NOTES ON MIXTEC TERMS FOR SUPERNATURAL BEINGS
Barbara E. Hollenbach, April, 2016

INTRODUCTION
This study briefly surveys terms for supernatural beings in Mixtec languages. It looks at the prehispanic period, the colonial period, in which the Dominican friars developed terms to use in their evangelization efforts, the nineteenth century, and the modern period. It treats terms for God, Lord, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Virgin Mary, Saints, angels, the devil, and demons.

Our chief sources for the prehispanic period are the Alvarado vocabulary and the Reyes grammar, both published in 1593, early in the colonial period; these books described the Mixtec language in order to help other Dominican friars learn it. These same two books also include considerable information about the friars’ work in the colonial period. Use of the vocabulary is greatly facilitated by the analytical version prepared by Maarten E. R. G. N. Jansen and Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez in 2009.

The official document presenting Catholicism to the Mixtec people is the Hernandez catechism, published in two Mixtec variants, the Tlaxiaco-Achiutla one in 1567 and the Tepozcolula one in 1568. This catechism was highly influential for most of the colonial period. There are also various manuscripts and archival documents. Almost all the materials we have for these periods are from the Highland Mixtec region; the Lowland region is sparsely represented, and the Coastal region not at all.

For the later colonial period there is the Ripalda catechism in the Nochixtlán variant of Highland Mixtec, published in 1719 and 1755 (and reprinted in 1808), which follows closely in the Hernandez tradition, and there are also archival materials. By the end of the colonial period, however, the use of written Mixtec had essentially come to an end in the Highlands.

In the nineteenth century, there was a resurgence in the use of Mixtec for religious instruction by the Catholic clergy, but this time the focus was in the Lowland Mixtec area, rather than the Highland area. Various catechisms were published between 1834 and 1899; these appear to show some influence from Hernández.

For the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there are modern linguistic descriptions and Bible translations available from various towns in each of the Mixtec regions, starting with the work of Kenneth Pike in the 1930s and 1940s. Modern Bible translations, like the catechisms, use terms for supernatural beings
that are carefully chosen, whereas dictionaries, grammars, and texts are more likely to use popular terms that have not been through such an editorial filter.

In that my knowledge of these sources is far from complete, the observations in this study should be considered preliminary. Hopefully they will stimulate further research.

**TERMS FOR GOD: ÑUꞌU**

At the eve of the Spanish conquest, the Mixtecs had a classic Mesoamerican religious system, in which the world was controlled by capricious, if not downright malevolent, deities, the chief of which was the rain god, Savi / Davi. In order for crops to grow well, and in order to avoid diseases and other disasters, it was necessary to appease these gods and to offer them sacrifices. There was no basic division between good and evil supernatural beings. Religion was largely a question of meeting the demands of the deities in order to maintain life. A detailed account of Mixtec religion during the colonial period can be found in chapter 8 of Terraciano (2001).

The most general term for a deity or spirit during that period was ñuꞌu. In his vocabulary, under dios, Alvarado gives ñuꞌu. Because this term was so general, the friars used it with various modifiers.

For the Christian God, they used phrases like:

- ñuꞌu toniñe
- ñuꞌu va kun nde'e va kun naa
- ñuꞌu nde'e kuvi nde'e va'a
- ñuꞌu tuꞌva ndichi

God, literally ‘the reigning sacred being’

infinite God, literally ‘the sacred being who will not end, who will not be destroyed’

infinite God, literally ‘the sacred being who can do everything, who is completely good’

all powerful God, literally ‘the sacred being who is prepared and wise’

With other modifiers, phrases with ñuꞌu referred to a demon or mountain spirit:

- ñuꞌu kuiꞌna
- ñuꞌu ndevi

demon, literally ‘the thief sacred being’

apparition, mountain spirit (the meaning of ndevi is uncertain)

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1 In this study, Mixtec words from the colonial period are adapted to the orthography used by the Mixtec Academy: x is an alveopalatal sibilant, word-final n symbolizes nasalization, and (ꞌ) is a glottal stop. Tone is not indicated.

2 When Colonial Mixtec words are cited in two forms, the first is the Tlaxiaco-Achiutla variant, and the second is the Teposcolula variant.
Sometimes in the catechisms, Ńuꞌu seems to mean ‘essence’ or ‘nature’, and it is used to describe abstract concepts like the three persons of the Trinity, and Jesus being truly God and truly man. The Ripalda catechism of 1755 has the phrase:

Ndixa Ńuꞌu nDios, ndixa Ńuꞌu ñayevi truly essence of God, truly essence of person.

The term Ńuꞌu³ continues to be used in many variants of modern Mixtec, but when it is used alone, it refers to mountain spirits (Spanish duendes or chaneques) that are capricious like the prehispanic gods. The generic meaning ‘supernatural being’ is extant mainly in compounds like veñuꞌu ‘church building’, lit. ‘house of sacred being’, and chiñuꞌu ‘to worship, to honor’. These two terms are found in Alvarado, and have come down from colonial Mixtec with their meaning unchanged.

**TERMS FOR GOD: DIOS**

In that they did not find the term Ńuꞌu alone satisfactory as a name for the Christian God, and in that most of the compounds given above include rather unwieldy relative clauses, the friars created new terms. One way of doing this was to borrow Spanish Dios, which was adapted to Mixtec phonology by adding an initial n, and it was often spelled with a capital D:

ndios, nDios

They also combined native Ńuꞌu with Spanish Dios:

ṽuꞌu ndios

In the nineteenth-century catechisms from the Lowland area, both the simple loan nDios and this compound are used for God.

The loanword ndios continues as the name for God in many Lowland and Coastal towns, and also a few towns at the edge of the Highland area. It has, however, suffered various phonological adaptations over the centuries.

**Lowland Mixtec area:**

Ndios Alacatlatzala
Ndioxi Xochapa

**Coastal Mixtec area:**

³ The lexeme Ńuꞌu has the same consonants and vowels as two other common Mixtec nouns, but differs from them in tone. For example, in Magdalena Peñasco, these three nouns are:

mountain spirit Ńuꞌu low mid
earth Ńuꞌu mid mid floating high
fire Ńuꞌu mid low

There are also two verb forms with these consonants and vowels. There is good reason, however, to consider Ńuꞌu ‘mountain spirit’ a separate lexeme from all of these other words.
Nyoo (Ndyoo)  San Juan Colorado

Highland area:
  Ndiosi'      Santiago Nuyoo (western edge)
  Ntiusi       San Juan Coatzospan (northern edge)

TERMS FOR GOD: IYA
In their search for a name for the Christian God, the friars also used the term
iya or i'ya, which was used in prehispanic and colonial Mixtec for persons of the
ruling class. This term was extended by the friars to good supernatural beings,
including God. In the Alvarado vocabulary, which reflects both the native use
and the evangelistic efforts of the friars, it is used with various modifiers for a
high-status person, and also for supernatural beings. In many cases it introduces
relative clauses. The following examples from Alvarado show various phrases
introduced by iya.

For a high-status person:
  iya ño'o xiña toniñe     viceroy, literally ‘the ruler who is in the
                           ruling region’
  iya nikuvi nuu ya       representative of the pope, literally ‘the
                           ruler who is in the place of the
                           (other) ruler’

For native deities:
  iya kaa viyu            moon
  iya kaa ma'a / iya kamaa sun

For God:
  iya nde'e kuvi          all-powerful God, literally ‘the ruler
                           who can do everything’
  iya nde'e tu'va ya      all-powerful God, literally ‘the ruler
                           who is prepared for anything’

For other supernatural beings:
  iya yodakaku ŋ'a'a       savior, literally ‘the ruler who rescues
                           us’
  iya ŋ'a yeke ŋ'a koño    angel, literally ‘the ruler not bone not
                           flesh’

4 The term iya apparently did not occur in colonial Mixtec as a simple noun, but always
together with something following, like a noun, adjective, or relative clause. In modern Mixtec,
this is also the case. Note that the entry for iya alone in Alvarado is translated don, señor; in
Spanish don occurs only together with another word.
iya nikana ndita   saints who are in heaven, literally, ‘the rulers who went out upwards in the air’

For God there are a number of even longer expressions in Alvarado, like iya di da'a nikevi nikitu andevi ñuu ñayevi, which is translated both as ‘God the author and creator of heaven and earth’ and as ‘creator of heaven and earth’. Another of these expressions is iya ñu'u tnanixi ñu'u ninduyu nide'va nikua'aya, which is translated as ‘God the author and creator of everything’.

Like many of the terms based on ñu'u, these descriptive terms with iya were too long or too specific to serve as a name for God, and so the friars constructed a compound containing iya and the Spanish loan ndios:

Iya nDios

This term is also found in the Ripalda catechism, along with others like Dutu nDios (father God) and ñu'u nDios.

Even though this compound has suffered many phonological adaptations and changes, it has continued through the centuries, and remains as the standard term for God in most modern Western Highland Mixtec variants, and some Eastern Highland variants. It is not, however, found at the edges of the Highland region, or in the Lowland or Coastal Mixtec regions.

In the following examples of this word in modern Mixtec, several phonological changes can be noted in addition to the initial n added during the colonial period: palatalization of nd to nch, lengthening the vowel o or changing it to u, dropping the final s, changing the final s to x or ch, and adding a vowel e or i at the end. Occasionally a glottal stop is added following the o or u. Such words are phonologically aberrant because in Mixtec, glottal stop usually occurs only before vowels and sonorant consonants.

Western Highland area:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>iya Dios</th>
<th>Yandioso</th>
<th>Yandra</th>
<th>Iya Ndiuxi</th>
<th>Yandioo</th>
<th>Yandios</th>
<th>Iya Ndioos</th>
<th>Iya Ndios (Dog)</th>
<th>Iya Ndios'isi, Iya Ndios</th>
<th>Yandoos</th>
<th>Yaa Dios</th>
<th>Yaa Dios</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ia Dios</td>
<td>San Juan Ñumí</td>
<td>San Cristóbal Amoltepec (centro)</td>
<td>Buenavista Amoltepec</td>
<td>San Cristóbal Amoltepec</td>
<td>Santo Domingo Huendio</td>
<td>Magdalena Peñasco</td>
<td>San Agustín Tlacotepec</td>
<td>San Mateo Peñasco</td>
<td>Santo Tomás Ocotepec</td>
<td>San Esteban Atatlahauc</td>
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</table>
Occasionally the name for God in a Highland town is a compound with something other than *iya* as the first element, as in San Bartolo Yucuañe in the Western Highland area, which has *Jitondyuxi*, which literally means Lord God.

In other parts of the Mixtec region, the term for God is either a form of the loanword *Ndios*, or it is a compound of some other word with this loanword, like *ñu'u* ‘sacred being’, *sutu* / *dutu* ‘father’, or *jito'o* / *xto'o* ‘lord’.

In most variants where the compound *Iya Ndios* is not used as the name for God, the term *iya* does not occur either. This is probably because these areas had less influence from either the stratified Mixtec society at the time of the conquest, or from the Hernandez catechism. The term *iya* is, however, found in part of the northern Lowland area in the nineteenth century catechisms, where it introduces descriptive phrases for sacred beings. Presumably this area had more influence from the stratified Mixtec society and the Dominican friars, because it was along the trade route with central Mexico.

Although *iya* is usually used for benevolent supernatural beings, in Santiago Nuyoo, at the western edge of the Highland region, it is used in two descriptive phrases for demons:  
- *ya'vi*’ demon, literally ‘evil sacred being’  
- *ya kini* demon, literally ‘ugly, bad sacred being’

The importance of the term *iya* in prehispanic and colonial Mixtec is shown by the fact that the reduced form *ya* was a part of the enclitic pronoun system. This pronoun was used during the prehispanic and colonial periods for members of the nobility, according to the Reyes grammar (page 15). Reyes also thought it was appropriate for angels, but not for demons (page 19). In the catechisms, the pronoun *ya* is used for God, Jesus, the Virgin Mary, saints, and angels. In many modern Mixtec variants in the Western Highland area, and sporadically elsewhere (Mitlatongo, Xayacatlan, Mixtepec), the pronoun *ya* has survived, and it refers to supernatural or sacred beings. The range of reference varies from town to town, and differs between Catholics and evangelicals, but it has been
recorded for Christian concepts like God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Virgin Mary, saints, and angels, and also for prehispanic deities like the sun, moon, rain, and some diseases. It is also used for members of the Catholic clergy, especially bishops and higher.

**TERMS FOR GOD: SU’SI**

There is another word for God commonly used in the Western Highland area, especially in the Achiutla valley, the term **Su’si, Chu’chi**. This word is phonologically aberrant in that it has a glottal stop before the obstruents s and ch; in Mixtec, glottal stop usually occurs only before vowels and sonorant consonants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chu'chi</th>
<th>San Juan Ñumí</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chu'chi</td>
<td>SC Amoltepec – centro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Su'si</td>
<td>Magdalena Peñasco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Su'si</td>
<td>SA Tlacotepec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Su'si</td>
<td>S Mateo Peñasco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Su'si</td>
<td>Santa María Yosoyúa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chu'chi</td>
<td>Chalcatongo</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

This term seems to be absent from the Eastern Highland, Lowland, and Coastal Mixtec areas, nor have I found it in any of the colonial materials or in later catechisms, which suggests that it was not a term promoted by the Catholic church, but was rather a folk development.

In that the only forms I have recorded are from modern Mixtec, there are few clues as to the history of this word, but it is almost certainly a loanword from the Spanish name **Jesús**. In Magdalena Peñasco, **Su'si** is one of the nickname forms of the masculine personal name **Jesús**, in addition to being a term for God. Even though this term must have originally referred to Jesus, it became generalized, and its current primary meaning is God. In some towns it is both a name for God, and a generic term for saints and images. This suggests that, even though the friars tried to teach the doctrine of the Trinity and to distinguish among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, they met with limited success among the common people.

In Magdalena Peñasco and San Agustín Tlacotepec, this term also occurs in a compound following the honorific classifier **tata**, literally father:

  Tata Su'si

In Santa Lucía Monte Verde, there is a form **chuchi**, which means a statue of a saint. In Santo Tomás Ocotepec, the form **su'si** exists as an interjection, rather than as a standard term for God. There are also compounds for baptismal godparents in Magdalena Peñasco, **tasu'si** and **nasu'si**, that incorporate this
The existence of these special forms suggests that the term Su'si is rather old, perhaps dating from the middle of the colonial period, a time when few Mixtecs knew Spanish, but many elements of Christian teaching had filtered into daily life.

In many towns a form of Su'si exists along with a form of Iyandios. My sense of things is that Su'si is a more popular term, and Iyandios is more formal.

**TERM FOR LORD**

In addition to a name for God, the friars needed a word for Lord, and they found an appropriate Mixtec term, jito'o / xto'o, which means the owner of an animal, or the boss of a person. It is probably the possessed form of the noun to'o, which referred to a noble in Mixtec society. This term for Lord is often found in all of the catechisms in the phrase jito'o yo / xto'o ndo ‘Our Lord’, and it has come down into most variants of modern Mixtec.

In some modern variants, this word for Lord has combined with the loanword ndios to form the standard name for God:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>San Bartolo Yucuañe</th>
<th>San Juan Mixtepec</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jitondyuxi</td>
<td>Sto'o Dios</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Magdalena Peñasco, this term has undergone a semantic restriction, and it is currently used mainly for the owner of an animal. The preferred term for Lord is Iya Tatnuni ‘the sacred being who rules’.

**TERMS FOR OTHER GOOD SUPERNATURAL BEINGS**

The friars also had to find terms for a variety of other benevolent supernatural beings that formed part of Catholic doctrine: Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Virgin Mary, saints, and angels.

For Jesus, which is a proper name, and also a common personal name for men, the obvious equivalent was to use a Spanish loanword, Jesús. The friars often used it together with the messianic title Christ in the form Jesu Christo. These loans were also used in the later catechisms, and they have come down into modern Mixtec, sometimes with phonological adaptations, like Jesuu, and Jesusi, both found in San Juan Coatzospan. In San Juan Teita, the term for Jesus is a compound with iya, Iya Jesus.

The Alvarado vocabulary includes descriptive terms for Jesus, like

<table>
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<tr>
<th>literally ‘the sacred being who rescues us’</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>iya yodakaku ŋa’a</td>
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</table>

Unlike God and Jesus, which are rather common concepts in everyday speech, the Holy Spirit was usually mentioned only in formal religious contexts. In the
catechisms, the friars used the loanword *Spiritu Sancto*, and it is still used widely in its modern form *Espíritu Santo*.

In Magdalena Peñasco, there is a native term for Holy Spirit, *xtumani Ndios*, which literally means ‘esteemed central part of God’. Nothing is known about the development of this term.

The Virgin Mary is a common concept in everyday speech, and the friars used the native Mixtec term for princess, *iya se'e / iya de'e*, literally ‘female sacred being’. This term was often used together with the name *Sancta María*. Terraciano points out that the Virgin Mary was treated as the female counterpart of Jesus, much as male and female rulers are shown facing each other in the prehispanic codices (2001:298-302).

This compound term was also used in the Ripalda catechism from the 18th century, and in the nineteenth century Lowland catechisms. I have not, however, found any modern instances of this term. Sometimes the honorific title *Nana* ‘mother’, a widely diffused term, is used as a title for the Virgin in place of the native term for princess.

For Catholic saints, the friars used both the loanword *sancto*, and descriptive phrases employing *iya*, like the following from Alvarado:

- *iya nicai kuiñe*  
  saints those who are in the sky

In modern Mixtec, the concept of saint refers at least as much to statues or images as to the personages behind them. In daily speech, saints are usually referred to with the loanword *santo*, and also, in the Western Highland area, by the term *Su'si, Chu'chi*. It is also common to use the honorific titles *Tata* and *Nana* before the name of a saint.

Likewise for angels, the friars used both the loanword *angel* and descriptive phrases, including

- *iya ña yeque ña coño*  
  ruler not bone not flesh
- *dza'a ndios*  
  slave of God

In modern Mixtec, various phonologically adapted forms of the loanword are still found with the meaning ‘angel’.

- *angli*  
  San Juan Colorado
- *anje*  
  San Juan Coatzospan

This term also sometimes refers to a dead baby, because in folk religion, dead children are believed to become angels.
In modern Bible translations, descriptive phrases are sometimes used. The two following terms employ the native Mixtec term for a *topil*, which is a low-level town service job that largely involves running errands; this term is a compound meaning literally ‘hand foot’:

- ndaje'ya San Esteban Atatlahuca (literally ‘messanger of God’)
- najia'a i' Ndiosi Santiago Nuyoo (literally ‘holy messenger of God’)

The following term for angel from San Juan Diuxi uses a different expression for running errands:

- ia xino kuechi nuu Ianyuux literally ‘sacred being who runs little things before God’

**TERMS FOR EVIL SUPERNATURAL BEINGS**

On the side of evil, Catholic teaching recognized the devil and demons. It appears that in prehispanic times there was no specific word for demon because the word *ñu'u* referred to all supernatural beings, and they were neither essentially good nor evil. Alvarado gave the following compound for demon or devil:

- ñu'u kui'na, literally ‘thieving spirit’

It is not clear whether this compound existed in prehispanic Mixtec, or whether it was coined by the friars.

Another term that Alvarado gives for demon or devil is:

- teñumi ña'a literally ‘owl person’

Terraciano says that this owl person was greatly feared, and that the friars employed this term for the devil.

In the catechisms the friars mainly used loanwords for the devil and demons. They employed the Spanish word *Demonio* (with a capital letter) for the devil, and they used the plural form with a lowercase initial letter *demonios* for demons. This use of loanwords accords with their practice for many other terms for supernatural beings.

In the 1899 Lowland catechism, a native term is used for the devil:

- ña u'i devil, literally ‘that which is evil’

In modern Mixtec, there are various terms for the devil and demons that reflect either Spanish loanwords like *demonio, diablo, and enemigo*, or native terms that include words like *kui'na* ‘thief’ and *u'vi* ‘evil’:

- xa u'u San Juan Diuxi, literally, ‘that which is evil’
- kui'na San Juan Diuxi, literally, ‘thief’
e ña va'a  San Juan Coatzospan, literally ‘that which is not good’
e ku'u  San Juan Coatzospan, literally ‘that which is sick’

I have not found any term in modern Mixtec corresponding to the owl person of the colonial period.

Perhaps the most common word for devil or demon in modern Mixtec is tachi, which has the basic meaning ‘wind’. This word was common in colonial Mixtec; Alvarado records the meanings ‘wind’, ‘air’, and ‘breath’.

Wind:

| tachi | wind |

Air:

| tachi | air |
| ñee tachi | bellows, literally ‘wind skin’ |
| ñee tevi tachi | bellows, literally ‘skin that blows wind’ |

Breath:

| yoko tachi yu'u | breath, literally ‘steam wind of the mouth’ |
| kua'i ña na ni'i tachi | asthma, literally ‘sickness of not getting breath’ |

Alvarado also records extended meanings for boasting or being conceited (cp. English puffed up).

| yokuvi tachi ini ndi | to praise oneself, literally ‘I am wind inside’ |
| yokuvi tachi ndi | to boast, literally ‘I am wind’ |
| yoka'an tachi ndi | to boast, literally ‘I speak wind’ |
| yokachi tachi ndi xita | to flatter, literally ‘I say wind to him’ |

There is, however, no entry in Alvarado that suggests that tachi refers to any supernatural being, nor even to a vague evil influence.

In modern Mixtec variants, however, tachi is widely used for the devil, for demons, and for vague evil influences. This extension is found in all four Mixtec regions. The semantic shift almost certainly came about through the use of
tachi\textsuperscript{5} as a translation equivalent for Spanish aire, which in folk culture, includes the meanings ‘evil influence’ and ‘demon’.

CODA: TERMS FOR SUPERNATURAL BEINGS IN A MODERN MIXTEC TEXT
As Terraciano has noted, references to supernatural beings in contexts removed from the church are more likely to reflect actual beliefs and practices (2001:297). I would like to end this note with a reference to a folktale from Magdalena Peñasco in which the main character meets three supernatural beings (Hollenbach F. and Erickson de Hollenbach 2016). He first meets a demon (tachi) and refuses to share his meat with him. He then meets God (Su'isi), and likewise refuses to share his meat with him. Finally he meets a bandolera (female mountain spirit, ñuyuku, a compound containing the old word ñu'u), and he shares his food with her and goes to her house. In this story, the polarized evil tachi and the good Su'isi count for very little, but the mountain spirit is very prominent.

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Larry Harris (Santiago Nuyoo)

Eastern Highland region
Priscilla Small (San Juan Coatzospan)
Joy Oram and Albertha Kuiper (San Juan Diuxi)
Leroy Whitman (Santiago Mitlatongo)

Lowland region
Carol Zylstra (Alacatlatzala, Gro.)
Sharon Stark and Audrey Johnson (Xochapa, Gro.)

Coastal region
Sharon Stark and Audrey Johnson (San Juan Colorado)

\textsuperscript{5} In some variants, the term tachi is used with a modifier for the Holy Spirit, but it is possible that such terms were constructed especially for Bible translation.
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