Szeljak György

Drinking patterns in a Nahua village in Mexico

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1. On a Monday morning in 1996 the municipality police of Xochiatipan in Mexico made an unexpected appearance in the market of Pachiquitla, a Nahua Indian village two hours walk from the municipality centre and then, ignoring the protests of the locals, seized a full container of spirit belonging to one of the wealthiest traders of the municipality centre. [1] The measure took place upon the instructions of a municipality leader, elected several months before, who, citing the excessive consumption of alcohol, prohibited the commercial distribution of spirit in the municipality that was being industrially produced from sugar cane. From this point on it was no longer possible to legally sell spirit in the municipality for several months, and many villagers thus had to walk several hours to the Indian villages of the surrounding municipalities to be able to drink spirit or acquire it for celebrations and rituals.

2. The introduction of the decree gave rise to fierce debate in Santa Catarina de Xochiatipan, center of the municipality, chiefly inhabited by Mestizos, and in the 32 Indian villages located among the hills, thus in Pachiquitla. The leader of the municipality and the members of the Mestizo elite who were not directly involved in the alcohol trade, as well as the healthcare employees and teachers working in the municipality cited the Indians' 'backwardness' as one of the main causes of excessive alcohol consumption. Their arguments were primarily supported by the 'enlightening principles' expressed by Mexican governmental institutions, in which creating a better quality of life and raising living standards for Indian families, reducing illnesses caused by alcohol consumption as well as better healthcare were directly linked to preventing the ever more excessive consumption of spirit. In their opinion, the money derived from the sale of surplus crops by the heads of Indian families and the financial state support they received were being spent on spirit and thus they were not capable of realising the strategies expected by the majority of society, which included forward planning, the investment of accumulated capital, the purchase of better work tools, the improvement of living conditions and schooling for children, and thus an increase in social status.

3. The traders who were making a significant profit from the distribution of alcohol interpreted the decree as an outright political assault, and claimed that the interest group of the municipality they were faced with was trying to reduce their economic and political power by its introduction. While acknowledging the destructive effect of alcohol consumption, they argued that they were merely satisfying an existing demand and, furthermore, that the trade in spirit, similarly to other alcoholic drinks, was legal all over the country, and if they did not deliver the spirit to the villages, the Indians would just acquire it from traders in other municipalities.

4. Opinions were also divided in Pachiquitla. Many women, who only took part in communal alcohol consumption on exceptional occasions, while tending to be the victims of abuse fuelled by it, welcomed the measure, yet they maintained that the consumption of alcohol was necessary on ritual occasions. The men almost

unanimously opposed the prohibition of spirit trade, their arguments primarily being cultural in nature. They were mainly concerned about traditions and communal unity saying that the symbolic offering of alcohol and communal consumption fulfilled a central role in the fertility and healing rites of the shamans as well as in communal celebrations, funerals, the conclusion of contracts, and everyday entertainment. As the most frequently expressed argument went, "If there is no spirit, we cannot hold a single celebration, rite, or concluding of a contract properly, and we cannot express our respect for one another."

5. It was only possible to maintain the decree for a short period. New, intensive commercial ties developed with the villages of neighbouring municipalities, a systematic deluge of alcohol began and at the same time the price of spirit went up, while the leader of the municipality realised within a short period of time that votes for his party, and indeed support for him, personally would be jeopardised if he continued to uphold the measure; therefore, after a few months it was again permitted to freely distribute spirit in the territory of the municipality.

6. During the conflict the prioritised economic and healthcare considerations inspired by the state and based on the principles of modernisation came into conflict with the defined cultural principles of the Nahua community. The paternal action of the municipality's local elite exclusively emphasised the disintegrative role of alcohol, while its symbolic role in the cohesion of the community became a central element in the system of argument expressed by the Nahuas (especially by the men).

7. There is no doubt that in Pachiquitla, the location of my fieldwork, the symbolic offering and consumption of alcohol was an expression of communal solidarity and one of the most important gestures in the case of the men. At the same time, it was also obvious that a significant amount of the money acquired by the heads of families for the sale of their surplus crops was spent on alcohol, and in regard to modernisation this could really have been an obstacle to creating relatively better living conditions. Drunken men lying on the ground in the village square and on the streets was an everyday sight. It is especially important to emphasise that alcohol consumption in Pachiquitla was a privilege of men, while the consequences of a husband's drunkenness (shame, physical violence within the family, the lack of nutritional food) were mainly suffered by women and children. The different approaches according to gender were clearly observable in the interviews I conducted. The men primarily emphasised the integrating effect of alcohol consumption (their key words in the reports were respect, recognition, friendship, equality, and solidarity), while women mainly emphasised destructive characteristics (violence, abuse, offensive behaviour).

8. Having said the above, the focus of the current study is not the analysis of the pathological features of alcoholism that can be observed at the local, individual level, when alcohol has already become an everyday necessity and the main goal of consuming alcohol is to improve feelings of well-being. Additionally, I will only touch upon but not discuss in detail the kind of conflicts all of this can cause within the family. I will principally examine the culturally defined patterns of offering and consuming alcohol, allowing me to point out the characteristic features of the community's value system, economic approaches, social organisations, and ritual practices.

9. The analysis that follows provides a method to understand why in the crisis, brought about by the cultural changes in the village in recent decades, the consumption of alcohol has penetrated more and more areas of everyday life. This is also very important since any government-initiated modernisation or healthcare programme, or informative work to temper alcohol consumption can only bear results if it considers the symbolic role that alcohol plays in local Nahua communities.

Changes in society and alcohol consumption

10. It is difficult to provide accurate figures on the amount of alcohol consumed in Pachiquitla. In 1996, after the construction of a dirt road leading into the village, one of the wealthiest traders in the municipality with a truck was delivering 880 litres of spirit in almost every week to the village with its population of almost 1,200. A part of this was purchased by those living in neighbouring Nahua villages without a market, while the other part of it was consumed by the villagers.

11. In order to understand the current rates of alcohol consumption, the changes in society that have taken place in the region in the last few decades must be taken into account. Up until 1981 the municipality of Xochiatipan, located in the state of Hidalgo, between the mountains of Sierra Madre Oriental, had only sporadic ties with other parts of the Huasteca hidalguense region. Due to the lack of proper roads, it was only possible to reach the region's economic, religious, and political centre, Huejutla, 60 kilometres away, on trails that could only be used during the dry season. The route was mainly undertaken by traders, who reached the town after travelling for 12 hours with mules loaded with corn, beans, chillies, and sugar, after which they would return loaded with fizzy drinks, textiles, soaps, and bushwhackers.

12. Up to that point industrially produced alcohol was not delivered to the area of the municipality in large quantities. The amount of alcohol necessary for rites, communal celebrations and everyday needs was produced by the Mestizo elite of the municipality centre and by Nahua Indians using traditional methods. Sugar cane was cut down in the given year in March or April, when it was one and a half years old, and the sap of the sugar cane was squeezed out using a wooden press (*trapiche*) turned by mules; it was then placed over a fire and left to boil. After 3-4 hours of boiling most of the sap turned into brown sugar (*pilon*) and placed into stacked clay pots (Ruvalcaba 1991:127–144). The smaller part was distilled into a liquor (*aguardiente*). At that time alcohol was a luxury item in Indian villages consumed in ritual offerings and at communal celebrations, and less a concomitant of everyday work and life.

13. The early eighties brought with them changes regarding both commercial opportunities and the structure of land ownership in the territory. In 1981 a dirt road was built between the municipality centre of Xochiatipan and Huejutla. In the dry season, even trucks were able to navigate the dirt road, thus the opportunity opened up to distribute a greater amount of commercial goods in the municipality. During that same time, after a decade of land disputes involving bloody clashes, Hidalgo state bought up the land of the Mestizo landowners living in the

surrounding area who raised cattle, and distributed it among the Indian communities that were suffering from a lack of land because of overpopulation (Ruvalcaba 1990; Schryer 1990). Nowadays nobody in the municipality of Xochiatipan owns more than 28 hectares of land. The Mestizo landowners who had owned private land and had up to then pursued the lucrative business of raising grazing cattle switched to commercial activities. Utilising the better commercial opportunities, they used the compensation money they had received to buy trucks and to open shops in the main square of the municipality centre. Then, using their economic power, connections and knowhow needed for commerce, they became the intermediaries for industrially produced products between the towns and Indian villages. From then on, the poor quality spirit made from sugar cane in San Felipe Orizatlán became one of the most important commercial articles in the area, the price of which continually decreased because of commercial competition, and which by now has completely squeezed out better quality alcohol produced using traditional methods.

14. The emergence and proliferation of cheap spirit was driven by an increase in demand. The government modernisation projects (Progresa, Procampo) from the 1990s delivered limited but freely usable sums of money to the Indians. In addition to this, the expansion of the market encouraged the Nahuas to forego their traditional bartering and instead to sell their surplus crops for money, since they were not able to directly barter their corn and beans for many of the new products that appeared on the market.

15. Based on the data for 1999, the traders who went to Pachiquitla were selling poor quality spirit with a strength of about 30-35 percent for 3.5 pesos (1.35 USD) per litre. The paradoxical situation developed whereby a Mexican beer (for example Corona, Lager) of 0.33 litres with a strength of 5-6 percent, which was mainly consumed by the teachers in the village, was being sold for around 4 pesos in the shops. The cost of Tequila or Bacardi, which were available in the municipality centre and regarded as luxury items, ranged between 80 and 150 pesos per litre depending on their quality. For comparison, a Nahua man earned 20 pesos (two dollars) per day in 1999. Thus, given such poverty, spirit was the only kind of alcohol that the Nahuas could afford to buy.

16. However, it would be an oversimplification if we were to merely attribute alcohol consumption to the cheapness of industrially produced spirit, and if we were to regard it as an ever more essential means of everyday entertainment. With the exception of some ritual offerings, the consumption of alcohol in Pachiquitla always takes place in public places: in the little grocery stores that sell spirit, among others, in the village main square, and on the streets or the terraces of houses. In the year I spent there not once did I observe a man drinking spirit alone. The public, communal gesture of offering and accepting alcohol is at least as important as consuming the drink itself. This is precisely why it is important to study who, with whom, in what sort of places and for what purpose alcohol is consumed in a given community, and how the symbolic offering and consumption of alcohol reflect the value system of a community facing the changes brought about by modernisation.

Respect, notions of equality, perceptions linked to illness

17. During the interviews I conducted on alcohol consumption habits and on the rituals, economic activities, and interethnic meetings connected with them, respect and the concept of equality came up as central categories. The term respect, used in the different contexts of profane life and rituals, is made up of several meanings, based on which the Nahuas make a distinction between acts that are accepted by the community and those regarded as contrary to them and classified as deviant. The most important meaning of the concept is cooperation and reciprocity, as well as maintaining the moral norms of the community. Included among acts classified as contravening respect are physical violence, murder, the infringement of ownership (land, work tools, crops or money), forgetting to pay back loans and not keeping to agreements as well as neglect of farming one's land and ritual offerings for good crops. Behaviour similarly counted as deviant includes magical attacks against others, absence from communal celebrations and, in the case of adult men, being absent from their offices and weekly communal work (*faena*), which they are obliged to fulfil in a cargo system and need to make financial contributions, too. Moreover, the ethnic boundaries are symbolically drawn between the Nahuas and the Mestizo based on the giving or lack of respect, and the inhabitants of the village often distinguish themselves from the Nahuas of neighbouring villages in this way. [2] The close relationship between the individual and the community is also demonstrated by the fact that individual actions contravening respect (for example, murder and physical violence) serve as explanations for the blows against the community inflicted by nature (hurricanes, drought).

18. Equality is the second most important element of the value system embraced by the community and closely related to respect. As the members of the community put it, "as long as we respect one another, we are equal." Until the early 1990s the village was cut off from the world and in the prevailing local circumstances it was not possible to accumulate large sums of money. The livelihood of self-sufficient Nahua families was provided by the corn, beans, chilies, sugar cane, and coffee they grew on a few hectares of land. Their isolation and scant experience of the rest of society coupled with their deficiency in Spanish meant that there was little migration worthy of note to other towns until the early nineties. There were no factories in the surrounding areas where the locals could have earned a wage, and at that time no state programmes had been introduced in the area that would have provided the Nahua families with freely usable money.

19. Of course, all of this did not mean that the inhabitants of the village were completely equal financially. Inheritance, individual skills, diligence, and luck led to limited material differences existing in the past as well. In the same way, there were differences in the level of prestige enjoyed in the community and in respect to the symbolic capital accumulated over a lifetime. The principle of equality linked to the concept of respect, often cited in conversations and in community meetings and frequently manifesting in everyday life, rather refers, to use Cohen's term, to its rhetorical (we are all equal here) and pragmatic (we act as if we were equal) functions (Cohen 1989:33).

20. The villagers saw the protection of the ethos of equality mostly in the preservation of the communally accepted value system of respect, thus preventing disintegration within the community. All of this was achieved by keeping out external

influences (for example, the evangelising activities of Protestant sects and the emergence of political parties) as well as by preserving the village's way of owning land, social institutions, religious beliefs and, closely connected with this, the customs of offering spirit.

21. According to the communal ownership of land (the *ejido* system), Nahua families were not allowed to sell land distributed to them by the community and land could only be passed down to grown-up sons. If a family died out or there were no male heirs, the land reverted to the community. Not being able to privately own land also prevented anyone in the village accumulating large areas of land. Inheriting through the male line meant that men from outside the community who had no livelihood of their own did not move into the village and because of the decisively endogamous lineage system, the village was effectively closed to strangers.

22. The community did its utmost to arrange internal affairs independently of state structures, i.e., through the officials elected by the villagers, who had to make the more important decisions together with members of the community (the *cargo* system). The officials were changed every year to give all the men in the village a chance to be one. The officials were not allowed to use their power for material gain, and for the men filling the position of an official was rather about making material contributions in order to acquire the social prestige appropriate to the stage where they were in life. Teachers and healthcare workers without permanent residence in the village were not allowed to undertake a decision-making role in the closed system of the village that integrated its male adult residents.

23. The community's perceptions of illness played a major role in maintaining the ethos of equality. The inhabitants of the village did not attribute illness or death in their families to bodily problems and to malnutrition as a result of a limited diet or a general lack of medical care but to magical attacks upon them. According to the general explanations for illness in the region, if somebody was angry with a fellow villager, they would employ a religious specialist (*tetlachiuijketl*) to inflict harm, who would use sympathetic magic or enlist evil spirits, called evil winds (*ajakatl*) to harm the individual in question (Viqueira-Palerm 1954; Montoya Briones 1971; Hernández Cuellar 1982). According to how the villagers generally explained it, the main reason for anger was envy because, for example, a brother, neighbour or other villager had more land, their harvest was better, or they had been able to obtain things regarded locally as luxury goods. Due to problems associated with inheritance, disputes in the village were mainly between brothers. Since it was not possible to prove magical attacks, neither the village council, nor the municipality justices were able to do anything about such reports, the everyday life of the village was permeated with a general feeling of suspicion and accusation. If somebody became ill or died, their relatives would turn to a shaman who would tell who had caused the illness and why by casting of 14 maize seeds. Amidst a general atmosphere of uncertainty, several strategies were employed to create a feeling of security for families and to avoid illnesses. On the one hand, they managed to avoid the open accumulation of marketable assets regarded as luxury items and available on the markets, which give reason for envy. On the other hand, by inviting adult male members to drink alcohol and by sponsoring community celebrations they declared that they were willing to devote part of their surplus to the good of the community. In this sense, the everyday offering of

alcohol was a conscious defensive strategy against envy and illnesses brought about by magic.

Contracts and consolidating ties of solidarity

24. Given the lack of knowledge of the law in Pachiquitla and the rate of illiteracy that can be observed among the adult population, there is still no tradition of written contracts. Disputes are settled through decisions made by the village leaders based on what they remember. For example, in land disputes between families, cases are decided according to the opinions of those elders who were present during the given distribution of land and can recall where the boundaries were drawn for areas of land distributed to the families in question. The agreements that are made in the village are legitimised by the presence of the adult male members of the community. Everybody tries to make sure that agreements are made publicly, in the presence of several people. For instance, if anybody buys produce or animals from the villagers, the money is carefully counted out in front of those present. The 'contractual parties' publicly state what the agreement is about and then the buyer offers the seller some spirit, which they each drink from, and finally some drink is offered to the others gathered. The acceptance of spirit, much like the signature of a written contract, authenticates the agreement, while the acceptance of the spirit by the other people present indicates that they are there as witnesses, and that in the event of a later dispute they would be willing to accurately recall the details of the agreement. When officials are elected annually, as nominees they promise to take up their given post for a year by accepting the alcohol offered to them. Once they accept the spirit offered to them, they are not allowed to withdraw their promise. The public consumption of alcohol also sanctifies the occasion when a father distributes his land among his sons.

25. Among the contracts concluded in this way, marriage contracts and more especially *compadre* contracts bear great significance. Marriages between young people are still based on an agreement between their parents, which is sanctified by the heads of families accepting spirit from each other in the presence of witnesses. First the boy's father offers it to the girl's father and then this is reciprocated on another occasion. The purpose of the *compadre* relationship, which is not based on being directly related, is so that the parents and their children can form alliances of solidarity with people who are not directly related and through this increase their security within the village. Throughout their lives children will acquire numerous godparents (*padrino* and *padrina*), which takes place during the rites of passage within the framework of the Catholic Church (baptising, the first Communion, marriages) and school leaving ceremonies. A family can choose godparents if they are unable to cover their child's medical bill or the cost of the shaman's cures. There are an average of 5-6 children in a Nahua family and the transitional rites associated with children provide the opportunity to develop an extensive *compadre* system. A social network is thus created around children, ensuring that they will not be left unprotected in the community in the event of their parents' death. The godparents can also form alliances, provide mutual help in carrying out agricultural work, as well as lend money and produce to one another in crisis situations with a greater degree of trust. After ties of friendship are formed, they consistently address one another as *compadre* and *commadre*, and often visit in the evenings. At such times, the host is expected to offer food and

spirit to the guests. The village is interwoven with publicly known *compadre* connections, which often mean alliances that are closer than those that have formed with direct relatives. It has become especially common in recent times that the number of conflicts about inheritance and rivalry with one another have increased between brothers and their families because of the lack of land; at the same time, the degree of cooperation among relatives has decreased. In the stories from the village that I gathered, a *compadre* is the one who will warn his fellow if his wife is cheating on him or somebody wants to hurt him. The families also try to persuade the people living in neighbouring villages, whom they mainly meet at the markets held in the municipality centre, and go on to talk with in the pubs after selling their produce, to enter into a *compadre* relationship with them. The mestizo political leaders and traders of the municipality centre also try to gain influence and assert their interests in the Indian villages through the *compadre* ties and the offering of alcohol that goes along with it. *Compadre* alliances are formed publicly with the consumption of alcohol, and from time to time these need to be publicly consolidated. Such occasions as this include the weekly market days, Sundays, celebrations sanctified by the Church and conversations after work when they invite one another for spirit. If these occasions are missed or if one of the parties does not accept the drink offered, the weight of the relationship and the strength of the moral obligation to work together wanes. According to the Nahuas, the money a family spends on alcohol is, therefore, not an expression of fatalism or a meaningless frittering away of money on communal entertainment but rather a strategy consciously based on traditions. Its purpose is to accumulate symbolic capital, upon which ever wider networks of solidarity can be built. In this still mostly self-sufficient farming community – where hurricanes and pests attacking plants can jeopardise a good harvest, which is the basis of their livelihood, and where the head of a family falling ill can make the whole family vulnerable, ensuring cooperation between the members of the community in times of crisis provides the fundament of social institutions.

26.

Migration is also approached within this context in the village. The boys and men of the village usually migrate for temporary periods of only a few years, since in the cultural environment of a town it is impossible to develop close ties of solidarity that provide security in the event of unemployment, illness or a lack of money (Szeljak 2000:126).

27.

Two major ways of offering and consuming spirit are accepted. In the first case the purpose of the offering is not to consolidate a public alliance with a specific individual but rather a general expression of respect for those present. At such times the person who buys and offers the spirit pours a few drops onto the ground, thus respecting Mother Earth, who nourishes everybody. After this, he drinks and then approaches each person present separately and offers them the drink one by one. These people traditionally only accept the alcohol after some persuasion to drink, declining it twice or three times. Accepting the first time is an expression of greed and drunkenness in the same way as if somebody conspicuously drank more from the bottle than everyone else. Offering the drink several times also demonstrates that the individual in question has taken the invitation seriously. The offering continues until the bottle is empty.

28. In the case of forming or consolidating an alliance with a specific individual, the full bottle is first offered to the individual concerned and the offering is accompanied by a few kind words to explain the purpose of the spirit offered. At such times the individual in question also pours the first drops onto the ground for Mother Earth, and then drinks from the bottle. After this he offers the bottle to the host first and then to those others present in the manner described previously. Nobody can be left out and spirit must be offered even to those who are already drunk. In both cases everybody drinks from the same bottle. In the conversations during the following days the gesture of the offering is often referred to, thus underlining the importance of the alliance.

Communal censure and alcohol consumption

29. The affairs of the village are managed by the annually chosen officials. Men who have completed their schooling and aspire to have their own abode and communal land are obliged to undertake a post in the hierarchical *cargo* system every few years until they take on the position of a judge at the age of 55-60 and then become members of the council of elders (Szeljak 2000:119-122; Romualdo Hernández 1982:57-93). They receive no financial remuneration. The office carries with it authority and respect and requires a material outlay since the officials have to sponsor the village celebrations with either work or money; during this year they have less time to devote to farm their own land. While in this position, they consume spirit almost every day since this is the way the community honours the work they carried out for the village.

30. The tasks concerning the village are discussed in the evenings at the house of the head of the village, the judge (*juez auxiliar*), who maintains contact with the officials channelled into the state structure of the municipality centre. It is at these occasions that disputes are settled. The complainants must make a personal appearance before the officials, who only take their problems seriously if they are offered a packet of cigarettes and a litre of spirit. According to the explanations I was given for this, the gesture refers to numerous things. The officials are convinced by this act that the appellant has a serious problem. By offering the alcohol the appellant symbolically shows that he is giving the respect due to the officials and that he will accept their decision. The alcohol also contributes to helping the officials to "be able to stay awake" after a tiring day's work, i.e., the alcohol and cigarettes lend them the strength to listen and to responsibly think through their decision. By accepting the alcohol, the village officials guarantee that they will make their decision according to the norms of the community and without bias. After listening to the appellant, the defendant is also called in and, for similar reasons, he also offers spirit and cigarettes to the officials.

31. In the case of minor infringements (regularly missing communal work, petty theft, physical assault that do not result in serious injury, infringements within the family) the village tries to make decisions within its own scope of authority. In more serious cases (assault that causes serious injury, if the accused and the aggrieved do not belong to the same village and if the infringement does not occur in the village or upon the request of the aggrieved) the fines and compensation to be paid are decided by a local official (*juez menor*) with a seat in the state judiciary based

in the municipality centre. In very serious cases (for example, murder and use of a firearm) the accused is brought before the court with its seat in Huejutla, the economic and political centre of the area.

32. A typical difference between the level of decisions within and outside the village is that fines levelled in the municipality centre always have to be paid in cash, in addition to sentences to be served; whereas the village leaders mainly levy fines in quantities of spirit.

33. In Pachiquitla the majority of offenses are carried out in a drunken state, and involve brawls with wives or other family members, or being absent from community work. The danger of clashes is reduced by the custom that before going out for drinks after work and during celebrations everyone leaves their *machete* at home, lest they cause permanent injures to others while drunk. In the case of assaults, the officials (*policias*) appointed to deal with the event lock up the individual concerned in a single unit jail built out of stone and situated next to the village square so they can "sober up". The democratic nature of the village is demonstrated by an incident three years ago, when, during the festival for the village's patron saint, the judge, who was sponsoring the whole event, was also locked up in the jail and punished for causing offense to others while intoxicated. The perpetrator of the offence had to appear before the officials the next day, who could decide upon two kinds of fines. In the same way, it is an everyday occurrence for the village leader to work as a casual labourer on the land of the man in whose case he is to make a decision. Anyone who breaks the communal norms has to pay a fine to the community. Without exception this is paid in spirit, and, depending on the seriousness of the offence, the fine usually ranges from one to twenty litres. The aggrieved party can decide themselves if they want the compensation levied by the official to be paid in spirit or in money. The punishment is mitigated if somebody was intoxicated when committing the offence since the individual did not know what they were doing. As alcohol is no longer made in the traditional way in Pachiquitla, the accused have to go to the shop and buy alcohol for money and then take it to the village officials. The alcohol is then consumed by the village leaders and those present along with the perpetrator of the offence and (in the case of a man) the aggrieved party, and they often all get drunk together.

34. Fines are also paid in spirit if an adult, healthy head of a family with his own abode does not turn up for the weekly communal work, during which they clear the paths leading out of the village, work the land set aside to pay for the school's expenses and construct buildings that will be the common property of the village. At such times, depending on the length of worktime lost, the fine is 2-5 litres of spirit, equivalent to half or one day's work. The alcohol accumulated in this way is drunk by those participating in the work. From one year to the next more and more men are missing from the communal work because of temporarily working away from the village and other family members cannot fill in for them, therefore, 20-30 litres of alcohol can accumulate as a fine on one occasion.

35. It may seem paradoxical that the punishment for somebody who, in a state of drunkenness, has carried out an act regarded as being punishable according to the community's value system must consume the fine, i.e., the alcohol, together with the person levying it; such occasions are often followed by those present getting drunk together. Before a monetary economy became common, the fine had to be

paid with locally made spirit, which was regarded as a luxury item for communal entertainment, celebrations and on occasions when men express their respect for one another. However, this practice can be explained not solely with an adherence to traditions but can be better understood if we consider the difference between the symbolic value of alcohol and money. As the Nahuas see it, the reason for punishment is that the guilty culprit violates the ethical norms of the community and does not show the expected respect to the members of the community. The purpose of the punishment is to force the punished individual to render a public gesture of respect before the community, which act is then mutually performed. During the one or two days of imprisonment the accused is physically and symbolically cut off from the community (they cannot take part in communal life and the jail is right next to the town square and thus exposed to public view). Offering spirit and its acceptance by members of the community, i.e., practising mutual respect, is also a gesture of an individual being restored to the community. For the Nahua families who over recent decades have had to come to terms with a monetary economy money is, as Bourdieu put it "an abstract medium of economic relations". "The sum of money currently possessed is not in itself the source of any satisfaction apart from the pleasure of possession" and "With paper currency, even more so, one no longer owns even symbols of things, but symbols of symbols" (Bourdieu 1963:68) However, in Pachiquitla money and respect are not directly linked and it would be inconceivable for a sinner to distribute the money that he would have spent on his fine, i.e. spirit, among those gathered together in the form of 'a few coins' and then to tell them to spend it as they saw fit. Such an act simply would not symbolically help to resolve conflicts as money cannot be 'consumed' communally. In Pachiquitla money is loaned in the presence of witnesses, but is never given as a gift. The same logic, which may seem paradoxical in itself, can be observed in the explanation given by the villagers: a monetary fine would imply that the community was directly taking money from the family of the accused, who would need it for purchasing medicine, clothes or agricultural tools.

36. It follows from the above that the officials consume varying amounts of spirit every day. To contextualise the situation, in March 1999 in the village with a total of 1,240 inhabitants, only 45 people actually carried out tasks in the *cargo* system out of the 240-250 male adults under the age of 60, who have a permanent abode in the village and can be enlisted to fulfil the office. Thus, on average, the adult males have to resume office every five years. [3]

Everyday work, energy, and competition

37. By the early 1990s the demographic explosion in the preceding two decades had created a shortage of land. All the land owned jointly by the village was under cultivation and the village could no longer use its own privately owned *ejido* land to supplement the micro allotments that boys who came of age inherited from their fathers. On the one hand, the tensions caused by the lack of land increased the level of migration to the towns. On the other hand, given that there was a lack of available paid work in the village, the only way to earn money for the young people working on micro allotments was to devote their free time to working the larger lands of other villagers. Since these young people with more free time had no use for being paid for their work with work, and a monetary economy was becoming ever more widespread, in the 1990s the previously predominant system of

mutual assistance between relatives and friends in work and working for crops was increasingly replaced by working for money. At the same time, in those families from which their young men had moved to the town, the family was no longer able to secure labour from within its own framework. A greater number of workers were required at specific times such as the clearing of land cultivated by the slash-and-burn method, planting corn, beans and chilies, weeding out and harvesting of plants, and when cutting down sugar cane and making sugar. At such times it was difficult to get paid labourers (*peón*) because these jobs have to be done around the same time by almost all of the villagers. Amidst the fierce competition for the available labour those people enjoyed an advantage who had extensive connections through relatives or the *compadre* system, and those who "paid their due respects" to their labourers, i.e., they supplemented wages with food and spirit. Because the financial situation of many families did not allow them to increase wages, the successful practice emerged whereby employers sought to attract labourers by offering more and more spirit. In addition to giving food made of corn as well as coffee to their workers during the afternoon break and after work, the employers (*patrón*) also had to offer alcohol to be competitive. By 1999 it was already a general rule that employers had to offer each worker two *topo*s, i.e., close to two decilitres of spirit a day. In other words, in addition to paying workers for 8-10 hours of exhausting work in the hot sun with a monetary remuneration, employers also compensated them for their 'lost energy' and provided them with the strength necessary to carry out their tasks. The Nahuas primarily understand strength and energy as the 'strength of blood' (*chicaualistli*). According to their belief in a dual soul, the Nahaus do not attribute illnesses to direct organic problems but rather to the weakness of the *tonali*, the part of the soul that leaves the body during an illness, an event indicated by a change in the normal body temperature. The strength of the soul can be primarily maintained by ritual offerings as well as generous amounts of warm food (tortilla pie, *tamal*) made from corn, since corn itself contains the soul of Chicomexochitl, the cultural hero of the Nahaus, who gave them the plant itself (Szeljak 1999:135-137). They also interpret the moderate consumption of spirit, which, on entering the body, induces a feeling of warmth and reduces the tiredness of daily work, as a kind of 'strengthener of the soul,' which contributes to regenerating a tired body. In this context, beer is not recommended because not only is it expensive, but its low alcohol content ensures less strength and energy (*chikaua*).

Deviance, cooperation, social categories

38. Social categories formulated about alcohol consumption differ according to gender. In the case of women, alcohol consumption, whether it takes place openly or in secret, is a sign of deviance, 'dirtiness,' and antisocial behaviour. The only exceptions to this are female religious specialists drinking alcohol during rituals linked to mourning and funerals, as well as in the case of paid work, when a little spirit can be accepted by women to alleviate tiredness.

39. In the case of men, deviance in connection to the consumption of spirit is interpreted in a different context. It is always classified as antisocial if anybody consumes it alone. In contrast to this, communal consumption is classified as a public and expected gesture of social solidarity. Based on their observation of communal

norms, the villagers divide men into three groups, which only partly accord with the financial situations of the members.

40.

1. *Those who neither drink, nor offer alcohol.* This group included adult and healthy men, the male members of the six families who were converted in the recent decade by the North American Protestant preachers. They regard rituals based on traditional, religious beliefs and the offering of spirit as idolatry, and spirit itself as the drink of the devil, who thus takes the souls of those living in ignorance. In their case the individual accumulation of wealth and ensuring a good life play an important role, and they regard the frequent celebrations connected to Catholic saints as an unnecessary time away from work. Their *compadre* connections are increasingly restricted to the religious community they belong to. They have moved to the peripheries of society and according to the locals, "they do not show their respect," and they "do not talk" to other people. The Catholics see the spread of Protestant sects as being dangerous, divisive within the community, and the cause of internal disputes.

41.

2. *Those who drink alcohol but work the land and keep their families.* According to my own estimates, about 70 per cent of the Pachiquitla men belong to this category. This category refers to those who, according to how the Nahuas put it, are willing to 'talk to other people', i.e., by devoting some of their money to alcohol they constantly consolidate their alliances whether with their fellow villagers or with the supernatural beings belonging to the pantheon of their syncretic religion. They are the men who are well integrated in society and strive to build networks of solidarity. They are willing to both offer and accept spirit, and at the same time diligently cultivate their land and are able to sustain their families in times of crisis through their connections.

42.

3. *Those who do not work, neglect their land, and cannot keep their families.* The alcoholics who belong in this category drink every day as a necessity to improve their feeling of well-being. Because of their physical weakness they are increasingly unable to cultivate their land or go and work for a wage. They neglect their families, and their clothes are dirty. Since they have no money, they are unable to offer alcohol and can only accept it. Their solidarity with others weakens as they cannot nurture their *compadre* ties; thus, they receive no help in cultivating their land, nor is anyone willing to give them a loan. They are drunk even when other people are carrying out their daily tasks. Although they are also classified as socially deviant, they are nevertheless not completely ostracised. The attitude of the community towards them is influenced by the villagers not making a direct connection between the development of alcoholism and the regular consumption of alcohol. They believe that alcoholism, just like other illnesses, is the result of a magical attack caused by envy. A reoccurring element in the stories about them is that at one point they had good lives, materially speaking, and they became the victims of a magical attack precisely because of this. According to religious beliefs, the *tetlachiuijketl* soaked a doll made in the image of the person concerned in spirit and through imitative magic made the victim is unable to resist the constant invitations to drink. Thus, avoiding alcoholism does not primarily depend upon the willpower of the individual, but rather upon the success of the purification rite performed by the religious specialist (*tlamatijketl*) to dispel the curse.

Religious beliefs and alcohol consumption

43. The offering and consumption of spirit can be traced back to the chief moral principles of the Nahuas' religious practice, called the *custom* (*costumbre*). Due to the superficial conversion to Catholicism, in this religion, which embraces and combines pre-Hispanic and Christian notions, biblical stories and the teachings of Christianity are adapted to the *custom*. The Nahuas interpret the relationship between humans and supernatural beings as similar to that between people, and the primary aim here is cooperation based on reciprocity. They imagine these supernatural beings, whether of pre-Hispanic or Catholic origin, as being anthropomorphic, i.e., they have human desires and needs. They get tired after fertilising the soil and bringing the rain, and at such times they like to eat and drink and have fun. An important element of the rituals performed by springs, on the tops of the holy mountains, on cultivated lands and at home altars is the offering of candles, copal smoke, tobacco, food, and drinks, including spirit too, which give 'warmth' and therefore strength (SignoriniLupo 1989:92-93). Before any communal consumption the villagers pour the first drops of spirit onto the ground, offering it to Mother Earth, who tires after nourishing sugar canes, which serve as the raw material for edible plants and spirit. If at the beginning of the rainy season, during June, it does not rain in the weeks after the corn kernels are sown, the shamans will hold a rite in the church, which is kept secret from the Catholic priest, who lives in the municipality centre, during which they will spit liquor at the wooden statue of Saint Peter, the village's patron saint, to give him enough strength to bring rain to the territory. According to the Nahuas' beliefs, the key in Saint Peter's hand endows him with the ability to open the gates of heaven from where the rain will fall to the ground, but because of all this work his strength sometimes leaves him.

44. Although the Nahua shamans are familiar with marihuana, which they call Santa Rosa, they only drink spirit during their ritual prayers and when curing the sick. This helps them establish a connection with supernatural beings, thus the shamans 'speak better' and 'their prayers are better heard'. In the same way, as they would in their relationships with people, in the final stage of the rites all of those present have to consume food and spirit before the altar together with the supernatural beings who arrive there; this is how they express their respect. The spirit, which is often humorously referred to by the locals as holy water among themselves, contributes to sanctifying the place along with the burning bark of the locust-tree.

45. The Nahua interpretation of the Holy Scripture also legitimises the moderate consumption of spirit. Starting from the 16th century, one of the main problems of converting the indigenous people to Catholicism was how to explain the basic Catholic tenets of faith, moral principles, and Bible stories in a way they would understand to the fullest (Burkhart 1989). Grapes, the basic ingredient of wine, are often mentioned in Bible stories both specifically and metaphorically, but they cannot be found in the municipality of Huasteca hidalguense. The word *vino*, meaning wine in the Spanish language version of the Bible, which was also adopted into the Nahuatl language, was applied to traditionally produced fermented drinks during the period of the conversion, and after sugar cane became an established crop it was also used to denote the distilled spirit. According to the

Nahua religious beliefs of today, Jesus miraculously turned water into spirit at the Wedding at Cana.

46. The cultivation of sugar cane and making spirit also have mythological roots. According to Nahua myths, Jesus once entrusted the cultivation of sugar cane to Saint John the Baptist. Since the people of the time constantly and greedily broke off the sugar cane stems with their sweet sap, the saint asked Jesus if he could be the patron saint of another plant. Jesus made him the patron saint of the strong chili, while the sugar cane was given to Saint Joseph, whose feast day coincides with the period when sugar cane is harvested, and he was the first to make spirit for people.

47. One of the times when alcohol is consumed to extremes is the carnival held according to the Catholic calendar. The dances and close company of others in the 'upside down world of the carnival', aggression, i.e., the symbolic demonstration of strength, plays an important role and goes hand in hand with excessive drinking. For six days at this period the men of the village go from house to house in masks, dressed as women, monsters and Mestizo men. The revellers dance in front of every house to the characteristic *huapango* music of the region, and the hosts give them spirit in return. The carnival is the wild, unfettered, and frightening celebration of the owl man (*tlakatekolotl*), associated by the Catholic Church with the devil, in whose honour they dance and consume alcohol (Burkhart 1989:41; Báez-Jorge – Gómez Martínez 1988). "We have to give him respect too, otherwise he will make us ill" is one of the most important principles of the Nahuas' syncretic religion. Supernatural beings are not endowed with moral absolutes, and their purpose is not to drive away dangerous, evil entities but rather to create harmony with them through ritual cooperation.

48. At wakes every mourning man has to come to the house of the deceased with a litre of spirit, a packet of cigarettes and the corn and beans prescribed for the funerary feast. After death and during the wake the cold soul of the departed, whose body is laid out before the family altar, wanders around the house in a state of anger because it has to leave the surroundings it is accustomed to. At such times the assembled mourners must express their respect to the deceased and then offer him or her food and spirit, which they later communally eat and drink. At the funeral, on the following day, they sprinkle spirit into the grave pit. The villagers explained that after a hard day's work the spirit gives the mourners the strength to stay awake all night for the vigil and during the funeral the next day. This is one of the exceptional occasions when women are also free to drink alcohol, since the 'coldness' that the angry soul can imbue in those present can weaken their souls. Thus, the participants at the wake try to lend their souls strength with the feeling of warmth that goes along with alcohol consumption, while the sick and those with open wounds do all they can to avoid the house of the deceased.

49. The priest who lives in the municipality centre only comes to the village twice a year, when he holds a mass, baptises all the children who were born in that year, and performs marriage ceremonies. The Catholic Church supports a moderate consumption of alcohol. In contrast to the traditional religious rites of pre-Hispanic origin and conducted by specialists, the consumption of spirit does not take place in public ceremonies linked to Catholic feast days. However, it does play a

central role in the festivities held after the ceremony, and especially in the festival of Saint Peter, the village's patron saint.

Social changes in Pachiquitla in the second half of the 1990s

50. The changes that took place over the past decade gradually shook the foundations of the ethos of equality in the village. The driving forces behind the growing disparity of wealth in the village included the villagers becoming more open, the onset of migration and the introduction of state projects providing the Nahua families with financial support. In addition, the young people, who worked in Mexico City and then returned, acquired a new model of living. Adopting a thus far unknown entrepreneurial spirit, they bought goods with money, with which they then move from village to village trading at the markets, or they open up small grocery shops in the village. In the second half of the 1990s new state projects were introduced. The most important among them was Progresa (Programa de Educación y Salud). [4] The support provided in the programme ensures enough buying power for more and more shops to open in the village. In 1996 electricity was brought in, televisions began to appear, and the villagers became familiar with consumer habits through television shows, and even more so through advertisements. The open accumulation of material goods began, and differences in wealth became more perceptible in the village. Stone houses were built, people bought cassette players, televisions, and fridges. As a result of the increasing polarisation in the community, which is manifest in the area of finances and in the acquisition of cultural knowledge needed to advance in society, the danger of magical attacks caused by envy increased and, therefore, equality and the public expression of respect became even more important, thus more prosperous families have to offer spirit in their community ever more frequently. These young people increasingly seek to attain the role of decision-makers within the village. Since their age prohibits them from officially becoming leaders, they try to obtain influence by becoming representatives of political parties (mainly for the PRI, which has been in government for 70 years) to get people's support and secure their votes. "You need to be able to manipulate people," explained a young man with good connections to the political elite of the municipality. To facilitate this, they seek to nurture close alliances both within and outside the kinship and *compadre* system, an important facilitating element of which is offering spirit.

Conclusion

51. The arguments pertaining to modernisation and the cultural changes that led to the restriction of the distribution of spirit, discussed at the beginning of this study, are similar in numerous respects to the debates conducted in social science in relation to alcohol consumption which have intensified since the second half of the 1960s (Mandelbaum 1965; Room 1984; Heath 1988). Resulting from the different research methods and approaches to problems, psychologists and doctors often criticise anthropologists for simplifying and minimising the problems stemming from alcohol consumption in their studies. They are criticised for chiefly studying the public, communal patterns of alcohol consumption, focusing on the integrating and cohesive role it plays in the life of the community, and for applying an

excessively functionalist approach and thus often ignoring the 'agony of the individual' and the destructive effect of alcohol.

52. In contrast, anthropologists emphasise that, during their research work, it is important to make a distinction between research into the development and destructive effects of alcoholism as an addiction, and research into the patterns of alcohol consumption with the aim of learning more about a community (Douglas 1988). Communal consumption itself follows varying patterns in different cultures, and it is the analysis of these patterns that forms the central tenet of most anthropological papers. During their research anthropologists strive to establish what a given community regards as deviant and accepted in respect to alcohol consumption based on its own values.

53. As I mentioned earlier, in my fieldwork I often came face to face with the destructive effects of alcohol in the village, which was mostly manifest in violence within the family, neglecting work and increasing poverty. It is also clear that my analysis, which chiefly emphasises the integrative role of alcohol, is 'male-centric' since in this society, rigidly stratified according to gender, this was what I was mainly able to observe; an analysis from the perspective of women would probably have emphasized other elements. From a cultural point of view, for Pachiquitla men alcohol is a means of consolidating their skills of cooperation and the ethos of equality. The most important element of creating security for Nahua farming families, exposed to the capricious whims of the natural environment and illnesses, is to build a network of solidarity, the strength of which is ensured by everyday cooperation and symbolically by the system of offering and consuming spirit. This is precisely why anyone not willing to drink spirit is marginalised. I should reiterate that the Nahuas, at least in the case of the consumers seen as moderate within the context of the local environment, do not regard the consumption of alcohol as "a waste of money" in contrast to the opinion of the majority of society, but rather as a communally accepted method of creating and consolidating symbolic capital. Besides being an important element in building relationships between people, spirit is also an important means of cooperation with supernatural beings.

54. Of course, it must be taken into consideration that this is not a matter of a definitively formed Nahua society, where everyone always behaves according to rigid rules and pre-planned strategies. Having fun together, relaxing after work, forgetting worries and pain as well as a cure for loneliness are equally important functions of drinking spirit.

55. In the context of modernisation, the question arises how the consumption of spirit can be moderated in the village. Protestantism, which rejects the consumption of alcohol along with its cultural context, is a drastic solution. North American evangelists have made significant inroads in some villages neighbouring Pachiquitla, albeit at a cost since in these villages there has been a major increase in religious and cultural conflicts within families and communities. In my opinion, change will be brought about by the village becoming more open, the expanding experience of migration and the behavioural patterns mediated by television as well as by the increasing disparities in wealth. Industrially produced spirit is regarded as an "ethnic drink" in the region. It is associated with poverty and the very 'existence of the Indian', while its public consumption delineates the boundaries between the neighbouring mestizos and the Nahua Indians. The types of alcohol consumed

and the patterns of consumption demonstrate the varying degrees of cultural mestization. These days it can be observed that the young people returning to Pachiquitla from towns only consume spirit on occasions when it is strictly necessary and, like the mestizo men of the municipality centre, prefer to drink beer in each other's company, while being increasingly choosy about with whom and when they should drink. In the future the character and value of the alliances of solidarity will probably change due to the growing disparities of wealth and individualism. Similarly, the tradition of certifying contracts through the consumption of alcohol will probably be replaced by contracts written on paper, which will also come along with changes in alcohol consumption patterns.

NOTES

1 The study was written based on the data compiled during my fieldwork in the Mexican territory of Huasteca hidalguense between 1996 and 1999. Hereby I would like to express my gratitude to the Hungarian Scholarship Committee, the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs, (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores), and the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS) institute of social anthropology in Mexico City for their support of my research. I owe a special debt of gratitude to the people of Pachiquitla, who welcomed me and afforded me so much help in my work.

2 For an interpretation of the concept of respect and the role of alcohol in interethnic relationships, see: Heat 1971, Lomnitz Adler 1991.

3 It is important to note that due to the annual variations in acceleration and proportions in the process of migration, these figures are only suitable for approximate estimates.

4 Within the context of a programme launched in the country's poorest regions, the central government paid Indian families a monthly sum they could use freely. The degree of support varied according to the number of children, and receiving the money was conditional upon the children and parents turning up at a specified time for a medical examination and the children attending school. In contrast to the traditional gender roles, the state sends money to mothers directly "lest the men spend it on spirit".

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