

# NOTES ON MIXTEC TERMS FOR SUPERNATURAL BEINGS

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## 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: ÑU'U<sup>1</sup>

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**.<sup>2</sup> 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 **ñu'u**. In his vocabulary, under *dios*, Alvarado gives **ñu'u**. Because this term was so general, the friars used it with various modifiers.

For the Christian God, they used phrases like:

ñu'u toniñe	God, literally 'the reigning sacred being'
ñu'u va kun nde'e va kun naa	infinite God, literally 'the sacred being who will not end, who will not be destroyed'
ñu'u nde'e kuvi nde'e va'a	infinite God, literally 'the sacred being who can do everything, who is completely good'
ñu'u tu'va ndichi	all powerful God, literally 'the sacred being who is prepared and wise'

With other modifiers, phrases with **ñu'u** referred to a demon or mountain spirit:

ñu'u kui'na	demon, literally 'the thief sacred being'
ñu'u ndevi	apparition, mountain spirit (the meaning of <b>ndevi</b> is uncertain)

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<sup>1</sup> 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 (') is a glottal stop. Tone is not indicated.

<sup>2</sup> When Colonial Mixtec words are cited in two forms, the first is the Tlaxiaco-Achiutla variant, and the second is the Teposcolula variant.



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.<sup>4</sup> 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 ña'a      savior, literally 'the ruler who rescues us'

iya ña yeke ña koño      angel, literally 'the ruler not bone not flesh'

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<sup>4</sup> 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 everything’ and as ‘creator of heaven and earth’. Another of these expressions is **iya ñu'u tnani vixi 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:

ia Dios	San Juan Ñumí
Yandioo	San Cristóbal Amoltepec (centro)
Iya Ndiuxi	Buenavista Amoltepec
Yandioo	San Cristóbal Amoltepec
Yandios	Santo Domingo Huendío
Iya Ndioos	Magdalena Peñasco
Iya Ndio'si, Iya Ndios	San Agustín Tlacotepec
Iandioos	San Mateo Peñasco
Yaa Dios	Santo Tomás Ocotepc
Yaa Dios	San Esteban Atlatlahuca

Iya Nchosi, Iya Nyosi	San Juan Teita
Iandios	Chalcatongo de Hidalgo
I'a Nchoox	San Miguel el Grande
I'a Ndiosi, I'a Ncho'xi	Santa Catarina Yosonotú
Yandios	Santiago Yosondúa

Eastern Highland area:

Ianyuux	San Juan Diuxi
Iya Ndiuxi	Santiago Mitlatongo

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.

Chu'chi	San Juan Ñumí
Chu'chi	SC Amoltepec – centro
Su'si	Magdalena Peñasco
Su'si	SA Tlacotepec
Su'si	S Mateo Peñasco
Su'si	Santa María Yosoyúa
Chu'chi	Chalcatongo

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

word for God. 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:

Jitondyuxi	San Bartolo Yucuañe
Sto'o Dios	San Juan Mixtepec

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 Coatzacoapan. In San Juan Teita, the term for Jesus is a compound with **iya**, **Iya Jesus**.

The Alvarado vocabulary includes descriptive terms for Jesus, like

iya yodakaku ña'a	literally 'the sacred being who rescues us'
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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:

<b>iya nicai kuiñe</b>	saints those who are in the sky
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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

<b>iya ña yeque ña coño</b>	ruler not bone not flesh
<b>dza'a ndios</b>	slave of God.

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

<b>angli</b>	San Juan Colorado
<b>anje</b>	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'e ya                      San Esteban Atatlahuca (literally ‘messenger of God’)  
naja'a ii' 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
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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**<sup>5</sup> 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'si**), 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'si** count for very little, but the mountain spirit is very prominent.

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##### Coastal region

Sharon Stark and Audrey Johnson (San Juan Colorado)

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<sup>5</sup> 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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