ skin and is informed by the colonial Casta System developed by the colonial aristocracy in their contemplation of the process of miscegenation and in their attempts to define and describe the offspring of couples of European, North American indigenous, and African descent (Katzew 2004:5–6). Historically, community members have not always been aware of their African descent, a result of Mexican culture’s reluctance to acknowledge the country’s participation in the Afro-Atlantic slave trade (Lewis 2004:471–499).

Ignorance of cultural origins is also compounded by a lack of available and adequate educational systems in the remote communities of the coast, the lack of financial resources to attend school among families in the region, and the failure of documentation of the Afro-Atlantic slave trade and related cultural contributions in textbooks and other written documents and sources of public information such as museums (Phillips 2008:40–43). A recent cultural and political movement, El Encuentro de Pueblos Negros (The Encounter of Black Towns) has worked to increase cultural and historical knowledge in the communities and to facilitate a re-identification with African culture as a source of cultural pride. El Encuentro de Pueblos Negros is a three- to four-day meeting that has been held annually in Oaxaca and Guerrero states for the last 12 years.

Early Research

In the 1940s and 1950s, Aguirre Beltran, a Mexican physician and anthropologist, worked in the coastal Afromestizo communities, including the small town of Cuijla, researching the members’ spiritual beliefs, cosmologies, and
healing practices (Aguirre Beltran 1989a:176–188). The women of Cuijla, known as Cuijlenos, described their conceptualization of the components of an individual and their related understanding of the nature of illness. According to the traditional beliefs of the Afromestizo people of Cuijla, an individual is composed of a body, a soul, a sombra (shadow), and a tomo, an aspect related to a totem animal.

Aguirre Beltran described the body as comparable to the Western concept of the physical body that decomposes after death. The soul is also like the Western conceptualization; it is the aspect that survives after death to ascend to a supernatural world where it experiences eternal goodness. Before ascending to heaven, the soul passes time in purgatory. For Cuijlenos, the soul is a less significant aspect than in Western conceptualizations.

Aguirre Beltran (1989a:176–188) described the sombra as an essential aspect of the individual from the Cuijlenos’ perspective. He noted that much attention was given to assessing its status and that illness was attributed to a related disequilibrium or imbalance. Perhaps similar to the subconscious, the sombra is not directly comparable to an aspect of Western religious or spiritual belief. Aguirre Beltran attributed the sombra’s origins to West African spiritual systems.

El tomo describes the aspect of the individual that has a special relationship to a totem animal in the wild. The human–animal-tomo relationship is described as involving interdependence; the animal takes care of the human partner and keeps him or her free from enemies and dangers in the wild. If the animal partner is injured or becomes ill in the wild, the human partner suffers the same symptoms. The two partners follow the same destiny. Aguirre Beltran noted that when a Cuijleno became ill, the status of the animal-tomo in the wild was always considered as a cause and was investigated.

Cuilenos (the people of the town of Cuijla) use the word cristiano to refer to the individual and use the cross as a representative symbol. Each person is made up of four integrated parts: (1) the body; (2) the soul; (3) la sombra; and (4) el tomo.

The concept of the human body does not differ significantly from the universal idea about this part of a person. It is the perishable aspect, that which disappears with death and is transformed into putrefying flesh.

The perception of the soul may be identified with Western ideas and meaning of the word. This is the part of the person that survives death and is carried to a world beyond the earth where it enjoys all kinds of good experiences.
Alternately, la sombra (the shadow) is a source of constant worry and a need for attention from the Cuileno’s perspective. It is considered to be the most primordial and valuable aspect of the human being, the part that imbues the essence and mark of individuality in each person; it is the component considered to be the most fundamental characteristic of the cristiano.

El tono, the final component of the individual neither has a parallel concept in Western cultures which provides an adequate definition. It is a relationship of dependence existing between human and animal that ties them to a common destiny. In psychoanalytic terms one may say that el tono is the introjection of the parental imago into the individual’s ego. [Aguirre Beltran 1989a, 1989:176–177, author’s translation].

AFROMESTIZO WOMEN IN ATLANTA

Recently, Mexicans from the communities in the vicinity of Cuijla have migrated to the United States, to regions including Atlanta, Georgia, where there exists a significant community of Mexicans of African and North American indigenous descent from the state of Guerrero. In Atlanta, as part of a study of the traditional belief systems and healing practices of Afromestizo women from coastal Guerrero, I decided to ask some of the Mexican migrant women if they were familiar with the terms mentioned in the descriptions of health-related belief systems made by Aguirre Beltran in early studies in the 1940s and 1950s.

I was shocked that many of the relatively young women (in their twenties at the time I interviewed them) who were recent migrants from La Costa Chica to Atlanta defined the terms and described beliefs in nearly exactly the same way as they were recorded in versions of the early research more than 60 years ago (Aguirre Beltran 1989a:176–188). This discovery motivated me to continue to explore the area of African-rooted philosophies and beliefs, and to begin to record the oral histories of Afromestizo Mexican women migrants to Atlanta, and also their mothers and relatives who continue to live in communities of “La Costa Chica” in Mexico.

EL TONO IN CHAUTENGO, GUERRERO MEXICO

I traveled to the community of Chautengo in coastal Mexico in 2005. Chautengo is a community of about 1,100 people located along the Pacific coast of Guerrero state approximately 70 miles east of Acapulco. Community
members work in industries related to fishing, the processing of fresh coconut, and in small businesses that serve other townspeople such as food vendors and operators of neighborhood stores. Extended families live in concrete one-story homes in close proximity to neighbors, each with a large side yard for gardens and space for the family’s farm animals.

In Spanish, the term *convivir* means spending time, celebrating, and socializing with others. Convivir is an aspect of community life valued by the people of Chautengo and the region of La Costa Chica. Community members collaborate to plan and celebrate weddings and patron saints’ days. They help each other with work projects and household chores. In the region, the concept of convivir is also extended to farm animals and family pets as well. Dogs know when the family’s pigs have ventured too far away, and they follow them and “run” them back home. Cats and chickens sneak into the outdoor traditional wood fire kitchen to share space with the family and in hopes that something from a meal will fall to the ground in providence. A burro comes to the front door of his family’s house to demand his food every morning, and a parrot who lives in the outdoor kitchen asks for and is offered his favorite food, a handmade tortilla with hot red chile salsa.

**EL TONO STORIES: THE FROG**

In Chautengo, I was surprised to hear the stories of the women of that community that demonstrate that beliefs about “animal-tonos,” like totem animals, continue to be a component of their contemporary philosophies. A relationship with el tono is still a way of understanding the cause of an illness, and an intervention that includes the participation of one’s animal-tono is still actively sought by persons who experience an unidentifiable illness of undetermined etiology. In Chautengo, I talked with Leonor, a mother and leader in the community about her experiences with animal-tonos.

Leonor told me the following story about her daughter Edit as an infant:

*When Edit was about 10 months old, she became very sick with a fever and diarrhea. I took her to a doctor [Western medical doctor] and she was given an injection, but she didn’t get any better. I remembered that there had been a small, unusually colored frog in the family’s water reservoir at the same time Edit got sick. I had pushed it away with a broom handle. Immediately after I did this, Edit got sick. I asked a woman who knows about such things. She told me that the reason must be that the frog is Edit’s animal. The frog appeared again, and I found my mother trying to kill it with a stick. Each time the frog was struck with the stick, Edit extended her legs [in discomfort]. When I told my*
mother that the frog was Edit’s animal, she let the frog go free, and immediately Edit’s health improved. [Research Notes: December 2005]

Leonor’s story demonstrates her belief in the possibility of an intimate relationship between a human and her animal-tono. When Edit became sick, the fact that Leonor had sought the help of a Western medical doctor whose intervention wasn’t immediately helpful didn’t lead her to conclude that the healing of the infant was not possible. The coincidence of the occurrence of the symptoms of Edit’s illness and the appearance of an unusually colored frog led her to seek the assistance of a traditional healer knowledgeable in the relation between the condition of an individual’s animal-tono and his or her health and well-being.

Per Leonor, an animal-tono may be as powerful and dangerous as a tiger, fox, crocodile, or snake, or as lowly as a frog. The consideration of the state of an individual’s tono in El Monte (the wilderness) is important in the identification of the source of illness and in planning an intervention for healing.

It is likely that the traditional healer was a curandera. Curanderismo is a system of medicine that is practiced in some communities of contemporary Mexico and continues to influence contemporary Mexican culture. Curanderismo is based in traditional North American indigenous and indigenous African medicine and healing practices blended with Spanish medicine at the historical occasion of colonization and slavery. The name Curandera is derived from the Spanish word cura, which means to heal or to be a priest (Avila 1999:16). In Mexican culture, La Curandera is a woman who is a traditional healer and whose spiritual gifts and acquired knowledge are a powerful balm for the problems and illnesses of members of her community. Curanderas work within their own diagnostic system that considers physical, emotional, and spiritual symptoms as indicators of defined illnesses, each of which manifests itself in a characteristic way (Rubel, O’Nell, and Collado 1984:1–15).

The conclusion of the curandera was that Edit’s animal-tono was the frog and that Edit’s improvement would depend on her human family’s actions toward the frog. Edit recovery—coinciding with Leonor’s protection of the frog from her mother’s rough handling with the broom handle—confirmed Leonor’s hypothesis about the nature of Edit’s relationship to her animal-tono. Although this scenario took place over 25 years ago, Leonor continues to believe that Edit has a relationship with an animal-tono, her frog.

THE CROCODILE

Leonor also told a story about an incident that occurred three months ago, in September of 2005. She began by describing the nature of an animal-tono:
Each person has a double-personality, like this man who had a crocodile as his tono. And he got sick, and felt that it was related to his animal-tono and he went to look for it. His family went to look for the crocodile and found it and brought it back, and now the man is better.

The man was living in Mexico City and he knew that his animal-tono was somewhere in the sun. And the crocodile was there in a sunny place the day his family went to find it. His family went and found it and carried it to its little protected lagoon. The animal-tono was sick and hadn’t been eating. They gave him chicken to eat, they gave him lamb, but he didn’t want to eat. He was there, and all he would do was open his eyes.

My nephew Saldino found him. He lives in Mexicali. He came here to visit, and he found the crocodile at the edge of the sea on the beach. And Salino took care of him, he took him to a place where there was water, a place like a river. He took care of him for two months, day and night so that no one would harm him because there were people who wanted to kill him and sell his skin. He took care of him day and night, and the family of the sick man gave him 500 pesos for him when they came for the crocodile. That’s very little money for saving someone’s life.

They know [people who have animal-tonos] because one day the sick man said, “Go to the beach in Las Salinas, and there you’ll find him [my animal-tono].” He gave the sign, the place where the tono would be, and his family went there, and there they found him a week ago. It was about the 3rd of December when they went to find him, and they took him away. And my nephew has already gone back to Mexicali because that’s where he lives.

The man’s name is Sabino. And later his family, when they got to the crocodile, his sisters and cousins called the crocodile “Sabino.” They said, “Sabino, I’m your cousin, don’t bite me Sabino.” They called him by his name because Sabino is the name of the man [who was originally] from Barra de Tecuanapa, there near Marquelia. The man lives in Barra de Tecuanapa, the sick man, and they took the crocodile, the man’s animal-tono there. They took him to the sea in a launch boat. To take him back to his place of origin in the little lagoon in Barra de Tecuanapa. The crocodile’s back home now. There with his friend named Sabino.

The man just knew he was a crocodile. Many other people here also have a tono. Sometimes they are tigers, sometimes they are lions. Onza real [a fox], that’s like a tiger, isn’t it? The onza sometimes eats chickens, it has a body like a dog, but with a more beautiful tail. That’s the onza real.
But yes, in these places we know that there are people who have a double personality ... but with an animal, that’s what it is.

Since the time of birth, [a person knows she has an animal tono] a person is born with her tono. A person knows because when she gets sick as a child [it’s because] her tono is out in the hot sun or has been injured. There are people who cure illnesses related to animal-tonos. Knowing that there is an animal tono, there are healing practices [sobar], and the child gets better. And now the mother knows that her child has a double personality, that there is a relationship with an animal. The curandera and the mother realize this. This is what happens when a child is born with an animal. Not everyone, but there are people like this.

They know when the child gets sick...when they are about a year old. When they’re older and start talking, they don’t get sick often. But when they’re younger, they don’t tell you, they can’t tell you what’s wrong. Only that the mother has to find out. The mother says to her friend, “I’m going to find out if this child is a tiger or another animal.” She takes the child to the curandera and [sometimes] the curandera says, “Take the child to the doctor because this child is not a tiger.” And the mother takes the child to the doctor, but first she takes the child to the curandera, to see what she kind of illness she has. [Research Notes: December, 2005].

Leonor’s story makes “visible” the persistence and vitality of beliefs about the intimate relationship between an individual and her “animal-tono.” Leonor describes the relationship as that of a “double personality”; the human and the animal are two parts of the psyche, sharing a physical body. Hence, when the human Sabino became ill, it was the crocodile, the instinctual aspect of his personality that suffered a physical illness at the same time. It did not matter that Sabino and his crocodile were in different geographic regions: Sabino in Mexico City and the crocodile in La Costa Chica of Guerrero.

The story also shows how members of the community who share the beliefs related to animal-tonos, illness, and related healing rituals participated in practices in order to heal Sabino from distinct spatial locations in the country. The goal of their efforts was to find the crocodile-tono, to care for him and heal him, then to return him to the physical location of Sabino’s ancestral homeland, La Barra de Tecuanapa. The human Sabino’s home was the best place for healing the crocodile and was the shared “place of origin” of the human Sabino as well as his animal-tono. Healing the animal-tono and returning him to the ancestral homeland allowed the human Sabino to heal, although he lived in Mexico City, five hours land travel away from La Barra de Tecuanapa.
The healing ritual required the participation of various persons who shared the belief in the human–animal-tono relationship. Leonor’s cousin Saldino from Mexicali cared for the crocodile for two months in Las Salinas, the place where he found it. Sabino’s family came from a distant location to transport the crocodile to its homeland in La Barra de Tecuanapa. The human Sabino, whose “knowing” about his intimate relationship with the crocodile and its relation to his physical illness, where the sick crocodile would be found, and where it must be taken, directed the role each person played in the ritual from his location in Mexico City.

Remarkable are the considerable time, effort, and use of material resources by the individuals who shared the belief in the value of the healing ritual. Saldino spent two months of his time caring for the crocodile, knowing intuitively that an animal as large and unusual as the crocodile must be metaphysically exceptional, an animal-tono, even though he didn’t know the identity of the human to whom the tono was psychically linked. Leonor noted that the sick man’s family’s payment of 500 pesos to Saldino was a small amount for “the saving of a life.” Her account of the way Sabino’s family talked to the crocodile in their attempts to calm him to prepare for the transport to La Barra de Tecuanapa is evidence of the shared belief in a “double personality” or shared aspect of the psyche between human and tono. Leonor relates that the family called and conversed with the crocodile using Sabino’s name, as Sabino the human and the crocodile were believed to be aspects of the same being.

Jung (1956:181, 327) has related the symbol of the animal to humans’ instinctual aspect. The animal is also described as a dream symbol representing the parents, whose attributes represent a child’s perception of the nature of the parental relationship at a particular moment in time. The relationship with the animal is also considered in relation to the Dual Mother motif and as an aspect of the ritual of rebirth. In this context, an animal may serve as a foster mother, supporting the individual’s growth and development and helping with childrearing. The animal is symbolically related to Great Mother, the archetype of Mother Nature, and also represents the power of the unconscious. Reasonably, in Leonor’s story and in the communities of La Costa Chica, animal-tonos—a manifestation of the Great Mother archetype and an aspect of the unconscious—are a component of rituals for healing as defined by Curanderismo.

Hillman (2008:11–12) has related animal symbols in dreams to Jung’s “religious instinct.” According to this perspective, animals may be considered as theophanies—representations of divinities who are at times present and experienced by humans as components of life’s dilemmas, challenges, and tribulations. Hillman also notes the role of an animal as a totemic ancestor, an aspect of a divinity in animal form who appends himself or
herself to the role of grandmother or grandfather, and who functions as the human’s guide.

Hillman (2008:88–91) also discusses the symbolic nature of some of the animals that are considered to be animal-tonos in Chautengo. Lions are associated with royalty and maleness. They are powerful, courageous, generous, and faithful. Tigers have been considered to be female, related to rites of initiation, night, and the moon, and are often imagined as killers. Foxes are agile and clever, proud and bold. Foxes seem to embody the Trickster archetype, stealing away to small spaces to hide undetected and outwitting humans or other predators.

Henderson (1964:120–121) described the formalization of an individual’s symbolic relationship to a totem animal as a form of initiation rite in which young members of a community are weaned from their parents and forcibly made members of their clan or tribe. As the initiate is physically separated from the parents in the initiation rite, the parental archetype is injured before being effectively healed as the initiate is assimilated into the group. The clan or tribe of persons who are also related to the totem animal becomes a group of “second parents” to the initiate. The individual and his or her animal-tono, or “bush soul,” share a psychic or unconscious identity. The animal-tono protects the individual when he or she is in the animal’s environment in the wild; however, if the animal is injured, the human “brother” will suffer the same fate and physical harm.

The relationship to a specific animal also defines the individual’s membership in a particular clan, shared with other community members who were related to the same species of animal described in Aguirre Beltran’s research or who shared a belief in the ritual in Leonor’s story. Community members who have a relationship with the same animal also share special intuitive abilities and know about the spiritual status and experiences of other members who share the same animal-tono.

In his research in Cuijla, Aguirre Beltran’s informants also described the relationship between human and animal tono as a familial relationship, similar to that between a parent and a child. The relationship between human and animal-tono was traditionally determined by a ritual that occurred in infancy. The infant was secretly taken by a family member to a remote crossroads location. The adult waited in hiding until an animal-tono arrived to claim the infant as his or her child, formalizing the lifelong relationship between individual and animal-tono (Aguirre Beltran 1989a: 184–185). In addition to being psychically and metaphysically linked, human and animal-tono were believed to share a common “mark” such as a birthmark in the human that corresponded in shape or location to a pattern in the animal-tono’s fur.
All true Cuilenos must acquire an animal or tono: this is well understood by the (infant’s) parents and extended family such that, one or two days after the birth, the family comes together to carry out the rite their tradition demands. The infant’s father’s extended family arrives at the home of the new mother and infant late at night and strikes up a lively conversation that may last for hours. While this goes on, one of the relatives “steals” the infant and takes it to a crossroad “where two roads cross.” The infant is laid down on a bed of ashes and is left there, abandoned, while the relative runs to hide in the nearby bushes remaining alert and vigilant. Soon the most ferocious beasts arrive—tigers, lizards, bulls; all pass over the child without causing any harm until one of them “licks and caresses it.” The wild animal that does this will be, for all of its life, the newborn’s animal (tono), his or her companion, or as uncle Tante says: “From this time on, the animal considers the infant as her child.” Once the animal leaves, the one who had been spying from the bushes picks up the infant and returns the infant to his or her home. It is when the parents realize that the infant has disappeared and find him or her under the bed that they realize that their child has acquired an animal (tono). The name of the animal is kept secret until the initiate is told when he or she is more mature. (Aguirre Beltran 1989a:184–185, author’s translation)

In her story about the frog and her infant daughter, Edit, Leonor also described the human–animal-tono relationship as beginning in infancy. Learning about the identity of a child’s animal-tono occurred in conjunction with a healer/specialist, the Curandera, who functioned in a way similar to the community member who took the infant to the crossroads to encounter his or her animal-tono as Aguirre Beltran’s informants reported (1989a:184–185).

In Leonor’s story, as well as in the ethnographic reports made by Aguirre Beltran, an individual’s identification with an animal-tono defines a spiritual relationship with the animal in which the individual’s state of well-being, health, illness, or death is related to the concurrent experiences of the animal-tono in the wild. Human illness was believed to be related to the condition of one’s animal in El Monte (the wilderness). Healing rituals are informed by the belief that it is necessary to attend to an individual’s animal-tono in the wild, restoring the animal’s health and well-being, and, consequently, the human partner would be healed.

From here, according to the traditional medicine of Cuijla, one never forgets to consider the state and circumstances of the animal-tono when investigating the cause of an illness. The tiger may be trapped in a cave by a predator or may be suffering from hunger or thirst; the lizard may have been injured by another animal or may have been shot by an
enemy of the human-tono. Here is the cause of the illness and the result of this mystical link between a human and an animal. [Aguirre Beltran 1989a, 1989b:185, author’s translation].

**BRINGING RELATIONSHIPS INTO BALANCE**

Leonor’s contemporary story of the crocodile demonstrated the importance of the collaboration of members of the community who shared beliefs about *el tono* and the requirements for a healing ritual. Health is restored when relationships are again brought into balance via the efforts of the persons from the community who participated in the ritual. Many of the aspects of Leonor’s ritual were related to returning relationships to balance. Locating Sabino’s crocodile and moving him out of the sun to a watery environment, feeding him, and caring for him brought his body’s systems back into balance and restored his health. Returning the crocodile to its ancestral homeland in La Barra de Tecuanapa, a place of origin it shared with the human Sabino, reestablished the relationship between the crocodile and human and promoted the improvement of both the crocodile’s and the human Sabino’s physical health. The human Sabino was also to return to Barra de Tecuanapa. Hence, human and animal tono were both physically located in their shared ancestral homeland, restoring balance and promoting the physical healing of both partners. The healing of the crocodile within the context of its relationship to the human Sabino, the other half of the “double personality,” was expected to promote the restoration of the human Sabino’s health.

According to Richards (1981:218–219), individuals understand the world and their experiences within it in symbolic terms. Nature, objects, and events are determined to make references to cosmic and sacred truths by analogy. In this way, individuals are able to make sense of their experiences living in the world and are able to understand divine order. In her essay about African cosmology and metaphysics, Richards (1981:223) emphasized the primacy of the concept of the whole in the consideration of the universe. The relationships between individuals and the natural world are defined by reciprocity. Reciprocal relationships involve the balancing of complementary pairs of forces in order to achieve harmony and equilibrium. A universal life force flows between all beings and forms a foundation for the system’s balance and reciprocal relationships.

Jung (1978:1–42) also emphasized the movement toward the joining and balancing of complementary and often opposing aspects of the personality. The total personality, which Jung refers to as the *Self,* is composed of conscious and unconscious aspects. Jung attributes a component of the unconscious to instinct and to a relation to nature and to other animals. The
joining and integration of these two components is part of the development of the mature personality, the process of individuation.

EL MONTE: THE LOCATION OF RITUALS FOR HEALING

Leonor’s story, like Aguirre Beltran’s record of his experiences in Cuijla, refers to the importance of El Monte (the wilderness) in locating an individual’s animal double who is sick or in trouble in order to provide the healing intervention that is the prerequisite for the health improvement of the human partner. Sabino “knows” about and sends his family to the place where the sick crocodile was found even though the crocodile was in a remote “wilderness” location not previously familiar to them. Diaz Fabelo (1960:46) has identified El Monte as a wilderness location where the plants and herbs used in the preparation of traditional herbal remedies and as components of healing rituals are found. Such plants are believed to be imbued with metaphysical qualities. El Monte is also the place where trees with magical qualities grow. At the base of these trees, rituals are performed. In Yoruba-derived traditional African religious systems, particular species of trees are related to certain African deities.

Pinkola-Estes (1992:353–357) described climbing a mountain as a metaphor for the process by which an individual becomes more knowledgeable about the instinctive aspect of the psyche and the creative acts that are possible there. In the “wild unconscious,” the location of cyclical occurrences, finding sought-after knowledge and a more profound understanding of the meaning of problems encountered in life becomes possible. Learning to heal an unfamiliar illness of unknown etiology would certainly be a possibility on the mountain. Pinkola-Estes likened the ascent to an opportunity for learning, and, upon arrival at the pinnacle located in the atmosphere of “thin air,” the individual realizes the highest level of understanding possible.

Leonor and other women from La Costa Chica have described La Curandera, the traditional healer’s ascent to El Monte to search for the wounded animal-tono or the animal-tono who is no longer able to feed himself and is the reason for a human partner’s physical and psychic illness (Phillips N.d.). Upon “El Monte,” in close proximity to the “wild unconscious,” creative healing solutions are possible. The experiences in El Monte may be described as paranormal in quality and may also be considered as examples of experiences in imaginal space, a place outside of the typical experience of the consciousness of everyday activities. In this space, animal-tonos exist in the wild, and Curanderas and others with special knowledge of healing can participate with the animals in healing rituals.
Of imaginal spaces and embodied images, Bosnak makes a comparison to dreams: “In the same way that dreams phenomenally speaking are self-contained worlds within which we dwell—not contained within an overarching space beyond the dream—where we participate fully in a substantive image, we are bodied forth by it. We become of it” (Bosnak 2007:21). In a state of embodied imagination in El Monte, the Curandera finds the animal-tono she seeks, such as the tiger, the lion, or the leopard (animals not known to normally exist in this coastal region of Mexico), and discerns what must be done to feed and heal the animal-tono so that the human partner may also regain his or her health.

Concerning imaginal spaces, Bosnak describes, “An embodied image is the interface between self and other. When fully confronted with embodied imagination, both self and other turn inside out, and we become a mutual body, a mutual state” (Bosnak 2007:21). Bosnak’s mutuality may describe the “state” or imaginal space into which the human Sabino in Mexico City enters together with his family in Las Salinas and La Barra de Tecuanapa, guided by the instructions the human Sabino receives from his animal-tono. And so for a month, his family and community members “participate in a substantive image...beyond a dream,” caring for and feeding the crocodile, returning him to his ancestral homeland to eventually be reunited with the human aspect of his “double personality,” making the human Sabino’s full recovery from psychic and physical illness possible.

The experience of imaginal space may also be considered from a biological perspective. Hobson (1994:172–177) discusses attention and perception as they are related to dreaming and conscious dreaming states, as well the mind’s ability to create artificial visions. The universality of dream forms and their dependence upon context among humans suggest that individuals living in the same geographic community and who have similar waking experiences in this context could share common or similar dream content—for example, the material of the animal-tono healing ritual. In a shared, intentional state similar to conscious dreaming, the Chautengo community members participate in the acts that are performed to facilitate the human and the crocodile Sabino’s healing.

The beliefs and actions Leonor reported are also similar to descriptions of traditional West African indigenous beliefs made by Parrinder (1951:140–141) who noted the belief in the bond that exists between man and animal among the tribes living in the region that is present-day Nigeria. For example, the Bura reported the relationship between the chief and his animal-totem crocodile. If the chief was ill and his crocodile left the water, the chief’s death was anticipated and burial preparations were made. The relation between the bodily sensations of a human and the actions of an animal-tono was also noted. If a man whose tono was a
hyena awakened with a full stomach, he concluded that his tono had stolen and eaten a neighbor’s livestock during the night. Another Nigerian tribe, the Kilba, believed that they could form a relationship with an animal by contract via a priest. The man was strengthened by his relationship with the animal. Similar to the Bura, the Kilba believed that behavior of the individual’s animal-tono may signal the human’s imminent death.

Possibly, the healing rituals and archetypal ideas of the members of the West African tribes who forcibly migrated to the Pacific coastal regions of Mexico beginning over 500 years ago have been preserved in the isolated coastal Afromestizo communities. Here, traditions and ideas have been passed down from one generation to the next and have been blended with those of the groups indigenous to the region. The imaginal space and the embodied images Bosnak (2007:21) described may have provided a mechanism by which community members in Mexico have continued their practices during slavery and colonial times, through the 20th century when Aguirre Beltran undertook his research, and have persisted until the present time.

The continuing belief in the relationship between humans and the animal-tonos that represent the instinctual aspect of the personality is evident in Leonor’s story. The relationship between humans and animal-tonos must be kept in balance and carefully tended to assure the physical and psychic health and well-being of each partner via the rituals described. Even in contemporary times, whole communities continue to participate in the rituals designed to ensure and restore human–animal-tono equilibrium.

The persistence of beliefs about the relationship between human and animal-tonos—the relationship Leonor described as a “double-personality”—attests to the essential nature of instinct as a component of the psyche that continues to inform the healing practices of the Afromestizo communities of coastal Mexico. Humans and their animal tono partners are considered to be aspects of the same being, sharing a psyche and the same physical and metaphysical experiences. Many components of the rituals involve bringing the human–animal relationship into balance: finding, healing, and nurturing the distressed animal whose illness is also manifested in the human partner and returning both partners to their shared ancestral homeland, a location that is ecologically suited to and that best supports health and well-being of both partners. The beliefs and practices surrounding the animal-tono–human relationship serve as examples of the reciprocal character of relationships between humans and the natural world (Richards 1981:223) and the psyche’s natural tendency toward movement to join complementary yet opposing aspects of the personality (Jung 1978:1–42).
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