

culture

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Journal of Medical Anthropology and Transcultural Psychiatry

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Schwerpunkt:

**Medizinethnologie
“on the Move”.
Lebenswelten unter
medizin-
anthropologischen
Perspektiven**

**Medical Anthropology
“on the Move.”
Anthropological
Perspectives on
Lifeworlds**

Zum Titelbild: „Die Beschwörerin (*Bajalica*) Biljana aus Budisava, Wojwodina. Rekonstruktionsversuche einer ethnischen Identität im postsozialistischen Nachkriegsserbien“ (Beitrag von MARIA VIVOD, siehe dieses Heft S. 153-162), hier im Rahmen ihrer Behandlungen beim Bleigießen.

To the title: “Reconstructing Ethic Identity in Post-socialist Postwar Serbia: The Charmer (*bajalica*) Biljana from Budisava in Vojvodina” (contribution of MARIA VIVOD, in this issue pp. 153-162), here in healing action with lead-foundry.

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Vorschau // Preview:

Curare 31 (2008) 1: Good Deaths/Bad Deaths: Dilemmas of Death in Comparative Perspective // Guter Tod/Schlimmer Tod: Dilemmas des Sterbens aus vergleichender Perspektive

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The Politics of Eco-Social Wellbeing in Nahua Society: Negotiating Lifeworlds through Indigenous Rights Claims*

KRISTINA TIEDJE

Abstract In this article, I explore how the Western view of nature as separate from culture bears a direct impact on the wellbeing of indigenous communities who see nature as a dynamic and integrated part of themselves. During an era when climate change and environmental catastrophes increasingly threaten the health and habitat of indigenous societies, biodiversity conservation programs have sometimes failed to include indigenous inhabitants in their planning. However, environmental change in the habitat of indigenous peoples can bear direct consequences on their wellbeing and *lifeworlds* (*Lebenswelten*), especially when the latter view their health dependent upon their immediate surroundings. Drawing on this problem, I first examine the cultural meanings of *nature embeddedness* of health and wellbeing through an ethnographic description of Nahua medicine. Subsequently, I analyze how these intertwined relationships of nature/culture/medicine can play out in an indigenous rights movement, demonstrating how indigenous healers and traditional doctors mobilize the narrative of biodiversity conservation to counter impending environmental change in their habitat and to advance cultural and environmental rights claims. In this context, I demonstrate how the articulation of nature/culture/medicine can lead to the creation of a shared narrative that crosses different views of nature and culture.

Politiken des öko-sozialen Wohlbefindens bei den Nahua Indianern: Ein Einblick in die Verhandlungen von Lebenswelten anhand von Völkerrechtsforderungen

Zusammenfassung Dieser Artikel analysiert inwiefern die globale Rhetorik des Umweltschutzes—auf einem westlichen Naturbegriff beruhend und die Natur von der Kultur deutlich abgrenzend—mitunter direkte Folgen für das Wohlbefinden und die Lebenswelten der autochtonen Völker haben kann. Diese verstehen sich oft als Teil einer Natur-Kultur und ziehen meist keine klare Grenze zwischen Natur und Kultur. Dies ist insofern aktuell, als dass der Naturschutz in den Zeiten der drohenden Klimaveränderung insbesondere den Lebensraum der Indianer Lateinamerikas und anderswo betrifft, der Begriff der Biodiversität die indianische Auffassung der Natur jedoch nicht genau trifft. Eine Veränderung des Lebensraumes der Indianer kann mitunter Konsequenzen für ihr Wohlbefinden und ihre Gesundheit haben, insbesondere, wenn diese vom Einklang mit der Natur abhängig ist. In Bezug darauf, und am Beispiel einer ethnographischen Studie der traditionellen Medizin der Nahua Indianer aus Mexiko, untersucht dieser Artikel zunächst die kulturelle Bedeutung von Wohlbefinden und Gesundheit, welche diese sich durch ein Eingebundensein ihrer Lebenswelt in - und eine Harmonie dergleichen mit - der Natur charakterisieren lassen. Die Verbindungen zwischen Natur/Kultur/Medizin werden dann anhand einer indianischen Bewegung analysiert, welche aufzeigt, wie eine Bedrohung ihres Lebensraumes die Heiler und traditionellen Ärzte dazu führt, sich die Sprache des Naturschutzes zu eigen zu machen, um kulturelle Forderungen nach indigenen Rechten und Schutz ihres Lebensraumes auszusprechen. Außerdem macht dieser Artikel deutlich, inwiefern die Artikulierung von Natur/Kultur/Medizin dazu führt, gewisse Auffassungen der Natur und Kultur zu übertreten, um eine gemeinsame Sprache zu finden.

Keywords (Schlagwörter) environmental change (Umweltveränderung) – biodiversity (Biodiversität) – cultural diversity (kulturelle Diversität) – healing (Heilen) – indigenous health systems (indigene Medizin) – religion and nature (Religion und Natur) – indigenous rights (indigene Rechte) – lifeworld (Lebenswelt) – nature embeddedness (Eingebundenheit in der Natur) – health (Gesundheit) – wellbeing (Wohlbefinden) – Nahua People (Nahua-Indianer) – Mexico

* This article is based on a series of lectures given on this topic, including a public lecture at the University of Florida, Gainesville in September 2005 and a paper presentation at the Meeting 18. Fachtagung Ethnomedizin AGEM in Kassel, Germany, October 21-23, 2005 („Bedrohte Lebenswelten – eine Herausforderung aus medizinanthropologischer Sicht“)

Introduction

Environmental degradation is a global problem that affects people's health and habitat. Issues surrounding the conservation of biodiversity and cultural diversity continue to attract international attention.¹ Scientists consider that humans form an integral and critical important part of biodiversity, even if the tendency has been to treat the human species as a separate entity from the rest of nature. Following this view, companies operating on indigenous lands are driven by powerful economic interests and give little deference to the indigenous inhabitants of the area for whom the resource may have non-monetary value. Particularly in the current climate of economic rationalism, neoliberalism, and free trade, multi-national corporations are made to feel less responsible for both infringement of human rights and environmental damage caused by their actions. The relationships between society/culture and biodiversity/nature lie behind much of this contradiction. The distinction, which has been used by anthropologists and others to mark the gap between human and non-human worlds, is a vision that is easily taken for granted. More importantly, it reflects a Western, predatory, economic view of nature as *separate* from society, rather than the intricate and complex relationship between so many indigenous peoples and their environments.

Indigenous people can be especially vulnerable to the effects of environmental depletion as it impacts their sustainable ways of life embedded within their immediate surroundings. Growing concern about environmental depletion and climate change calls for improving our understanding of the interactions between humans and nature. Though there is little doubt that in many cases Western medicine and other services may bring benefit to indigenous communities, environmental depletion may cause greater harm to indigenous communities because their wellbeing often depends on the forest and surrounding natural areas. This increasing awareness about the threat that environmental degradation may pose to indigenous wellbeing provides the context for examining the spiritual dimensions of nature in indigenous health systems.²

In this article, I seek to introduce recent anthropological insights on indigenous conceptualizations of the environment and the impact of environmental change on indigenous people. I focus on a particular

indigenous society, the Nahua People who live in the mountainous areas of the Huasteca in Mexico. This mountainous area harbors one of the last remaining patches of cloud forest and was recently chosen for several environmental conservation projects. The essence of my argument in this paper is that the *nature embeddedness of indigenous lifeworlds (Lebenswelten)* is far more important for indigenous health and wellbeing than initially assumed in the anthropological literature. By lifeworlds, I refer to EDMUND HUSSERL's "the world as lived experience" (*erlebt*), linking it to the habermasian culturally grounded understandings, and the beliefs and practices that make up the every-day life, a type of heiddegerian "Being-in-the world" (*In-der-Welt-Sein*). I argue here that in many indigenous societies, their lifeworlds are embedded in their immediate surroundings. I shall use the term nature embeddedness to refer to this phenomenon, meaning the appreciation of both the material and the non-material properties in plants, animals, minerals, and other features of the surrounding landscape for the functioning of the indigenous health and wellbeing. It follows that the recognition of the intertwined dimensions of spirituality and indigenous medicine makes it possible to subtly examine the ways in which the environment and lifeworlds are intertwined. Moreover, this implies that environmental change (both degradation and change through conservation programs introduced by government institutions) in or near areas may have considerable impact on indigenous wellbeing. As a result, environmental degradation, or the threat of increasing environmental degradation on or near indigenous lands, can result in the destruction of indigenous lifeworlds and, thereby, in the violation of indigenous people's individual and collective rights.

It should be emphasized that I focus on the spiritual dimensions of Nahua medicine that link their immediate surroundings directly to Nahua beliefs and practices of health and illness, which can be read in Western terms as part of the indigenous health system. Given a long history of colonization and medical and religious pluralism, the Nahua health system is very complex and includes practices characteristic for an eclectic mix between indigenous, African, and European traditions—the discussion of which would go beyond the scope of this article. My concern here is to address Nahua understandings of health and wellbeing that relate directly to

the environment and thus, may suffer directly from changes in the environment. This will allow me to analyze the intricacies and add an additional level to the linkages of indigenous health systems with biodiversity and cultural diversity that are addressed at national and international levels. First, I state below my argument concerning the importance of nature embeddedness in indigenous health systems for the biodiversity/cultural diversity debate, and introduce the ethnographic location and population. Then, I illustrate Nahua conceptions of health and illness with ethnographic detail. Lastly, I elucidate the intertwined relationships of nature/culture/medicine by means of comparing a recent Nahua mobilization to claim cultural and environmental rights using the Western narrative of the biodiversity protection as a potent vehicle to be heard by environmental protection institutions. In doing so, they construct a shared narrative that crosses the lines of different views of nature and culture to engage in a dialogue with conservationists.

Nature and Culture in Indigenous Health Systems

Indigenous and other traditional health systems are classically understood as systems of balance between mind and body, linking both to the community, the local environment, and the universe. By indigenous health systems, I mean bodies of knowledge that include concepts of both the sacred and the empirical that serve as frameworks for understanding health and healing including cosmology and spirituality (BODEKER 1999). Specific traditional health systems, such as Ayurveda and traditional Chinese medicines have been identified as cosmology-based system where illness and disease are defined as a breach in the interconnectedness of life (POSEY 1999; BODEKER 1996, 1999).

An understanding of the holistic nature of most indigenous health systems, which view the environment as essential to human wellbeing, has much to contribute to an emergent literature concerned with the protection of biodiversity and cultural diversity, especially knowing that many traditional and indigenous health system rely on the fundamental concepts of interconnectedness—a being-in-the-world—, which Fikret BERKES (1999) has described as a “community-of-beings.” Anthropologists James DOW (2001) and Andrew GRAY (1991, 1997a, 1997b) have emphasized that the understanding and use of

natural resources as a means for sustaining human health and wellbeing in indigenous societies reflects a cultural and spiritual appreciation of both the biological environment and the deeper forces perceived to influence it. Similarly, a publication by the United Nations Environment Program compiled by Darrell Addison POSEY (1999), also examined the cultural and spiritual values of biodiversity, while highlighting the importance of traditional health systems for human wellbeing. Moreover, this effort to analyze the linkages between the environment, indigenous rights, and indigenous health systems is echoed in a number of issues of *Cultural Survival Quarterly* that address the interrelations of health and environment in indigenous societies around the world, especially with regards to environmental change, conservation politics, indigenous medical systems, cultural rights and resource rights (ALI 2004a, 2004b; COLCHESTER 2004; DOUNIAS *et al.* 2004; GRIFFITHS 2004; KATZ & BIESELE 2003; MILLS & CLIFTON-PERCIVAL 2003; NELSON & TCHOUMBA 2004; WINKELMAN 2003).

Others argue that indigenous people would be better off to give up their traditional lifeworlds and join mainstream society with its material benefits and available services. The race for natural resources by multinationals, the pharmacological industry and other stakeholders does not halt despite a growing global effort by indigenous and human rights activists to protect indigenous lands from development and mining. The hunger for wealth often especially targets the natural resources on indigenous lands. As a result, those who become displaced and join the larger societies around them often lead marginalized lives, losing family and community and experiencing a sense of their own irrelevance within the mainstream culture, suffering from landlessness, migration to urban areas, drug and alcohol problems, as well as exposures to new diseases (ALI 2004a:11). Too little attention, if any, is given to indigenous conceptions of health and wellbeing and its implications for biodiversity conservation.

Drawing on my ethnographic field research in the Huasteca, this paper explores a politics of nature, health, and wellbeing among the Nahua People of Xilitla municipality in the southern part of the State of San Luis Potosi. The Nahuas potosinos are indigenous peasants (*campesinos*) who live in rural hamlets in the mountains and foothills of the Sierra Madre Oriental or Eastern Sierra Madre.³ They have been studied by Kristina TIEDJE & Gonzalo CAMA-

CHO (2005) and Kristina TIEDJE (i.e. 2002, 2005a, 2006, 2007a, 2008a, forthcoming 2008a, forthcoming 2008b). The Nahuas of the Huasteca potosina interact with mestizo town-dwellers as well as with neighboring Teenek and Xi'Oi Peoples. The Nahuas traditionally lived from subsistence agriculture cultivating the triumvirate of corn, squash, and beans, which they combined with day labor on large farms. Nowadays, they combine subsistence agriculture and animal husbandry with cash crops such as coffee, sugarcane, oranges, and chili. At the same time, they are involved in other economic activities as casual wage laborers. Due to land shortage and recent agricultural reforms, young people leave to work in the cities or in the United States.

The Nahuas from Xilitla live in an area that is prized for its rich biodiversity and rare cloud forest. The rapid degradation of the global biodiversity is pressing the international community to take measures to respond to environmental problems. They have been actively involved in a regional indigenous rights movement to secure the rights and ensure the protection of ceremonial caves that represent the center of their universe and the primary working environment for indigenous healers (see TIEDJE 2005, 2007a, 2007b). This particular context adds an additional analytical level to my discussion. Specifically, my research with the Nahua People examines how environmental change threatens to affect indigenous lifeworlds. More precisely, I explore the role of healers and shamans who acquired political leadership in addition to their spiritual, religious, and political roles in their communities. Not only do they mediate between the seen and the unseen world, the material and the non-material but they have also begun to negotiate with national institutions in the domain of biodiversity conservation to secure cultural and environmental rights.

Nahua Lifeworlds' Nature Embeddedness: Understanding Wellbeing

Similar to other indigenous societies in the Americas⁴, the Nahuas understand human and environmental health as a vital expression of the ways humans and non-humans interact in the environment of the Sierra Madre. The concept of biodiversity, which is largely defined as the "diversity of species, genes, and ecosystems" (GARI 2000), is foreign to most, if not all indigenous languages. In Nahuatl, the terms "nature," "biodiversity," and "environ-

ment" are translated as *tlaltepactli*. Literally, this term means "the sphere above the earth." It specifically refers to the immediate surroundings inhabited and shared by humans, plants, and animals including non-human spiritual entities, the *teyomej*. In Nahua cosmology, *tlaltepactli* stands for an eco-social environment on earth where the spiritual and the material are intrinsically related. It is not surprising that the Nahuas often find themselves clashing with the artificial distinction between the economic value and their spiritual and moral values of the environment when, in fact, the spiritual world is ever present in *tlaltepactli*. Indeed, Nahua cosmology influences human daily existence and interactions with their environment, the material and spiritual realms. As for many other Native Americans, the distinction between nature and culture, biodiversity and cultural diversity, is problematic for the Nahua People. It is an outside dichotomy stemming from Western epistemologies. Consequently, the material and the non-material are not separate spheres in Nahua cultural understandings of Being-in-the-World. Moreover, this unity is one of the central holistic tenets of Nahua health system, which views all being and things in nature as sacred.

Nahua concepts of health and illness integrate various dimensions of a complex matrix of interrelations humans and their environment. In fact, Nahua medical beliefs and practices are brought directly into the realm of the environment. Health not only implies wellbeing of an individual at a bodily level but include the familial, social, and cosmic relationships with animals, plants, and non-human persons, including environmental health.

The Nahuas live in an environment of a community-of-beings including humans, plants, and non-human persons (*teyomej*) in an equal relationship. The *teyomej* reside in their immediate surroundings as their ancestor-spirits who have become the spirit guardians and with whom humans interact constantly. The presence of the *teyomej* and other non-human persons bears direct influence on Nahua health and illness. A well known fundamental concept in traditional health systems is that of balance and interconnectedness "between mind and body, between different dimension of individual functioning and need, between individuals and community, between individual/community and environment, and between individual and the universe" (BODEKER 1999: 263). This can be exemplified in Nahua etiology

where incidents of illness are often mapped onto the surrounding landscape. Humans and *teyomej* share the same paths. Individuals fall ill when they offend the guardian spirits or *teyomej*. Traditional healing practices attempt to restore that balance and recreate a harmonious whole between body, spirit, and society. Encounters with *teyomej* can lead to disease, such as the culture-bound-syndromes: *Nejmajtili* (fright) and soul-loss. The Nahuas believe that over-exploitation and disrespect for their surroundings result in illness, a phenomenon Gonzalo AGUIRRE BELTRAN (1947) identified as the “etiology of sin,” meaning that there are strict rules on how to behave in the environment and if transgressed, *teyomej* are able to punish those unruly who over-fish, over-hunt or litter. Further, the “etiology of fright” refers to those illnesses provoked by the *teyomej* or other spirits to annoy humans, generally out of envy.

Echoing the conception of the ancient Nahuas that humans were not made to “dominate the earth,” but instead “to adore the gods” (LOPEZ AUSTIN 1996: 282), Nahua conceptions of health and illness health rely on notions of respect, care, and stewardship as an intentional, ethical, and emotional obligation to the ancestral forces and non-human persons, *teyomej*. Nicolas BERMUDEZ-VELEZ (2004: 27-28) has called this type of system of interrelationships “an eco-social equilibrium, which is constantly moving in complementary patterns of rupture and restoration.” The principles of holism, interconnectedness and reciprocity between humans and non-human entities form part of this process of creating or restoring harmony and balance to achieve an eco-social wellbeing.

Correspondingly, the Nahuas give the *teyomej* and other earth spirits a great deal of importance in their daily lives because they consider them influential in matters of health and wellbeing. To identify the cause of an illness or other type of malaise, Nahuas distinguish between different illness types: First, “illnesses of the body,” overlapping sometimes “natural illnesses” (*catihuelicoclistli*), have easily identifiable causes and may be treated with empirical means, such as plants and allopathic medicine. Second, “spiritual illnesses” need the attention of a *tlapahtiani*, a healer who may prescribe both, empirical treatment (plants) and ritual. For example, illnesses that are caused by fright (*espanto*) are usually referred to as spiritual illnesses as they occur when the balance between the material and

the spiritual parts of a person has been disturbed by the presence of the *teyomej* or *axteyomej*. In the literature, these illnesses are often described as provoked by “supernatural” causes (SIGNORINI 1982). However, some Nahua *tlapahtiane* (-e, plural form of *tlapahtiani*) may refer to a spiritual or soul illness as a natural illness, which blurs the first and second illness types. For the Nahuas, a natural illness is an illness with an easily identifiable cause that is directly linked to the Nahua cosmos, caused by disrespect of the non-human persons or *teyomej*. Third, they may interpret an illness as being caused by sorcery. In that case, they refer to it as an “unnatural illness.” Finally, the Nahua distinguish a fourth category, “illnesses whose origin may not be identified” (*tetzacocolistli*). As opposed to “natural illnesses,” where humans are at fault through misbehavior or unnatural illnesses caused by the ill wishes of another human person, the illnesses that cannot be identified may originate in the envy of dark spirits or they may have been “put” by a sorcerer (*techihuiliquetl*) or a turning witch (*brujitini-nahualli*). In those cases, the sick person must seek the help of a *tlapahtiani* who will attempt to reconcile angry spirits and send back the ill wishes to the place/human person/non-human person where they originated.

Nahua medicine is deeply influenced by their animistic worldview; each object of their surroundings is believed to possess a “soul” or “spirit” (*alma* in Spanish).⁵ For the Nahuas, this belief has no Christian connotations but instead, it expresses a deep kinship ideology of all beings that co-exist in a community-of-beings. The spirit-souls originate in the same universal motherly force that unites all living beings, plants, humans, animals alike. Each living being carries inside a vital force, *chicahualistli*, that provides for its existence and all *chicahualistli* has the same origin. In the Nahua invisible world, the distinction between humans, animals, and spirits sometimes becomes blurred, which is exemplified by the Nahua concept of *chicahualistli*, the life force that unites all beings spiritually. *Chicahualistli* enters the body through one’s spirit-soul, *tonalli*, which is related to the sun (*tonatih*), exemplified by the root *tona* (heat). Humans and non-human beings share this force and make up “kin-related” spirit-soul families. This force gives them light, *tlanextli*, and warmth, *tona* necessary for human survival and wellbeing. When the life force

is disturbed or the spirit-soul is missing some of its parts, the Nahuas seek the help of a healer. Nahua *tlapahtiane* proceed to restore the energy flow of *chicahualisli* through curing rituals. The healer recites prayers directed to Catholic Saints and ancestor deities. The chants involve various offerings to ancestral spirits and deities who help retrieving the lost soul parts (see TIEDJE forthcoming 2008a for a detailed discussion of a concrete healing event). The near fusion of natural and social worlds, described above, characterizes the nature embeddedness of the Nahua health system.

Nahua conceptions of health and wellbeing draw together several themes. The relationship between the Nahuas and their environment concerns culture, biodiversity, moral values, and spirituality. In daily life, these principles are intimately bound. They are expressed in practical activities, such as curing rituals and myth through which they express their inextricable connections between human and non-human beings. Underlying these practices are the spiritual dimensions to Nahua lifeworlds, which constitute an imminent presence, and constantly manifest and mediate between the human and non-human world. This holistic perspective of Nahua medicine offers a valuable criticism to the common Western view of nature as a resource for agricultural and pharmaceutical research. In Nahua conceptions of health and illness, health comes from the balance between humans themselves, as well as between humans and animals or humans and non-human entities that live in the immediate surroundings. In this sense, health describes a dynamic process of wellbeing (BERMUDEZ-VELEZ 2004). A breaking of this harmony can result in *dis-ease*, which can progress to stages of illness. Treatments are therefore directed not only to relieve the symptoms, but also to restore harmony and state of systemic balance to the individual and his inner and outer environment. But how do the Nahuas perceive, understand, and engage with other forces that reside in and appear in their immediate surrounding and environment? Put more specifically, how do they interpret and react to changes in their immediate surroundings that may impact their health and wellbeing in other ways? In my recent fieldwork, I investigated this question analyzing the case of human-controlled environmental change introduced by Western development projects (TIEDJE 2008). I will return to this question by linking en-

vironmental change and the resulting cultural and environmental rights movement in the Huasteca.

Protecting the Ancestors, Protecting Wellbeing

In the late 1990s, the cultural and spiritual values of nature in Nahua society have spurred an indigenous rights movement in the Huasteca, which I will briefly outline in this section. Nahua conceptions of eco-social wellbeing were first brought to the attention of the media when tourism and road construction began to threaten the existence of the ceremonial Wind and Fertility Caves located in the foothills of the Sierra Madre Oriental. These caves had long been a ceremonial center for Nahua, Teenek, and Xi'O'i indigenous doctors. In their respective cosmologies, the caves are viewed as the residence of the Mother Earth and the home of all spirit-souls, for humans, animals, and plants alike. The caves are also described as their "university" where apprentices learn the art of healing and undergo initiation rituals. They view these caves as a source for human and non-human health, and wellbeing (TIEDJE 2005a, 2007a)

In 1997, planned road construction threatened to destroy the access to the caves. At that time, the caves, albeit located on the private land of a large cattle estate in the foothills of the Sierra, were surrounded by thick forest. Up to 1997, indigenous ritual specialists, shamans and traditional doctors, had been using the caves for their ritual purposes. For many Nahua people, the threat was first interpreted only as another occurrence of the marginalization of their lifeworlds. During the research period, the theme of economic, religious, and political marginalization came up in almost every conversation with Nahua men and women. Community leaders underlined that their communities are readily overlooked when it comes to providing access to resources. Engraved in their collective memory many recounted stories to illustrate how their forefathers, their parents, and themselves suffer from a long history of colonization, and land expropriation, so that it impacts their current political, economic, and religious decisions.

The impending construction plans near the ceremonial caves triggered a regional response to end the marginalization of their communities. The reasoning that the caves were considered sacred and the source of wellbeing became a mobilizing force to unite twelve healer organizations regionally

in order to protect the area from destruction. The Nahuas mobilized together with their neighboring Teenek and Xi'Oi and framed their land claims in terms of the cultural and spiritual values of nature. Not only did they claim the protection but they also demanded indigenous control over the caves and associated sacred areas. Local healers and indigenous traditional doctor organizations took on the key role as primary actors in this movement. Opposing economic views of nature, they mobilized the cultural and spiritual values of nature as a liberating force to engage their people in new political spaces that opened the public sphere to indigenous leadership. Margarita (name changed to protect her identity), a Nahua traditional doctor (*médico tradicional*) described the threat to the caves by tourism and development:

“There were people who came to look at it and they wanted to take our cave away. They wanted to take *Xomocunco* from us. They wanted to make it a place for tourists, but we are not going to let them do that. [...] It is sacred. That is the reason why we will not abandon it. We will defend the caves because they want to go to the cave to bring tourists and then the traditional indigenous doctors [healers], we would have to pay if we wanted to go to perform our offerings. Everything would be lost. That is why we started to work together [with other indigenous organizations] in order to protect the caves and the mountain.”

The governor of San Luis Potosi granted the Indigenous People of the Huasteca the protection of the caves, and the area around the caves was officially declared a natural protected area (NPA) in 2000. However, the indigenous organizations deemed that the designation of a NPA did not accurately reflect the cultural importance of the caves as a ceremonial center for the indigenous doctors and center point to restore an eco-social wellbeing. Therefore, they continued their battle to gain more control over the caves that they viewed as their patrimony. The state of San Luis Potosi decided to create a new category in order to better reflect the sacred and spiritual meanings of environmental features and landscapes. In 2001, the designation of the protected area was changed from being called a “natural monument” to that of a “sacred-natural site.” One of the goals of the Secretary of Ecology and Environmental Management (SEGAM, *Secretaria de Ecología y*



Traditional healing inside the Fertility Cave in the Huasteca: The female Nahua healer holds the dress of an elderly woman who is too weak to come to the cave for a healing session. The healer invokes the sick person's spirit in front of the statue of the Mother Earth (Tohueynana) and prays for healing (TIEDJE 2002). Other healers gather nearby and participate in the chanting.

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Gestión Ambiental) was to recognize the intricate links between nature and culture, drawing upon the knowledge of the indigenous people of conservation practice and practical expertise. This was outlined in a publication by the Secretary of Ecology and Environmental Management on the natural protected areas in San Luis Potosí:

The conservation of biodiversity is intrinsically linked with the cultural conservation of the indigenous societies in the region, a fact that was recognized by the Government of the State in SLP by the decree of April 15, 2001, that declared the *Caves of Wind and Fertility* and its environment as “Natural Monument” in the interest of the

state; and subsequently changed the modality to a *Sacred-Natural Site* (“*Sitio Sagrado Natural*”); thereby recognizing the importance that this site will be considered “sacred-natural” because, for the Indigenous People Teenek, Nahuas, and Pames of the Huasteca, it is a space for cultural transmission, functioning much like a university where rituals of transmission of cultural *cargos* and oral knowledge are carried out. It is furthermore a space where the shamans and indigenous traditional doctors receive the knowledge in the cave about the health of sick people, where the midwives search for the fertility of the gestating mothers, and where they ask for the fertility for their harvest in agricultural rituals. This is why it is important to promote the conservation of these caves and their surrounding areas, formed of a small remaining area of the dense tropical forest, the vegetation that in the past covered a vast area of the Huasteca until the 1970s. As this small area is still conserving medicinal plants used by indigenous doctors (*médicos indígenas*), it is important to conserve it (TORRES JIMÉNEZ & SIERRA RIVERA 2001: 93, my translation, emphasis in original).

The creation of a new category of a natural protected area as a “sacred-natural site” valued cultural and religious meanings of nature and secured the rights of the Indigenous People of the Huasteca to the land; thereby allowing them to become part of the managing body of this area, while engaging in a respectful dialogue and articulation with national and international institutions. It created a space for the Nahuas, Teenek, and Xi-Oi peoples to claim and obtain the political recognition of the intricate links between their immediate surroundings and their medical practices that had been overlooked for so long. More importantly, the category change of the natural protected area reflects a change in emphasis going from pure biodiversity conservation goals, which throughout history have tended to sacrifice cultural diversity by shutting indigenous people out of national parks and protected areas, to linking environmental conservation programs with programs that intend to foster cultural diversity and well-being.

Seeking Environmental and Social Justice

Not only for the Nahuas, Teenek, and Xi-Oi, the near fusion of the social and natural worlds is a fun-

damental quality of indigenous traditional medicine and lifeworlds (ALI 2004b). If the threat of environmental destruction in indigenous areas by outside forces produces and reinforces narratives of marginalization and colonization of indigenous lifeworlds, successful environmental protection counters these powerful narratives by producing ones that indigenous people come share with non-indigenous persons, such as environmental protection agents, a narrative of mutuality and belonging to one earth. So for instance, when indigenous healers requested the protection of environmental and landscape features that are deemed at the center of their wellbeing, they spoke to shared values and practices. The ability of indigenous healers to recognize, acknowledge, and build commonalities that cross the lines of different views of nature and culture was as important as recognizing the existence of cultural difference that could act adversely as a tool for confrontation, stereotyping, and thus, hinder dialogue.

It is within the politically and spiritually charged context that the power of nature embeddedness of indigenous wellbeing needs to be understood. This study shows how biodiversity, albeit insufficient to describe indigenous environments (also see edited volume by TIEDJE & SNODGRASS 2008), may at times provide a common language for government conservationists, ecologists, and indigenous people. Indeed, the emphasis placed on biodiversity conservation—as offered by the international community and reflected through the mass media—, played a critical role in facilitating the construction of shared dialogues, drawing on cultural resources that were familiar to all involved parties in the Huasteca struggle. For conservationists, who were seeking to protect biodiversity, the ability to open up to the nature embeddedness of indigenous lifeworlds was extremely powerful in forging a shared narrative across social divides and continues to be vividly remembered. Indigenous healers involved in the cave land claims often remarked with whom they interacted during their struggle. By inviting environmental protection agents to their healing rituals and ceremonies in the caves, the healers were able to participate as actors in an unfolding story, introducing culture into the biodiversity of Western conservationists in search for environmental justice. Eventually, they created a shared narrative of belonging to this earth. By *shared*, of course, I do not mean that environmental protection agents and in-

indigenous healers come to see and experience nature and wellbeing the same way but that there is a consensus and shared sense that everyone is working in the best interest of the environment. This is only possible if all parties agree and share a collective imagining that a healthy environment is needed to ensure wellbeing.

Conclusion

In an era where international organizations and national institutions adopt the protection of biodiversity as their primary goal, it is important to recall that biodiversity is not a useful category for most indigenous peoples and maybe misleading when attempting to understand their world-as-lived. I have shown that for the Nahuas of the Huasteca, their notions of biodiversity are inherently linked to notions of wellbeing, which they view as inseparable from environmental wellbeing. Their Being-in-the-World is fundamentally embedded in their surroundings, which they experience as an eco-social lifeworld. The cultural and environmental rights movement of the Huasteca demonstrates that the current attention to biodiversity/cultural diversity protection provides a useful set of symbols that indigenous people can draw on to try to connect with outsiders. Even strangers, like government agents, conservationists, and perhaps health professionals, can draw upon these notions to connect to common concerns about the environment and human wellbeing.

The analysis I have proposed here seeks to mediate positions emphasizing contradictions and complementarities in the definitions of biodiversity/cultural diversity and nature/culture in an attempt to bridge these dichotomies, drawing attention to the world-as-lived. Despite the changes brought about by the growing pressures of globalization, capital accumulation, and Western conservation, the Nahuas have managed to maintain their cultural dynamics while seeking for new ways to preserve the diversity and richness of their surrounding lifeworlds, which they view as the basis of their health and wellbeing. In many ways, the Nahuas have developed local strategies to an ever-changing environment and changing global-economic circumstances. Yet, in order to forego the luring threat of the destruction of their ceremonial caves, the Nahua traditional doctors chose to cooperate with neighboring healers and indigenous organizations to protect the landscape and surrounding biodiversity. At

the same time, they began to weave stories of environmental wellbeing into human life and culture and into interactions of indigenous healers, activists, and environmental protection agents and other government officials. Such stories revealed that the natural was made cultural in specific contexts. This also demonstrates that the meaning of environmental and human health is not given by measurements of eco-systemic health and biodiversity, but by the processes, in which it is contextualized, rephrased, and rendered intelligible by particular communities. The meaning of health and wellbeing is a complex local practice of negotiations involving one world that unites the material, the symbolic, and the spiritual.

Notes

- 1 The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is promoting the conservation of biodiversity and cultural diversity. In 2002, UNESCO launched the Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems Program (LINKS) to empower indigenous communities and include them in conservation programs (see www.unesco.org/mab/biodiv/unesco/home.shtml, accessed March 19, 2008).
- 2 I am using the term indigenous when referring to those who self-identify as "Indigenous Peoples" based on their cultural and linguistic heritage, customs, and ways of life. The concept "indigenous" and more particularly "Autochthonous Peoples" stands in stark contrast to the former colonial term that tended to essentialize native peoples as "people without history" (WOLF 1982). My use of the term reflects the self-identification of indigenous activists, after the international pressures of International Labor Organization and the United Nations to respect the rights of Autochthonous Peoples.
- 3 The Huasteca is located near the Gulf of Mexico and extends across three states. Throughout the region, indigenous speakers cohabit with Spanish-speaking Mestizos. In the state of San Luis Potosí where this study took place, ninety-eight percent of the indigenous population is concentrated in the southern part of the state, a region known as the Huasteca potosina.
- 4 For example, in the article "Intercultural Health Processes in the Colombian Amazon," Nicolas BERMÚDEZ-VÉLEZ (2004) describes the eco-social conception of health among the Amazonian Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian rainforest that is very similar to the Nahua conception of health.
- 5 For a more detailed description of Nahua Animism see TIEDJE 2008 and forthcoming 2008a.

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