

## *Ke Petiu Hein+*, What Did You Dream Of?: Autonomy and Healing in Azqueltán

Sexta Grietas Health Brigade

In November 2021, members of Sexta Grietas del Norte joined a health brigade that traveled to San Lorenzo de Azqueltán, Mexico, to inaugurate the community's recently completed autonomous clinic. Azqueltán is a half-day's trip by car from Guadalajara, in the state of Jalisco, in the municipality of Villa Guerrero. Home to both the Tepehuano and Wixárika peoples, the community is cradled deep in the majestic Bolaños River Canyon. Surrounded by soaring cliffs, the remote territory is home to a wealth of natural riches, including the pitaya cactus, oaks, maguey, and a host of medicinal herbs and plants, as well as minerals. And all this makes the region coveted by profit-seekers who regularly threaten and physically attack the community using narco and paramilitary forces.

Establishing an autonomous health clinic is a fundamental part of the Tepehuano and Wixárika peoples' resistance strategy in Azqueltán. Autonomous institutions replace nonviable government institutions with community-based structures, and an autonomous clinic allows a measure of independence from a negligent, racist, and Western-science dominated institution of the "white robes." Creating their own healing

institutions allows communities to develop and nurture practices from below that are grounded in a harmonious relationship to the natural world based on dignity, respect, appreciation, and mutual nourishment. The Zapatistas, who have taught the world these lessons by developing their own education, justice, and health systems, serve as a direct model and inspiration for Azqueltán.

## Western, Socialist, and Indigenous medicine

Our connection to Azqueltán had been nurtured for years by a Grietas member whose family is from the community. As a medical doctor, she was tasked with a *cargo*<sup>1</sup> to provide health services and facilitate the cooperative international effort. The Azqueltán Health Brigade she came to organize included doctors trained in Cuba, health professionals from India, nurses, herbalists, midwives, nutritionists, massage therapists, artists, and other practitioners. In order not to burden the community, two chefs from Grietas joined the group, organized the purchase of food, and worked with other *brigadistas* (Brigade members), and with women in the community to cook our meals. The kitchen hearth became an extension of the ceremonial fires, creating opportunities for being together, sharing, and bonding. And we found other ways to contribute by helping paint murals on the clinic's walls, translating for the health professionals, and caring for children so their mothers could receive treatment.

Azqueltán's autonomous clinic is based on a holistic, decolonized, from-below model of health and nutrition that draws from the best of both Western and Socialist medicine while centering the power of Indigenous medicine to ward off the destructive binaries of mind/body, collective/individual, and material/ spiritual, often present in both. Thus, doctors on the Brigade could evaluate and treat their patients' medical issues while also assessing them for symptoms of trauma and anxiety, calling in other *brigadistas* to offer healing massage or ear acupuncture. A midwife led a women's circle and demonstrated the use of *rebozos* (shawls) as an aid to childbirth, while the community's women shared their plant remedies, as

<sup>1</sup> A *cargo* (literally, a "load" or "burden") is a responsibility for a volunteer service that people in the community perform at the request of the community assembly.

well as their traumatic stories of having to give birth alone and of losing their children to untreated diseases. The Brigade's herbalists offered samples of plants they brought with them, and they, in turn, learned about the knowledges and practices of plant medicine from within the community.

## Taking the path of autonomy, together

The Brigade had been invited to help inaugurate the clinic, to participate in traditional ceremonies celebrating its opening, and to commemorate the community's decision to take the path of autonomy. Eight years before, in November 2013, Azqueltán's assembly formally took up autonomy as a resistance strategy.<sup>2</sup> Its community assembly, a collective body composed of *comuneros*,<sup>3</sup> is the ultimate authority within Azqueltán's governance structure. Their communal decision-making is based on pre-colonial forms of government that are still practiced throughout Mexico in many Indigenous communities. In recent times, asserting autonomy has become an integral part of the struggle to protect Indigenous lands from dispossession and invasion driven by government efforts to impose capitalistic economic forms. It's a dispossession that often begins with the privatization of communally held land, forcing communities to defend themselves from violent takeovers by local *caciques*<sup>4</sup> who are supported by narco and paramilitary forces.

The village of Azqueltán is the political center of Tepehuano territory, originally comprising 230,000 acres stewarded for thousands of years before the Spanish Viceroy officially "granted" them the land in 1733. While the Viceroy introduced the alien colonizer notion of "ownership" of land, today those viceregal acts are being strategically deployed by Indigenous peoples throughout Mexico as legal protection. Nevertheless, much of their territory continues to be taken over by invaders, including many

2 "Convocatoria al 5 aniversario del nombramiento de autoridades autónomas de Azqueltán" *Congreso Nacional Indígena*, <https://www.congresonacionalindigena.org/2018/10/24/convocatoria-al-5-aniversario-del-nombramiento-de-autoridades-autonomas-de-azqueltan>

3 *Comuneros* are members of the community, often heads of family, who work plots of land that are administered in common by the community.

4 A *cacique* is a person who exercises a lot of power in the political or administrative affairs of a town or region, using money or other influence to control the lives of the locals.

cattle ranchers, often facilitated by local governments under the control of wealthy invaders and “justified” by laws that allow people to take possession of communal indigenous lands that they claim are “vacant.” The community is now in an intense struggle to prevent further dispossession from the remaining 93,000 acres to which they are legally entitled.

The Tepehuanos are joined in this struggle by the Indigenous Wixárika who originally arrived in Tepehuano territory fleeing Spanish settlers, and who continue to inhabit the remotest areas of the landscape. Resisting the state’s efforts to assimilate them, the Wixárika have carefully preserved their language, their way of dress, and their spiritual traditions. They have also formed alliances with their Tepehuano brothers and sisters against Spanish invaders,<sup>5</sup> against the Mexican state, and more recently against incursions by capitalists seeking to profit off of resource extraction on their lands. In order to protect what remains of their land from invasions and from neoliberal government privatization schemes that allow the sale of common lands, and after decades of attempting to work through the official legal system, the Tepehuanos and Wixárika allied to take matters into their own hands and build autonomy together.

Guided by the Zapatistas and the National Indigenous Congress, their first step was to officially reinstate traditional forms of communal government, naming their own authorities in the assemblies, thereby forming a parallel Indigenous government that strategically deploys Mexican and international law to legally supersede the authority of local official government officials. The Wixárika and Tepehuana Autonomous Community of San Lorenzo de Azqueltán now participates in the National Indigenous Congress, a nation-wide network aligned with the Zapatistas and the principles of governance from below, collective work, defense of land and territory, and ceremony.

## The importance of ceremony, rituals, and dreams

Ceremony is key to Azqueltán’s autonomous project because it is how the community interprets knowledge of the land and communications from

5 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huichol>

ancestors, providing guidance on how to recover the land together with their traditions, culture, language, and ways of healing. These practices continue in the face of violence: the local *caciques* who have benefited by invading Indigenous lands, have reacted with an extremely violent campaign against the most active *comuneros* who suffer multiple attacks, severe physical injuries, and deep trauma. Some *comuneros* no longer go to work in their lands for fear of being attacked, and other families have had to move out of the area temporarily.<sup>6</sup>

While the health brigade treated several of these community members for trauma, we learned that, despite the assaults, they remain firm in their commitment to recover and protect their lands, reflecting a spiritual conviction that is supported by healing ceremonies and spiritual traditions, including the interpretation of dreams that reveal the paths the community must take. This allowed us to better understand the Wixárika greeting “*Ke petiu hein+?*” (What did you dream of?) as an everyday reminder and practice of the guidance the community receives during ceremonies, rituals, and dreams. It was these practices that provided the community with the conviction that it was time to recuperate the land and propose a clinic that would provide “true health.” The clinic and the Brigade were thus realizations of the community’s collective dreams.

A key practice of autonomy in Indigenous territories, especially those belonging to the National Indigenous Congress, is the recovery of traditions and ceremonies that pertain to an ancestral cosmovision in which humanity is not the dominant species, as visualized by European tradition, but a part of nature, a being among other beings who must acknowledge and reciprocate the many gifts that nature provides for our sustenance. Ceremonial dances and offerings to Mother Earth at sacred sites are crucial to establishing such a harmonious, reciprocal relationship. The construction of autonomy thus connects the physical world with the spiritual; the territory that must be defended and protected is not just the physical land, but a place where the community constructs its collective life, both material and spiritual. “The clinic is meant to be a place of spiritual as well as physical healing,” says Marcos, a Tepehuano

6 <https://www.agendapropia.co/content/dual-isolation-displaced-indigenous-people-san-lorenzo-azquelt%C3%A1n>

elected authority. Mario, a Wixárika trained in spiritual practices who was also elected as an authority, elaborates, “The body needs two kinds of medication, two types of curing; one having to do with [physical] discomforts and the other being the spiritual.”

In ceremony, the community offers gratitude and sustenance to nature deities who then, in turn, send back energy and strength and offer guidance to the community. We were invited to participate in traditional ceremonies where offerings are made to Mother Earth, and energy and guidance is transmitted from the ancestors. Mario personally approached many of us, encouraging us to participate in the ceremonies and explaining how we could do so. He wanted us to learn about how to offer gratitude and sustenance to Mother Earth in order to receive her energy and strength. He said, “Mother Earth is hungry and thirsty just like we are. So we can all begin to live like this, to make offerings, to give to her, because the earth gives to us what we need and Mother Earth needs us to give to her, too.” He wanted us to participate in the practices that Indigenous traditions offer “because making offerings to Mother Earth means giving her energy so that the same energy can strengthen humans. As Indigenous, if we don’t do this, the struggle is worthwhile, but it proceeds very slowly. But when we walk with nature, we get much more strength, it gives us knowledge that we human beings cannot imagine [on our own].”

At the invitation of our hosts, we joined the community in a collective hike up to a sacred mountain site where we held candles as the Tepehuano dancers, dressed in their traditional garments, re-enacted their ancient stories. Later that evening, we moved to the town square and gathered around a roaring fire where the Wixárikas performed their dances. We were invited to share a drink of *rosita*<sup>7</sup> prepared with great love and care by our hosts. As we sat together by the fire until dawn, everyone was invited to share their thoughts. Some people spoke of their suffering from the violence of their adversaries, others spoke of the joy they felt at this gathering. Brigade members shared their awe and appreciation of our new brothers and sisters of the Azqueltán community. Many shared intimate feelings. We listened to the words of the *maracáme* (shaman),

<sup>7</sup> *Rosita*, or *tutu*, is the name the Wixárika use to refer to “peyote,” a term they do not like.

who counseled on practices of grieving and healing. As we gazed into the ceremonial fire, we felt it enter our bodies, creating an emotional and spiritual warmth that opened our hearts and bonded us to this project that, from that moment, expanded beyond the community of Azqueltán and into each one of our own geographies.

## Dreaming collectively across geographies

After the ceremonies, there were more workshops, trainings, and health consultations. *Promotores de salud* (health promoters), members of the community who had been elected to learn and administer healing in the clinic, received training in basic practices such as drawing blood, taking blood pressure, administering shots and basic medicines. One glance inside the small clinic revealed how worlds apart it was from the Western medical system, where doctors seldom listen for more than a few minutes to patients before prescribing their remedies. Here the doctors listened carefully, asking questions about the patients' lives and wellbeing. They listened for and treated signs of emotional trauma, which many have suffered from the constant threat of violence. People from the surrounding community who had been refusing to participate in the construction of autonomy came by to be treated, or simply to witness the outpouring of care and camaraderie. We were later told that the autonomous authorities felt this was an important positive development for the communities. They noted that there was a lightness of spirit during those days of our gathering that had not been felt in the community for a long time, due to the darkness and dread cast by violence and harassment.

Many follow-ups are now being planned for this experience that moved us all so deeply—guests and community members alike.<sup>8</sup> In our report-back to the broader Sexta Grietas del Norte assembly, the Brigade was unified in expressing how much we had learned from the experience, including new understandings of our own processes of decolonization. Guests in a breathtakingly beautiful landscape, we were fortified by participating in this

<sup>8</sup> *Brigadistas* continue the work of organizing virtual follow ups with patients and discussing continued training in health promotion and midwifery, supporting the recovery of ancestral childbirth traditions, cataloging and disseminating the community's endemic medicinal plants, and supporting in organizing women's circles and men's circles to address gender inequalities.

brave, collective struggle, and we were overwhelmed by the warmth and generosity of our hosts. The solidarity, the mutual respect, admiration, and love that comes with a shared vision of a world that could be, and that we are all committed to living for, will continue to inspire and energize us here in our resistances in *el Norte*, the other United States. ✖



Azqueltan's children in front of the new clinic, "Hope and Life." Photo by Semillas.





Health promoters inaugurating the autonomous clinic. Photo by Semillas.



Top: The cliffs at the entrance to Bolaños Canyon. Photo by Caitlin Manning.

Bottom: Harvesting pitaya flowers. Photo by Hanna Wallis.

Opposite: The flowers of the sacred “tutu” offered during the traditional ceremonies.  
Photo by Semillas.











Top, bottom, and opposite: Ceremonies celebrating the opening of the clinic in Azqueltan. Photos by Hanna Wallis.



Top: Midwives from the health brigade offering workshops in *rebozo* techniques. Photo by Alé.

Bottom: Doctors from the health brigade attending patients from the community. Photo by Caitlin Manning.

Opposite: Community members practicing tourniquet techniques. Photo by Caitlin Manning.











Top: Brigadista Targol mindfully preparing rice. Photo by Chris Canek Rodriguez

Opposite top: Herbalists from the health brigade offering herb samples while pinning up artwork of the 7 principles of leading by obeying. Photo by Pete Heshner.

Opposite bottom: The compañeras from Azqueltán took turns standing over the *comal* making tortillas from sun up to sun down. Photo by Chris Canek Rodriguez



Top and opposite: Azqueltán's church at the center of town. The ceremonies continue around the fire until dawn. Photos by Semillas.

