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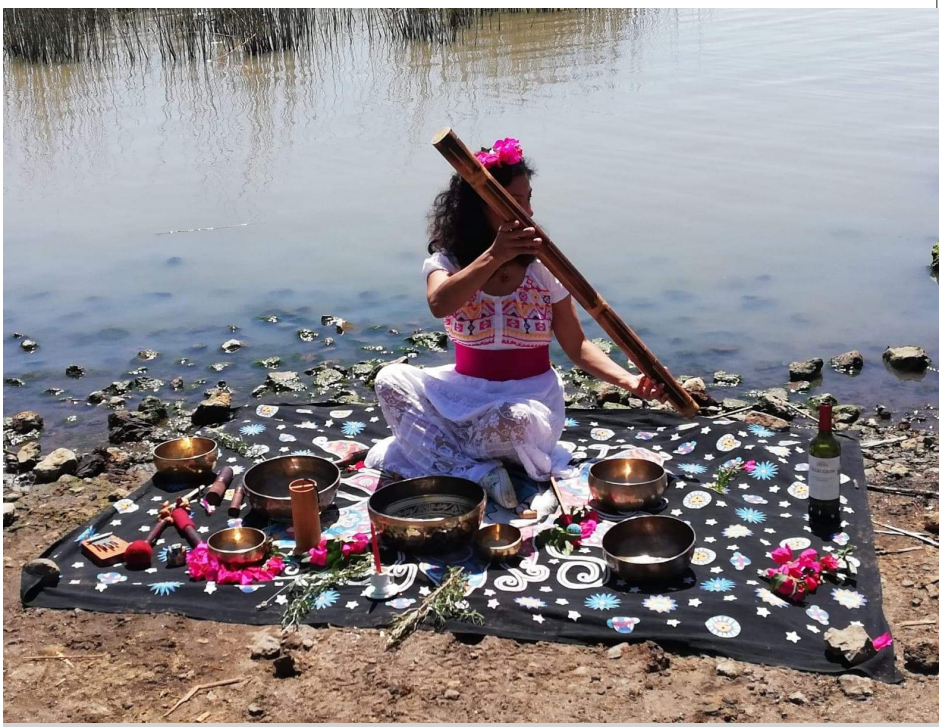
My Menstruation Ceremony

BY JAN HANVIK

I was an ordinary, middle class, Catholic Midwesterner in Minneapolis until the Selective Service System notified me that I had a high number and would soon be drafted to be trained to join the US invading forces in Vietnam. I would later become a pacifist Quaker, but at that time, I knew I had no skills or temperament for war, so I escaped to Mexico with a then University of Minnesota girlfriend.

Whereas my church, family, and government wanted to send me across the Pacific to fight for a soon-to-be proven unjustifiable cause, Mexico—having been invaded more than once—knew what invasion and colonization were and gave me refuge. While hitchhiking the country, I was taken in by a middle class Mexican family—Félix Vargaz Báez, originally from Puebla, of Spanish–French descent, comptroller general of a tobacco factory, tall, elegant, and what one might imagine of a Spanish grandee, who relaxed after a day at the factory, listening to European classical music on his record player. Mamá Maria Luisa Velasco Arroyo de Vargas, originally from Oaxaca, of Spanish–Zapotec descent, a small businesswoman, short, dark, rotund, an expert teacher of how to dicker for the best mole prices and ingredients in the Indigenous food market in Oaxaca. Marilu later told me I was the reincarnation of her second born son, Alejandro (of a total of eight children, uncannily like the eight in my Minnesota family), who died at the age of two or three days, probably from the cold in their then poorer house on the high slopes of the Toluca volcano. (Except for the loss of the oldest, Jorge, to COVID-19 in September 2022, and the youngest, Adolfo, some years ago, I remain "brother" to Maria Esther, Raúl, Cruz, Raquel, and Judith, and "brother-in-law" and "uncle" to many others.)



At Lake Pátzcuaro, so important to the P'urhepecha, on one of the islands where the menstruation ceremony was held, Juana sets up, with the important red wine bottle. *All photos by Juana Flores.*

When you are adopted, you remain tied together to your new family. I still am, and my adoption was in approximately 1972. All of my acceptance by and experiences with Mexico, Mexicans, and Indigenous colleagues and friends, and my fluency in Spanish, stem from those literally life-saving experiences, and from mutual love.

Juana Flores—Joan Flowers—is my sonic harmonization teacher at the Tiendita Verde—Little Green Shop—in Pátzcuaro, Mexico. My friend Abdiel, a choreographer and competitive artistic pole dancer, took me to Tiendita Verde for lunch. Surrounded as it was by extensive lawns and flower beds, the sad emptiness of the mostly locally sourced and organic restaurant and food shop made me fantasize about organizing an international Call for Choreographers to stage dances in the gardens. Diners and shoppers would benefit; artists would benefit; the owners would benefit.

The owners were smart enough to stage other kinds of events in the restaurant and gardens, including sonic harmonization. I had no idea what it was, but for 75 pesos—about US$3.75—I wouldn't lose much. In fact, I gained. Juana is 40ish, small, *mestiza*, not overweight but comfortable with her curves, jolly, indomitable. Whether she had one student or five, it was the same to her. When her mother died, I tried to console her, but *her* passing fit into Juana's broader view of life. She brushed away my concern, saying, "I'm ok!" In sonic harmonization, we sat cross-legged, lifting our arms up to the sky, or heaven, gathering in positive spirits or a positive feeling, bringing our arms down across our centers, all the while inhaling and slowly exhaling deeply. For

Spilling the wine, representing menstrual blood, onto the earth.

most of the one-hour session, we simply lay comfortably on blankets or yoga mats in the bamboo-framed treehouse, above the restaurant, and breathed—or slept—while Juana ran a round felt mallet around the edge of a series of bronze bowls—Nepalese, I think—which emitted an eerie, whining, keening sound.

Very few others attended. Attending sometimes was the portly, graying curtain and pillow maker, Gris ("grees," for Griselda), from whom I ordered brightly colored, locally woven, traditional cotton pillow covers for my twig patio furniture. Once in a while, her husband came, too. They held an open house lunch every Tuesday, to which I was invited, and which I regret never attending. I don't think anybody else attended either. They were so informal. Although I greeted everyone with hello and goodbye every Thursday, between 5 and 6 p.m., I never became close to anyone. So, I was surprised when Juana announced that my "balancing" male energy, along with that of "Mr. Gris," was required at the fall equinox menstruation ceremony, to be held Tuesday, September 22, 2020, on Yuñuén Island of the Indigenous P'urhépecha people, in the heart of sprawling Lake Pátzcuaro.

Juana, when she hears that I am writing my impressions of the ceremony, is delighted, and sends me notes about the most important things to remember about it.

Importante es en luna llena Este Domingo es un buen momento para ese ritual !!

Fuego, agua, tierra aire Los elementales honrado a la Luna.

Mujeres y hombres vestidos de colores claros ! Velas, Flores, incienso !!!

Recuerda que se hace una fogata la gente entra descalzas y la corona se pone enfrente de cada participante con una velita en el centro que al encenderse significa la luz de la Luna después se colocan las coronas y se inicia la meditación con sonidos de cuencos! O instrumentos armónicos Iniciamos con respiraciones medias mano derecha en el ombligo mano izquierda corazón respiraciones qué conecten con el momento y el espacio que mi energía se una a la de la luna, la luna llena es para agradecer por todo lo vivido en un ciclo se puede decir estoy completo estoy en paz y en armonía plena.

Most important is the full moon!

Fire Water Earth Air. The elementals honored the moon. [Open to interpretation.]

Men and women dress in pale light colors. Candles! Flowers! Incense!!! [She's very emphatic!]

Remember that *you* make a bonfire. The people enter barefoot. A crown of flowers is placed in front of each participant with a little candle in the center that, when you light it, signifies the light of the moon. Then, everyone puts on their crown and begins the meditation with sounds of the bowls! Or other harmonic instruments. We begin with half breaths, neither deep nor shallow, with the right hand on the navel and the left on the heart. The breaths connect this moment and the space that our energy unites to the energy of the full moon. This is to express thankfulness for all that we have lived through in this cycle of the moon. It is to say—I am complete. I am in peace and in complete harmony.

I wasn't sure I would go, and I wasn't sure I *wouldn't* go. As usual, Juana's communication and organizational skills were a bit lax. She rarely and unmethodically advertised her sonic harmonization sessions, then was surprised that no one came. The day of the menstruation ceremony, she would pass by my house en route to the dock. Around the appointed time, she texted that she *wouldn't* pass by my house, but would meet me at the dock at Ukaz, to leave by ferry for the island at 5 p.m. I had no idea where that was, nor

how far away from my house, nor how to get a taxi. My assignment also was to find and bring a bottle of red wine. I was soon to find out what for. But at 4:40 p.m., or so, I found a local minivan bus, called a *combi*, from my remote house to a busy street, asked a taxi driver if he knew what Ukaz was, and was on my way.

Around 5:30 p.m., I arrived at Ukaz to find Juana, six or seven other women, and the other male energy, Mr. Gris, peacefully lounging dockside. Around 6 p.m., I guess, we boarded a low-in-the-water ferry that had room for about 50 passengers, for a peaceful, humming glide out to the island. We clambered up a long but gently sloping cement runway to the peak of the island, past bougainvilleas, a cemetery, tiny pastures with a cow or two, and everywhere, extraordinary views of the volcano-ringed lake.

At the top of the ramp, a family with wheelbarrows greeted us to carry our bags the rest of the way to a nearly completed, two-story concrete home that belonged to a friend of Juana. Why couldn't they have met as at the *bottom* of the ramp, I wondered. Nervous about such proximity to strangers during the COVID-19 pandemic, I found my own way farther up the hill to an unoccupied ecotourism center managed by the P'urhépecha people, who have occupied the lake's islands and surrounding lands for centuries.

A local family prepared plates of beans and tortillas for us. Beer was forbidden as inappropriate for a spiritual ceremony, but with Juana's usual relaxedness about formalities, we passed a few around.

At the time that the menstruation ceremony was to begin, we all took our mats and blankets to the unfinished concrete balcony of the house, with 360-degree views. Juana had a small bonfire going. She played the bowls. She put crowns of marigolds on our heads. We drank water out of plastic cups, water that had been purified *in* the singing bowls. I was reluctant to drink the water, in which various cups by people fairly unknown to me had been dipped, and set my glass down by my mat without drinking.

To almost imperceptible candlelight and flashlights, we later filed down a narrow cement staircase to the tiny backyard. We were each given a small plastic cup, into each of which Juana poured a small amount of red wine, which I had successfully managed to pick up en route. We crouched down. With our hands, we dug a small hole in the earth underneath our squatting legs, poured the wine into the hole, covered it up again, and rose. We placed the cups down, linked arms around each other's backs, and leaned backward, with all our weight and worries released—trusting that the group's female energy, balanced by about 15 percent male energy, presumably, would prevent any, or all of us, from falling. It worked!

Then it was time to head upstairs to a communal picnic, drinking all the wine and beer we wanted.

Toward 2 a.m., under the full moon, I headed alone to my cabin on the crest of the island at the ecology center. Around 7 a.m., I was awakened by rough, chopping sounds. I thought that was odd, as there was, to my knowledge, no one else staying at the center. (I found out later a young couple and their four- or five-year old daughter were at

Red wine is offered up, normally to the full moon.

The menstruation ceremony.

a nearby cottage.) I went out on the balcony. Just below it was a man who appeared to be in 60s or 70s, with a wrinkled face, wearing work clothes, chopping away at vegetation at the edge of the steep slope down to the lake. At an ordinary hotel, a worker might have thought not to do this at 7 a.m., outside the only occupied cottage on the property, but I didn't feel like arguing or complaining—or being a gringo. I was on P'urhépecha lands. Let me learn P'urhépecha ways.

I greeted the man and thanked the universe for the beautiful day. I said to him that I had been worried, walking back home alone in the dark at 2 a.m., earlier that morning. "No!" he said. "We're on an island for a reason! Bad people who want to come to the island, they drown!" He seemed very confident of his safety, which I was glad to hear, given the vast unsafety so many millions of humans live with every day.

I was chosen. I didn't push my way in anywhere. In ways unexpected, when I wafted into my first sonic harmonization session with Juana, I also wafted into unlimited spheres of global harmonization.

I was struck by the gardener's matter-of-factness. He *knew* and he *knows* that no violence will come to the island. Just as Juana and the other women *knew* and *know* that my male—albeit, "foreign," that is, non-Indigenous, non-Mexican, non-P'urhépecha—energy was the correct counterbalance to their female energy. Our balanced energies still needed to be harmonized with the equinox to build women's strength and community strength on the island of Yuñuén, the town of Pátzuaro, the state of Michoacán, the country of México, and the planet.

Jan Hanvik (he, him) holds a BFA in Dance from City College of the City University of New York, and an MA from New York University's Center for Latin American & Caribbean Studies. He has twice been a Fulbright Senior Scholar, in El Salvador in dance, and in Argentina and Uruguay in Arts Management. For 30 years, he was Executive Director of three not-for-profits dedicated to multicultural exchange. In 2018, the Indigenous P'urhépecha ecotourism center Patzingo, in Michoacán, Mexico, named him Ambassador to share their values with the world. *Photo:* Jan Hanvik, experiencing a sonic harmonization event, in the "treehouse" of the Tiendita Verde, Pátzcuraro, Michoacán. Photo by Juana Flores.

The participants, seven women, and two men to balance the female energy, in the menstruation ceremony.

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