

edited by
JEREMY D. COLTMAN
and JOHN M. D. POHL

SORCERY IN MESOAMERICA



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Edited by

Jeremy D. Coltman and John M.D. Pohl

UNIVERSITY PRESS OF COLORADO
Louisville

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Published by University Press of Colorado
245 Century Circle, Suite 202
Louisville, Colorado 80027

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The University Press of Colorado is a proud member of the Association of University Presses.

The University Press of Colorado is a cooperative publishing enterprise supported, in part, by Adams State University, Colorado State University, Fort Lewis College, Metropolitan State University of Denver, Regis University, University of Colorado, University of Northern Colorado, University of Wyoming, Utah State University, and Western Colorado University.

ISBN: 978-1-60732-944-2 (hardcover)

ISBN: 978-1-60732-945-9 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-1-60732-954-1 (ebook)

<https://doi.org/10.5876/9781607329541>

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Coltman, Jeremy D., editor. | Pohl, John M. D., editor.

Title: Sorcery in Mesoamerica / edited by Jeremy D. Coltman and John M. D. Pohl.

Description: Louisville : University Press of Colorado, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020001814 (print) | LCCN 2020001815 (ebook) | ISBN 9781607329442 (cloth) | ISBN 9781607329459 (paperback) | ISBN 9781607329541 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Witchcraft—Mexico. | Witchcraft—Central America. | Mayas—Social life and customs. | Indians of Mexico—Social life and customs. | Indians of Central America—Social life and customs.

Classification: LCC BF1584.M6 S67 2020 (print) | LCC BF1584.M6 (ebook) | DDC 133.4/30972—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020001814>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020001815>

Cover illustration: Polychrome plate with glyphic sign composed of a hand with human face. Cholula, Puebla. AD 950–1050. Princeton University Art Museum, y1967-147.

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Preface

Jeremy D. Coltman and John M.D. Pohl

This volume is the outgrowth of a session organized by the editors for the seventy-seventh annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in Memphis, Tennessee. The contributors share a fascination with a number of puzzling questions about Mesoamerican supernatural belief, ritualism, and social behavior that extend from the second millennium BC to the earliest encounters with Europeans and continue to the present day. Considering the size of our endeavor, we felt that a coherent introduction would be absolutely essential to how the book is received by our colleagues. It might seem logical to simply list the papers according to regions and compose an introduction that inventories each article's highlights, except we found that this just results in a grab bag of assorted topics loosely connected by a general theme. The problem with a chronological approach, on the other hand, is that it tends to reify the image of pre-Columbian sorcery as being something exotic and mysterious, if not bizarre, as it is primarily conveyed to us through pre-Columbian art and writing. It subsequently appears to be associated with failed millenarian movements and some nasty idolatry trials in the Colonial period and then continues on as what is still widely perceived to be the corrupted and vestigial religious practices in remote rural areas of what had once been magnificent state-level religions. We now know this was not the case.

We have organized this book by putting all of our ethnographic and colonial articles together at the very beginning because we realize that each work asks very different questions about what exactly sorcery is or isn't in Mesoamerica. They discuss the pros and cons of the vocabulary of sorcery, and they demonstrate together just exactly how a holistic system and world view rooted in sorcery was transformed into what was perceived to be the positive behavioral logic in Christian belief versus the negative associated with the Devil and yet with the two continuing to vigorously coexist side by side today. In doing this we can rationalize the seeming inconsistencies in points of view and establish a basis for reconstructing an original indigenous logic behind sorcery as we then examine chronologically its various manifestations through Classic Maya city-states to the Late Postclassic Aztec Empire. In this way we avoid the customary comparative approaches of Evans-Pritchard, Turner, and others as our sources for explanatory models and analyze sorcery on the merits of our own data. The result is a profound appreciation for the evolution of cultural beliefs and avoids the pitfalls of evaluating behavior on a purely subjective basis at any particular time and place. Our goal has been therefore to create a book in which the articles mutually augment one another in such a way as to answer some major questions and provide some significant new insights into a topic that has suffered from a considerable amount of misunderstanding in the past in ways that no individual article addresses alone.

In planning this volume all the contributors expressed concern over the terminology that

should be applied to the subject of sorcery, with the terms “sorcerer” as opposed to “witch” being a thorny topic as they have been used more or less interchangeably in Mesoamerica (Madsen and Madsen 1969). With his pioneering work *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*, E. Evans-Pritchard originally observed that the Azande of north-central Africa clearly distinguish between sorcerers and witches, the primary difference being that the sorcerer “uses the technique of magic and derives his power from medicines,” while the witch “acts without rites and spells and uses hereditary psycho-physical powers to attain his ends” (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 387). Mesoamerican ethnographers later proposed comparable distinctions between sorcerers and witches, but they also concluded that the criterion for classification is seldom absolute, and in composing this volume we were continually reminded of Victor Turner’s proposal: “Witch beliefs can no longer—if they ever could—be usefully grouped into two contrasting categories, witchcraft (in its narrow sense) and sorcery” (Turner 1964: 318; see also Nutini and Roberts 1993: 127–129; Knab 1995, 2004).

There was further concern among the contributors that terms like “sorcery” and “witchcraft” represent very general categories that may mask indigenous titles for practitioners and therefore misrepresent their roles by lumping them into any single broadly defined term. There is a myriad of occupational titles for magico-religious specialists in Mesoamerica, and we would not dare suggest that one term such as “witch” or “sorcerer” would be adequate to cover them all (López Austin 1988, 1: 362; Knab 2004; Pohl 2007). However, these terms as well as many others in the anthropological literature like “shamanism” are broadly used for comparative purposes by the contributors as they continue to provide a framework “for the identification and exploration of behavioral similarities and differences and fosters communication across regional or subdisciplinary boundaries” (Hill 2002: 407). Since there is no commonly accepted definition, we use indigenous terms when necessary, but many of these will continue to fall into a category of either sorcery or witchcraft, especially when dealing with actions of mal intent. In short, we seek a more refined and nuanced terminology but not at the expense of general public understanding (Klein et al. 2002: 400). Consequently, the editors have made no attempt to make the contributors adhere to any specific terminology but rather have encouraged the authors to use terms in a manner that best articulates their point of view.

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Acknowledgments

A work like this owes much to the shoulders of the giants it stands upon. An intellectual debt is owed to Alfredo López Austin, William and Claudia Madsen, Hugo Nutini, and Neil Whitehead. We would also like to thank our colleagues James Brady, Michael Coe, John Hoopes, Mary Pohl, Karl Taube, and Marc Zender. Darrin Pratt, Laura Furney, Dan Pratt, and the University Press of Colorado have been exceptional in so many ways, and we thank them heartily. We would also like to express a huge thank-you to former acquisitions editor Jessica d'Arbonne, who believed in this project from its infancy, and the new acquisitions editor, Charlotte Steinhardt, who has picked up the momentum to carry this project to fruition. Finally, we would like to thank Bryan Just; Peter Jay Sharp, Curator and Lecturer in the Art of the Ancient Americas, for arranging permission; and Jeffrey Evans, Manager of Visual Resources, for his special photography of the Cholula plate from the Princeton University Art Museum that appears on the cover of our book.

Sorcery and Witchcraft in the Mesoamerican World

An Introduction

John M.D. Pohl and Jeremy D. Coltman

In 1632 Thomas Gage, a Dominican friar of English ancestry, was ministering to the highland Maya community of Petapa, Guatemala, when he became involved in a remarkable encounter with the leaders of two rival political factions within the community.

They told me that the report went that Juan Gómez was the chief wizard of all the wizards and witches in the town, and that commonly he was wont to be changed into the shape of a lion, and so to walk about the mountains. That he was ever a deadly enemy to one Sebastian López, an ancient Indian and head of another tribe, and that two days before they had met in the mountain, Gómez in the shape of a lion and López in the shape of a tiger, and that they had fought most cruelly till Gómez, who was the older and weaker, was tired of it, much bit and bruised, and died of it . . . This struck me at the very heart, to think that I should live among such people, who were spending all they could get by their work and labor upon the church, saints and in offerings, and yet were so privy to the counsels of Satan. (Gage 1958: 275–276)

Juan Gómez had been a person of considerable wealth and power in Petapa. Gage even refers to him as a kind of “ruler.” He had been entirely dedicated to the church, attending morning and evening prayers regularly and contributing generously with gifts that supported the Dominicans in their missionary activities in the region. Even more surprising however was that, following Gómez’s death from injuries sustained during their supernatural encounter, his rival, Sebastian López, was incarcerated by the town’s indigenous administration while they decided how to resolve what was becoming an increasingly volatile situation, with the Gómez faction demanding that López be turned over to Spanish administration for trial as a murderer, while the López faction argued that such an action would result in both they, together with the rest of the ranking sorcerers in Petapa, being prosecuted for witchcraft. As a devout Catholic, Gage was appalled by the revelation that his parishioners were continuing to engage in such fundamentally pagan practices, but he was equally fascinated with the accounts of human-animal transformation, particularly in regard to how seriously the entire community seemed to accept the phenomenon not only as an explanation for Gómez’s mortal wounds but also as an expected, even logical, outcome of the political rivalries that had

divided the population for so many years.

The continuation of pagan beliefs and ritualism was of grave concern to the mendicant orders of friars serving in the Americas, many of whom wrote accounts of their personal experiences of what they identified as witchcraft, sorcery, necromancy, and related practices that they associated with a chief devil identified as Satan in the Christian theology of the time. What makes Gages's account so intriguing is how his inquiry into the death of Juan Gómez seems to anticipate so many of the questions that ethnographers would have about the same forms of behavior when they encountered it nearly four centuries later (Tedlock 1992). While the writings of his Spanish contemporaries were laden with evangelical rhetoric condemning pagan beliefs in response of the censorship of inquisitorial reviews, Gates's account was published in England at the conclusion of the Civil War and reflects a sense of the objective empiricism that was beginning to characterize serious scientific investigation in that country by the middle of the seventeenth century. Therefore, in many ways it anticipates comparable inquiries into the phenomena of sorcery presented by the scholars here.

John Monaghan examines witchcraft or *supersticion* as it was defined in Spain during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. *Supersticion*, literally superstition, was one of the major divisions in the Spanish theory of knowledge, but it was acquired through a pact with the Devil on the part of a practitioner who might be engaged in any of four major categories of ritualism: *brujeria*, *magica*, *ensalmacion*, and *hechiceria*. For Spanish ecclesiastics, *brujeria* was by far the most sinister form of superstitious knowledge. Upon entering into an express pact with Satan, the brujo carried out her or his bidding and even worshipped the supreme devil as a god. Women in particular were believed to specialize in *brujeria*. *Magica*, on the other hand, was rooted in arcane knowledge handed down from classical times in books and formulas that were studied by men engaged in what they advocated was *arte* or *sciencia*. There were two principal forms of *magica*. *Adivinacion* or the art of predicting the outcome of future events was accomplished primarily through the practice of astrology, casting lots, and the interpretation of dreams, whereas *nigromancia* was defined as the ability to control demons or the souls of the dead to affect the behavior of the living. *Ensalmacion* was the practice of healing the sick. Ensalmadores were credited with the power to heal by invoking through oratory, particularly invoking the psalms, while *saludadores* advocated that they had the ability to cure through their breath, saliva, or vision. Finally, *hechiceria*, also attributed mainly to women, was a term used to refer to individuals who had mastered combinations of *brujeria*, *magica*, and *ensalmacion* as well as more recognized forms of curing with the rituals and potions employed by *medicos* and *boticarios*.

By examining terminology as it was recorded in dictionaries among the Kaqchiquel and K'iche' Maya, Gage's friend Juan Gómez having belonged to the latter, Monaghan demonstrates that Spanish friars were not only very successful in identifying Maya terminology that matched their concept of *supersticion* but seemed to go so far as to map their taxonomy onto the indigenous culture. For example, a *balam* could be defined as an indigenous brujo who can change into a jaguar, like Gómez's rival Sebastian López, and were not perceived as being all that different from Iberian brujos who could turn themselves into cats, dogs, and other animals. For the Spaniards, the words differed, but the concepts behind

the words were the same.

Renowned for their ethnographic research with the Nahuas of the Sierra de Puebla over decades, Alan Sandstrom and Pamela Effrein Sandstrom are more concerned with how sorcery and witchcraft fit into broader perspectives of Mesoamerican religion. Much of the ritualism they have examined focuses on the use of mesas or ritual tables—in reality more like miniature stages—upon which Nahua spirit entities are called forth to act as assistants to healers and rainmakers. Nahua healers attribute disease to both anthropomorphic and environmental causes (Sandstrom 1991, 2003; Sharon 2003). Many are generalized beings responsible for drought, rain, thunder, lightning, and other atmospheric phenomena. Others are the spirits of people who were murdered in factional disputes, the souls of neglected relatives, malevolent sorcerers, and witches. Diagnosis is performed through the use of maize casting and scrying while curing is affected through highly dramatic performances that include the manufacture of scores of miniature paper images of the offended spirits (Sandstrom 1991: 235–237).

Sandstrom and Effrein Sandstrom propose that pantheism fits the ethnographic data on the Nahua better than polytheism, thereby resolving many of the contradictions in traditional Nahua world view that are derived as much from scholarly assumptions about an ancient Aztec imperial cult as the beliefs of their present-day descendants (see Nicholson 1971 for discussion). In a pantheistic religion the cosmos partakes of the sacred manifested in an impersonal divinity that fundamentally unites all objects, animals, and human beings. The Nahuas address this sacred principle as *totiotsij*. The root of the word *tiō-tl* is a regional variant of *teō-tl*, the term used by the sixteenth-century Nahuatl speakers to refer to both god and an animating principle that permeates everything in the environment, more of a cosmic life-force rather than a person-like deity (Pohl and Lyons 2010: 34–35). The multitudes of cut-paper images that portray different aspects of *totiotsij* do not represent separate spirit entities arranged in a polytheistic hierarchy. Instead, all spirit entities, all objects, and all living forms are fundamentally one and essentially the same. Thus, Nahua spirit entities may substitute for each other or shade into one another and exhibit all of the contradictions that characterize the world at large. As a consequence, a peculiarity of Nahua thought that derives from this pantheistic world view is that it is impossible to differentiate between what is ultimately good versus evil among spirit entities.

Although they keenly observed the sophistication with which Nahua physicians diagnosed patients, administered medicines derived from more than 1,200 plant species, and performed delicate operations, Spanish friars were nevertheless confounded by the indigenous physician's explanation for the primary causes of injury and disease as either witchcraft or transgression against spirit forces in nature. The mapping of categories onto indigenous practices by Europeans, as Monaghan proposes, seems to have the effect of dividing what had been a holistic theory of disease, curing, control over meteorological phenomena, astrology, and divination into what they regarded as positive or negative qualities of *magica* versus *supersticion*. Sandstrom and Efrein Sandstrom therefore argue that much of what we are discussing as sorcery and witchcraft is actually the result of the adoption of both Iberian and African diaspora ritual practices, first introduced into the Caribbean after 1492 and later

spread throughout Mesoamerica during the early Colonial period. Their point is well taken. The widespread use of standard treatments such as rubbing an egg over the forehead for the diagnosis of disease or the sacrifice of black chickens to appease a spirit entity, spitting liquor, and so forth are clearly connected to practices of Iberian superstition as well as being documented in Africa and the Caribbean (see Madsen and Madsen 1969 for discussion).

While the ritualism associated with curing, rainmaking, divination, sorcery, and witchcraft is remarkably consistent throughout Mesoamerica, suggesting some form of integrated social mechanism for its distribution, it nonetheless seems to be applied differentially according to variables in cultural, historical, social, political, and economic settings at any given time. Sandstrom and Effrein Sandstrom believe that the comparative lack of overt witchcraft in the communities in which they studied is the result of a concerted effort to reduce “envy” in these communities (Sandstrom 1991: 218–219). Envy is a complex topic, and it is associated with terms in indigenous languages that express powerful and destructive emotions in Mesoamerican communities. The Nahua of Chicontepec, Veracruz, have one particular *mal aire* known as *Tzitzimicohecatl* (wind of envy and anger) (Báez-Jorge 2004: 134). In comparable fashion among the Teenek (Huastec) of Tantoyuca, envy and anger provoke an alliance with the earth and the recruitment of the evil spells of a sorcerer (Ariel de Vidas 2007: 183) while in Pedrano Tzotzil Maya thought, envy will also cause the *wayhel* souls to cause harm (Holmes 1961: 158).

Lilián González Chévez discusses highly aggressive forms of witchcraft practiced by the Mixtec and Tlapanec communities of the Costa Chica Guerrero where illness is attributed to envy. Nothing escapes witchcraft’s influence from personal health to the size of harvests, the fertility of animals, children’s success in school, or even the arrival of remittance payments from migrants. Witchcraft is therefore responsible for a high level of psychosocial stress, as it affects not only one’s physical and emotional states but also one’s material well-being. For González Chévez much of the underlying causes of witchcraft are rooted in limitations in resources to which all members of a community otherwise have an equal right. A fundamental belief is that if someone profits in the community, others can suffer a downturn in fortune with an equivalence in loss. Whether literally true or not, a community uses this theory of “limited good” to maintain balance in social and cultural dynamics that is rooted in its population’s common history and the systems of reciprocity that bind its kin groups together.

The appearance of unequal access to wealth, on the other hand, can lead to serious accusations of witchcraft within families, between families, and in other factional components of the community. A Mixtec brujo may become envious if someone has land, money, or livestock and will take it upon himself to relieve an individual of their assets by summoning powerful spirit entities such as the brujo’s ancestors or the souls of those who have died a violent death. The objective of a defending brujo is to insinuate oneself with these entities to channel or direct these forces so that they inflict sickness, bad harvests, and death on the offenders. In this way, evil in the hands of brujos is never created or destroyed; it is simply transferred. Among the ritual objects that are employed in Mixtec witchcraft ritualism is the fascinating use of the skulls of former brujos, some of whom have been killed

in earlier factional conflicts. They are believed to be the means by which one can summon the spirit entity of the dead and invoke its power to cause harm to the living. The practice brings to mind the Postclassic Mixtec custom of using skulls inlaid with turquoise and other precious stones as objects of veneration and even ornamentation in ritual dress. The conflict between Juan Gómez and Sebastian López that Thomas Gage witnessed threatened to divide the community of Petapa, suggesting that the rivalry between the two leaders could have erupted into armed conflict by their followers if it weren't for the fact that the two factions feared the repercussions of the viceregal authorities more than one another and managed to resolve the issues through their own *alcaldes*.

Nowhere is the process of the breakdown of a once unified pantheistic system of thought and its reassignment into positive and negative attributes discussed by Sandstrom and Effrein Sandstrom more clearly demonstrated than in neighboring Oaxaca. The region is characterized by small, widely dispersed valleys surrounded by high mountains within which are situated indigenous communities with average populations of about 10,000. While anthropologists differentiate them regionally on the basis of language and customs, the peoples themselves tend to emphasize a community identity, specifically in regard to the cult of a patron saint whose church is frequently constructed adjacent to the ruins of the ranking palace of former dynastic rulers and a cult temple dedicated to a heroic ancestor. Among the Mixtecs, the term for a ruler or *cacique* was *Yya*, meaning both “king” and “god.” Some sense of the transference of that cult is found with the term *Yya* being used to address the community's patron saint, whose spiritual “house” is the church. The saint personifies the religious and social ideals of the community in a way comparable to a city-state dynastic ancestor.

An equally significant component of cult, however, is found in the reverence for the Cueva del Diablo ([figure 1.1](#)) or Cave of the Devil, a shrine usually located in some more remote region of the community's territory.



Figure 1.1. The Cueva del Diablo, located in the southern end of the Nochixtlan Valley. It contained the funerary remains of Postclassic Mixtec nobles and was noted by the Dominican chronicler Francisco de Burgoa as being particularly sacred to women. It continues to be venerated by healers and sorcerers throughout the Nochixtlan Valley today. Photo by John Pohl.

These caves are notable for being the locations in which the ritualism of superstition continues to be practiced, largely with regard to healing, rainmaking, or seeking financial gain but also what can be called “assault sorcery,” the invocation of spirit entities to attack members of rival communities frequently during boundary disputes (figure 1.2). Archaeological reconnaissance, however, has shown that the locations of many Cuevas del Diablo can be correlated with significant locations appearing in the Mixtec codices as places of creation where the founders of dynasties, whose cults were otherwise maintained in community temples, had first magically appeared from the caves as well as stones, the earth, trees, rivers, the sky, or more ancient ruins at the beginning of time. In some cases these caves represent major Postclassic funerary shrines where the mummified remains of Postclassic nobles were deposited. Sacred caves described by Francisco de Burgoa, for example, include those of Chalcatongo and Jaltepec and have been identified

archaeologically (Byland and Pohl 1994; Pohl 2007).



Figure 1.2. Offerings of food for the spirit entity patron of the Cueva del Diablo at Mitla, Oaxaca. The lavish feast features chicken tacos, beans, rice, and pan dulce together with aguardiente. A chicken had been sacrificed, and its blood was spattered across the entire meal. Sheets of paper are inscribed with the names of deceased relatives who are petitioned during curing ceremonies. Other lists feature the names of members of neighboring communities with whom the petitioner is engaged in a boundary dispute and invokes the cave's spirit entity to inflict harm on his rivals.

Photo by John Pohl.

By advocating sources of ancestral power through creation legends associated with the surrounding natural environment, Mixtec elites succeeded in co-opting environmental cults that might date back to as early as the Preclassic and in so doing bolstered their claims of political control over territorial city-states and yet also provided a sense of common origin for the members of the broader marriage alliance system. Given the traditional sanctity of these locations in unifying the beliefs of peasants and elites, it is no coincidence that these sensitive boundary zones are frequently addressed as *tierra encantada* or “haunted land,” and the Cuevas del Diablo remain a significant place for curers to practice, especially in areas where federal and state-sponsored health services are unattainable (Pohl et al. 1997).

It is clear that we are dealing with indigenous forms of sorcery that have profound antiquity in Mesoamerica. Furthermore, there is an intentional and even purposeful use of ancient sites that indicate a perceived equivalency in many forms of ritual behavior as well as visual symbolism. In fact, the conditions under which present-day sorcery practices have evolved seem directly comparable to the transference of deity cults from temples to churches with their cults of Christian saints that has been documented more thoroughly throughout

Mesoamerica. John Chuchiak and Tim Knab are interested therefore more specifically in the mechanisms for the transformation in sorcery practices during the early colonial period.

Sorcery in Colonial Mesoamerica

Investigating the significance of Yucatec Maya magical and medicinal practices on the development of colonial sorcery and curing, Chuchiak proposes that during the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries the racial composition of colonial Yucatan had changed so dramatically that it naturally fostered reciprocal encounters between Spaniard, Maya, and Afro-Caribbean and rapidly cross-cut the categories of race and class that were otherwise enforced by the viceregal administration under systems of “Casta.” Consequently, colonial Yucatecan medicinal and magical practices came to play a major role in the development of what can be considered a *mestizaje* of sorcery and medicine in the mixed racial environment that existed in the colony. By examining several cases of Colonial *curanderos* as well as a detailed analysis of court documents pertaining to accused sorcerers and witches, Chuchiak examines the cross-cultural importance and impact of traditional Maya medicinal and magical practices.

One case that he features is fascinating in that it recognizes the effect of Afro-Caribbean influence manifested in the physical being of a mulatto named Joseph de Zavala, who became expert at practicing his profession as a *curandero* in the manner of the indigenous Maya. De Zavala told the witnesses that he conducted ceremonies in order to expel the cause of illnesses by chanting incantations to the Maya god of death, *Yum Cimil*, and the god of disease, *Ah Puch*, who he claimed gave origin to all diseases. He invoked them to come and receive the fermented drink *balché*, food, and sacred copal incense in order to cure the diseases by conducting ceremonies at the entrances to caves and cenotes, traditional Maya ritual sites. De Zavala therefore represents a fascinating counterpoint to observations of Afro-Caribbean and European-affected witchcraft recorded throughout highland Mexico but still practiced at sacred sites associated with pre-Hispanic ritualism. For Chuchiak, the increasing interracial contacts that occurred in colonial Yucatan therefore actually ensured the survival of traditional Maya concepts of sorcery and medicinal curing.

Timothy Knab is fascinated with when, how, and why Mesoamerican sorcerers began to incorporate European perspectives and practices into their indigenous belief system in the Mexican highlands. While studying Aztec religion with Thelma Sullivan, Knab became interested in what if any of the Nahua cosmos might be reconstructed from a study of witchcraft in the Sierra de Puebla. In so doing he found himself working in an area that was renowned for its twentieth-century “witch wars.” During the first half of the twentieth century an extraordinary factional generational conflict broke out among Eastern Nahua villages in the Sierra de Puebla, during which scores of people were killed under the most perplexing circumstances, in some cases in ways that were directly comparable to the death of Juan Gómez. What Knab discovered was exactly what many of us had suspected; that during periods of factional conflict, curers ordinarily responsible for the health of the community could become killers in the defense of the community (Knab 1995: 93). The

twenty-year-long conflict, Knab determined, was rooted in the changing fortunes of kinship groups as they grappled with the shift from traditional reciprocity to a cash economy following the introduction of coffee. The suppression by federal troops of firearm use in the region following the Revolution left the beleaguered with little choice but to carry on their disputes by more clandestine means. Knab recorded stories that were surprisingly similar to those written down centuries before, but he uncovered an extraordinarily ingenious kit of murderous instruments, from the administration of poisons; to gifts of fouled copal, the smoke from which could choke the practitioner who ignited it; to ambushes in which victims were viciously mutilated with weapons that mimicked the claws and teeth of predatory animals. No matter which technique was deployed, each was designed to mask the cause of death by appealing to explanations rooted in the traditional belief system rather than outright murder.

If witchcraft was as closely associated with factional conflict as Knab's conclusions imply, then his observations help explain the activities of the Eastern Nahuatl leaders of insurrectionist movements that unfolded within the first few decades following the Spanish Conquest. Martín Ocelotl (Martín Jaguar) was born in 1496 in Chinantla, a kingdom lying sixty kilometers southeast of the Tehuacan Valley. He was the son of a prominent merchant, but his mother was renowned as a powerful witch as well. After the conquest, Ocelotl engaged in lucrative business dealings, but he also gained a reputation for being able to transform himself into wild animals, to perform miracles, and to heal the sick. Holding secret feasts and rituals in the concealed rooms of his house as well as in remote caves, he preached that the Spaniards would be destroyed by the Tzitzimime, the monstrous creatures with whom he held personal council. He passed out gifts, claiming that they came from the patron god of the Eastern Nahuas, Camaxtli-Mixcoatl, and told his followers to plant as much food as possible in order to insure their survival during an ensuing drought, promising that they would be well looked after by his "sisters," the clouds that would bring life-giving rains.

In short, Ocelotl displayed all the characteristics of both sorcerers and witches as well as curers. Given the friendships he maintained with the indigenous nobility, he might have succeeded in fomenting rebellion if he had not been stopped in 1537 by the first bishop of Mexico, Juan de Zumárraga. Following Ocelotl's arrest, public humiliation, and subsequent disappearance, the call to rebellion was continued by Andrés Mixcoatl, who claimed at times to have been either Ocelotl's brother or even Ocelotl himself. Mixcoatl performed miracles of rainmaking for which he was richly rewarded in lands and property. He continued preaching, going so far as to denounce the Christian friars while holding his own communions, during which he distributed hallucinogenic mushrooms among his parishioners and called upon them to prepare an arsenal of weapons with which to kill Spaniards. Although Ocelotl and Mixcoatl were unsuccessful, their activities, together with those that succeeded them, point to institutional forms of belief in Nahuatl society by which witchcraft was perceived to be a logical proxy for warfare, particularly during factional disputes among the elite. They also suggest that the elite had formerly employed witchcraft as a particularly intimidating form of social power. Even in predicting the fate of children, a *tonalpouhqui* was serving as no less than an enforcer of the principals of class structure and social order (Pohl 1998: 196).

For highland Mexico, the subject of pre-Columbian sorcery has received comparatively little scholarly attention in comparison to the city-state cults dedicated to the pantheon of Nahua gods such as Tlaloc, Tezcatlipoca, Cihuacoatl, Tlazolteotl, Quetzalcoatl, and a score of others. Eduard Seler wrote a preliminary article on the subject that H. B. Nicholson subsequently used to formulate an addendum on magic for his classic work on Aztec religion (Seler 1991; Nicholson 1971: 439–442). Both scholars tended to treat the subject superficially, making no significant connection to the wider belief system. On the other hand, ethnographers studying sorcery in contemporary indigenous communities have tended to view it as the state cult gone underground by interpreting the various rituals they have observed as relics of the large-scale ceremonials described in Sahagún and Durán, among others. Research into the category of Nahua spirit entities called Tzitzimime, on the other hand, has changed our perspectives on the role of pre-Hispanic magic, sorcery, and witchcraft and its relationship to the Nahua deity pantheon and in so doing has redefined a system of belief that is directly antecedent to the practices that continue in indigenous communities today ([figure 1.3](#)) (Pohl 1998, 2007; Klein 2000; Coltman 2007). The Tzitzimime (sing. Tzitzimitl) represent a category of Erinyes-like spirit entities that personified indigenous belief in a relationship between disease, drought, war, sacrifice, death, and divine castigation (see Boone 1997 for general discussion). The codices portray images of the Tzitzimime as frightening creatures with claws for hands and feet, teeth and eyes at their joints, necklaces of human hands and hearts, and a fleshless skull.



Figure 1.3. Tzitzimime as it appears in Codex Magliabechiano. Illustration by John Pohl.

The Tzitzimime were most feared during climactic events, especially eclipses, when they were to emerge as stars from their nighttime world to attack the sun and bring an end to the present age of mankind. However, there was also a fertility aspect to their cult, for they were said to come from the clouds bringing rain, water, thunder, and lightning.

The Tzitzimime could be punishers or protectors and in so being they exemplified an indigenous axiom that what caused misfortune could also reverse it. They were considered to be the source of diseases, and yet they were invoked by curers. They could incite murder, drunkenness, and lasciviousness, but they were also the castigators of overindulgent sinners. They brought torrential storms that destroyed crops, and yet they were petitioned by the rain-bringers. In short, they represented a blend of the positive and negative qualities that composed both human social order as well as universal chaos. The Tzitzimime were particularly celebrated by Eastern Nahuatl nobles across the Plain of Puebla through a series of moveable feasts dedicated to calendrical spirit forces known as the Cihuateteo and the Macuiltonaleque. The Cihuateteo (sing. Cihuateotl) were believed to be the souls of women who had died in childbirth; therefore they were venerated by midwives in particular. Invoked

during feast days for which they were calendrically named, they were patronesses of the five trecenas assigned to the West, or Cihuatlampa, a nether world of witches. The Macuiltonaleque (sing. Macuiltonal), on the other hand, were the male consorts of the Cihuateteo and represented the patrons of the five trecenas assigned to the South, the netherworld of sorcerers. Diviners invoked the Macuiltonaleque through their fingers, calling them the pearly headed Tzitzimime, as they manipulated the codices and other sacred objects upon mesas and altars during curing rituals.

There is an iconographic theme of divisiveness and social violence as well as drunken intoxication in the cult of the Tzitzimime. Nahua polychrome ceramics presented during palace feasts feature the Tzitzimime theme of severed hands, human hearts, skulls, limb bones, symbols of sacrifice, and death and dismemberment (Lind 1994: 97–98; Pohl 1998, 2007). The symbolism reflects creation stories that recount factional strife between gods and other spirit forces in which the defeated are ultimately sacrificed and dismembered, a metaphor for the fragmentation of the greater social and political “body.” While the palace feast was the primary means toward alliance-building between political factions, Colonial sources describe them as being extremely violent as well, suggesting that displays of generosity, gift giving, and reciprocity did not always achieve the expected outcome of strengthening social bonds. Eastern Nahua politics in fact were plagued by factional disputes, including assassinations, which attended the succession to high office in kingdoms, for example. However, there is considerable evidence that it was not the intoxication itself that was ultimately blamed for homicides but rather by nagging social issues and the frequent disputes between close kinsmen over land claims and adulterous relationships that threatened to break up their otherwise highly profitable confederations.

Murderers in general were identified as Tzitzimime (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 10: 38). All societies view murder with abhorrence and exact punishment according to the conditions under which the crime was committed, but the evaluation of such conditions can be subject to widely differing social values. In traditional societies crimes are viewed as offenses against individuals, but they even more drastically affect the ability of extended families and their supporters to function together as social units. The goal of judgment is directed at restoring social harmony in ways that satisfy the kinship units involved rather than castigating a single offender. In Eastern Nahua society it seems that the conception of the sorcerer or witch, through its third-party participation, allows people to condemn the horrific nature of murder but facilitates the resolution of disputes between the affected kinship groups by blaming a substantial proportion of the act on an uncontrollable supernatural being manifested in the concept of the Tzitzimime. This is exemplified in the case of Juan Gómez and Sebastian López in Petepa, Guatemala, discussed above, where the resolution of factional conflict was resolved within the community by explaining the loss of a political leader to an act of the supernatural. In fact, the term Tzitzimil persists for spirit entities in highland Guatemala today (Tedlock 1992: 147–148).

Significantly, the Tzitzimime theme predates the imagery associated with the Nahua deity pantheon in the archaeological record. Stratigraphic excavations at Cholula have produced a developmental sequence for the iconography of the Late Postclassic international style that

clearly roots the origins of the theme in Classic Maya antecedents at a time when the Plain of Puebla was dominated by the Maya-affected Olmeca-Xicalanca of the Gulf Coast. Particularly notable is the symbolism associated with the Maya Maize God, which anticipates the Nahua Seven Flower–Xochipilli complex together with Akan and Mok Chih, the Maya *wahy* beings or spirit entities that are in many ways comparable to the Tzitzimime and associated with drunkenness and disease, which anticipated the cult of the Cihuateteo and Macuiltonaleque (see Coltman, this volume).

Finally, altars and ofrendas, some painted with frescoes that connect them directly to the divinatory rituals portrayed in the codices, have been excavated within Eastern Nahua palaces and represent the elite form of the mesas that are still invoked in diviners' household cults today. It is notable that while the names for gods like Tezcatlipoca and Cihuacoatl, the archetypal sorcerer and witch respectively of the Nahua pantheon, have all but disappeared from contemporary ritualism, Tzitzimime beliefs such as the mal aire Tzitzimicoehecatl or wind of envy and calendrical terms for spirit entities such as Macuilochoitl or Five Flower (one of the five Macuiltonaleque) and Seven Flower (the Maize God) have persisted. Archaeological, ethnohistorical, and ethnographic evidence consequently points to two separate but interconnected cults, one serving the city-state or alteptl as a symbol of political unity, and the other manifested among noble households during the Late Postclassic. The former was quickly replaced following the conquest. With changes from the names of gods to those of saints and the elimination of public displays of human sacrifice, the Catholic cult continues to define the principal values of community identity through the church that could be compared to the ancient temple. Household sorcery practices, on the other hand, are not the relics of the state cult concealed within the home but rather the continuation of rituals tied directly to a projection of personifications of the natural environment through spirit entities associated with sacred landscape features, kinship systems, and factional conflict, all of which have profound antiquity in Mesoamerica.

From Were-Jaguars to Nahuals: Sorcery's Origins

The origin of settled life in Mesoamerica dates to between 5000 and 3000 BC. It is equated with the development of agriculture and the establishment of permanent communities that defined the landscape around them as territorial by investing it with the supernatural qualities of spirit entities and deceased ancestors. Anthropologists tend to think of early tribes as egalitarian societies that restricted the accumulation of personal wealth by continually circulating food and materials through reciprocal exchange networks. But while food-sharing and gift-giving may have promoted trust and bound tribal members together, the ability to generate surpluses with domesticated plant cultivation would have created status differences. Testament to the critical part that feasting played in establishing Formative networks of social intercourse are found in the refined and highly imaginative forms of ceramics that were developed during the Formative period (Clark and Blake 1994; Clark and Gosser 1995). What is significant is how this mastery of display for the feast was paralleled by the development of figurine traditions that represent an artifactual antecedent in clay of precisely

the behavior exhibited with feasts and curing rituals conducted by the Nahua practitioners discussed by Sandstrom and Effrein Sandstrom (Marcus 1998). Considering that maize was first domesticated more as a ritual beverage comparable to “tesguino,” for example, the serving of intoxicating drinks in curing rituals together with specially prepared foods suggests a highly developed, fundamental, and broadly distributed form of ritual behavior throughout Mesoamerica as early as the second millennium BC that continues through the present day.

Once maize had become a staple, more intensive agricultural techniques were developed that led to the emergence of chiefly authorities from positions originally attributed to powerful healers and spiritual leaders. Chiefs coordinated their community’s undertakings from cooperative farming ventures to the redistribution of stored surpluses during feasts. If populations increased, competition for resources might follow and charismatic chiefs could coordinate military ventures against rival communities to seize goods and slaves or demand tribute. Having acquired coercive powers in this way, chiefs tended to institutionalize their authority within their most trusted followers, their own kin group, and thereby introduce a system of social stratification as chiefdom members determined their place in a social hierarchy by proximity through marriage to the chief’s hereditary family.

We know that by the Middle Formative period, chiefs or their more kingly descendants began to co-opt the religion, focusing on spirit entities belonging to a community at large, and to personalize creation stories as the history of their own kin group. This effectively made popular religion the same as elite religion, further binding commoners to the disposition of paramount authority. Consequently, scholars have long proposed that monumental portrait heads are testament to the charismatic powers of Olmec rulers while smaller works of statuary in serpentine and jade graphically portray the process of transformation by sorcerers from human beings into jaguars and serve as exclusive intercessors with the divine.

Peter Furst originally identified a jaguar-transformer theme in Olmec art by proposing that figurine images portraying human beings with feline attributes were “were-jaguars” and compared them to the belief systems of South American tribes that credited their shamans with the ability to transform themselves into animal familiars, of which the jaguar was most common ([figure 1.4](#)) (Furst 1968). Many of these practitioners are perceived as “dark shamans” and are known for their use of witchcraft and assault sorcery to cause physical harm and even death (Whitehead and Wright 2004). Among the Bribri of Costa Rica, Usékars are “shaman-priests” thought to be descended from jaguars who can control the weather and become attackers through the use of black magic or assault sorcery. In former times Usékars were more than just individual practitioners but represented a distinct social group whose methods of sorcery and witchcraft constituted a form of social control (Hoopes 2007: 468).



Figure 1.4. Basalt representation of an anthropomorphic jaguar from Tuxtla Chico, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas (AD 600–300). Illustration by John Pohl.

By comparison in Mesoamerica, Villa Rojas (1947) looked at kinship systems based on patrilineal clans and the methods of social control exerted through nahualism among the Tzeltal Maya. The community of Oxchuc has rancherías tied to specific caves sharing the same name. All chiefs and elders are thought to receive supernatural help from a nahual, a system described by Villa Rojas as serving as a method of social control by emphasizing traditional customs as well as sanctioning the moral code of the group (1947: 583). The nahual's role is absolutely pivotal in reinforcing social control:

Through the intermediation of these supernatural beings, the elders and chiefs are able to know the thoughts and actions of their subordinates and thus mete out punishment in the shape of illness or other misfortunes. Any person committing a sin, or who plans to violate the community's mores, is exposed to this sanction. Because of their ability to do damage at will, people with nahual are commonly known by the name of *agchomel*, meaning “maker of

disease.” (1947: 584)

Furst further proposed that the Olmec transformer was invoking a jaguar nahual. Nahualism is the widespread Mesoamerican belief that each human being has a companion animal with whom one shares a soul, and hence a common fate. Individuals credited with superior powers in society such as a shaman, priest, chief, or king could have several nahual forms, and possess the ability to transform their physical being into their spirit companion. Mesoamerican peoples compare the relationship between a person and his or her nahual as being like that between a ritual performer and a mask in that one hides behind the other. Most definitions of nahual seem to refer to something hidden or cloaked (Serna 1953). Some Olmec scholars have compared transformative figurines to a nahual’s ability to control the weather (Gutiérrez and Pye 2010). Nowhere is this ritual practice more clearly expressed than in indigenous communities like Zitlala and Acatlan, Guerrero, where ritual performers conceal their identities within jaguar masked-helmets and engage in boxing matches that are meant to draw blood and in so doing call forth the rains during Holy Week in anticipation of the onset of the wet season and the time for planting of subsistence crops (Zorich 2008).

While figurines, both in clay and precious stone, reflect Formative household-to-palace sorcery practices of rainmaking, curing, and factional conflict artifactually, the representation of the human body to symbolize an emergent elite ideology of territorial possession is explicit in the portrayal of Olmec spirit entities and ancestors in pictographic reliefs and paintings that were applied to natural features in the environment itself at Oxtotitlan and Juxtlahuaca, for example (Grove 1970). The relief carvings at Chalcatzinco, Morelos, portray an Olmec woman seated within an anthropomorphic cave from which maize plants sprout as rain falls from the sky overhead (Angulo 1987; Grove 1970). Testament to the coercive powers of the nahual of Olmec nobles, on the other hand, appears with the depiction of jaguars tearing human beings to pieces.

At one point scholars hotly debated whether Mesoamerican societies were being governed by “shamans” or “kings.” Advocacy for the former tended to reify simplistic models of sociopolitical organization extending back to Morgan and Bandelier while Mesoamerican art was still categorized as “primitive art” and taught together with the “tribal” arts of Oceania and Africa in art history departments across the United States as late as the last quarter of the twentieth century (Klein et al. 2002). Consequently, while Peter Furst had emphasized the role of the shaman as a were-jaguar, Michael Coe (1972) proposed that in a hierarchical Olmec society the paramount rulers themselves would be depicted as the transformers. Using comparisons to the Aztec gods Tezcatlipoca and Tepeyollotl, he advocated that Olmec rulers were presenting themselves as having a special relationship with the top predator in their world, a “king of beasts,” as it were, as a potent symbol of rulership. The jaguar is a predominant name or title for Maya as well as Mixtec kings, for example, the ranking members of the dynasties of Yaxchilan and Tilantongo being primary examples (Martin 2000: 116–137; Hermann Lejarazu 2013).

Linda Schele and David Friedel later reinvigorated the debate between Furst and Coe by proposing that Maya rulers were “Shaman-Kings” (Schele and Friedel 1990). Their criterion

was based upon their own shamanic interpretation of a decipherment for the Maya term “wahy” by Houston and Stuart (1989). David Stuart (2002: 411) subsequently responded:

In our original presentation of the decipherment . . . we outlined the evidence and related the vessel images to the animal-like “co-essences” described in many ethnographic sources, but we never once used the terms “shamans” or “shamanism” in describing its significance. . . . I have since suggested that the way figures on pottery are better understood as dream figures, related to the nightmarish “spooks,” witches, and animated diseases of Maya folklore. . . . These are very closely related to widespread and ancient beliefs surrounding “nagualism” in Mesoamerica.

The study of Mesoamerican civilization has reached a state of maturity that enables scholars to recognize it as being among the most sophisticated in the world. Groundbreaking exhibitions like “Isis and the Feathered Serpent” and “The Aztec Pantheon and the Art of Empire,” along with their accompanying publications, have paved the way for comparing Mesoamerican, Egyptian, and Graeco-Roman civilizations behaviorally as the fields of anthropology and art history move toward global cross-cultural studies of art and ritual in the twenty-first century (Fernández 2007; Pohl and Lyons 2010, 2016). The results have led scholars to question assumptions about not only the primacy in sophistication of ancient Mediterranean art but also the “rational” ideologies with which they are equated. Our attribution of norms in everything from aesthetics to ritual behavior is just as much, if not more, the projection of Early Modern thinking onto the past as it is a reflection of those ancient civilizations themselves. Despite being credited with the roots of empiricism and objectivity that we value in our own systems of belief and logic today, the ancient Egyptian, Middle Eastern, and Mediterranean worlds were nevertheless heavily engaged in mystical thinking and projected their beliefs onto images in many ways directly comparable to those of non-Western civilizations throughout other parts of the world (Ogden 2004, 2009). Comparisons with Southeast Asian religions in particular might be most informative in this regard.

Nowhere does the complex relationship between sorcery and state religion express itself institutionally more than in Myanmar-Burma with pantheistic cults rooted in a seemingly infinite number of environmental spirit entities or “nats,” but organized in such a way as to facilitate the incorporation of polytheistic deities from Buddhism, Hinduism, and even Christianity (Spiro 1967). Its roots lie in a remarkable case of politics and religious accommodation. Anawratha, the eleventh-century founder of the Pagan Empire, was faced with the encroaching Hindu Khmer, on the one hand, and disunity over the investment in the more ancient native belief systems of his constituents, on the other. His solution was first to formalize a cult of thirty-seven of the most prominent nats and then to construct the imposing Shwezigon Pagoda as a place of worship for them as the attendants to Buddha, whom he had declared to be the patron of a Burmese state. This synthetic solution was successful and remains a fundamental part of the Burmese identity today by acknowledging the significance

of nat cults as a very ancient and fundamental belief system associated with ancestor cults as well as the spiritual inhabitants of the natural environment at the village kinship-group level. It seems that what we are dealing with both in Southeast Asia and Mesoamerica are in fact two distinct forms of belief that have become intertwined through time but continue to exist in a state of parallelism and even capricious tension. At certain points they become syncretic, but in other periods they exist together as separate and distinct forms of belief, a revelation that may give us insights into the complexities of Classic Maya belief systems, for example.

The *Wahy* Beings of the Classic Maya

Juan Gómez and Sebastian López, the Petapa sorcerers whose supernatural mortal combat had fascinated Thomas Gage, were the descendants of ancient Poqomchi lords, a Quichean-related people. Both the mythology and history of the Quiché is recounted in a remarkable work of literature known as the Popol Vuh or Book of Counsel, composed around the beginning of the eighteenth century by Dominican friar Francisco Ximénez. The accounts extend from the time of creation through the thirteenth century when Maya kingdoms engaged in lucrative trading ventures with the Toltecs of highland Mexico and established confederacies of independent Postclassic city-states throughout the Guatemalan highlands.

One of the most remarkable narratives in the Popol Vuh is the primordial story of the Maya Hero Twins, Junahpú and Xbalanqué, and their rivalry with the lords of an underworld called Xibalba. The offspring of a hero who was defeated but nonetheless succeeded in magically impregnating the daughter of one of the nine lords, the twins engage in a series of epic adventures using feats of sorcery, trickery, and murder to destroy their rivals. Eventually they journey into the underworld of Xibalba itself to avenge their father and find themselves confronting beings of truly frightening appearance with titles like Scab Stripper, Demon of Pus, and Bone Scepter. The lords challenge the twins to a series of ballgame matches that include several deadly challenges. When the twins are incinerated and yet magically resurrect themselves, the lords are awed by their superior powers and beg the twins to show them their secret for transcending even death. The twins then decapitate each of the lords in turn—but of course revoke their promise to return them to life. Having reclaimed their family's honor in this way, the twins miraculously rise into the sky where they are transformed into the sun and moon to herald a new age of creation.

Recognizing similarities between the written descriptions of the mythic events in the Popol Vuh and specific scenes of what appear to be the Hero Twins on eighth-century Maya lowland polychrome vases, Michael Coe (1973) first proposed that these remarkable works of art in fact represented a Classic period interpretation of the Maya epic. His revelations have had a lasting impact on subsequent studies of underworld imagery in Maya art, not the least of which is the identification of an astounding array of creatures that are phantasmagoric, if not terrifying. Most are hybrid creatures that possess both animal and human attributes. K'ak' hix, or Fire Jaguar, for example, stalks around a vase on its hind legs while magically bursting into flames. These jaguar and incendiary attributes are shared with Junahpú and suggest a close connection between the sorcerer Hero Twin and the spirit entity

wahy. Others represent an entire menagerie of tropical forest animals including deer, snakes, monkeys, lizards, coatis, peccaries, and turkeys, to name a few. These beings, however, frequently interact with entities with more human qualities possessing fleshless heads, extruded eyeballs, twisted limbs, and bloated torsos reflective of conditions of disease and death, not unlike the descriptions of the lords of Xibalba, suggesting that Classic Maya lords were concerned with depicting more than simply nahualistic animal counterparts on the vases.

Following up on his proposals for the powers of Olmec chiefs and kings, Coe subsequently went on to examine the jaguar among other creatures with regard to an underworld theme in Classic Maya art manifested in polychrome drinking vessels (Coe 1973). When Stephen Houston and David Stuart identified a glyph for *wahy*, basically a Maya equivalent to the Nahuatl term “nahual,” on these same vessels, no one was surprised to see that it was composed of the sign Ahau, meaning lord, half concealed behind a jaguar pelt.

Houston and Stuart then adopted the term “co-essence” over “nahual” as a more generalized reference for a Mesoamerican transformational state of being, following a recommendation by John Monaghan after his own research into the qualities of supernatural beings among the Mixtec. Examining the complexities of the supernatural universe portrayed on Maya vases, David Stuart presents a seminal paper in which he proposes that the categories of *wahy* beings are far more complex than anyone previously had considered. For example, in making his original decipherment of the *wahy* glyph using Maya-language dictionaries, Stuart had every reason to believe that the term was more or less a Maya equivalent to the Nahuatl term “nahual” or the culturally more neutral “co-essence” because of the apparent relationship of the ancient depictions to historical and modern concepts of the companion animal spirit possessed by individuals as an aspect of the human soul. On closer inspection, however, Classic Maya *wahy* beings are not associated with specific individuals but rather with entire lineages and place glyphs. The noble families of Calakmul are associated with giant deer-snakes, for example, while the lords of Tikal are associated with jaguars and the Palenque lineage with monstrous centipedes. Stuart compares these names to the terms for diseases appearing in the colonial manuscript called the *Ritual of the Bacabs* that appear as personified entities with both hybrid animal and anthropomorphic designations. He proposes that it is the anthropomorphic beings in particular that appear to be the most capable of inflicting serious harm. They appear with the attributes of death and sickness comparable to the lords of the underworld in the Popol Vuh.

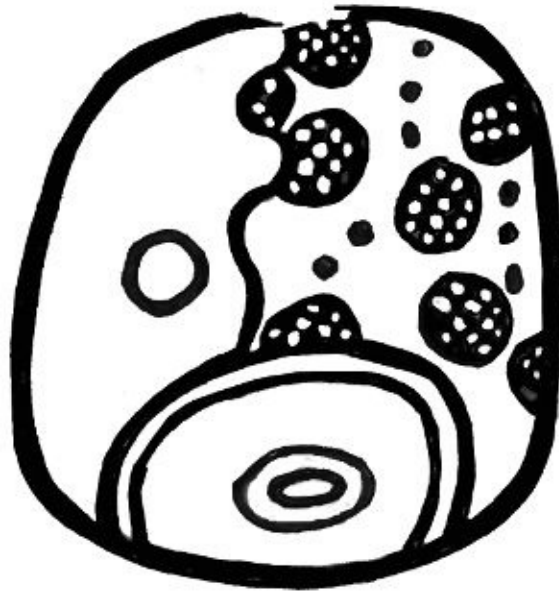


Figure 1.5. The *wahy* hieroglyph in a caption for a “Water Jaguar” on Kerr 771. Drawing by David Stuart.

One of the most multifaceted of the *wahy* beings is the ominous Akan.

Originally attributed to Förstemann’s God A category of death deities, several scholars subsequently succeeded in defining this Akan *wahy* being’s attributes and behavior more specifically in terms of a Classic Maya belief system (Taube 1992: 1–17; Grube and Nahm 1994; Grube: 2004). Akan is less an individual and more of a complex that embodied themes of disease, drunkenness, self-sacrifice, and castigation, with the earliest manifestation appearing in the murals of Late Preclassic San Bartolo (Taube 2011: 50–57). God Zero, a closely related being, shares so many overlapping traits with the Akan beings that it is almost certain he can be counted as a variant within this complex (see Coltman, this volume). As such, God Zero may represent the beginning and end of time reckoning, suggesting that the Maya thought of Akan and its avatars as an infinite number of eternal beings.

One Akan avatar, Mok Chih, translates as “Knot Mouth,” one of his attributes being a bow tie affixed over his jaw, but the term also represents a homonym for “pulque sickness” that emphasizes the relationship between Akan and pulque, the fermented beverage made from the maguey plant. In one scene Mok Chih vomits while holding an enema syringe, a scene clearly evocative of the unrestricted alcohol consumption of both maguey-based pulque as well as *chih*, maize fermented with honey, and the nauseous aftereffects that characterized palace drinking bouts. In many Mayan languages Akan is a term for “wasp,” and Mok Chih in fact appears with a pulque vessel surrounded by wasps and bees among other insects (Stone and Zender 2011: 39). Southern Mesoamerican creation stories describe wasps and other noxious insects as representative of both diseases and their treatment to alleviate symptoms with insect toxins (Grube 2004: 69, 70; Pohl 2007).

The appearance of the closely related God Zero on ballcourt markers at La Esperanza and Copan testifies to his importance with regard to sports as well as the high-stakes wagering. The connection between gambling and divination as acts of sorcery are particularly significant in this regard (Kowalski 1989; Fash and Kowalski 1991; Pohl et al. 1997). A closely related competition also associated with ballcourts was ritual combats such as boxing.

Jatz'on Akan "Striking Akan" appears on Maya vases wielding a stone as a boxer and is named by a logographic sign of a hand grasping a stone (Zender 2004; Taube and Zender 2009: 202–203) (figure 1.6b). The symbolism is no doubt metaphorically related to acts of both ritual and supernatural castigation in Mesoamerica.

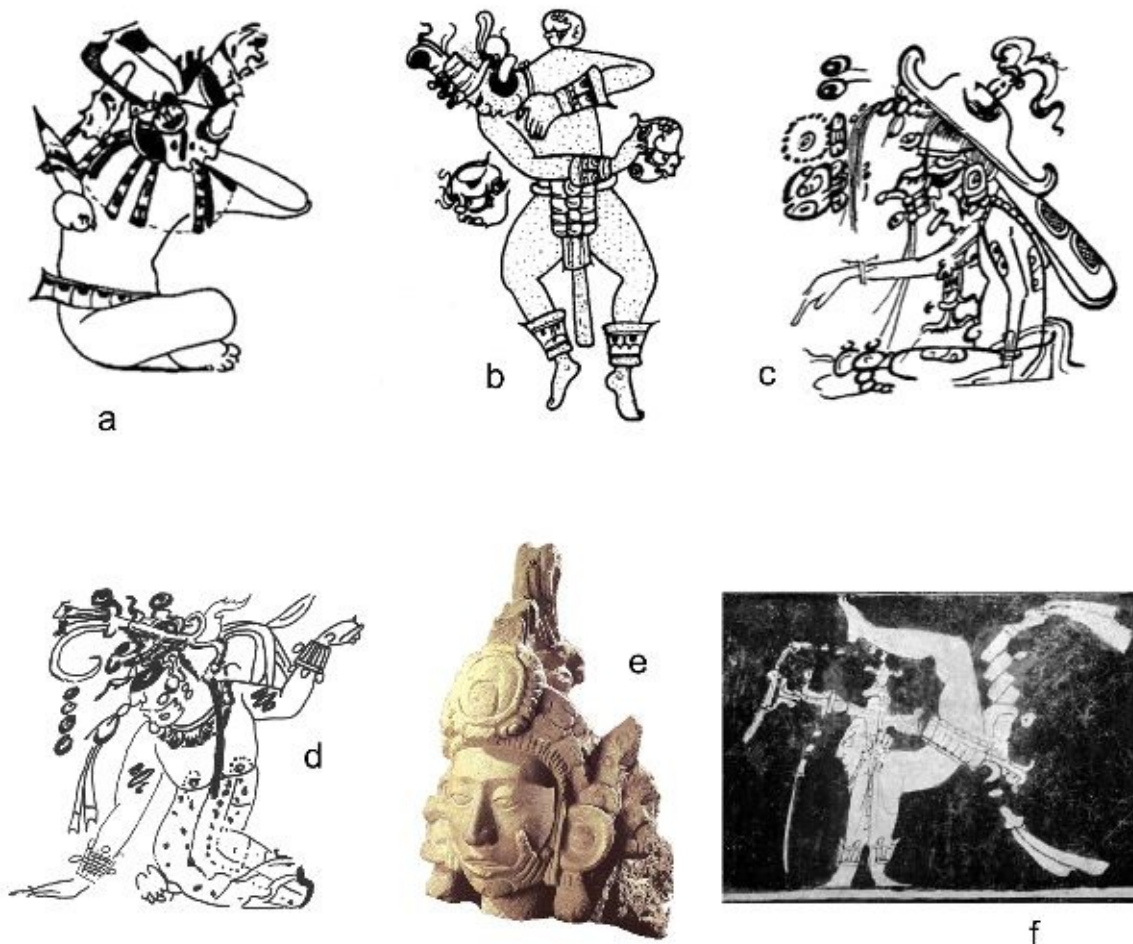


Figure 1.6. Representations of Akan. (a) Self-Decapitating Akan, vase from Altar de Sacrificios. (b) Stone-Throwing Akan, Kerr 791. (c) Mok Chih Akan, Kerr 2286. (d) Female Akan, Kerr 2286. (e) Copan sculpture of God Zero as Akan, Cleveland Museum of Art. (f) Maize God as acrobat, Kerr 4386. All other illustrations by John Pohl.

Akan engages in feats of magic that typify acts of sorcery among American Indian peoples in general. As the “Self-Decapitator,” he is capable of cutting off his own head with an axe, an act so impossible as to inspire the surreal equated with that unique sense of Indian “humor” that derives from juxtaposing the profoundly reverent with the outrageously absurd and characterizes comparable feats by the Maize God on Maya vases as well as the Hero Twins in the Popol Vuh (Grube 2004: 64) (figure 1.6a). Such behavior can still be observed in the ritual humor performed by costumed performers in Tzeltal and Tzotzil communities and has its roots in the performances of clowns and buffoons depicted in Classic Maya art as well (Taube 1989).

In many ways, Stuart’s proposals are comparable to what Sandstrom and Effrein Sandstrom advocate for the spirit entities that concern the contemporary Nahuas of the Sierra de Puebla and constitutes the basis for their advocacy of a pantheistic perspective in their

understanding of Mesoamerican religion. Kings and other high-ranking elites were embodiments of social, political, and religious order; yet they were also morally ambiguous and possessed a complex notion of power that they called *ch'ab ak'ab*, a combination of two important and complementary operating principles of “generation” and “darkness.” For the Classic Maya these were the two sides of power and ceremonial “magic,” one positive and creative by nature (*ch'ab*) and the other more esoteric and negative.

Consequently, Stuart believes that the *wahy* represent an inherently ambiguous category of being that bridges extremes. He proposes that the traditional terminology and labels for defining supernatural entities, the scholarly tendency to want to organize supernatural forms into neat categories of iconography or behavior and even construct pantheons, is simply too restrictive. Rather, Classic Maya religion is better characterized as a continuum of overlapping types that resist any rigid typology. The very fact that Maya themselves use the term *juun pik chan(al) k'uh kab(al) k'uh*, meaning “the eight thousand heavenly gods and earthly gods,” in hieroglyphic texts is indicative; the gods are simply infinite in number (Stuart 2017: 257).

Wahy beings should be viewed therefore as being far more than “nahuals” or “co-essences” in the traditional sense, but rather powerful beings in and of themselves that are rooted in the most primal conceptions of land and lineage. Furthermore, the *wahy* clearly lies at the root of indigenous concepts of social, political, and ritual power, and it seems likely that the possession of a powerful, possibly even institutionalized position associated with a *wahy* being would be a prerequisite for assumption to political office. We have seen that this is true for the Postclassic Mixtec where stand-ins and stakeholder positions that support systems of checks and balances in the royal administrations are filled by close relatives of the kings and queens serving as bundle priests and sacrificer-necromancers. They appear in the Mixtec codices, however, with all the attributes of underworld deities and hybrid creatures such as the Yahui or fire serpent. It is these hybrid creatures that fascinate Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos and Jesper Nielsen, and their respective examinations of centipedes and serpents as *wahy* beings reveal much in terms of the complexity in thought and detail in the belief systems surrounding these spirit entities.

Like their male counterparts, female versions of Akan appear in Classic Maya art as well wearing the diagnostic band across the eyes and the hand across the mouth (figure 1.6d) (Grube 2004: 70). They are the antithesis of the courtly Maya woman with their breasts exposed and disheveled hair, and as such they represent primeval figures who join the Hero Twins in calling forth the Maize God, the epitome of the divine Maya king, from a watery underworld. These female Akan characters allude to the role played by royal women as sorceresses like Lady Xoc and Lady Ik Skull, graphically depicted in the carved lintels at Yaxchilan (Tate 1992: 88–89). The fact that some of the serpents that they conjure depict men in warrior dress emerging from their jaws alludes to a role palace women may have played with regard to acts of psychic violence the royal court was expected to practice on their political rivals while ranking lords engaged in more remote cave-based sorcery rituals before they took to the battlefields to engage the enemy directly. Chinchilla Mazariegos, however, demonstrates that the serpents portrayed on the lintels signify an even broader

diversity of symbolic actions on the part of royal Maya women.

Yaxchilan Lintel 13 portrays Lady Chahk Skull together with Lord Bird Jaguar. A serpent passes around her body, and its massive head reemerges, cradled by her husband. The text describes the action as being the birth of a royal heir named Itzamnaaj Balam III. An associated scene on Lintel 14 shows Lady Chahk Skull conjuring the serpent itself, which is titled Chanal/Chahkbay/Kan, a name more specifically associated with a centipede evidenced by the serpent's segmented body and multiple appendages. Chinchilla Mazariegos therefore proposes that the act of giving birth is thus equated with the noble woman's power to conjure this creature through sorcery. After examining further evidence for his proposal iconographically with comparable scenes in other Classic Maya artworks, he then examines sixteenth-century sources where serpents and centipedes are even more clearly associated with feminine sexuality and in so doing proposes that a broad complex of beliefs existed that related these creatures to women's genitalia throughout Mesoamerica in general. Associated with the negative connotations of filth and pollution on the one hand, they are equally associated with opposing positive conceptions of power and mystery of feminine sexuality and portrayed as the channels through which rulers and deities were born into their divinity. Chinchilla Mazariegos further proposes a provocative analysis of the sarcophagus lid from the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque in which he reasons that the famous image of Pakal reclining on his back represents the king as the deified incarnation of the Maize God, while the mask with fleshless jaw from which he emerges is the great centipede itself, the creature of cosmic birth with which the female Akans were so closely associated together with the Hero Twins.

Just as significant a *wahy* being as the centipede-serpent is the deer snake. As we have already seen, it was the emblem of the Calakmul dynasty, the Campeche capital that had been responsible for subjugating the rival titan city-state of Tikal during the sixth century AD. Jesper Nielsen is fascinated by the creature not only because of its source of potency for Classic Maya rulers but the fact that it was known to have had such a broad distribution throughout the Western Hemisphere that it may in fact represent a spirit entity that extended back to the first Paleo-Indian migrations, especially considering the equally significant role that horned serpents play in elite status and ritualism of Asian civilizations as well.

Nielsen's broad comparative perspective produces a review of the religious stories and beliefs centered on horned serpents that demonstrates a remarkable consistency in the meanings associated with this supernatural entity. Clearly, possessing both benevolent as well as malevolent aspects, horned and antlered serpents were closely related to water, rain, wind, and violent meteorological and geological phenomena as well as disease and curing. For example, as one of the feared *wahy* beings of the Classic Maya, the *Chijchan* or Deer Snake continues to be associated in contemporary Maya legends with the bringer of benevolent rains over the earth or destructive landslides, floods, and hurricanes (Coltman 2015: 24–25).

Nielsen makes a significant point in that there appear to be a number of distinct serpent beings in Mesoamerican beliefs, including the feathered or plumed serpent, a war serpent, a maize serpent, a water serpent, and a centipede-serpent, but that these supernatural entities are not subject to strict and formal distinctions but rather possess overlapping features and

attributes. Thus, horned serpents can appear with feathers or wings or both, which may point to some shared features with Quetzalcoatl; yet Quetzalcoatl is never shown with horns or antlers. Like Chinchilla Mazariegos, Nielsen uses ethnohistorical and ethnographic sources to amplify his arguments; what readily becomes apparent in the ethnohistorical and ethnographic literature largely derived from highland Mexico is that the “deer-serpent” (or *mazacoatl*, as it was known in Nahuatl), became associated with the Devil of the Christian tradition so soon after the conquest. Nielsen proposes that the characteristics of the “deer-serpent” or the horned serpent were shared with some of the most common representations of the Devil in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe, both in appearance and in many of its abilities, such as causing violent weather, geological disruptions, and being associated with pagan sorcery and witchcraft.

Sorcery in the Postclassic Mesoamerican World

Teotihuacan and Monte Albán had emerged to dominate the Mexican highlands between AD 100 and 600, the former in particular having influenced the development of Late Classic lowland Maya civilization. By AD 650–850, a number of political centers emerged in the Morelos, Puebla, and Veracruz region, including Monte Albán, Xochicalco, Cacaxtla, and El Tajin. Scholarly investigations into sorcery in the art of these ceremonial centers have been limited, but depictions of certain spirit entities like the stellar anthropomorphic creatures from Cacaxtla are notable and represent prototypical forms of the Late Postclassic Tzitzimime on the Plain of Puebla (Pohl 1999b: 139) ([figure 1.7](#)).



Figure 1.7. Mural depicting a blue anthropomorphic star being with scorpion tail and rain god eye ornament, Cacaxtla, Tlaxcala. Illustration by John Pohl.

With the collapse of the Classic lowland Maya, two new political centers emerged to dominate the Mexican highlands and the Yucatan peninsula respectively. Tula, the Tollan of Aztec legend, had been somewhat of a puzzle to archaeologists for over a century and a half because its development in such an isolated area of the northern Basin of Mexico seems so incongruous with the florescence of so many cities around Lake Texcoco itself in the Classic and Late Postclassic. We now know that the Toltecs had a special interest in both western Mexico and the desert lands of the so-called Chichimec peoples to the north. Building on an Epiclassic Puuc foundation on the other hand, Chichen Itza positioned itself to control much of the Atlantic coastal trade from Tabasco to lower Central America in a directly comparable way.

Reevaluation of the Toltec power base as being mercantile and messianic rather than imperial has led a number of scholars to examine Tula's relationship with remote sites like La Quemada in the state of Zacatecas and Pueblo Bonito in New Mexico (Pohl 2016). As Ancestral Pueblo peoples engaged with the Toltecs, it is clear that the leaders responsible for

directing the efforts for the acquisition and processing of materials like turquoise began to affect certain forms of Toltec political behavior, leading to an intensification of social stratification (Weigand 1992). Artifacts of precious turquoise, shell, copper, and cacao associated with burials at Pueblo Bonito, for example, are indicative of individuals who were clearly attributed paramount rank, and many religious stories related by contemporary Pueblo peoples through their oral traditions suggest that they possessed formidable powers of control over their people, subverting traditional systems of exchange that led to indebtedness and even enslavement through the actions of sorcerer leaders (Lekson 2008: 200–201; Pohl 2016).

Iconographic studies of Tula itself have tended to overlook the sorcery theme in favor of searching for iconographic evidence for the later Aztec imperial deity pantheon such as Quetzalcoatl, Tezcatlipoca, Mixcoatl, and Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli. Nevertheless, indigenous histories attribute the Toltec city-state's collapse to violent internal factionalism among its administrators, the priest Quetzalcoatl, and the sorcerers Tezcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli in myth. Significantly, the Ancestral Pueblo center of Chaco Canyon was abandoned around the same time, and contemporary religious stories attribute its demise to comparable forms of behavior (Lekson 2008: 200–201).

During the Middle Postclassic, a representational art style was widely adopted throughout central and southern Mexico called the Nahua-Mixteca, Mixteca-Puebla, or International horizon style (see Pohl 2007 for discussion). It was composed of highly conventionalized symbols characterized by an almost geometric precision in delineation. Colors were vivid, and imagery shared many of the attributes of contemporary cartoons, the exaggerated emphasis on the head and hands in particular being reminiscent in overall design to characters made famous by contemporary film animation studios like the Walt Disney Company. In full figurative form the style was primarily employed to convey historical or ritual narrative, but certain symbols could also be reduced to simple icons that symbolized either an idea or a spoken word. For example, the depiction of repetitive designs of such common motifs as birds, butterflies, and jewels probably invoke the spirits of ancestors. By AD 1300, the Late Postclassic International style had supplanted earlier pictographic and phonetically based scripts employed by the Classic period civilizations of La Mojarra, Teotihuacan, Cacaxtla, Xochicalco, Nuiñe, Monte Alban, and to some extent even the Maya. There is considerable evidence that the old writing systems were intentionally rejected and that the new system was adapted from figurative symbolism used to ornament elite artwork in precious metals, stones, wood, ceramics, and textiles. Far from representing any decline in literacy, therefore, the employment of this new abstract representational horizon style became an ingenious response to the redistribution of power among Postclassic confederations of city-states and great houses whose leaders communicated in as many as twelve different languages (Pohl 1994).

Stratigraphic excavations carried out since the 1950s confirm a Terminal Classic–Early Postclassic origin for the Late Postclassic International style in the polychrome ceramic tradition at Cholula, its appearance following the erosion of Teotihuacan's influence in the central Puebla region by AD 750 (Noguera 1954; Lind 1994). Although varieties of painted or

burnished paste ceramics date to as early as the Formative in central and western Mexico, during the Late Classic the Olmeca-Xicalanca peoples of the Gulf Coast were producing variants of Maya polychrome, indicating a more direct technological and stylistic influence from the culture historically associated with Cholula prior to the Tolteca-Chichimeca intrusion (Lind 1994: 98).

An early Cholula Aquiahuac-phase plate dating to between AD 950 and 1150 depicts an anthropomorphic sorcerer's hand marked with an odd image that looks similar to the Maya Maize God, for example (figure 1.8). In fact, the overall composition of the face in profile featured in the center of the plate, with the radiating bands of color surrounding it, invokes at least some representations of the Classic Maize God depicted on plates originating in the central Peten a century and a half earlier. As we have already discussed, the human hand attribute over the face is associated with sorcery. Therefore, Cholula plates of this kind may represent a conflation of attributes between the spirit entities closely associated in Classic Maya art that we have discussed above.



Figure 1.8. Aquiahuac-phase plate depicting possible Maya nominal head glyph for the Maize God, formed as a human hand associated with the sorcery theme, Cholula, Puebla. (Photo by Jeff Evans, Courtesy Princeton University Art Museum y1967-147. Gift of Thomas C. Roberts, Class of 1921, Mrs. Roberts, and Gillett G. Griffin.)

By the Tecama phase between AD 1150 and 1350, we see a standardization of the sorcery theme in Cholula ceramics. A predominant twelfth-century Cholula image appears on polychrome plates and cajetes in much the same way as earlier portraits of the Maize God. The face represents a male personage with a bulbous forehead and a mohawk-style hair crest. His face resembles a spider monkey with ribbon-like designs curving up over the lips and around the eyes. An elaborate song scroll emerges from the deity's mouth. In many cases the being is frequently painted entirely black and/or sports paint around the mouth and eye that is diagnostic of both the Maya God M or the Nahua god Ixtlilton (Spranz 1973: 339; Pohl 2003c: 202, 322–323). Other details link these two conceptions, including clown-like attributes with distended lips, oddly shaped heads, and either phallic or pug-shaped noses (see Taube 1989 for discussion of clowns). A star symbolized as an eye appearing overhead accompanies both gods as well. The face painting is frequently marked or labeled as ash in codices, and the two gods clearly share attributes with the “ash-mouths,” a common name for the clowns of the Zuni, Hopi, and Rio Grande Pueblo peoples (Wright 1994).

These characteristics directly anticipate the iconography of members of the Late Postclassic Centeotl-Xochipilli complex who appear in the codices as musicians, singers, dancers, and jugglers (Seler 1990–1998 II: 242–243). The caricaturish, monkey-like appearance is suggestive of a jester or clown (Nicholson 1971: 417–418; Spranz 1973: 335–352). While Centeotl and Xochipilli are both associated with a maize cult, in other cases the musician-jester can be identified as the Nahua god Ixtlilton, “Little Black Face,” as the patron of scribes, diviners, healers, and octli drinkers, characteristics that Ixtlilton also shares with the Macuiltonaleque. Therefore, we shouldn't be too surprised to see the Cholula deity's attributes, such as the white hand over the mouth and the yellow band across the face, anticipating the iconography of the Macuiltonaleque as well ([figure 1.9](#)). As with Centeotl-Xochipilli, the Cholula deity's relationship to both Ixtlilton and the Macuiltonaleque has a Classic Maya antecedent in a patron god of alcoholic drink known as Akan (Grube 2004; Coltman, this volume). Buffoonish with a bloated face and body, Mok Chih, “Knot Mouth,” was named after an element of ritual dress with which he is associated (Grube 2004: 67). Four Macuiltonaleque appearing in Codex Vaticanus B wear knots over their mouths that substitute for the human hand in the same configuration as the Maya being. We have already seen that Mok Chih was regarded as a god of sickness and appears on Maya vases cradling an octli olla surrounded by insects, perhaps a Classic Maya allusion to a story that anticipates that of the Macuiltonaleque, the Cihuatateo, and the creation of disease portrayed in Codex Borgia. The roots of the Late Postclassic International style therefore may lie in a form of feasting behavior originally associated with a Classic Maya sorcery theme.



Figure 1.9. Tecama-phase plate depicting a singing clown with attributes that anticipate the Late Postclassic Macuiltonaleque theme, including the yellow face band and the hand covering the mouth, Cholula, Puebla.
Illustration by John Pohl.

The fact that the musician-jester aspect of the emergent Centeotl-Xochipilli and Macuiltonaleque-Cihuateteo complexes was adopted as a fundamental symbol of the twelfth-century feast at Cholula should come as no surprise considering how fundamental this performer's behavior was to American Indian ritualism in general. The facial ornamentation around the mouth and eye represent the use of soot, ash, and clay for their facial decoration, the antithesis of proper face paint used by deity impersonators. Clowns have been enigmatic in ritual studies. From the Maya Blackman and Monkey impersonators of highland Chiapas discussed by David Stuart in this volume to the Zuni Newekwe, their behavior is regarded as the antithesis of a culture's most esteemed values, with their outrageous parodies combined with public displays of gluttony, alcoholic overindulgence, sexual intercourse, exposure of social transgressions among community members, and the consumption of garbage or excrement, among other forms of foul conduct. Consequently, art historians and anthropologists have tended to treat the subject as superficial, avoid it entirely, or bury it in complex interpretive frameworks. The fact is that clowning is integrally woven into the

fabric of dance and performance as the essential part of American Indian ritual humor that juxtaposes the profoundly reverent with the outrageously absurd, thereby creating an atmosphere of the unworldly, even surreal, that characterizes feasts, dances, and ritual performances of the most sacred nature, while the clowns themselves may rank among the most highly regarded community leaders (Blaffer 1972; Bricker 1973; Taube 1989).

It is only after AD 1350 during the Late Postclassic *Martír* phase that we first see the appearance of Nahua-Mixteca style together with a complete symbol set, at which time it is deployed by over fifteen different language groups extending throughout southern Mexico (Lind 1994: 81). For the first time, we see representations of people, places, and things in much the same way as they appear in the codices of the Borgia group of divinatory codices and the Mixtec group of historical codices. Many represent deities adopted from Early Postclassic prototypes originating at Tula and Chichen Itza, including representations of Mixcoatl, Quetzalcoatl, Tonatiuh, and Tezcatlipoca, clearly a response in ritualism to the intrusion into Cholula and across the Plain of Puebla by Tolteca-Chichimeca populations after the fall of Tula. Nevertheless, the principal theme continues to be one of sorcery. The ornamental bands of human skulls, hands, hearts, and shields that appear on vases and frescos were particularly diagnostic of the *Tzitzimime*, the supernatural patrons of the court diviners who served as intermediaries with the souls of the dead (Lind 1994: 92–97; Pohl 1998, 2007). However, rather than representing members of a diety pantheon per se, they appear as distinct representations of the *Tzitzimime* as the *Cihuateteo* and their consorts the *Macuiltonaleque*. Plainly stated, part of the roots of the Late Postclassic International style lie in a form of feasting behavior originally associated with a Classic Maya sorcery theme.

Case Studies in the Postclassic Iconographic Interpretation of Sorcery

John Pohl and Jeremy Coltman present two case studies in the decipherment of the ritualism associated with sorcery in Late Postclassic southern Mexico. Having written extensively on the contextual use of the divinatory codices by reconstructing the communicative environments in which they were displayed, John Pohl examines a significant manifestation of sorcery in the Late Postclassic in *Codex Fonds Mexicains 20*. It is not actually a codex but rather a single sheet of animal hide that was first described by Lorenzo Boturini in Mexico and then acquired by Joseph Aubin, who took it to France in the mid-nineteenth century. From Aubin, the manuscript passed to Eugene Goupil, who possessed it until his death, after which his wife gave it to the National Library of France in Paris.

Long recognized as a masterpiece of Late Postclassic Nahua-Mixteca style, it has been largely ignored by manuscript specialists due to its poor state of preservation and its somewhat enigmatic content. However, Pohl has created an artistic reconstruction of the imagery by examining both the original and a century-old watercolor executed by Wilhelm von den Steinen that details much of the iconography of the place signs together with the human and animal figures, thereby enabling him to present a more insightful interpretation of the imagery by comparing it to cognate scenes in both the codices of the Borgia Group and the Mixtec Group.

For some scholars, the two groups of codices represent a basic division in intellectual thought between the construction of retrospective narratives on the one hand and divinatory almanacs on the other. In other words, the Mixtec Group manuscripts represent history books in that they describe events that took place in the past and will never recur again. The Borgia Group manuscripts are science books, on the other hand, and prescribe events that may take place at some time in the future. Pohl demonstrates that this perspective results from the projection of European divisions in intellectualism onto indigenous ideology and offers an alternative interpretation based upon his years of archaeological research with the actual Mixtec landscapes portrayed in the codices as well as the contemporary descendants of the people who painted them and upon his analysis of associated ritual objects and architectural settings within which the Borgia Group were actually deployed. For Pohl, the two manuscript groups therefore represent differences in ritual behavior reflective of the Nahuas of the Plain of Puebla on the one hand and the Mixtecs of the Mixteca Alta on the other. *Fonds Mexicains 20* presents something of a conundrum, therefore, in that the place signs identify distinctly Mixtec locations while the spirit entities ascribed to these place signs represent the Macuiltonaleque and the Cihuateteo associated with Nahua sorcery of the Plain of Puebla. Pohl proposes that it was produced in an intermediate area, possibly the Coixtlahuaca Valley or the adjacent Tehuacan Valley, where a number of different ethnic groups, including the Chocho-Popoloca, Mazatec, Cuicatec, and Chinantec peoples, combined elements of ritualism derived from both the Mixtec and Nahua ritual systems with which they were closely associated (Pohl 2014).

While codex scholars tend to view the pre-Columbian codices as books and the Nahua-Mixteca style as “writing,” Pohl points out that there is a lot more to the system from a performative perspective than the indigenous artists who composed the works are given credit for. Such works were in fact produced as more than just documents but served as portable altars for use in healing and divinatory rituals both within sacred architectural spaces as well as adjacent natural features such as nearby mountains. Furthermore, the images are pictographic because this is the means by which the diviner invokes the spiritual power of the representation of the actual thing itself rather than the more abstract invocation by means of a text that mimics verbal recitation. The images are therefore believed to be directly endowed with spiritual power, and by combining them and then invoking them orally through prayer, the sorcerer calls upon the spirit entities portrayed on the hide sheet and invites them to participate in the curing and divinatory rituals directly. Pohl calls this “image sorcery” and proposes that this form of behavior is what directly links the practices relating to the codices, censers, and serving vessels from the Late Postclassic Nahua-Mixteca style back to their antecedents in Late Classic Maya polychrome ceramics and therefore divinatory feasting behavior rather than anything relating to the extensive written texts associated with the erection of carved public monuments.

Although the Eastern Nahuas of today no longer create hide sheets like *Fonds Mexicains 20*, they do practice a comparable form of image sorcery through the creation of cut paper silhouettes that are displayed on altars and used to invoke the presence of spirit entities in directly comparable ways. Sandstrom and Effrein Sandstrom have discovered that some even possess the names of their pre-Columbian antecedents, including Seven Flower, the

caldendrical name for the Nahua Xochipilli, the Maize God avatar and patron of palace feasting and royal marriages, as well as Macuilxochitl, the Macuiltonal of the West, according to Fonds Mexicains 20, who was associated with gaming and gambling. In fact, it appears that the layout of the 260-day calendar on Fonds Mexicains 20, with its sequence of day names for the five Macuiltonaleque together with the red circle spacers, which must have been used to direct the sorcerer along a specific pathway between the place signs and the spirit entities, is directly comparable to a kind of board game known as patolli with which Macuilxochitl was specifically associated.

Archaeological evidence for patolli extends back to the Formative period (Voorhies 2012). The fact that pictographic designs for boards are found inscribed into elements of ritual architecture as well as sacred landscape features are a clear indication that patolli was more than an amusing pastime and obviously had sacred connotations as well. Patolli was both a competitive race and war game in which players competed with one another to move their pieces around a game board that was constructed of either hide or woven grass on which was painted four quadrants surrounding a center, not unlike the layout of Fonds Mexicains 20. Equal to if not surpassing the rubber ballgame as a form of high-stakes gambling, both commoner and noble players were known to wager everything from their jewelry to clothing, even their homes, going so far as to sell themselves into slavery if need be. After throwing a game piece to calculate the number of positions that can be advanced, each gambler attempts to complete an entire circuit around the board, thereby causing losing opponents to forfeit their wagers. Beans, maize kernels, carved bones, and pieces of jade among other markers were used.

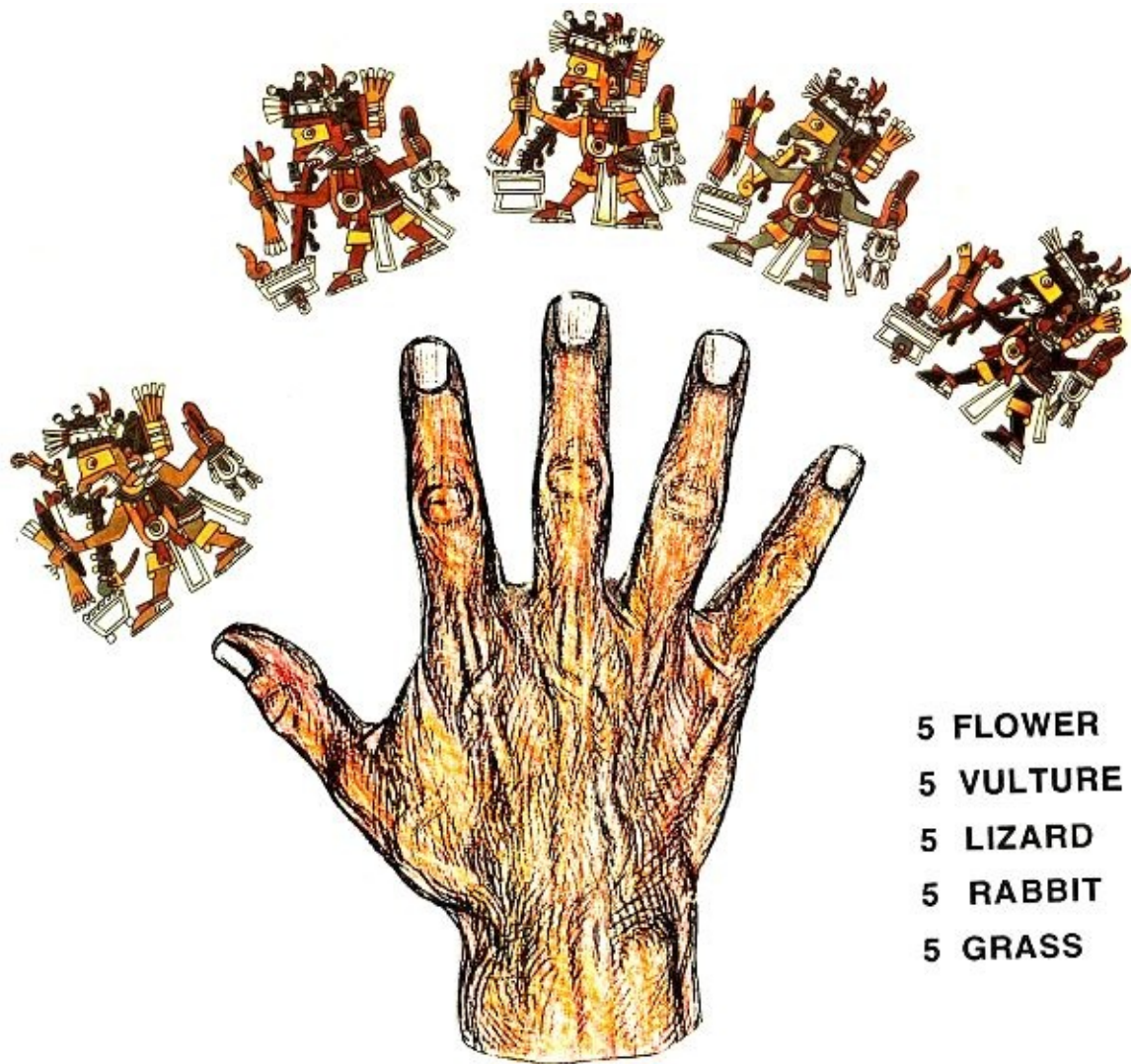


Figure 1.10. Diagram illustrating a Nahua sorcerer's hand by which the fingers are addressed as the five Macuiltonaleque. Illustration by John Pohl.

The association between divinatory practices and gaming extends back millenia in many parts of the world, particularly among Asian civilizations, so it would be surprising if comparable behavior wasn't pervasive in the Western Hemisphere as well. There are a number of possible ways that one might use the Fonds Mexicains 20 as a gaming board; we just don't know exactly how it would have been played, and different kinds of boards are portrayed in the pictorial manuscripts and in pictographs. Nevertheless, confirmation that Fonds Mexicains as well as the Borgia Group in general were functioning in this way is found in accounts by Colonial chroniclers like Diego Durán who describe the casting of lots with maize kernels upon the images of the gods as part of the use of divinatory codices in general.

We have seen that the cultures of the Southwest were integrally connected to those of southern Mexico along Pacific routes of exchange and shared ideological, ritual, political, economic, and commercial forms of behavior over the course of the centuries between AD 1000 and 1500 (Pohl 1999a, 2016; Mathiowetz 2011). Testament to the power that gaming and gambling in the hands of elites might have over their subjects is found in a story related to Chaco Canyon. According to legends shared between the Navajo and Pueblo peoples,

Chaco Canyon was ruled by a sorcerer named Noqoìlpi, the Great Gambler, who subjugated his people by indebting them with a series of games that he continually won and was able to first seize their property and lands and then their women and children. He then told his people that he would return a portion of what they had wagered only if they would agree to construct the buildings of Chaco Canyon (Matthews 1889). It would not be surprising if such behavior constituted more than myth but functioned as part of the exchange systems in Mesoamerica as well.

It is the performative aspect of codices and associated ritual objects that interests Jeremy Coltman in focusing on the human arm and hand in sorcery ritualism. The appendages are what directly link the diviner to his patients through physical examination, diagnosis, and treatment as well as instruments of prophecy, such as scrying mirrors, censers, and counting pieces of various kinds such as maize, beans, bone, or jade for casting lots. The human hand is the basis for the vigesimal system upon which the *tonalpohualli* or sacred day count of the 260-day calendar used by palace sorcerers was predicated.

A human hand painted over the mouth was a diagnostic attribute of both the Classic Maya God Zero, a female variant of Akan, and the Nahuatl Macuiltonaleque. Coltman argues that the origins of the Macuiltonaleque may be found with these Maya beings. The symbolic significance of the hand to Nahuatl sorcerers is found in a remarkable Colonial-period study of curing practices written by Friar Ruiz de Alarcón called *Tratando de las Supersticiones de los Naturales de Nueva España*:

After being well informed of the case and its circumstances, he (the diviner) carries out his sorcery, for which he prepares himself with tobacco with lime. Taking it up with the right hand, he puts it in his left palm, and there breaks it up with his thumb. Next he adjusts his clothing like someone who is getting himself ready for some important business . . . rubbing between his two palms the tobacco with lime which he had previously put on one of them . . . he kisses his crossed thumbs, his hands being joined together as in prayer and proceeds:

For I kiss the Maquiltonal
For I have brought them forth
My men, the Maquiltonaleque
Those of the one courtyard
The pearly headed Tzitzimime
Let us go to see
Our enchanted mirror.
Who is the deity,
Who is the marvel
Who is breaking things
Who is now smashing things,
Who is effacing

Our jade,
Our Jewel,
Our Plume.

(Ruiz de Alarcón 1982: 203)

Veiled in metaphor, the meaning of the ritual is nevertheless apparent. After dusting his hands white with the mixture of powered lime and tobacco, the sorcerer invoked the Macuiltonaleque through his fingers, addressing them as the Tzitzimime or demons; their pearly heads being a reference to his fingernails. The palm of his hand in turn was the courtyard around which the spirit patrons were to gather. Ethnobotanists have determined that lime served as an alkali accelerant. When mixed with potent forms of native tobacco or picietl, it would have affected the nervous system in a manner comparable to cocaine use in the Peruvian highlands (Pohl 2007). Consequently, there may have been more to rubbing the white substance over the hands and kissing the thumbs than simply ritual purification. Ruiz de Alarcón's observations suggest that by invoking the Macuiltonaleque, the diviner was in a sense asking them to possess his fingers as the means of guidance in his diagnosis and in the use of his instruments.

More generalized friezes of disembodied human hands, together with skulls and hearts, was characteristic of the Tzitzimitl theme in general in both polychrome ceramics and in frescoes (Pohl 1998, 2007). They appear to have represented a kind of prayer or song appearing on mesa or altar frescoes and polychrome vases (Pohl 1998; Urcid 2004). In some cases vases and frescoes are marked with designs that may relate them to certain deities of the Nahua pantheon such as Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli and Tezcatlipoca. Coltman looks at one of the many distinct groups of sorcerers discussed by Bernardino de Sahagún and relates their behavior to Tezcatlipoca in particular. Known as Temacpalitotique, these sorcerers coveted the left arm of a woman who died in childbirth and used it as a fetish object or magical charm to induce sleep on potential victims who would then be violated and robbed. Warriors also sought talismans from this woman's body such as a finger or a lock of her hair, which was supposed to give them courage in battle. Coltman notes examples from the Borgia Group of codices in which Tezcatlipoca is holding a severed arm with the palm placed directly over the lower part of his face, an action that may be invoking the Macuiltonaleque, who were the male counterparts to these deceased women whom the Temacpalitotique so desperately sought. While the severed arm was used for maleficent means, the disembodied hand symbolism that would come to in part characterize Eastern Nahua art in the Postclassic International style was indicative of curing. Coltman's article not only highlights the overlaps in sorcery and curing ritualism by looking at distinct groups of sorcerers but also shows that their practices are never that far removed from one another and are in fact tied together much more than previous scholars have taken into account.

The tendency has been for scholars working with Late Postclassic iconography to identify nearly all human representations as members of the Nahua deity pantheon, which, it has been argued, had been spread throughout southern Mexico by the expansion of the Aztec Empire

(Nicholson 1971). Much of what has been examined by Pohl and Coltman, for example, has traditionally been ascribed to ritualism associated with the Aztec god Tezcatlipoca exclusively, while the Macuiltonaleque have been characterized as poorly understood (Nicholson 1971; Boone 2007). However, we have seen that the cult of the Macuiltonaleque is directly derived from sorcery ritualism practiced by the Classic Maya and together with the closely associated Maize God cult was conveyed into the highlands during a period of time when there was Olmeca-Xicalanca influence on the Plain of Puebla. Therefore, the iconography of the Macuiltonaleque as spirit entities and patrons of court sorcerers may very well precede the cult of the man-god Tezcatlipoca. Consequently, it may be more logical to think of Tezcatlipoca as being the representative of a sorcerer within the pantheon of gods by invoking iconography of the Macuiltonaleque. So what is the Nahua deity pantheon to which Tezcatlipoca belonged, where did it come from, and how did it spread?

We know that the Aztec Empire evolved by exploiting the preexisting regional “world system” founded by a confederacy of city-states, the “Children of the Plumed Serpent,” as they called themselves, which dominated southern Mexico a century and half before the rise of the Aztec Empire (Pohl et al. 2012). These city-states thrived within a larger international system that promoted shared traits among members who saw the advantages of forming exclusive long-distance economic relationships (Pohl 2003b, 2003c; Scheidel 2016). Standardization in commercial forms were then supported by a symbolic vocabulary that defined a field of common values through the promotion of internationalism in art and architecture, the spread of the Nahua-Mixteca style throughout southern Mexico, and the invention of a deity pantheon. The iconography of the deity pantheon therefore developed along with the Nahua-Mixteca style and symbol set around 1250–1300. Its origins lie in the introduction of the cults of patron deities associated with the various city-states associated with the Children of the Plumed Serpent confederacy. Some are directly inherited from legends associated with Tula such as Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca; others are incorporated from regional cults throughout southern Mexico. Xipe Totec, for example, was known to have been a patron god of the Zapotecs of Oaxaca while Tlazolteotl’s cult was incorporated from Veracruz.

As the Aztec Empire expanded beyond the Valley of Mexico, it found itself having to accommodate differing agendas both inside and outside of its imperial center. This was effectively achieved by co-opting the international identity of the Nahua-Mixteca world system in order to legitimize powers of taxation, maintain a military presence, and enforce laws among its subjects in distant lands. The Aztecs became supremely effective at this process, creating masterpieces of monumental public sculpture that capitalized on the basic meanings, forms, and functions of the Late Postclassic Nahua-Mixteca style but presented on a titanic scale.

Fascinated by the origins of the Aztec imperial pantheon, Cecelia Klein focuses on the cult of the Aztec goddess Cihuacoatl, who, like Tezcatlipoca, appears to have its origins in the ritualism associated with the primordial female Tzitzimitl spirit entities known as the Cihuateteo. She presents her case by dividing the surviving visual resources that portray the goddess into three areas of investigation, beginning with the earliest Colonial representations

painted by indigenous artists during the mid-sixteenth century. She compares these images to written descriptions appearing in the works of historians such as Sahagún, Durán, and Torquemada, among others. In so doing she shows that the goddess shared the attributes with a primeval avatar known as Tzitzimicihuatl or Tzitzimitl and therefore was characterized as a dangerous, frightening, shape-shifting sorceress with wounds that alluded to a theme of defeated motherhood shared with the Cihuateteo, her vanquished form a stunning visual expression of misery, anger, and thirst for revenge clearly represented in monumental art as well.

In contrast to this image of the malevolent sorceress that prevailed in Aztec imperial art at the time of the conquest, however, Klein examines accounts of the goddess associated with polities outside Tenochtitlan, revealing a very different perspective. She was revered, for example, for being a culture hero who emerged from Chicomoztoc, led the seven Chichimec tribes into central Mexico, and according to some sources was even credited with being the mother of Quetzalcoatl. This more heroic perspective is also reflected in the goddess's appearances on two monuments, the Stone of Motecuhzoma I and the Stone of Tizoc, which are believed to be more historical than allegorical. Both feature carved representations of the emperors for which they are named, dressed in the guise of Toltec warriors capturing the defeated gods and goddesses of conquered city-states. For example, Xochimilco and Culhuacan were known to have worshipped Cihuacoatl as their patron goddess, but she is portrayed on these monuments not as a malevolent sorceress but as a vigorous young warriorress. Fascinating correlates appear in the discovery of ceramic figurines portraying either Cihuacoatl or the Cihuateteo as well. We have seen how the figurine tradition has its roots in the Preclassic, in which the representations functioned as an essential part of divinatory ritualism associated with life-sustaining themes of the promotion of fertility, curing, and birth. Klein concludes therefore that Cihuacoatl had undergone a dramatic transformation in the hands of Aztec political strategists, particularly Tlacaelel, who even appropriated her name and ritual dress to represent his role as high priest at Tenochtitlan and for all intents and purposes the commander-in-chief of its army. Following the ritual defeat of the goddess as a culture hero and city-state patroness, Aztec artists then increasingly emphasized Cihuacoatl's darker side by equating her with the Tzitzimime, particularly the Cihuateteo, and casting her as a practitioner of sorcery whose dangerous powers had been harnessed by the imperial government to promote its own agendas.

We conclude our volume with a paper by Roberto Martínez González that brings us back to where we began. While John Monaghan was concerned with the Spanish vocabulary for priests, sorcerers, and witches, Martínez González examines the semantics of Aztec terminology and sees a trend extending back to the sixteenth century for the classification of two major groups of ritual specialists: the Tlamacazqui and the Nahualli. The Tlamacazqui are those most often equated with the Spanish term *sacerdote*, indicating that they served as public figures responsible for the moral and spiritual guidance of the Aztec citizenry. They organized the principal festivals throughout the year, collected and presented offerings, and conducted songs and dances. They maintained the temple cults by censuring the god's images, tending to their eternal fires, and conducting ceremonial offerings, especially blood sacrifices. Their principal role seems to have been to serve as intermediaries and agents in

what was believed to be a very delicate balance in the relationships between the gods and their people. Ritualism focused on the symbolism associated with gift-giving and reciprocal exchanges. Prayers made during offerings refer to terms closely associated with debt payment and loans, as if the priests were negotiating financial transactions with the gods.

The Nahualli, on the other hand, were practitioners who conducted secretive or hidden forms of ritualism. One of their main functions was to deploy illness and death by supernatural means. However, this does not mean that they were inherently evil beings; rather, ethnohistorical sources suggest that these creatures also acted as protectors of their communities, especially with regard to conflicts with outsiders. They are credited with the ability to transform themselves into wild creatures of various kinds as well as the ability to use supernatural flight as a means of traversing real space. This was believed to occur during sleep, when the Nahualli left its human body in repose and awoke in the form of its animal counterpart.

One of the principal attributes of the Nahualli appears to be the difficulty in classifying them, for they are credited with a range of skills and powers and are described as “witches,” “sorcerers,” “curers,” “spell-casters,” “prophets,” “hermits,” and “monks,” among other terms that were just as hard to categorize in the sixteenth century as they are today. Martínez González proposes that the translation of Nahualli and Tlamacazqui, as “witch” and “priest” respectively, actually encompassed a multitude of different personalities that performed similar actions with some individuals simultaneously acting in both capacities. It is therefore two forms of logic that differentiate the two forms of practitioners rather than their attributes, skills, or abilities. Furthermore, they can express themselves through a wide range of social and political functions as well.

We have seen how the arch-sorceress Cihuacoatl was promoted from being the patron deity of a conquered city-state to the title for a Tlamacazqui deity impersonator who served as the second-highest-ranking administrative authority in the Aztec Empire while the Nahualli identity attributed to Aztec rulers empowered them to summon creatures like snakes, centipedes, and scorpions to watch over their kin or to transform themselves into fire serpents when going to war against their enemies. Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin was credited with the powers of a Nahualli. When he was plagued by visions of the fall of his empire, he dispatched sorcerers to attempt to kill the Spaniards before attempting any military action. The fact that sorcery seems to have played such an important role in the political lives of high-ranking leaders in the Aztec administration suggests that this had been a planned objective in the design of Aztec imperial policy since the fifteenth century.

The fact is that Aztec monumental art, the public reflection of this policy, is unprecedented not only in its scale and innovations in physical form but in its presentation of sorcery as a primary theme. Monoliths of decapitated goddesses wear necklaces of human hands, hearts, and skulls, the emblems of arch sorceresses—the Tzitzimime—the great mother sustainers who represented the ultimate protectors of the Mexica, on the one hand, and the vengeful punishers of those who sought to harm them on the other. The same symbolism is displayed on the Stone of Motecuhzoma to link the sorcery theme together with the rights of conquest ordained by Huitzilopochtli and carried out by his representative on earth, the tlatoani of

Tenochtitlan. The great calendar stone is a pictographic testament to the creation of the world, but it also functioned as a kind of theatrical set for the bloodiest of human sacrificial rituals upon which hundreds of enemy warriors died. Aztec songs and stories described four great ages of the past, each destroyed by some catastrophe wrought by vengeful gods. The fifth and present world only came into being through the self-sacrifice of a hero who was transformed into the sun Tonatiuh. But Tonatiuh refused to move across the sky without a gift from humankind to equal his own. War was thereby waged to feed the sun his holy food and therefore perpetuate life on earth. The Aztecs did not use a term like “human sacrifice.” For them it was *nextlaualli*, a sacred debt payment to the gods. For Aztec soldiers, participation in these rituals became a means of publicly displaying their prowess, gaining rewards from the emperor’s own hand, and announcing their promotion in society. But these sacrifices worked just as effectively as a grim reminder for foreign dignitaries, lest they ever consider war against the empire themselves.

As we have seen, the evidence for Aztec sorcery practices first appears at the end of the first millennium in the symbolism associated with a polychrome ceramic tradition at Cholula with roots in Late Classic Maya. By 1300, evidence for sorcery practices appears across the Plain of Puebla. The archaeological context clearly indicates that this ritualism was practiced by the elite within their palaces in association with a system of moveable feasts timed to the 260-day calendar or *tonapohualli* and calculated with the use of the divinatory codices. The principal religious theme of these palace feasts was an encounter with the Tzitzimime, potentially malevolent spirit entities that also embodied a cult of the ancestral dead in general and the spirit entity patrons of palace sorcerers, the Maquiltonaleque and the Cihuateteo. Patron gods for each city-state, many of whom possessed the attributes of Tzitzimime as well, were worshipped in public cults that focused upon the community temple. In designing their empire, what more powerful statement of their militaristic ambitions could the Aztec imperialists of Tenochtitlan invoke than the imagery associated with the most formidable form of psychological power among those city-states they sought to dominate than the imagery of the Tzitzimime displayed on a monumental level?

Conclusions

The topic of sorcery and witchcraft in anthropology is far more developed in other areas of the world such as Africa, Melanesia, and the Amazon. It has been largely ignored in Mesoamerica. This volume has set out to change that. The introduction to this volume has sought to place these diverse essays in a historical context by looking at the wide distribution of sorcery practiced throughout Mesoamerica. The indigenous forms of sorcery have tremendous antiquity, and while much of this ritualism regarding sorcery, divination, curing, and witchcraft are consistent throughout, it should nevertheless be noted that any number of cultural, historical, social, political, and economic variables contribute to how and why it is practiced. While many of these practices developed independently from one another, we have presented evidence in this introduction that at least part of the roots of the Late Postclassic International style and writing system may lie in a form of feasting behavior originally

associated with a Classic Maya sorcery theme. It is no wonder then that Late Classic Maya polychrome drinking vessels invoked the dangerous *wahy* beings. Furthermore, while it is difficult to investigate sorcery practices among the earlier Olmec, images from Oxtotitlan, Juxtlahuaca, and Chalcatzingo certainly suggest it. To put it quite simply, sorcery is power, and this power is often manifested in distinct ways such as the ability to transform into one's nahual. Oftentimes these familiars are animals of the dark and untamed forest wilds such as snakes, jaguars, mountain lions, eagles, and deer. This brings us back to an important point regarding the relationship between rulers and the natural environment.

So where do we go from here? The terminology we use will continue to be debated for sure. The historical and historiographical problems regarding these terms as well as others like "shaman" and "nahual" are far from being resolved (see Klein et al. 2002 for discussion). Despite the recognized problems of these terms, they will in many ways have to suffice, at least for the moment. It is certainly better than unnecessary jargon. For instance, the term "witchcraft" was adequate enough for Clyde Kluckhohn who preferred "Navajo Witchcraft" as a title over the more jargon-filled "Navaho idea and action patterns concerned with the influencing of events by supernatural techniques that are socially disapproved" (1944: 5).

Another direction that needs to be taken is in regard to comparative approaches. As previously noted, recent attempts have sought to compare Mesoamerican, Egyptian, and Graeco-Roman civilizations behaviorally. While this trend has existed for some time, comparing the Classic Maya court and Aztec imperial strategies in art and architecture with those from antiquity, the more esoteric behavior involved in courtly feasting and ritual has been largely ignored. It would be beneficial to compare these specific types of behavior. We have also turned briefly to practices in Southeast Asia, which we think is also a worthwhile line of inquiry. But what of other Amerindian traditions? While far-reaching global comparisons are well warranted, the traditions of Amerindian people "closer to home" provide an array of mythic traditions concerning sorcery and witchcraft throughout North America and deserve comparative study (see Walker 1989). The southeastern United States is particularly rich in beliefs related to sorcery. One of the most explicit examples of sorcery in the Southeast occurs in a drawing generally credited to Theodore de Bry. The description of this striking image describes Outina, chief of the Timucua, consulting an aged sorcerer to reveal the disposition of his enemy (de Bry 1976).

The old man requests a shield that he puts on the ground and proceeds to draw a circle around it and then draws letters and signs within the circle. From here, he begins unintelligible chanting, gesticulating, and contorting until his bones can be heard cracking. Finally, he emerges exhausted and confused and reveals the number of enemies and where they are waiting. This is a fine example of "image sorcery" at work.



Figure 1.11. Southeastern sorcery. (a) Timucua “Magician,” after a print by Theodor de Bry. (b) Drinking cup with skull and bone motif, Moundville, Alabama. Illustrations by John Pohl.

Some of the mythology regarding powerful sorcerers still exists in contemporary oral traditions and titles of religious authority. The Great Gambler of Pueblo Bonito, who used sorcery to enslave people through indebtedness, is an example of the use of the kind of authority that we have discussed in this volume for the greater Southwest (Matthews 1889). Southeastern legends describe hereditary secret societies that used sorcery to coerce their people and were put to death (Fogelson 1984). Prior to the formation of the Iroquois League, the Onondaga nation had a sachem named Tadodaho, who according to oral tradition was an extremely powerful sorcerer. Also a warrior, he was said to pose quite the menacing image. According to several sources, he was a “misshapen monster” who had a twisted body and snakes in his hair (Hale 1883: 12–20; Barr 2006: 9–12). The legend of Tadadaho puts him at odds with Hiawatha since he opposed the Great Law of Peace; however, they eventually won Tadadaho over by soothing the seven crooks in his back. His legend is still told and his name endures as a title for the most spiritual of leaders in the Iroquois Nation.

Our goal then has been to offer a sensitive and sympathetic study of sorcery and witchcraft

in ancient and modern Mesoamerica. Serious caution has been required in regard to approach, and we have attempted to examine this behavior not as something irrational and steeped in superstition but rather as highly rational and rooted in significant social and cultural values. In doing so, however, we also recognize the unavoidable question of who speaks for the “Other”? This remains one of the key questions anthropologists struggle with. Presenting the politically acceptable publication of the Other has become an increasingly difficult task with post-Colonial, revisionist, and even “denialist” critics (Watanabe 1995; Demarest 2007: 592–594, 599). We do not intend to separate indigenous Mesoamerican peoples from “the human family.” These practices are universal. To deny that ancient and modern Mesoamericans practiced or believed in such things would be to unashamedly designate and keep them as the Other and would only further remove them from a cross-cultural phenomenon known from around the world. We do advocate strong caution, however, when looking at these forms of ritual behavior and would strongly agree with historian Matthew Dennis, who notes:

. . . we must distinguish between the “witchcraft” attributed to Indians by ignorant or biased white observers—misrepresentations of misunderstood native rites and beliefs, which had nothing to do with any diabolical force—and the witchcraft that Indians believed actually troubled their existence, an indigenous craft uniformly regarded by them as nefarious and dangerous. (2003: 22)

Such practices do not make Mesoamerican people primitive nor does it make them superstitious natives. As such, we are not describing “exotic bugaboos, but beliefs actually held by actual people who accept them and take note of them in their everyday lives” (Middleton 1967: x). To deny them their beliefs because of our fear of perpetuating the Other only keeps them as such and speaks volumes about our own psyche, namely our discomfort of them not being “just like us.” We hope this volume has placed them in a more human context as people engaged in a rational and logical system of behavior.

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Spanish Taxonomies of Witchcraft and the Colonial Highland Maya

John Monaghan

Introduction

Witchcraft was a central concern of European theologians long before the first Spanish friars set foot in the New World. By the sixteenth century *superstición* (of which witchcraft was a subcategory) had been closely associated with idolatry; Cobarruvias, in the first dictionary of the Spanish language, simply defined it as “a false religion” (Cobarruvias [1611] 1977: 948). It is therefore not surprising that the Franciscans and Dominicans who first encountered Mesoamerican religions would understand them in the light of what they knew about *superstición* (Cervantes 1994: 5–39; Coe and Whittaker 1982: 22). Olmos, the great Franciscan linguist, had even served as an official investigator for witch trials in Spain before coming to Mexico. It is clear from his writing on the topic that what he believed he encountered in central Mexican religion was of the same general order as what he found in Vizcaya in during a 1527 witch-hunt (Olmos [1553] 1990). A casual reader of the sources will know that in general the Spanish saw Mesoamerican religions as demonic inspirations. What is perhaps not well understood is that the Spanish category of superstition was a highly organized semantic domain. This means that the terms the Spanish used had precise meanings and relationships to one another that the modern reader is often not familiar with.¹

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries *superstición* was one of the major divisions in the Spanish theory of knowledge. It was defined as knowledge acquired through a pact with the Devil and was opposed to instinctual knowledge, rational knowledge, and divinely inspired knowledge. In superstition one learns “things that are impossible to know normally” in the words of Olmos (1990: 17). Despite the connotations the term has in the English language today, superstitious knowledge was considered in the sixteenth century to be effective and powerful. Spanish priests of the period were very much concerned with circumscribing the domain of superstition, since it was a way of knowing that was not informed by Christian morality and at times it presented a direct challenge to ecclesiastical authority. In learned treatises men such as Pedro Ciruelo and Martin Casteñega² took great pains to warn people of the demonic origin of the basic propositions of superstitious knowledge and to condemn it as un-Christian.

In the course of these activities Spanish ecclesiastics arrived at a fairly well-defined classification of the types and subtypes of *superstición*. While much of the initial inspiration for this work came from abroad, by the middle of the sixteenth century Spanish theologians had produced a significant number of works dealing specifically with superstition. These

theological developments are of utmost importance for understanding Spanish accounts of Mesoamerican religions; the very first Spanish work translated into Nahuatl was a version of Casteñeda's treatise on superstition (Olmos 1990). By combining these sources with other texts of the period this chapter outlines the major types of superstitious knowledge. It then turns to the bilingual Kaqchikel- and K'iche'-Spanish dictionaries produced in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in order to see the extent to which this taxonomy informed Spanish understanding of Mesoamerican religious specialists. The conclusion offers some words of caution and suggestions about what can be learned about the Maya of the sixteenth century from the Spanish sources.

Superstición

Following the *Malleus Maleficarum*,³ Spaniards recognized two distinct ways of acquiring superstitious knowledge. The first was through an express pact with the Devil, or the willful invocation of Satan for the purpose of becoming one of his disciples (Casteñeda [1529] 1946: 34; Ciruelo [1529] 1978: 48; Las Casas [1547] 1958: 279–280, see also Coe and Whittaker 1982: 22). In return the Devil bestowed on his followers certain powers, such as the ability to transform themselves into animals and transport themselves across great distances very rapidly (Casteñeda 1946). Individuals making an express pact with Satan communicated with him through his familiares, a generic term for the diverse forms he assumed (Cobarruvias 1977: 584). They were also able to contact him through the celebration of blasphemous ceremonies, and through dreams.

The second way of acquiring superstitious knowledge was through an implicit pact with the Devil. In this case the person did not enter into willful communication with the Devil or formally renounce Christian belief, but nevertheless engaged in practices that were diabolically inspired (Ciruelo 1978: 47). Of the two ways of acquiring superstitious knowledge, an explicit pact was seen as the most evil. It also invested the Devil's disciple with the most power.

Spanish priests partitioned the domain of *superstición* into four major categories: *brujería*, *mágica*, *hechicería*, and *ensalmación*. In the minds of Spanish ecclesiastics, *brujería* was by far the most sinister form of superstitious knowledge. Upon entering into an express pact with the devil, the *brujo*⁴ promised to carry out Satan's bidding and worship him in place of God (Cobarruvias 1977: 238). *Brujos* were also active in recruiting others to the service of their master (Iodate [1613] 1972: 47). *Brujos* were often women, which the friars explained was due to female inconstancy, frailty, excesses, and envy (Casteñeda 1946: 39; Cobarruvias 1977: 238). From time to time Satan would call all the *brujos* in a district together in an *aquelarre*, or sabbath. There they would blaspheme the rituals of the Catholic Church, debauch themselves in orgies, and even have sex with Satan himself (Iodate 1972: 135, 140, 163).

The Devil granted to his *brujos* a number of powers. He gave them an unguent, which after rubbing on their bodies enabled them to fly through the air. This permitted the *brujos* to travel great distances very quickly and thus be apprised of things in far-off places. The Devil

also gave brujos the ability to assume the appearance of animals when necessary. The sources emphasize that this change was in appearance only, as the Devil was not able to actually transform matter and turn his disciples into real animals (Casteñega 1946: 41; Ciruelo 1978: 49; Las Casas 1958: 310, 313). In Navarra's seventeenth-century witchcraft trials, Satan reportedly instructed *brujos* in the preparation of poisons, which they spread over cropland and used to kill people and animals (Iodate 1972: 111, 123). Brujos had the power to cast the evil eye when they wished (*aojar*) and were reputed to eat human flesh and suck the blood of children (Ciruelo 1978: 96, 144; Iodate 1972: 123, 135). *Brujos* acted only out of malice and never used their powers or knowledge to assist people, which other specialists in superstition might do.

Mágica was a second category in the Spanish domain of *superstición*. *Mágica* differed from *brujería* in that its practice did involve some learning based on nonsuperstitious knowledge. The various types of *mágica* are thus referred to as an *arte* or *ciencia* (e.g., Ciruelo 1978: 48, 75; Cobarruvies 1977: 153, 415). One meaning of *mago*, for example, was philosopher or sage (Cobarruvias 1977: 780). *Mágica* was considered to be arcane knowledge handed down from classical times in books and formulas that were studied by erudite men (Caro Baroja 1967: 49; Casteñega 1946: 39). Although *mágica* was a form of *superstición*, those who practiced it were not dominated by Satan to the same degree as a *brujo* (Casteñega 1946: 143). It should also be pointed out that it was the opinion of the day that only men could practice *mágica*, since women were not capable of the learning it required (Casteñega 1946: 39).

Within *mágica* a distinction was made between *nigromancia*, on the one hand, and *adivinación* on the other (Ciruelo 1978: 48). The powers of the *nigromantico* arose from his ability to control demons and the souls of the dead (Casteñega 1946: 140; Cobarruvias 1977: 829). He achieved this control through his knowledge of special ceremonies that involved the use of human blood, the sacrifice of food, and the drawing of magic circles. In the course of the performance of one of these ceremonies the *nigromantico* was able to summon either the Devil or the dead in a kind of séance (Ciruelo 1978: 48–49; Las Casas 1958: 291–292; Venegas, cited in Caso Baroja 1967: 199). This power gave the *nigromantico* the ability to prophesize (Las Casas 1958: 28). As Casteñega pointed out, prophecy could be a gift to the bad as well as to the good (Casteñega 1946: 38; see also Ciruelo 1978: 48).

The power of the *nigromantico* over demons and the souls of the dead also enabled him to *conjurar*, or exorcise. Several kinds of *conjuradores* were recognized, and Casteñega mentions that their successes often earned them a place on the public payroll of Spanish towns (Casteñega 1946: 117). One type of *conjurador* was able to drive the demons out of clouds, thereby dispersing hail, damaging rains, and unhealthy vapors (Ciruelo 1978: 119). Others had the ability to drive the demon out of swarms of locusts, green flies, and other pests (Ciruelo 1978: 126). A third type of *conjurador* possessed the ability to exorcise demons that had taken possession of human bodies (*arrepticos*, *endemoniados*). Casteñega wrote that he did this through a recitation of long incantations and the performance of “strange” ceremonies (Casteñega 1946: 123).

The knowledge of the *conjurador* was classified as *superstición* because, as Casteñega

explained, the *conjurador* was in league with the Devil, and the Devil had already agreed to leave as part of a plan to trap the unsuspecting in superstitious belief (Casteñega 1946: 124–126). Casteñega's rather weak explanation for the success of the *conjurador* was made necessary by the ambiguity that existed between *conjuración* and other types of knowledge that were not superstitious. The four principle types of knowledge recognized in Spanish epistemology shared, in the sense of Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblances," overlapping boundaries with one another. As pointed out earlier, clearing up this ambiguity was an important goal for Spanish priests, who were trying to circumscribe *superstición* so they could condemn it. In the case of *conjuración*, superstition touched on divinely inspired knowledge, since priests were also given the power to conjurar (Casteñega 1946: 131; Ciruelo 1978: 110; Cobarruvias 1977: 349). The church and the nigromantico were thus in direct competition. The dilemma this created for men interested in classification like Casteñega and Ciruelo caused the former to state that only the superstitious *conjurador* was in league with the Devil (Casteñega 1948: 130–132), while the later, going in the other direction, accused friars who often used their powers of *conjuración* of being *nigrománticos* (Ciruelo 1978: 113).

The other division recognized within *mágica* was *adivinación*, or the art of predicting what the future holds (Cobarruvias 1977: 43). *Adivinación* differed from *nigromancia* in that knowledge of the former was acquired through an implicit pact with the Devil, and not an express pact, as with the later (Ciruelo 1978: 54). Knowledge of divination, while superstitious, did not require that the *adevino* enter into willful contact with the Devil. Although *adivinación* differed from *nigromancia* in the way it was acquired, the two were similar in that both were *artes* and based to some extent on legitimate knowledge.

Two subcategories of *adivinación* were commonly distinguished. The first was called divination by *agueros*, or the observation of the physical and social environment for signs of what the future might hold. One form that this type of divination took was the observation of animal behavior, particularly birds (Ciruelo 1978: 63; Cobarruvias 1977: 53). Another form focused on the human body, paying close attention to the cracking of joints, coughs, and the occasions when someone stumbled (Ciruelo 1978: 63). A third type of *aguero* was the interpretation of omens or, as Ciruelo explained it, divination through utterances and events (Ciruelo 1978: 63). Also included as *agueros* were a large number of techniques such as *chiromancia*, or palm reading; *spatulamancia*, divination with the bones of certain animals; *aeromancia*, divination by observing the direction of the wind; *hidromancia*, divination with water; and *piromancia*, divination by the flames of a fire (Ciruelo 1978: 59–60, 62; Las Casas 1958: 280).

Astrología was yet another form of divination by *aguero*. However, it was also one of those points where superstitious knowledge shaded into nonsuperstitious knowledge since some forms of *astrología* were considered to be natural philosophy (*filosofía natural*) (Ciruelo 1978: 56), which would classify it as a type of rational knowledge. It was a common belief in the day that, in the words of Las Casas, "celestial bodies exercise a causal influence over natural things" (Las Casas 1958: 282). The movement of the planets and stars was seen as effecting both the weather and human dispositions (Casteñega 1946: 147; Ciruelo 1978:

57; Cobarruvias 1977: 160–61; Las Casas 1958: 284). Moreover, the positions of the celestial bodies were taken into account when making medical treatments, since the stars influenced the health of humans and animals (Las Casas 1958: 315). Ciruelo was of the opinion that the position of the celestial bodies at birth could also have an impact on the child's capacity for higher forms of learning (Ciruelo 1978: 56). In any case, Spanish ecclesiastics agreed that the movement of celestial bodies, because of their effect on human dispositions, health, and the weather, could be used to predict such things as draught, starvation, pestilence, migrations, and war (e.g., Las Casas 1958: 282–283).

Astrological predictions, such as favorable and unfavorable days, were set down in *almanaques* and in calendars (Cobarruvias 1977: 95). Although these were useful tools for determining weather patterns and the like, Ciruelo bemoans the fact that some publishers included astrological predictions in missals and breviaries (Ciruelo 1978: 97).

While the bulk of astrology was considered to be natural philosophy, some of its applications could be superstitious. Chief among these false applications was the use of astrology to predict events that occur by pure chance, such as a roof tile falling off a house and hitting someone, or finding money (Ciruelo 1978: 57). Another was the prediction of willful acts. Since these decisions were a matter of free will, Ciruelo wrote, they could not be determined by the stars (Ciruelo 1978: 58). Another misapplication of astrology occurred when it was used to determine the personal characteristics of associates, such as the constancy of a prospective wife (Ciruelo 1978: 58).

One final type of *aguero* that should be mentioned is divination by *sueños*, or dreams. This divinatory technique worked by matching the content of a dream against a formula for dream interpretation. If the subject dreamed about a horse, for example, this might mean luck in business. It was the position of Spanish ecclesiastics that divination of this sort was superstitious, since dreams possessed no natural properties making them an effective means for predicting future events (Ciruelo 1978: 64–65).

The Spanish texts are not entirely clear on whether divination by dreams is a type of *aguero* or whether it is a separate subcategory of divination. Ciruelo assigns it the status of a subcategory (Ciruelo 1978: 64), but most others treat it as a type of *aguero* (e.g., Las Casas 1958: 281). In the taxonomy presented here it will be treated as an *aguero*.

The second type of *adivinación* was called *sortilegio*, or divination through casting lots. There were innumerable forms of superstitious *sortilegios*, one example being the use of playing cards to indicate who is a thief (Ciruelo 1978: 61). As with divination by *aguero*, some types of *sortilegio* were considered legitimate. Legitimate types of *sortilegio* were divided by Ciruelo into *suerte consultoria* and *suerte divisoria*. The former was legitimate because it was based on divine inspiration. It was a procedure used by sixteenth-century prelates and princes to decide weighty matters. The options available to them were put before God, who would then send some sign indicating the correct choice. The second type of legitimate *sortilegio* was one whereby lots were used to partition goods, land, and certain tasks (Ciruelo 1978: 611). This was probably thought to be legitimate because it put chance to use in solving a dilemma.

A third major category of superstitious knowledge was *hechicería*, sometimes also referred

to as *encantación*. *Hechicería* can be defined as the knowledge of ceremonies and spells designed to bring about a change in the natural state of a person or thing (e.g., Cobarruvias 1977: 680). With his spells, a *hechicero* could kill, cripple, or cause impotence (Ciruelo 1978: 94–95, 131; Cobarruvias 1977: 680). However, *hechiceros* did not always act out of malice. They could cast spells that altered judgments for the benefit of their clients. They knew how to influence the opinions of important personages and how to prepare love potions (Ciruelo 1978: 94–96). *Hechiceros* were also reputed to have the power to improve luck in business ventures, games of chance, and the hunt. They could even cure certain illnesses, such as the evil eye (Ciruelo 1978: 107–108).

Knowledge of *hechicería*, like *adivinación*, was obtained through an implicit pact with the devil (Casteñega 1946). *Hechicería* was more common among women than among men due to the former's predisposition to envy according to Cobarruvias (1977: 680). *Hechicería* could be, and frequently was, combined with other types of *superstición*—for example, a *nigromantico* could also be a *hechicero* (e.g., Ciruelo 1978: 109). Thus, even though *hechicería* was recognized as a separate category within superstition, in practice other kinds of superstitious practitioners could acquire knowledge of *hechicería*.

A final type of superstitious knowledge gained through an implicit pact with the Devil was the ability to cure with remedies outside of those allowed for by nature or the divine. In Spain individuals who practiced this type of cure were known as *ensalmadores* and *saludadores*. All sources agree that the first was a type of superstition and that practitioners should be reported to local bishops (Cobarruvias 1979: 522). *Ensalmadores* depended almost exclusively upon prayer to cure (see, however, Ciruelo 1978: 80). They earned the name *ensalmadores* for their use of the Psalms in treating patients, some even going as far as to tie pages of scripture onto the affected area of the body (Ciruelo 1978: 81). These procedures were condemned as having no real effect on the patient's health, and the *ensalmadores* were accused of being quacks.

While there was no doubt that *ensalmación* was based on superstitious knowledge, there was some uncertainty regarding *saludadores*. *Saludadores* were people whose breath, saliva, or vision was thought to have curative powers (Ciruelo 1978: 101; Cobarruvias 1977: 923). It appears that *saludadores* were primarily concerned with treating animals, especially cattle. One of their remedies was to wet a piece of bread in their mouths and give it to the sick beast to eat. Another was to simply spit in the face of the animal (Cobarruvias 1977: 923). Some *saludadores* were famous for their feats of self-discipline, such as washing their hands in boiling oil or walking barefoot on red-hot steel (Ciruelo 1978: 101). Casteñega saw their ability to cure as a natural gift and not superstition. He cautioned, however, that most *saludadores* were really fakes who were trying to trick people into believing they were holy people. In contrast, Ciruelo placed *saludadores* alongside *ensalmadores* as users of superstitious knowledge. He contrasts them with *medicos*, *sabios*, *cirujanos*, and *boticarios*, all of whom use the legitimate methods defined by natural philosophy to cure (Ciruelo 1978: 101–103).

The Kaqchiquel/K'iche' Dictionaries

Maya languages in general, and the closely related Kaqchiquel/K'iche' languages in particular, are unusual for being the subject of a relatively large number of colonial dictionaries. Even though the Maya area was far from colonial cities, we have more dictionaries by Spanish ecclesiastics for Kaqchiquel than we do for Nahuatl. The major central Mexican languages are represented by one or at most two colonial dictionaries, whereas Kaqchiquel/K'iche' have at least six. The reason for the high number is that in southern Mesoamerica works on indigenous languages were not published in the colonial era. As a consequence, there never was a single, authoritative edition for Kaqchiquel or K'iche' like the Alvarado for Mixtec, the Cordoba for Zapotec, or the Molina for Nahuatl. Published copies of these works would have been available for consultation and study in the major centers for evangelization. In contrast, the Kaqchiquel dictionary produced by a friar like Domingo de Vico would remain in manuscript form (even today many remain unpublished). What would happen, then, is a later priest working on the language would copy this and other earlier works for his own use, adding new terms and glosses and sometimes disputing previous definitions. There are even dictionaries with no original copies extant, but we know of them because a latter priest used them extensively in his work (see Carmack 1973).

Although the dictionaries I examined did not contain terms for explicit or implicit pacts with the Devil, each did contain entries for the major categories and subcategories of *superstición*, and in many cases the author demonstrated an understanding of the taxonomy's levels of inclusion. Father Thomas Coto, for example, defined one Kaqchiquel word as *adivinar por suertes* (to divine by lots), indicating that he saw sortieria as a type of *adivinación* (Coto 1690: fol. 367).

The question then becomes, how deeply did the taxonomy of superstition affect the Spanish description of Maya culture? It is human nature that in our quest for understanding we relate the unfamiliar to the familiar. So when the Spanish were compiling their colonial dictionaries, a gloss might contain the phrase "this is a kind of . . .," or "this is a local (de la tierra) type of . . ." followed by the word for an animal or plant from the Old World that had some resemblance to what they were defining. This was also true for their descriptions of beliefs and religious practices. So when the Spanish discovered that the owl could be a foretoken of misfortune in Mesoamerica, they fixed on this as an example of an *aguero* since, as mentioned earlier, the behavior of birds could be used for divination back in Spain.

When it came to superstition, however, something more profound was at work. As can be seen in [table 2.1](#), Spanish friars were very successful in discovering Maya words and phrases that matched ones in their domain of superstition. The formal completeness of the chart suggests that they did not stop at simply labeling some Maya words with terms drawn from *superstition*, but went much further and mapped the entire taxonomy of the domain onto Maya culture. It was as if the only differences the Spanish recognized between themselves and the Maya in regard to superstition were differences in language and some superficial features.

Coto indicates that the *brujos* of Guatemala can transform themselves into jaguars, other

fierce cats, and lizards, not dissimilar from the *brujos* back in Spain who turned themselves into cats, dogs, and other animals (Coto 1690: fols. 61, 270).⁵ The men who compiled the dictionaries appear to have taken the stance that although the words differed, the concepts were the same. Even the detailed glosses in dictionaries such as Coto’s do not alter the situation. These glosses turn out to be structured, to a large extent, by the taxonomy. An example is Coto’s entry for *prognosticar*, which he treats as equivalent to *agorear* (see Coto 1690: fol. 14).

Prognosticar:

The ancient word is set down as natahic L i tichijni1 . . . and Il or tzap is what they use to form the words for the misfortunes that occur to one, and at times, blame. For the n the Indians those who prognosticate they call cholol k’iz 1. ah k’iz. Lab is the bad aguero. For an unfortunate prognostication they usually use ?m Labaz agorar or prognosticar others . . . t vaqhiq is the dream that is a sign. They have a superstition that certain birds, when they come to their houses and sing, signify unfortunate occurrences in the future. One they call Pigh and say if it comes in the night and sings it prognosticates death or sickness and if it lands on a house the house’s owner, or someone inside will die . . . The eclipse of the sun or the moon is taken as an unfortunate prognostication. Prognosticate with the mirror or in water pa q,etbal cak ri lemo. (Coto 1690: fol. 367, my translation)

Coto’s description of Maya prognostication, while rich in detail, is structured by the Spanish category of divination, both in terms of the meaning he assigns to Maya words and phrases and the pattern of relationship he sees between these words and phrases. Coto describes no significant differences between the concept of divination by *agueros* and the Maya words he defines as such. It appears not only did the Spanish fix on certain features—*brujos* turn themselves into animals, *nigromaticos* use human blood, *hechiceros* know formulas to cause misfortune, and so on—and rapidly identified counterparts among the Maya who shared these features, but started with the taxonomy and assumed there would be equivalent specialists and practices among the Maya. The Spaniards’ devotion to their taxonomy severely affects our ability to uncover the Maya meaning of the words defined as superstition from these sources. It is particularly troublesome because it is not immediately obvious to the modern reader that a particular term has a well-defined relationship to other terms. A reliance on Spanish sources thus carries the danger that we unwittingly reproduce a domain of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish knowledge.

Table 2.1

Superstación			
Pacto Explicito	Pacto Implícito		
Brujería	Mágica	Hechicería	Ensalmación

Ca. G. 76. halom Naua! Balam Ak' vtk' Cakivachinel Uz Eik' Coto halom naua! ahik' Vico 75-76. Huleb 164. Puk'naua! (encantador beuxo) Voc. C. ak' ytk' Balam- es indio bruxo que se hace tigre P.G. 69. Puk' naua! 71. Haleb naua! 76. chalamacal EleEam Villa. 107. Balam ahik' Tirado 32. Naualon	Coto 276. Puk' naua!						Coto 61. cak tix 218. itk' Ah ik' ik'inel hechik'an para q quieren bien a uno, o lcaborresan dicen Im yaaEom chiczuquxchik'irixhail Tirado 136. ytk'inic, ytk'inen, ytk'ibal 187. Atk' Itk' Itk'nel Varea 145. Itk' 210. naualitk' 22. Balam Vico 106. Ik' Ak'ik' Yk'ia Ca. G. 205. Atk'ytk' Balam tk'inel balaminel Voc Cak ytk' Atk' Ik', Ik'inel P.G. 71. Ak' ik' 11. mulol iximgite (el heucero o sortero) 125. Ahytik'	Coto 157. Imtk'ihobek' ... (Ensalmar con palabras) Ca. G. 205. quitk'iham tihtk'ihohé tintk'hoh yabil xatk'ih qnaEomunuj ... 205. Atk'ytk' Balam tk'inel balaminel Voc Cak ytk' Atk' Ik', Ik'inel P.G. 71. Ak' ik' 11. mulol iximgite (el heucero o sortero) 125. Ahytik'
	Nigromancia	Adivinación						
	Ca. G. 328. Naualil Naua! Coto 276. Puk' naua! 305. naualil 90. conjuror Tempestades: Imtk'ihoz hau chu quabal ries Im kagok' bendigia chik'ik' Varea 226. Puk' naua! L haleb era una manera ae nigromancia o magica qusaban los indios, transformandose en qlobos de fuego y otros animales	Vico 233. Ak'eik', Aztoeol qui cunan, adivinor o curar 137. Navalitk' 270. qite 39. cakivochin	Varea 57. cakivachinel ak'Eik' 118. cholol Eik' Eihih Eihinic	Villa. 53. Naualih cadeuina Ca. G. 10. quicakivac	Coto 10. chololEik' 367. Tincakivachik' naualik'	Voc. C chololEik' naualik' AhEik' novulilnel		
		Agüeros				Sortiaria		
		Coto 367. Lab (el aquero) Ca. G. 10. Labak' Nulab	Vico 114. vak'ul labak'- aquoreur 152. lab	P.G. 72. Lab	Villa. Laboh tin cahok'ah labahes (agorear)	Vico 233. AhilabalEik' chololEik' 102. molol ixim Varea 381. qilte 270. mololoxim qite ak'qite 73. cololEik' 137. Ahiluy yxim P.G. 11. malol yxim qite 80. AhEik' chololEik' Eihiwic (hecicero o sortero) Ca. G. 10. molol rakan ak'z yanel cholol 4ite		
	Profeta	Adivinación por Sueños	Adivinación por Animales	Astrología	Chiromancia Piromancia etc.			
	Coto 336. mom cakivochinel Vico 123. Ak' maik'ik'	Voc. C. Lavach Vico 152. Lab el aquero q se cree o sospecha qclo se sueña algo Coto 15. timk'ohak' Ca. G. 10. quicholol Eik'	Voc. C. Piqn- cierta ave q3 tienen por ciquero Varea 271. Piqh Vico 157. Piqh Coto 367. Piqh	Coto 347. chotol eik' 180. qetu' eik' qetul iq qumil al eik' gakivachinel Tirado 102. ylol u qoheic equmil Ca. G. 229. gakivochinel	Coto 10. miq vachik' Iu vach paya (adeivenen aqua) 367. pa qei bal eakrilemol pala			

KEY

Ca. G.: Calepino Grande

Voc. C.: Vocabulario Cakehiquel

Villa.: Villacunas

P.G.: Pantaleon de Guk'man

One can see, however, that the Spaniards found an easier time finding Maya terms that discretely matched some parts of their taxonomy than others. On the one hand, *adivinación*, and in particular *sortero*, is usually *ah k'iz* or *cholo k'iz*, the word we would translate today as daykeeper, although a word that connoted hate and envy also appear in this category. In

the same way the *ah itz* is fairly consistently defined as *hechicero*. On the other hand, in the category of *mágica*, *nigromancia* was defined consistently in the dictionaries by the word *nahual*. Varea said it was a kind of *nigromancia* that the Indians used, transforming themselves into balls of fire and other animals (Varea 1699: fol. 226). In the Spanish conception, the *nigromantico* can also be identified as a sacrificer, and able to commune with the dead. But one can also see that the term *nahual*, originally a Nahuatl word, shows up in all major categories of superstition, from *brujería* to *ensalmación*, indicating the Spanish had a very difficult time comprehending what the *nahual* was. We know today that *nahual* is not a term that is used consistently from one region to another, so the Spanish difficulty might reflect this. But we also know that *nahual* is likened to the idea of the coessence, where something that is not physically attached to one's body can be an essential part of the self, which was a difficult concept to grasp even for anthropologists in the twentieth century, let alone Spaniards of the sixteenth century.

If the Spaniards mapped their domain of superstition onto Maya culture with such diligence, one suspects that they did the same thing with other highly organized domains. In general, then, if what we read in sources like the dictionaries are Iberian taxonomies with Maya words, then we must be careful not to accept the Spaniards' organization of their semantic domains for the Maya's. At the same time, superstition represents an extreme case, and the failure to imagine a different world by men like Coto and Varela should not be seen as something they were incapable of, since their dictionaries show they did imagine a language with a different phonetic system and syntax from Latin, which was seen by many in the sixteenth century as the model for all languages. Since what they were dealing with in superstition was demonically inspired, it was unnecessary (and perhaps even dangerous) for the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century friar-lexicographer to go beyond a surface description. In this context we can contrast Spanish descriptions of Maya superstition with Maya astrology. I pointed out that astrology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was still thought to be, for the most part, a science and did not become superstition until later. It was therefore a legitimate topic of interest for the educated Spanish priest, and something about which the observations of New World peoples could shed light on, since this aspect of their culture was not superstition but legitimate knowledge. As a consequence, Colonial-period Spanish priests left behind detailed and relatively sophisticated accounts of those areas of Maya religion that have to do with "astrology," such as the complex calendric systems that Mesoamerican peoples developed. So while some aspects of Maya religion were ignored or, at best, mentioned only as examples of the extent of the penetration of superstition into the New World, there are other areas where the sixteenth-century Spanish were in some sense much closer to their sixteenth-century indigenous subjects than we are, and could produce a description that more fully reflects Native Mesoamerican categories than what we see in the case of superstition.

Notes

1. For a bibliographic review of this material, see Carmack 1973.

2. Pedro Ciruelo held the chair of Thomistic theology at the University of Alcala, and later a similar post at Salamanca. Martín de Casteñega was a Franciscan stationed in Logrono in the early sixteenth century. Of the two treatises, Ciruelo's was by far the most influential in shaping the literate Spaniard's definitions of superstition. Ciruelo is specifically cited by Cobarruvias as an authority on witchcraft, and his work was reprinted nine times in the sixteenth century alone (Pearson 1977: 17). In contrast, Casteñega's work was not reprinted until 1946 (Darst 1979).
3. The *Malleus Maleficarum* was first published in 1486 by Heinrich Kramer and James Sprengler. These German Dominicans had been given wide-ranging powers to proceed against witches and heretics by Innocent VIII in a bull published in 1484. They intended their work to be a handbook for the prosecution of witches and indeed were so successful that it was used in even Protestant countries. Almost all the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish sources on superstition mention the *Malleus Maleficarum*, and a few make explicit references to it in their definitions (Summers 1971: v–xl).
4. Other names for those who practiced brujería included hollin, from the word for ash, which *brujos* apparently got on themselves as they flew up and down chimneies, joringuesb and mego (Casteñega 1946; Cobarruvias 1977).
5. It is interesting to note that the Maya word balam, or jaguar, which was a common appellation for powerful religious specialists and political leaders, is similar to Balaam, a prophet hired by a Moabite king to curse Israel in Numbers 22–24. The Spanish refer to Balaam as a “nigromantic priest.” This may have played a role in the Spanish definition of balam in the New World.

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Sorcery and Counter-Sorcery among the Nahua of Northern Veracruz, Mexico

Alan R. Sandstrom and Pamela Effrein Sandstrom

The Christian dichotomy between the forces of good and evil was completely foreign to Aztec religion. Mexicans saw both good and evil in every man and god.

—William Madsen and Claudia Madsen (1969: 14)

Introduction

In this chapter we address the paradoxical position of sorcery and the sorcerer in the religious ideology, world view, and magico-religious beliefs of Nahua people of the Huasteca region of northern Veracruz.¹ Our research to date shows that many Nahua follow a traditional religion that, while not unchanged from ancient times, is firmly rooted in the pre-Hispanic world view. We argue that Nahua religion is fundamentally pantheistic in that people consider the universe itself to be the deity and that a single, indivisible sacred principle called *totiotzin* encompasses every object and being.² In such a universe, no clear division exists between good and evil. Everything in the cosmos, including spirit entities, is a combination of good and evil—beneficent and at the same time threatening, necessary for life and simultaneously a danger to life. Although Nahua today generally claim to know little about sorcerers, they clearly believe them to be wicked and without redeeming qualities, despite their pantheistic ideology. Many Nahua also believe that sorcerers pose a constant danger to the human community, and people routinely engage curers to conduct counter-sorcery rituals.

How then to explain the uniformly evil nature of the Nahua sorcerer? As a working hypothesis and following the lead of Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán (1963), we propose that the contemporary Nahua conception of the sorcerer most likely originated from or was highly influenced by ideas brought by the Spaniards or possibly African slaves who began arriving in New Spain in the sixteenth century (Carroll 2001). In short, according to Aguirre Beltrán, Nahua beliefs in sorcery (and, by extension, the beliefs of other contemporary Native American groups) are the product of profound changes in indigenous magico-religious systems following the dual cataclysms of conquest and slavery. We approach the “dialogical frontier” between indigenous religion and the beliefs and practices imposed by the colonizers, as discussed by Louise Burkhart (1989: 185–188), with the goal of better understanding contemporary Nahua culture. We do not seek to uncover survivals from the pre-Hispanic era or claim complete synthesis of Old and New World belief systems. Instead, we hope to clarify an apparent anomaly in the Nahua world view by placing it in historical context.

The first modern study of witchcraft and sorcery was carried out by British anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard between 1926 and 1930 among the Azande of central Africa. This work has had a profound influence on how anthropologists view these phenomena, particularly in the distinction the author draws between witchcraft and sorcery. It is a distinction that the Azande themselves recognize: “Azande believe that some people are witches and can injure them in virtue of an inherent quality. A witch performs no rite, utters no spell, and possesses no medicines. An act of witchcraft is a psychic act. They believe also that sorcerers may do them ill by performing magic rites with bad medicines. Azande distinguish clearly between witches and sorcerers” (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 21). For the Azande, witches contain within their bodies a special substance that causes danger to those around them quite apart from any intent to do harm. The power of the witch is innate and often appears as an oval, blackish swelling or bag containing small objects attached to the liver (22).

The sorcerer is a different kind of being that intentionally uses techniques learned for the expressed purpose of destroying others. A sorcery attack may be motivated by envy or revenge, and the sorcerer may sell his or her services to a client who wishes to destroy an enemy. Sorcerers are evil in the sense that they are morally compromised without hope of redemption. They are capable of spreading disease and death on a whim, to satisfy their evil nature or to gain profit. They are actual human beings or believed to be evil creatures who take human form either permanently or temporarily. Sorcery by this definition is found in many societies around the world, and a number of competing explanations have been proposed to account for its existence.³

The data for this study derives from our long-term ethnographic research, which began in the early 1970s and remains focused on a single Nahua community that we identify by the pseudonym “Amatlán.” The village today has a population of just under 600 people divided into about 115 households with a social organization resembling an embryonic house society (Sandstrom 2000b). Located in the heart of the Huasteca Veracruzana in the *municipio* of Ixhuatlán de Madero, the community is set among the tropical, heavily forested foothills of the Sierra Madre Oriental. Atlán had remained largely isolated from urban influences until extensive road building began during the 1990s. The people traditionally practiced milpa horticulture and grew maize, beans, squash, and a variety of other products for their own use and for sale in one of three regional markets. While still basically self-sufficient in food production, the village economy is quickly being transformed into one based on remittances, the sources of which include household members, particularly the young, who find temporary or permanent work in urban areas throughout Mexico and the United States.⁴

The widely held distinction made by anthropologists between witchcraft and sorcery is useful for helping us sort out key variables associated with these beliefs, but it can be difficult to apply to actual field data. While we have recorded statements by the Nahua that some people have a kind of innate power or strength that can inadvertently harm others, this concept is not nearly as developed as that found by Evans-Pritchard among the Azande, and it does not seem to fulfill the classic definition of the witch. One source of confusion in this matter is that when speaking Spanish, Nahua villagers use the word *brujas/os* (“witches”)

generally and ambiguously to refer both to male and female ritual specialists or traditional curers as well as to people who qualify as true sorcerers based on the classic definition. As we report below, terms that people use for these specialists when speaking Nahuatl, their native language, help to clarify the matter.

The only evidence we have that might qualify as Nahua witchcraft comes from a single oral narrative we recorded in 1990 called “El brujo.” The story is about an evildoer who was stealing women and girls and imprisoning them in his house. He was described as having the heart of a porcupine that was located on the right side of his chest. In the story the husband of one of the victims goes in search of his wife. Along the way, many animals contribute claws and other potentially lethal body parts to help the man in his quest. With the aid of the animals, the husband vanquishes the malefactor, kills him, and frees the kidnapped women and girls. The kidnapper in this story has witch-like qualities in the classic definition because of the evil nature of his deeds and the biological anomaly of having the ill-positioned heart of a porcupine. The man’s character appears to satisfy the classic Azande definition of a witch. Yet the man intended evil through his actions, and thus we believe that he is better classified as a sorcerer. It is the thoroughly evil intent of Nahua sorcerers that is so contradictory to a pantheistic world view. The concerted efforts on the part of sorcerers to harm others place them at odds with any human values and require that they be countered, and even killed, to remove the danger they represent. Among the Nahua who are the focus of our study, no other personage or spirit entity manifests evil in this way.

Sorcerers hide their black arts from everyone, especially outsiders, and so it is difficult to gain empirical information on their identities and practices. The paucity of ethnographic reports in Mesoamerica documenting acts of sorcery suggests either that it is rare or always carefully concealed for fear of retaliation (Dow 2001: 88; 2003: 28; Martín del Campo 2006). After decades of research in the Huasteca Veracruzana, we have only a rudimentary knowledge of Nahua sorcery. It is not openly discussed, and simply possessing knowledge of the dangerous craft can bring people under suspicion. This reticence about the practice of sorcery (and counter-sorcery) is a clear indication that it is a problematic domain for many Nahua. We know that for the Nahua, a particularly dangerous kind of sorcerer is a curing specialist who has gone bad. Curers are generally viewed as warriors who possess extensive knowledge and technical skills for dealing with the spirit world and who work on behalf of the community. Their skills, including construction of altars, paper cutting, and chanting, are highly valued by other villagers, who turn to them during crises involving disease, crop failure, and other threats to well-being. However, if this extensive knowledge and the techniques for applying it are perverted and used to evil intent, it can be formidable and very difficult to counteract.

Nahua Religion and World View

In this section we examine the religion and world view of the contemporary Nahua in order to provide a context for discussing their conception of the sorcerer and sorcery. Nahua religion in northern Veracruz has been undergoing rapid and profound changes since the early

1980s. Before then, most people participated in a rural form of Catholicism dominated by elements deriving from pre-Hispanic indigenous religions.⁵ Protestant missionaries first entered the region probably at the turn of the twentieth century. However, they made few converts until economic and political changes altered the old social arrangements. The changes were due to improved roads in the region and forces of globalization and modernization that were sweeping Mexico and the rest of Latin America (see Dow and Sandstrom 2001). By the beginning of the 1990s, many people had forsaken their traditional religion and embraced one of several forms of Pentecostalism. Nearly one-half of the people of Amatlán converted. In response to widespread conversions to Protestantism throughout Latin America, the Catholic Church began a vigorous program of reevangelization, promoting a more orthodox form of Catholicism (Garma 2001: 59; Gooren 2001: 186). As a consequence of these processes, many small communities such as Amatlán have become internally fragmented, with brothers pitted against one another and extended-family structures weakened.⁶ Today Amatlán is composed of Protestants (themselves split into several competing groups), the more urban-oriented Catholics who reject most of their Native American traditions, and a small group of two or three dozen traditionalists who continue to follow the indigenous religion called “*el costumbre*” with its relatively minor admixture of colonial Spanish Catholicism (Sandstrom 1991: 349–364, 380; 2001: 271–275). In our discussion of sorcery and counter-sorcery, we will focus on this older tradition with its roots in pre-Hispanic Mexico.

For convenience of description we can say that the Nahua divide the universe into four realms (although it is doubtful they would agree to such a tidy distinction): *ilhuicactli* (sky), *tlaltipactli* (earth’s surface), *tlalli* (earth, incorporating *mictlan*, the underworld where souls of the dead reside), and *apan* (water). Each of these realms is inhabited by numerous spirit entities that relate to human beings in different ways. Use of the term “spirit” in this context is problematic because it carries connotations from Euroamerican cultural traditions that are not shared by indigenous Mesoamericans. The concept of spirit is equally complex in all cultural traditions, but when most Westerners conceive of the “rain spirit” or “earth spirit” they probably envision something like “a supernatural, incorporeal being, [especially] one inhabiting a place, object, etc., or having a particular character: [as in] *evil spirit*” (*Random House Dictionary of the English Language* [2nd ed., unabridged] 1987: 1839, def. 5.). In contrast, the Nahua conception of spirit is closer in meaning to “energy center” or “power source” (following Maffie 2014: 35, 93). Ethnohistorian Alfredo López Austin (1988, 1: 181–236) uses terminology such as “animistic centers” or “animistic entities” in place of “spirit,” “soul,” or “*anima*” in his classic work on Nahua concepts of the human body. Nahua spirits (and those of other Mesoamerican peoples) are highly abstract and challenging to define partly because they derive from a world view and religious system historically unrelated to the Euroamerican system. However, as many investigators have shown, concepts of spirit throughout Mesoamerica share a core belief and symbol structure (see Dow 1982, 2003; Monaghan 2000; Nicholson 1971). In this chapter we generally use the phrase “spirit entity” to call attention to the differences in these conceptions, although occasionally “spirit” must suffice for readability.

Nahua spirit entities bear superficial resemblance to the wide assortment of Euroamerican

spirits (ranging from fairies or leprechauns to angels or demons) that many people believe populate the natural and social worlds. They also seem to resemble a fixed polytheistic pantheon of spirits, comparable to that found in state-level civilizations such as ancient Greece and Rome. Polytheism is a system of belief in multiple spirits in which the spirits are typically arranged hierarchically according to their power and scope of influence. Similar to polytheism, Nahua spirit entities have specific characteristics and names, appear to take an interest in human affairs, and figure in a complex mythic system that recounts their relations and adventures. Probably due to these similarities, researchers who write about the religious systems of the contemporary and ancient Nahua often describe them as a form of polytheism (Madsen 1967: 390), polytheistic monism (Burkhart 1989: 37), or even animatism (Marcus 2006: 223).

The impression that Huastecan Nahua religion is polytheistic is reinforced by the practice of cutting paper images of the spirit entities for ritual use.⁷ Most Nahua, and the ritual specialists in particular, are reluctant to talk in detail about abstractions such as spirit entities, and so the paper images provide an opportunity for ritual participants and outsiders alike to understand abstract religious conceptions. The images often take the form of small, anthropomorphic figures fashioned with iconographic elements that reveal their natures or roles within the larger mythic system. For example, disease-causing wind spirits are cut with rib holes to link them to skeletons and the realm of the dead and to indicate how dangerous they are to human well-being (Sandstrom 1991: 269–271). We are always astonished to observe the many thousands of paper figures cut for a single ritual. The inventory of images is immense and varies from specialist to specialist. In general, they represent natural forces such as rain (and water's many states and manifestations), crop growth, the earth in its many aspects, seeds, the sun and moon, comets and stars, sacred hills, disease, death, and so on. Images cut from paper may represent human souls or even human-made objects as diverse as houses, musical instruments, and wood piles, among other things. There seems to be no end to what can be portrayed, and ritual specialists do not hesitate to experiment symbolically and stylistically. The Nahua pantheon does not seem to be as fixed as one would expect. Researchers of ancient as well as contemporary Nahua religion have noted how the spirit entities sometimes exhibit contradictory characteristics or identities that merge into one another in perplexing ways that defy the neat logic of a purportedly polytheistic religion (Nicholson 1971: 409).

In a series of publications following the lead of Eva Hunt (1977: 55–56, 187), we have made the case that Nahua religion and other religious systems throughout Mesoamerica are forms of pantheism rather than polytheism (Sandstrom and Sandstrom 1986: 275–280; Sandstrom 1989; Sandstrom 1991: 236–261, 315–322); others, notably anthropologist John Monaghan (2000: 27–29) and philosopher James Maffie (2014: 79–136) have taken different approaches in making the same argument.⁸ Features of pantheism fit our ethnographic data on the Nahua better than those of polytheism and resolve many apparent contradictions in traditional Nahua world view and religion. In pantheistic religions the cosmos itself is the deity, and everything in it is an expression of a single, seamless sacred principle. All diversity is an illusion, the product of our sense organs and our brains that focus on superficial difference while failing to perceive the unity that lies at the heart of reality. The divide

between animate and inanimate in pantheism is false because everything in the cosmos partakes of the sacred impersonal divinity that fundamentally unites all objects, animals, and human beings. Nahua of the Huasteca call this sacred principle *totiotzin*. The root of the word is *teotl* (or *tiō-tl*, a variant of *teō-tl*, according to Karttunen 1983: 228), used by the sixteenth-century Nahuatl speakers to refer to the animating principle that permeates everything, but which the friars translated simply as “God.” The prefix *to-* affixed to the modern term *tio-* is the first-person plural possessive (“our”), and *-tzin* is the honorific diminutive (“our honored god”). Both ancient and contemporary terms denote a sophisticated conception of the sacred—a cosmic life-force or power rather than a person-like deity.⁹

Christianity differs fundamentally from pantheism. In the Judeo-Christian system, God is the supreme creator, and the cosmos (including humans) is the creation; in pantheism, the creator is synonymous with the creation. For the Nahua, *tonatiuh*, the sun, comes closest to a creator deity, but it is creation in the sense that this spirit entity animates the cosmos with its energy. Sun power is the mechanism through which *totiotzin* comes to permeate existence. For Christian theologians, pantheism is regarded as a heresy that defies sacred writings and fundamental beliefs about God’s transcendent nature. Pantheists tend to be more ecumenical, seeing all religions as valid attempts to understand the abstract nature of being–spirit–deity.

Totiotzin is an indivisible spirit entity with multiple and infinite manifestations. The multitudes of cut-paper images that portray different aspects of *totiotzin* are not separate spirit entities arranged in a polytheistic hierarchy. Instead, all spirit entities, all objects, and all living forms are fundamentally one and essentially the same. Thus, Nahua spirit entities may substitute for each other or shade into one another and exhibit all of the contradictions that characterize the world at large. Probably most Native American religions are a form of pantheism or have pantheistic qualities. As Hunt (1977: 233) puts it: “In a pantheistic religion in which God is one, two, and four simultaneously, in which he divides and transforms himself into infinite images, he is both one and all of the sacred symbols that have been invoked.” Both Tibetan Buddhism and Hinduism are generally considered pantheistic (Hartshorne 2005). It is interesting to note that in these great Asian religions, as in Mesoamerica, people have invested tremendous effort to render tangible visual images of deities that speak to the pragmatic concerns of people, even as they are elaborated and made to seem esoteric at the same time. It is almost as if the abstract nature of pantheism is too far removed from daily life to have meaning for people. The statues and paintings portray spirits that address immediate and mundane concerns, although they are said to be temporary manifestations or aspects of the great unity that lies at the heart of apparent diversity. Nahua ritual specialists fashion their images in the medium of paper to deal with specific problems such as disease, drought, or infertility. At the end of the ritual, the images are destroyed and the spirit entities they represent return to the great unity from which they were extracted. The Nahua paper images reduce *totiotzin* to a human scale.

A peculiarity of Nahua thought that derives from a pantheistic world view is that it is impossible to differentiate among spirit entities according to whether they are ultimately good or evil. As Fernando Cervantes writes (1994: 40) about pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican religious belief, “Evil and the demonic were in fact intrinsic to the divinity itself.” The

ambiguity of good and evil in the pan-Mesoamerican ethical system also permeates people's myths and pictorial symbols, according to Hunt's (1977: 170) analysis:

The Mesoamerican peoples of the past mapped out, in their conceptions of the gods, their ambivalences about the social, moral, and psychic. Their descendants still do this today. None of the deities were without ambivalent images, none of them were pure metaphors for good or bad, wholly beneficial or destructive. The earth was both nurturant mother and cannibalistic monster. The sun was a nurturant warm father as well as the destructive fire of the sky. The gods who reflected sexuality were also ambivalent images. The goddess of love, Tlazoteotl, was simultaneously, the goddess of sin, the "filth eater."

Hunt goes on to describe this ambivalence as "integral to all levels of the pantheon. All attempts to exalt the deities singly or collectively as representing purely good or evil, spirituality or materiality, body or soul, in either the prehispanic pantheon or the contemporary one, lead to a distortion" (170). This mutability seems alien to people who view the workings of the cosmic order from a Judeo-Christian perspective that insists on the dichotomy of good and evil. In theistic religions like Christianity, the existence of evil challenges a belief in God as a loving, all-knowing, omnipotent force for good. By contrast, in pantheistic religions, there is "no need either to *explain* evil or to *explain evil away*—at least not in any way resembling theism's need to do so" (Levine 1994: 208, emphasis in original). The existence of evil is mainly a problem for theologians and priests, including the Spanish friars bent on replacing one set of beliefs with a different dogmatic system. The indigenous sense of harmful or wrongful behavior was never fully subsumed by the dualistic Christian model, but instead accommodated the friars' rhetoric of evil. Evil action for the Spaniards worked in opposition to God's absolute moral code, while an "'evil' action for a pantheist will be one that works against . . . [or is] disruptive of the Unity in some way" (Levine 1994: 209; see epigraph that begins this chapter).

For the Huastecan Nahua today, all spirit entities are a mixture of good–bad, beneficence–malevolence, as Italo Signorini and Alessandro Lupo (1992: 81) have also found among the beliefs of the contemporary Nahua of the Sierra Norte de Puebla:

[The] process of syncretic mixing and adapting took in many of the concepts and figures of Catholic thought, including good and evil in their respective manifestations (divinities, supernatural beings, spiritual powers and human feelings). Good and evil, however, were not conceived as ethical absolutes clearly opposed one to the other, but as contingent realities, in which the positive or negative assessment of an act depends on the context in which the action was performed.

Seemingly positive spirit entities all have salutary as well as harmful or dangerous aspects, including *tonantzin* (in her guise as the Virgin of Guadalupe), *totiotzin* (in its alternate

identity as *tonatiuh*, the syncretic sun-God-Jesus entity), the many manifestations of *tlalli* (earth), or *apanchaneh* (the dweller of the water realm). Failure to make proper offerings or to make amends for offenses can cause these powerful spirit entities to seek revenge against their human supplicants. Similarly, presumably negative spirit entities are susceptible to human entreaties and expected to accept the ritual goods offered in their names. Even death can be cajoled, and the hordes of disease-causing spirits placated. These spirit entities may be dangerous or threatening, like viruses, but they are not considered to be evil or malevolent in the sense of intentionally wishing ill.

In a world lacking a clear divide between good and evil, how should a person act to avoid negative consequences in life? The Nahua conceive of the world, especially the earth's surface, as being a complex place filled with pitfalls and traps that can entice and fool the unwary. The ancient Aztecs had a saying, *tlalaui tlapetzcaui in tlalticpac* ("it is slippery, it is slick on the earth"), explicated by Burkhart (1989: 58), which captures something of their moral code, ethical system, and understanding of how people should behave. This understanding continues to preoccupy contemporary Nahua. The idea is that the path of a person's life is uncertain, and it is easy to lose one's balance and fall into immoderate indulgence or intemperance. Evil, in the Christian conception, is not the central problem for the Nahua, but rather what is problematic is excess and imbalance in the conduct of one's life. One should try to follow the middle way and avoid indulging in extreme behaviors. Among the Nahua today, people judge ill of others who act excessive in their behavior, regardless of what that behavior is. For example, in loving a person too much, one is apt to veer from the straight path and to invite disaster. In Western society an alcoholic who fails to hold a job and support his family is viewed as having some moral defect or, more typically today, as suffering from an illness. The Nahua we know do not see a drunk as evil, immoral, or sick, but rather as a person who has slipped off the path of moderation and who is behaving in an extreme fashion. This type of immoderation can bring serious trouble to the community and is condemned, but not for the same reasons that Westerners might do so. Just as the system of slash-and-burn horticulture that sustains the Nahua requires a delicate balance between the forces of nature and the efforts of the human community, so we find the same emphasis on balance in traditional Nahua religious and ethical conceptions. Burkhart (1989) offers an excellent discussion of the dangers of occupying the earthly plane of existence, with tensions cast as metaphors of center-periphery and abstinence-excess. She notes that, for the ancient Nahua, sorcerers and sorcery attacks come from the geographical and social periphery to disrupt the orderly center (Burkhart 1989: 64, 86, 117).¹⁰ We are not able to present observational data on actual sorcery practices, and it would be an ethical breach to endanger individuals through discussion of such antisocial behavior. We cannot conceive of how we could ever witness such events. However, it is certain that the Nahua rituals we have observed are designed to address the problems of disruptive imbalance and disharmony and are based on the assumption that these disruptions can also be manipulated by sorcerers intent on unleashing forces of disease and death in the community. As we indicated in the introduction, people's belief in the power of sorcery is evident in the curing arrays that ritual specialists construct when clients call on them to counteract misfortune and disease brought on by the acts of sorcerers. The outline of ritual practice presented below

clearly illustrates the anomaly of sorcery and counter-sorcery in the belief system of the Nahua.

Nahua Rituals and Curing Specialists

Nahua rituals reflect the sensibility of balance required to live in a universe that is itself the living deity. Rituals vary in complexity from a simple divination lasting a few minutes to elaborate pilgrimages to sacred mountains that involve the efforts of dozens of people over many days or even weeks. The essential feature of all Nahua rituals is the offering or *tlamaniliztli* through which participants engage spirit entities in a distinctive form of social exchange. Just as humans obligate one another through gift-giving, people can obligate spirit entities by dedicating valued offerings to them. The spirit entities associated with the key forces of nature and growth in return provide people with all the necessities of life. The Nahua cosmos is in a continuous precarious balance that can create or destroy, support or subvert human interests, give or take back life. The rituals organized by the Nahua are a very human attempt to tip the balance their way (Báez-Jorge and Gómez Martínez 2000: 89–92).

In their characteristically respectful, unhurried way, ritual participants construct elaborate altars that act as seats of exchange between the human and spirit realms. The standard Nahua altar is a small table with a flexible branch bent over it to form an arch. The inventory of valued offerings includes food, cornmeal, tobacco, soft drinks, cane alcohol, music, flowers, copal incense, and the animal blood spattered over cut-paper images. The altar is a model of the Nahua cosmos with the arch representing *ilhuicactli* (the sky realm), the tabletop representing *tlaltipactli* (the earth's surface that supports the fields of maize and all human life), the area beneath the table, *tlalli* (the earth itself, including *mictlan*, the underworld place of the dead), and a display at a nearby spring or, alternatively, a pot filled with water representing *apan* (the water realm). The altar receives the offerings, and it is before the altar that people dance and show their devotion to the spirit entities. It is here that the delicate balance between human and spirit realms is maintained. The spirit entities do their provisioning in the fields, rivers, and forests where the people seek sustenance and the means to produce what is necessary for life and happiness. The Nahua abide and the spirits provide.

What is it that interferes with this delicately balanced system of exchange? Why, despite all the effort, does the exchange sometimes break down and leave people vulnerable to starvation, disease, and death? Two major disruptions in the system are acts of disrespect and sorcery. Disrespect (*axtlatlepanitta*, literally, “to disrespect something”) is related to excessive or immoderate behavior, as discussed earlier. To disrespect other people and the things of this world or to fail to participate in the ritual exchanges is to reject the shared understanding of the sacred principle that underlies the Nahua cosmos. But acting with respect (*tlatlepanittaliztli*, literally, “that which looks upon or sees things with respect”) is to recognize the sacred character of the world and its inhabitants. After witnessing acts of disrespect among people or perhaps experiencing disrespect themselves at the hands of immoderate people, the spirit entities react by sending disease or by withholding rain, fertility, and the other necessary conditions of life. Disrespect represents a breakdown of the

exchange achieved through ritual offerings between spirit entities and human beings. Consequently, acts of disrespect provide an opening for disease-causing wind spirits to enter the community and attack people. A malevolent wind (called *ehecatl* in Nahuatl) is an angry spirit of a person, often a former member of the community, who, having died a violent or premature death, unleashes disease and misfortune upon the living. However, unlike the Euroamerican belief system in which the sinner pays for the sin, wind spirits representing generalized disharmony and chaos often attack the least hearty, especially newborns or the elderly. Such acts threaten the whole community and not simply the perpetrator.

Once disease enters the community and people have fallen ill, the victims and their families must consult with a curing specialist in order to get well again. The curer cuts numerous paper images of the offending wind spirits and dedicates offerings in their name to entreat them to leave the patient's body and surroundings. Even the dangerous wind spirits can be obligated through the giving of valued items to return health to their victims. They are not entities with an irredeemable evil nature, but rather manifestations of malignant dangers lurking everywhere that, despite their reckless power, are expected to respond to heartfelt appeals and gifts. The Nahua concept of disease broadly encompasses all misfortune to include not only bodily illness but also infertility, crop failure, drought, and natural disasters, for example. As mentioned earlier, all rituals have at their core the dedication of an offering of valued goods to key spirit entities. The object is to restart the cycle of exchange upon which all beings depend. It is not surprising, given the Nahua understanding of the cosmos and the place of humans within it, that the same ritual specialists are called on to cure illness, to bring rain or fertility to the fields, or, through divination, to predict the outcome of human endeavors as well as to detect and deal with acts of sorcery.¹¹

Curing specialists among the contemporary Nahua of northern Veracruz may be either male or female, and they are called to their profession through dreams or miraculous recovery from a serious disease. They must heed the call to become a curer or otherwise, as is widely believed, they risk attracting the wrath of vengeful spirit entities. Being a curer is hazardous because one is forced to deal on a daily basis with potential danger and unseen forces. We have recorded cases in which people have met disaster for evading the call to cure by being stricken with mental illness, afflicted by alcoholism, or seriously injured in an accident. The supernatural aspect of recruitment among various kinds of curing specialists is widely reported throughout Mexico and Guatemala from colonial times to the present (see comparative information presented in Huber and Sandstrom 2001). Once having accepted the summons to cure, they become apprenticed to an established master who teaches them the techniques and esoteric knowledge required to counteract disease. In the Huasteca, Nahua curers must have the ability to cut sacred paper images, construct altars, memorize long chants, speak authoritatively, and deal effectively with clients. In order to succeed, they must establish a record of successful cures over an extended period of time. Otherwise their clientele base dwindles, and they eventually cease to practice. In general, they are remarkable people with compelling personalities who spend their lives as warriors protecting individuals and the community as a whole from disease and misfortune (Dow 1986: 59; Sandstrom and Sandstrom 2002). Aguirre Beltrán (1963: 83), however, writes about the ambiguous role of the curer: "The *curandero*[a] is a doctor and sorcerer who cures and harms people; the

ambivalence of his [or her] behavior reveals at every turn an individual who is frankly antisocial.”¹² He adds (92), “the *curandero* . . . dispenses not only health but, besides, has the capacity to cause disease and death.”¹³ Curers may also face retribution at the hands of fellow villagers who suspect that they use their powers to spread disease and death.

While curing specialists are expected to use their skills to ward off wind spirits attracted by acts of disrespect, they must be capable of handling the second cause of the breakdown in the exchange system between humans and spirit entities—namely, sorcery. Before addressing sorcery and counter-sorcery among the Nahua, it would be helpful to summarize the main points of Nahua religion and world view that have been presented. We have made the case that the Nahua have a pantheistic religion in which everything in the cosmos is a manifestation of a single sacred principle called *totiotzin*. The Nahua conceive of key forces in the cosmos in the form of spirit entities, the diversity and number of which are an apparent artifact of rituals designed to address specific human concerns such as disease or crop fertility. Diversity is an illusion in that there is only one pervasive spirit entity with multiple, seemingly infinite aspects. Curing specialists organize rituals and make manifest the spirits by cutting images of them from paper in order to make the workings of the cosmos appear temporarily less abstract and more relevant to the pragmatic concerns of their clients. Rituals are essentially a form of social exchange through which people try to set things right in the face of acts of disrespect, with the primary aim of removing obstacles to the normal exchange cycle between human and spirit realms. Every spirit entity, every being, and every object in the Nahua pantheistic system is an aspect of *totiotzin* and is therefore a combination of the positive and the negative—beneficent and malevolent, animate and inanimate. The acts of disrespect that attract disease and disease itself are considered to be dangerous but without moral implication. The exception to these generalizations, however, is sorcery.

Nahua Conceptions of Sorcery and the Transforming Sorcerer

People are understandably reluctant to reveal how much they know about sorcery. To be overly familiar with this esoteric and problematic topic is to invite accusations that can have dire consequences. It is impossible to witness rituals associated with acts of sorcery, if indeed they even exist. A further complication for the anthropologist is that there are a number of fearsome spirit entities in the Nahua pantheon, and it is a challenge to determine precisely how they are all interrelated and implicated in the practice of sorcery. What we have learned about them has been gleaned from passing comments and oblique references rather than gathered more systematically and confirmed over time, as for other aspects of Nahua beliefs. However, as we explain below, we have gained some insight into these dangerous spirit entities just by witnessing how they are treated in the context of a ritual. Our iconographic analysis of ritual practice must compensate, to some extent, for the absence of direct observation of sorcery rituals and the lack of elaborate exegesis by the participants themselves.

A general term that contemporary Nahua use for sorcerer is *tetlachihuiquetl*. The word is related to the term *tetlachiuiani*, recorded in the sixteenth century, which Fray Alonso

de Molina defined as “sorcerer who ensorcelles others” ([1571] 1944: 108).¹⁴ Because of their Eurocentric bias, it is difficult to know from the Spanish descriptions recorded after the conquest what the Nahua thought about this figure and whether or not it might have had redeeming qualities as one would expect. In the modern Nahua understanding, the *tetlachihuiquetl* is evil without redemption and fits the conventional definition of sorcery. With this practitioner, unabated evil enters into Nahua belief and world view, presenting an apparent paradox.

Another term associated with sorcery is *nahualli* (also spelled *nahuali* or *naoalli* in Nahuatl and *nagual* in Spanish)—a kind of sorcerer who can transform himself or herself into an animal. *Nahualli* is used also to refer to the animal double itself. Such a manifestation is called *tlacueptli*, meaning literally, “something turned over or sent back, something vaulted” (Karttunen 1983: 258), or, for the purpose of this discussion, “something transformed.” The *nahualli* often transforms into a bird or bird-like manifestation (sometimes called *tlacuapali*) that travels around at night in search of victims to kill. Because of this propensity to transform into a bird, a sorcerer is sometimes identified by the term *tecolotl* (“owl”), a feared harbinger of death among the Nahua and other indigenous groups in Mesoamerica. For the contemporary Huastecan Nahua, the *nahualli* and related creatures are clearly associated with sorcery and appear to be embodiments of evil in the Western sense of the word (Sandstrom 1991: 253–254).¹⁵ The concept of *nahualli/nagual* is widespread throughout Mesoamerica, but it has come to mean various things among different ethnic groups. The *nagual* is often unfortunately confounded with *tonalli* (alternately spelled *tonali* or *tōnalli* in Nahuatl, *tonal* in Spanish), another term in common use throughout the Mesoamerican culture area that often refers to a person’s animal double. The belief is that this animal is born at the same moment as the person and their fates are thus entwined; should the companion animal be killed, the person also will die. In our research region, however, we found no such belief in *tonalli* animal doubles. The concept of *tonalli* among the Huastecan Nahua refers not to an animal double but to one of two souls that all beings possess (Sandstrom 1991: 258–259). The *nahualli*, however, is an animal double only of a sorcerer, and it is inextricably associated with sorcery and evil. People believe the *tonalli* soul can travel for brief periods outside of the body, most commonly during sleep, and the adventures that it experiences are what cause people to dream. Confusion over *tonalli* and *nahualli* concepts has led anthropologists and other researchers to write extensively on the topic. For instance, Monaghan (2001: 672) argues that “the distinction between ‘spirit companion’ and ‘transforming witch’ is one of degree, not kind,” and concludes that “a consistent etic vocabulary has not emerged” from these many discussions to clarify the issue.¹⁶

Descriptions from the early colonial days reveal the ambiguous nature of the sorcerer and the *nahualli* for people at the time. The great Spanish chronicler of the sixteenth century, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, divided sorcerers and diviners into good and bad types. The following descriptions all come from his “Ninth Chapter, which telleth of the enchanters, the sorcerers, the magicians,”¹⁷ where he wrote about the sorcerer—his definition of *in naoalli*: “The sorcerer [is] a wise man, a counselor, a person of trust—serious, respected, revered, dignified, unreviled, not subject to insults. The good sorcerer [is] a caretaker, a man of

discretion, a guardian. Astute, he is keen, careful, helpful; he never harms anyone” (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 10: 31). But in the very same passage Sahagún went on to describe a bad *nahualli* that he called *in tlaueliloc naoalli*: “The bad sorcerer [is] a doer [of evil], an enchanter. He bewitches women; he deranges, deludes people; he casts spells over them; he charms them; he enchants them; he causes them to be possessed. He deceives people; he confounds them.”

In the next passage, Sahagún wrote about *in tlapouhqui tonalpouhqui* or “the soothsayer, the reader of the day signs,” who could be either good or bad: “The soothsayer is a wise man, an owner of books [and] of writings.” The bad soothsayer, whom he called *in tlaueliloc tlacateculotl*, is “a deceiver, a mocker, a false speaker, a hypocrite—a diabolical, a scandalous speaker. He disturbs, confounds, beguiles, deceives others.”

There is also a type of *nahualli* that Sahagún labeled *in tlacateculotl mocuepani naoale* (“the possessed one who transforms himself”). Apparently, this creature does not have a good counterpart, as he writes that it “assumes the guise of an animal. [He is] a hater, a destroyer of people; an implanter of sickness, who bleeds himself over others, who kills them by potions—who makes them drink potions; who burns wooden figures of others. . . . He causes one to be possessed; he destroys people . . . destroys them by deception, depresses their hearts. He turns himself into a dog, a bird, a screech owl, an owl, a horned owl” (31–32). Sahagún clearly tried to classify these spirit entities as beneficent or malevolent. He finds both good and bad *nahualli* and diviners, but only evil *nahualli* of the *tlacateculotl* type. Burkhart (1989: 34–45) and Cervantes (1994: 5–39) detail the Spanish friars’ efforts to find indigenous and Christian parallels for good and evil and to explain how they deliberately adapted the concept of the malignant *tlacateculotl* to represent the Christian Devil to Nahua converts. As will be seen below, many of these creatures, particularly the manifestation of *tlacateculotl*, continue to live in the beliefs of contemporary Huastecan Nahua.

Henry B. Nicholson (1971), in discussing what he calls “black magicians” among the various types of magico-religious practitioners, describes the *tlaueliloc naoalli* of Sahagún (using the plural form and spelling *tlahueliloc nanahualtin*, literally “wrathful transformed sorcerers”) as a class of malevolent practitioners, among the most common of which was *tlacateculotl*, a term he translates as “human owl” that “also applied to a class of fearsome demons” (Nicholson 1971: 441–442). The concept highlights the ability of the *nahualli* to change from a human form into an animal—typically an owl. In pre-Hispanic and early colonial times, there were dozens of practitioners of the negative arts, many with bizarre names such as “inflicter of harm on someone’s tonalli,” “dancer with someone’s hand,” “sleep-thrower,” “calf-eater,” “heart-eater,” one “who stupefies someone” or “who disarticulates the foot bones,” and others bent on destruction (Nicholson 1971: 442). Nicholson points out that, following the conquest, the organized indigenous priesthood was crushed but individual magical practitioners survived despite “the best efforts of the missionaries to destroy them” (442). A wide array of indigenous magical traditions was thus preserved within a framework of local Hispanic traditions, or, as he puts it, “In modern Indian Mexico the old tradition is still very much alive today” (443). Although Nicholson does not address the topic directly, it appears that these black magicians were viewed by the

chroniclers as able to harness the supernatural forces of evil, akin to European witches and sorcerers during this same period.

L. Marie Musgrave-Portilla (1982) provides a thorough analysis of the conception of the *nahualli* before and after the conquest, basing her analysis on writings of the colonial chroniclers and contemporary ethnographers. The author concludes that contemporary usage differs from the earlier meanings recorded in the sixteenth century, writing, “Although the pre-Hispanic *nahualli* was capable of both good and evil, the influence of the late medieval European interpretation of Mesoamerican mythology had such an impact that the transforming wizard became a being whose supernatural powers were (and are) used exclusively for evil purposes” (1982: 4–5). While Sahagún wrote about good and bad sorcerers and soothsayers, he was unclear if they were separate individuals or whether these two opposing qualities could appear in the same individual. Musgrave-Portilla contrasts the absolutist world view of the Spaniards, who characterized the universe in terms of the opposition of good and evil, with the sixteenth-century world view of the indigenous inhabitants who saw everything as an admixture of (and tension between) good and evil. Because this bias was reflected in the European written records, Musgrave-Portilla writes that “the opposition between the forces of good and evil, so essential to the Western-Christian world view, was applied to the Indian cultures” (1982: 25). From our perspective, many contemporary indigenous people continue to adhere to pantheistic tenets. The Nahua with whom we have worked still partake of a world view based on the autochthonous pantheon—spirit entities in a “nonhierarchical ordering” (following Maffie 2014: 100–113)—in which absolute evil or good do not exist as mutually exclusive characteristics. They view humans and spirit entities (and all things) as imbued with positive and negative attributes in a constant state of balance and imbalance.

If Musgrave-Portilla and others who have noted these incongruences are correct, it is probable that the Spaniards, who wrote so extensively about Mesoamerica, were uncritical if not wholly unaware of their own deeply held beliefs in the existential dualism of good and evil and thus imposed this understanding on the ethnographic information they recorded. An excellent example of the process can be found in the 1629 treatise on indigenous beliefs and practices written by Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón (1984), edited and translated by J. Richard Andrews and Ross Hassig. The work is a litany of condemnations of preconquest survivals based on Spanish understandings of alien traditions. The sixteenth-century Spanish friars themselves, as exemplified by Fray Ruiz de Alarcón, believed in the existence of sorcerers and witches, but their conception was far different from that of the people they were trying to convert to Christianity. A telling example of the divergence between Spanish and indigenous world views revealed by Ruiz de Alarcón is the Christian concept of the Devil (Aguirre Beltrán 1963: 110–111). This figure represented absolute evil to the Spaniards and must have puzzled indigenous people when they first encountered it. That the Spaniards equated certain Nahua spirit entities with the Devil must have been doubly mysterious (Cervantes 1994: 40–73).¹⁸

It should be kept in mind that the sixteenth-century chroniclers wrote about the urban centers of Mesoamerica and almost completely neglected the rural areas where the beliefs

and practices continue to survive and even thrive. Both urban and rural ideological systems are based on a common Mesoamerican tradition, but it is likely that native scholars and theologians, particularly in the Aztec Triple Alliance, were recasting the religion to fit the needs of the emerging state. Religion at the center may have taken a more polytheistic slant than at the rural periphery of the empire, and it may have hardened after the postconquest introduction of definitive distinctions between good and evil. The urban societies were clearly in transition when the Spaniards arrived, and their writings inevitably reflect this situation. Because the chroniclers neglected the periphery, ethnohistorians face a challenge in documenting urban-rural differences in beliefs and practices at the time of conquest. In the aftermath of the Spanish Inquisition and colonial rule, it was largely left up to the inhabitants of small, dispersed villages to adapt their Mesoamerican religious traditions and world view to the tenets of late-medieval Spanish Catholicism.

Nahua Spirit Entities Related to Sorcery

Among the contemporary Nahua in the rural Huasteca Veracruzana, there are a number of beings linked to sorcery. The fearsome leader of dead souls in *mictlan* (literally, “place of the dead” in Nahuatl) continues to be identified in local parlance as *tlacatecolotl* (in Spanish, *hombre búho*, which we translate as “man owl” but is also styled “owl man” or “human owl”)—a creature considered to be a dangerous *nahualli* who may bring death to a sick person (Sandstrom and Sandstrom 1986: 78–79; Sandstrom 1991: 251, 260). Owls or their manifestations may foretell or hasten the arrival of a frightening creature called *miquiliztli*, (“death”), who is portrayed in cut paper as a skeleton. Death also has a counterpart in sixteenth-century Mesoamerican belief systems surrounding the personage of Mictlantecuhtli (“ruler of the underworld”) (Nicholson 1971: 427–428). A patron of sorcerers who may be a sorcerer himself or herself continues to be called *tlahueliloc* (“wrathful one”). *Tlahueliloc* is the image of a person who loses his balance on the slippery earth and provides an example of what happens to people who fail to control their anger when dealing with others. A female counterpart to *tlahueliloc* is the *tzitzimitl*, a kind of hag or crone who is also associated with sorcery. Among contemporary storytellers, the *tzitzimitl* sometimes appears as a kind of vampire who sucks blood from her victims or as a murderous recluse living alone in the forest. These spirit entities and several related ones in the chroniclers’ accounts are found among the Nahua of Amatlán. Of course, there have been significant changes in the belief systems over a half-millennium, but the continuities are truly remarkable. All of these creatures are today considered dangerous and all are associated with sorcery, but each one can be recruited through ritual offerings to use their power to help people resolve crises. It is worth reemphasizing that none—with the exception of the *tetlachihuiquetl*, mentioned earlier—are believed to be exclusively evil.

Hugo Nutini and John Roberts present ethnographic data on witchcraft and sorcery beliefs among Nahua people in the neighboring state of Tlaxcala that reveal some of the complexities and regional variations in the belief systems. Their focus is on what they term “bloodsucking witchcraft,” but they also summarize what they know about several types of

“supernatural practitioners” that play a role in contemporary beliefs (Nutini and Roberts 1993: 39). Interestingly, these same practitioners were first described among the Nahua of Tlaxcala by Frederick Starr (1901), an American anthropologist who traveled to the region between 1898 and 1900, thus underscoring that the system of beliefs is somewhat stable. The first practitioner Nutini and Roberts describe is the *tezitlazc*, who controls weather phenomena (1993: 40). We have been unable to confirm the existence of this practitioner in the belief systems of Amatlán or the surrounding region. The second is the *nahual* (*nahualli* or *nahuali* in different spellings), which they describe as a transforming trickster, who steals, deceives, and is basically a prankster (1993: 43). The authors are clear that the *nahual* is not malevolent, as has been described for other areas of Mexico. A third practitioner is the *tetlachihuic* or *tetlachihuique* (47–53), clearly the counterpart to the *tetlachihuiquetl* of Amatlán. However, in opposition to our information from the southern Huasteca, Nutini and Roberts identify this creature as a sorcerer who can do good or evil and who pursues its goals using learned techniques based on innate “inclinations” or “latent dispositions” (48). Apparently, people value them for the services they provide but at the same time fear and avoid them. The authors present data that seem ambiguous on the question of whether or not witch-like inclinations are truly innate for this particular type of practitioner. At one point they state, “There is nothing inherent or hereditary about the tetlachihuics’ craft” (48), and yet they also contend that these inclinations are “implanted there at birth by evil, personified supernaturals” (49). The final practitioner they name, and the major focus of their study, is the *tlahuelpuchi* or “bloodsucking witch,” a creature that can transform into animals to suck the blood from people (54). The authors label this class of secretive practitioners “witches” and assert that they have inborn powers and “personify the exclusively evil and malevolent aspects of the supernatural struggle that constantly affects humans” (54).

The information that Nutini and Roberts present for the Tlaxcalan Nahua is clearly at variance with the information we have collected among Nahua of the southern Huasteca. We find no evidence of the *tezitlazc* (or its variant spellings), and although we have heard of the *tlahuelpuchi* as a dangerous bird-like creature similar to the *nahualli*, it apparently does not play a significant role in Nahua beliefs in Amatlán; Montoya Briones (1964: 173–176) also notes the similarities between these two creatures in the Sierra Norte de Puebla. According to our research, the *nahuali* is indeed very dangerous and a nocturnal bloodsucker. It cannot be seen as a simple trickster, as reported by Nutini and Roberts. Our findings suggest that the *tetlachihuiquetl* is the evil-incarnate sorcerer, while for Nutini and Roberts it is an ambivalent creature capable of both good and evil. We do not question the accuracy of their reporting but assume that there is a great deal of variation in beliefs from one part of Mexico to another. The Nahua of Tlaxcala have been subject to major forces of modernization and proletarianization, and the authors state that their book is about “culture loss and decay” (1993: xi). They stress the syncretic nature of Tlaxcalan Nahua religion and do not characterize it as pantheistic. In fact, in quite the opposite vein they write about the “almost Zoroastrian belief of the people in the constant struggle that goes on between the good supernaturals propitious to human existence . . . and the evil anthropomorphic supernaturals antagonistic to human well-being” (49). This distinction between good and evil supernaturals, we argue, probably reflects Spanish influence. In contrast, we offer evidence to

document the fact that the Nahua do view the world as a struggle—not between good and evil but between order and disorder, harmony and disharmony, respect and disrespect, excess and moderation. There is no reason to expect that Hispanic and African influences on Nahua perspectives over the past 500 years have been uniform or systematic, nor that Nahua resistance to domination has been consistent or sustained. The episodic and unpredictable nature of the interactions between Spaniards, Africans, and New World peoples undoubtedly accounts for much of the variation in Nahua history and culture witnessed today.

Felix Báez-Jorge and Arturo Gómez Martínez (1998) link the ambiguous nature of *tlacatecolotl* in the contemporary Huastecan Nahua pantheon with the ancient conception of *Tezcatlipoca*.¹⁹ They make the case that “[a]mong the Nahuas of Chicontepec, Good and Bad are not conceived as absolute ethical opposites, but as contingencies whose negative or positive sense depends on the context in which the behavior unfolds in accord with a pre-Hispanic pattern of thought. In this ideational frame the [contemporary] beliefs surrounding *Tlacatecolotl* can be explained” (1998: 15–16).²⁰ They point to, among other sources, Fray Andrés de Olmos’s efforts to overlay the Nahua concept of *tlacatecolotl* with that of the Christian Devil (Olmos [1553] 1990: 13, cited in Báez-Jorge and Gómez Martínez 1998: 63). However, they argue (1998: 74–75) that the world view of the Nahua of Chicontepec (as elsewhere in the Huasteca region of Mexico) preserves the original ambivalent character of this figure as one who serves to arbitrate or mediate among the forces that threaten the fragile equilibrium between good (*cualli*) and bad (*axcualli*, literally, “not good”) (75). Two orations by Nahua ritual specialists, recorded and translated by Gómez Martínez, beg *tlacatecolotl* (addressed as “*hombrecito búho*” or “little owl man”) not to become enraged and send illness or malignant winds, but to accept the array of food and other offerings made in this spirit entity’s name (Báez-Jorge 2003: 496–497, 515–521). This malign figure is one that can be propitiated, unlike the Christian Devil.

Ritual specialists among the Huastecan Nahua cut paper images of each of the most dangerous entities and use them in ritual offerings. [Figure 3.1](#) portrays the diversity of stylistic conventions of these cut-paper renditions.²¹ *Tlacatecolotl*, for example, is portrayed with animal horns, a tail, and rib holes to illustrate his dangerous nature and association with death ([figure 3.1a](#)). The “wife of owl man,” *tlacatecolotl cihuatl* ([figure 3.1b](#)), is also cut from paper; both images are blackened with charcoal from the fireplace to symbolize their dark, hideous character. *Tlahueliloc* (“wrath”) ([figure 3.1c](#)) is depicted as an anthropomorphic figure with a long animal tail in order to associate this creature with wild, untamed forces. The figure of *miquiliztli* (“death”) ([figure 3.1d](#)) is represented as a skeleton with dangerous teeth, bones, and other frightening attributes. The *tzitzimil* ([figure 3.1e](#)) is a crone with long hair that looks like a ghostly apparition cut from black paper. The *nagual* ([figure 3.1f](#)) depicted here is a fearsome half-human–half-animal winged creature. The ritual specialists make very clear through their cuttings that these are unwholesome, terrifying beings. They all travel at night, attack the sick, and bring death to the community. And yet each of these manifest horrors can be persuaded, cajoled, and encouraged. Precisely because they are not completely outside of the social universe they can be made to cooperate with human interests.

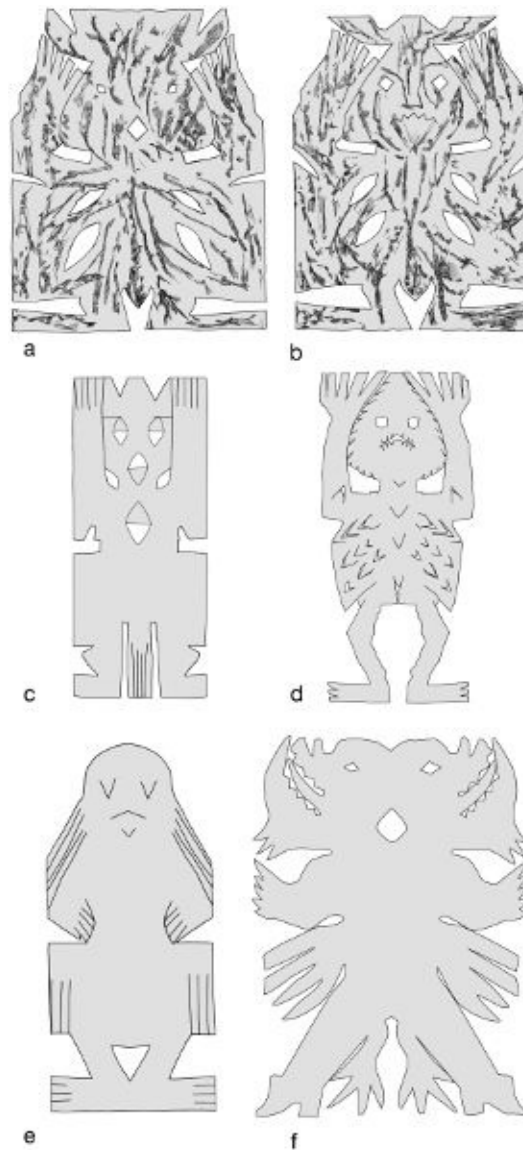


Figure 3.1. Paper images of dangerous spirit entities associated with death and the underworld, including (a) *tlacatecolotl*, (b) *tlacatecolotl cihuatl*, (c) *tlahueliloc*, (d) *miquliztli*, (e) *tzitzimil*, and (f) *nagual*.

The paradoxical quality of these creatures can be seen in stories that the Nahuatl tell about them. A segment from a story we recorded in 1990 about a *tzitzimil* who was both a *nahualli* and vampire woman reveals the multivalent symbolism attached to this fear-inspiring creature:

A woman had three sons and these three men worried about their mother because she always served them blood to eat. They were worried about where she obtained the blood she served them. They pretended to go to their milpas but instead spied on their mother to find out where she got the blood. After they left, their mother removed her two legs and turned into a bird. She turned into a bird and flew far away to suck blood. She then carried the blood back in her body. When she returned, when she came back, she vomited up the blood and cooked it. This is the food she gave to her sons. They exclaimed upon seeing it, “Who knows how she does this?” This bird fed her sons with the

blood she brought back. They were horrified and threw ashes on the joints of her legs. They threw ashes where her bones join and she couldn't put them on again. She stayed a bird forever, and they called her vampire woman.²² (Sandstrom and Sandstrom 1990: narration 26, told by Domingo Lagos Hernández)

Note how this creature fits Nahua conceptions. She is dangerous and she apparently kills without mercy. In the Western tradition vampires crave blood to keep themselves alive. However, in this story the *tzitzimitl* kills in order to get blood to feed her children. She obtains blood to give food, which is the greatest expression of love among the Nahua.²³ Her problem is not that she is evil but that she is excessive (i.e., unbalanced, immoderate, indulgent) in her love for her children. She has fallen off the slippery earth.

A story recounting the origin of maize (paraphrased here from multiple narrators' accounts²⁴) conveys this fundamental principle of Nahua religious belief and practice:

There was a *tzitzimitl* who lived with her beautiful daughter deep in the forest. The old woman was afraid that her daughter would marry and leave her alone, so she took great pains to keep her away from other people. When her daughter was not working around the house, she was forced to stay in a large earthenware pot and no visitor was allowed to see her. The only time she left the house was to go to the spring. One day, when she was drawing water, a beautiful deer appeared, and as she glanced away it turned into a handsome young man. The young man (who was in fact the deer spirit and future father of maize) tried to speak to her, but she hurried back to the house. The *tzitzimitl* was furious when she heard about the young man and she insisted that the girl get back into her cooking pot. Later that evening, the old woman heard laughing coming from the pot and became alarmed. She opened the lid and found a flea inside the pot with the girl. The young man had turned into a flea so that he could visit the girl.

There are many variants of this story, but the resolution of this version explains how people have come to live on earth:

A short while later, the girl became pregnant and gave birth to an extraordinary boy they called Seven Flower, the maize spirit. From the start, the boy's grandmother, the *tzitzimitl*, resented him. She tried on a number of occasions to kill him but he miraculously survived each attack. Finally, she enticed him into the sweatbath and piled on the wood to burn him alive. He emerged unharmed and talked his grandmother into entering the sweatbath herself. Once inside, she was instantly reduced to ashes and Seven Flower carefully collected them in a pot. He gave the pot to the toad and told him to dump the ashes into the sea without looking inside. The toad, giving in to his

curiosity, opened the pot and unleashed all of the stinging insects that today plague human beings. Some of the grandmother's ashes fell into the sea and they became the caiman. The caiman is the earth spirit, and we humans now live on the caiman's back—the surface of the earth.

Once again, we see in these accounts the *tzitzimitl* behaving not so much as an evil force but as a mother who loves her daughter too much. She tried to sequester the girl to prevent her from marrying and going off with her husband. Her immoderate behavior was reinforced when she repeatedly attempted to kill her grandson, a competitor for her daughter's affection. She tried everything, but he kept coming back alive—just as human beings plant the maize in the earth, grind it on a metate, and cook it on the comal, and it keeps coming back year after year to support people. The *tzitzimitl* paid for her excesses when she was killed in the sweatbath. Her bitter and disagreeable nature was shown when the ashes became stinging insects. But in the end she became the earth monster that supports human existence. The story is an excellent illustration of how the Nahua conceive of evil: even the hideous hag who repeatedly tries to kill her maize-spirit grandson possesses redeeming qualities.

Among the contemporary Nahua, a man or woman bent on sorcery presents a completely different kind of being—someone who is apparently evil in the Christian sense. The Nahua in our study link sorcerers to the Christian Devil, a personification that was clearly introduced by the Spaniards. But the Nahua exhibit an ambiguous attitude towards the Devil. When people speak of this enemy of God, he appears to reflect the Christian representation of absolute evil, and there seems to be a consensus that it was the Devil who was responsible for Jesus' death. However, the Nahua with whom we have worked may also casually refer, when speaking Spanish, to the underworld figures created from paper for curing or cleansing rituals as “devils” (*diablos*), and sometimes they refer to *tlacatecolotl* as “the Devil.” And yet these figures as represented in paper clearly enter into exchanges with ritual specialists and therefore respond to the pleadings of human beings.

In Nahua oral narratives of this region, the Devil is often spoken of in slightly comic tones. While his character may be a heavy or malign presence in the story, he is usually outsmarted by the hero. During Carnival (*nanahuatilli*), a dancer once portrayed the Devil by dressing in an old army uniform. He danced around with his masked and costumed helpers and made a spectacle of himself, to the delight of the onlookers. Of course, one of the purposes of Carnival worldwide is to mock that which is taken seriously during normal times, so the antics of this dancer are not difficult to interpret. We can see that the contemporary Huastecan Nahua, influenced by Spanish definitions, have partially assimilated the Devil into their magico-religious beliefs while at the same time preserving the propitiatory capacity ascribed to similar dangerous beings.²⁵

The sorcerer frightens in a way unlike the other dangerous entities that figure in the Nahua pantheon; what most alarms is the possibility that anyone can be a sorcerer. A sorcerer may be one's own neighbor or even a kinsman; one rarely knows a sorcerer's identity for sure. They may appear as a normal person during the day but by night go about in the guise of their *nahualli*. People who seek revenge search out sorcerers so as to employ their wicked

powers against enemies. Many people agree that the most dangerous sorcerers are curers who have gone bad—they are the paradoxical *curers who kill*. The reason for this assertion is that curers have the detailed knowledge of the cosmos, the pantheon, and the techniques for dealing with spirit entities—the capacities that make them truly dangerous and thus difficult to detect and stop (see Aguirre Beltrán 1963: 93). These curers gone bad cut the paper images to do harm rather than to cure or restore the exchange cycle between human and spirit realms.

Nahua curers run the considerable risk of being accused of sorcery. In rural communities like Amatlán, people commonly die from unknown causes, and there is always a danger that someone may blame a curer for a family member's demise. Such accusations are hard to fend off. Even when a person succumbs to a familiar illness, the question of why he or she became sick in the first place or at a particular time remains unanswered. In such cases, people often say the victim died from *ataques* ("attacks"), an ambiguous term that could include assault by a sorcerer. As mentioned above, Nahua curers are typically called to their profession by dreams or some other means interpreted as a sign. Once summoned, a person has little choice but to comply. But because of the fear of being accused of sorcery, many people evade the call to cure. We have recorded at least two instances of curers being murdered on suspicion of sorcery (Sandstrom 1991: 234; also Montoya Briones 1964: 158). In the case of Amatlán, the murders always took place at the periphery, far away from the community center and under mysterious circumstances. Anyone willing to speak of the events expressed confidence that each of these individuals had met their end at the hand of some relative of the suspected victims. Sorcerers cannot be reasoned with—they are inhuman, evil, and (as people hinted) must be killed when their identities are revealed.²⁶

We have information about a kind of sorcerer's brotherhood or sisterhood that supposedly meets at midnight in a cemetery (presumably a European scenario) to hold a ritual investiture that somehow involves the irregularly shaped root of the camote (a sweet potato-like tuber). It appears that sorcerers are dedicated to the service of wrath (*tlahueliloc*) and that they use paper images of death (*miquiliztli*) to kill their victims. The *nahualli* of a sorcerer is said by the Nahua of Amatlán to be a bird-like creature that perches in the thatch of the roof, lowers a string or small tube, and sucks blood from people at night. Like the bloodsucking witches reported in Tlaxcala by Nutini and Roberts (1993), the creature is partial to the sweet blood of newborn babies and children. People may place an opened pair of scissors near the cradle because this type of *nahualli* is repelled by metal and gets tangled in the blades when it tries to take the child's blood. What makes sorcerers so aberrant is that one cannot reason with them. They are not like other people or spirit entities, as they utterly lack the social qualities that allow normal interaction and obligation through exchange.

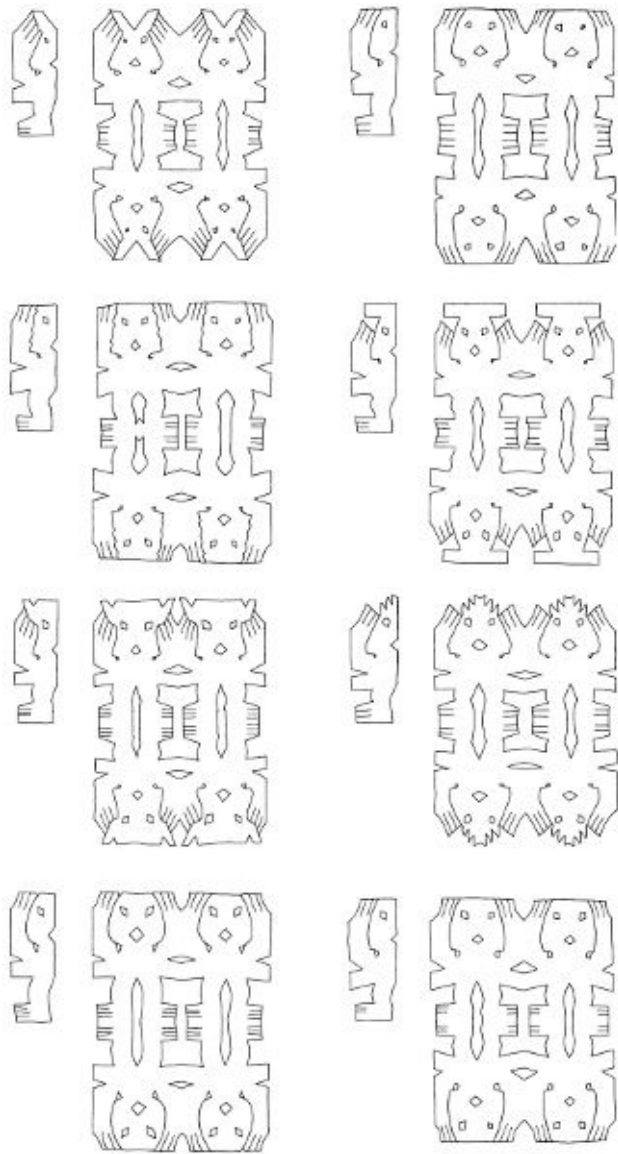
Nahua curers will determine through divination whether a sorcerer is the cause of an illness by crystal gazing or by casting kernels of maize and reading the result. With this knowledge, they can then take steps to counteract a sorcerer's harmful acts on behalf of the victim. They cut a special set of paper images for such curing rituals to represent the disease and misfortune sent by the sorcerer. Called *tlacotontli*, these images are portrayed in colorful tissue paper as four adjoining, anthropomorphic figures. They are diminutive, cut much

smaller than the images of ordinary disease-causing wind spirits. When asked about the spirit entities represented by these cuttings, one ritual specialist made the following comments: “People with a ‘bad heart’ [i.e., sorcerers] send these malevolent spirits [embodied by the *tlacotontli*] to attack their victims. They move with the wind. They break everything and cause people to be confused.” The speaker went on to emphasize that such spirits are essentially similar and are all equally vigilant in their “search for envy or envious talk.” They “go where they like,” “strike down and deceive people,” and are “very, very hard.” Our friends in Amatlán identified these figures as *tlacotontli*, but an ambiguity exists in how the term is applied or generally understood. According to one person, *tlacotontli* refers to a small preventive ritual designed to deflect or thwart sorcery or envy. Gómez Martínez (2013: 197–198) writes that the term refers to part of the cleansing/curing where the ritual specialist gathers the paper images after offerings have been poured on them and removes them from the shrine. However, contemporary Nahuatl speakers have variously translated the term into Spanish as *cortar* (“to cut”), *reventar* (“burst or wreck”), or *destruir* (“destroy”), each of which seems to apply to the dangerous spirit entities embodied in the paper cuttings rather than to a ritual. Over the centuries, the word has perhaps changed meaning. In the sixteenth century Fray Molina defined *tlacotontli* (in part, in our translation) as “something diminished, or cut, something reduced” (Molina [1571] 1944: 119).²⁷ This portion of Molina’s definition of the term could apply equally to the diminutive paper cuttings or an abbreviated cleansing/curing ritual. It is possible that in Amatlán the cut-paper figures take their name from the ritual of which they are a part.

Unlike most other paper figures, the individual images of *tlacotontli* do not appear to have separate identities but are associated generally with the dangerous winds and have such nonspecific designations as *xochiehecatl* (“flower wind”), *tlazolli ehecatl* (“filth wind”), *cuatitlan ehecatl* or *cuatipan ehecatl* (meaning “forest wind,” perhaps in reference to the disordered, tangled underbrush of the forest). The four figures depicted in each *tlacotontli* image are joined at the sides, hands, and feet (although we have also seen reversed examples, joined at the head). They are described as *compañeros* (“companions”) of each other, and the curer indicated that each cutting includes a woman, a man, and two children that seem to be organized into a kind of malignant family. The ritual specialist pointed to several of the *tlacotontli* cuttings and said that two of the figures were *malos aires* (“bad airs” or “bad winds”), another was *mal tierra* (“bad earth”), and a fourth was “*olor de cabeza*” (possibly an epithet or a mispronounced reference to *dolor de cabeza* or “headache”). Commenting on the other figures, the curer identified one with a rake-like headdress representing growing plants as “bad earth,” and two others with horned or wave-shaped headgear that signifies water as “bad water.”

Figure 3.2 contains a set of fourteen *tlacotontli* images cut for a typical curing ritual that entails counter-sorcery. The line drawing on the left of each pair of drawings shows the folded paper as the figure is cut out by the ritual specialist, and next to it, the figure is shown unfolded for use during the ritual. These unnamed *tlacotontli* images do not take their place in the array alongside the other paper depictions of specific dangerous wind spirits but instead are separated into four piles (of three or four paper cuttings each), and placed around the periphery with assorted sacred cleansing herbs that the curer has selected and neatly

assembled into bundles.



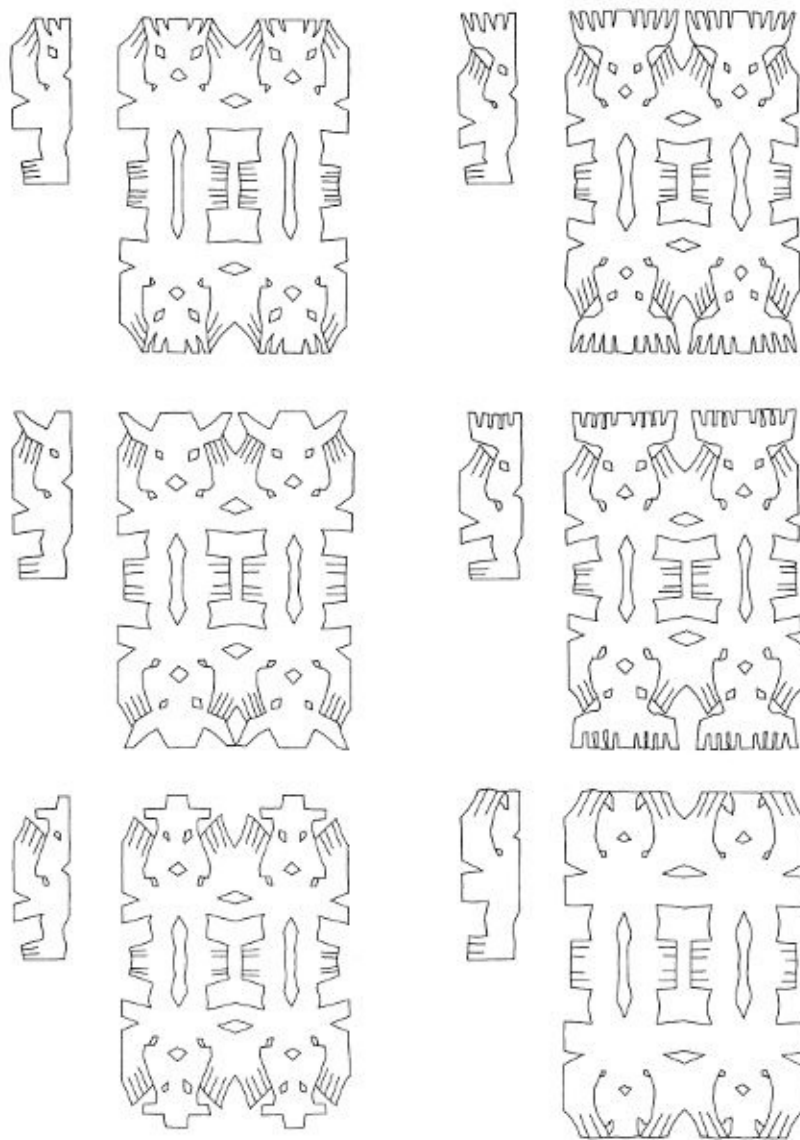


Figure 3.2. Fourteen *tlacotontli* figures, not individually identified, each shown folded (top) and opened (bottom).

Figure 3.3 is a diagram of an array for a cleansing/curing ritual that we have observed. Paper images of wind spirits have been cut by the curer and carefully laid out on the house floor in rows on top of four rectangular, decoratively cut paper beds called *tlapechmeh* (sing. *tlapechtli*) in Nahuatl (in Spanish, *cama* or *petate*, from the Nahuatl *petlatl*, a woven palm sleeping mat). At the base of the array are twelve paper images of dangerous spirits associated with death and the underworld, blackened with charcoal from the fireplace. Each image has a lighted cigarette placed in its mouth as a tobacco offering. The array is encircled by a vine-and-marigold loop used to cleanse the patient's body of lingering wind spirits. Just outside the loop are four piles containing the fourteen *tlacotontli* figures. The two closest to the loop are placed on top of the bundles of sacred herbs (lower left and right). Several of the figures are draped over a vessel of water taken from the patient's bathing place (far lower right), while the remainder are placed nearby on a packet of earth from the patient's house. Inside the loop are palm-and-marigold brooms used to brush and cleanse the patient during the ritual. Bundles of beeswax candles (left) and tallow candles (right) are laid nearby. Lighted beeswax candles in braziers or freestanding on the earth are represented in the

diagram by small darkened circles; six lighted tallow candles (shown by open circles) flank the smoking copal incense brazier at the bottom of the array (lower center). On top of the paper figures, during the course of the ritual, the ritual specialist places three soft-drink bottles, six cups containing coffee and bread, and a sacrificed baby chick whose blood he sprinkles on the offerings.

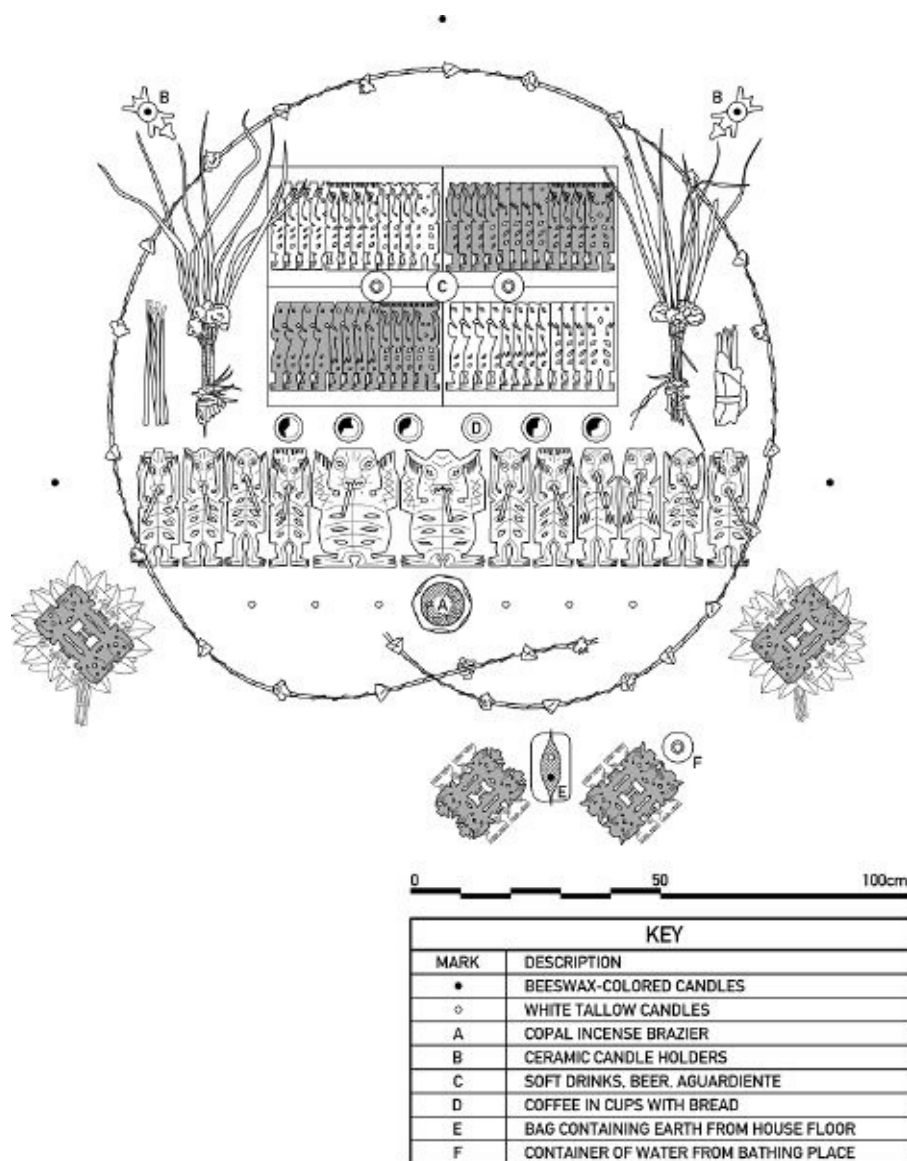


Figure 3.3. Diagram of a typical Nahua cleansing/curing array showing paper figures and ritual offerings.

During the ritual the curer delivers a sequence of heartfelt chants over the paper images, imploring each one to accept its share of the offerings, including the sacrificial blood. He takes up the *tlacotontli* images in a bundle with the sacred herbs, rubs them over the body of the patient, and then tears them into small bits while chanting and exhaling forcefully over them.²⁸ While a curer cannot directly engage with sorcerers, he or she nonetheless has the ability to intercept and cleanse the area of the diseases and misfortunes that they send out to afflict their victims. Although the techniques of sorcery and counter-sorcery may not be identical, we can assume that the ritual practices entail similar strategies. Signorini and Lupo (1992: 81) state that “the instruments used for healing action are the same as those used to do

harm” among the contemporary Sierra de Puebla Nahua.

Conclusion

Aguirre Beltrán has suggested that elements of contemporary indigenous beliefs regarding sorcery derive from the belief systems introduced by the Spaniards and African slaves. In his monumental work *Medicina y magia: El proceso de aculturación en la estructura colonial* (1963) he presents an extended discussion of medical beliefs and practices in Mexico from pre-Hispanic to modern times. He includes sorcery in the discussion because it is intimately linked to health and curing. He is definitive in stating that from the beginning of the colonial period, processes of acculturation influenced the evolving medical system: “Native American, Black African, and Spanish medicine came into contact at the moment of the discovery and conquest of Anáhuac [Valley of Mexico]” (Aguirre Beltrán 1963: 78).²⁹ Thus, ethnographers working among indigenous groups in Mesoamerica are not dealing with mere remnants of pre-Hispanic peoples and cultures. Rather, the cultures of the region are products of the great clash between the Old and New Worlds.³⁰ According to Aguirre Beltrán, “[Contemporary] indigenous culture is no longer the original pre-Cortesian culture, although it continues to be a complete culture that is easily identifiable as indigenous” (1963: 273).³¹ Included in this general statement are areas of social life that normally remain hidden from view, such as beliefs surrounding sorcery and aspects of ritual practice.

Concerning the *nahualli/nahuali* or transforming sorcerer, Aguirre Beltrán writes, “The *nahuali*, from the time of the conquest, has lost its ancient socially productive attributes. On the other hand, it has preserved the malign characteristics attributed to it by the sublime fear of a people who are anxious about the uncertainties of rainfall agriculture” (1963: 99).³² Later in the book he writes of the *nagual* and other spirit entities, including the *chan* (a kind of water spirit) and *sombra* (a soul concept), saying:

The *nagual*, *brujo*, *chan*, *tona*, and *sombra* were originally complexes with definite characteristics that performed specific functions in the societies where they existed. The unexpected domination by Spaniards and the arrival of Black Africans, with the subsequent creation of a mixed population, created culture conflict. The above-mentioned complexes were blended and reinterpreted giving birth to new complexes that today still retain the original names. But even though their content has been modified, it is possible only with great difficulty to disentangle the concepts that gave birth to the original complexes.(114)³³

Contemporary Nahua sorcerers contradict the pantheistic basis of the religion because they personify evil in a world in which everybody and everything partakes of the sacred and wherein it is impossible to classify spirit entities as solely good or bad. Apparently—and improbably—they alone among the entities of the cosmos are not suffused with the sacred power of *totiotzin*. They exude the moral quality of evil and, thus, are exceptions to the

overall Nahua world view, existing outside of the normal cycle of exchanges between humans and the spirit world. Sorcerers stand apart from the delicately balanced Nahua cosmos, the continuity of which depends on fine-tuned cycles of reciprocity between human beings and spirit entities. They have their own set of rituals that feed on envy, greed, and people's sometimes murderous intentions. They are closely affiliated with the Devil, a figure that did not exist in the pre-Hispanic world and that represents an obvious case of borrowing from Spanish missionaries. Unlike all other Nahua spirit entities and malevolent figures, sorcerers do not respond to human intentions, desires, and reciprocal obligations.

To the sixteenth-century Nahua and other indigenous groups in Mesoamerica, this form of sorcery represented a new conception of evil that had no direct counterpart in their traditional belief systems. Their religious ideology, informed by pantheism, acknowledged that terrible events befall people and that suffering, disease, and death are intrinsic to the human condition. They recognized that people could be selfish or injure and kill others for their own gain, and from their perspective the cosmos incorporated wicked creatures capable of disarticulating people's foot bones and eating their hearts. But one does not find spirit entities, creatures, or human beings that are uniformly evil without a trace of redeeming qualities. Sin for pre-Hispanic and contemporary Nahua has to do with excess, imbalance, and disequilibrium; deviation from the path of moderation is the root cause of the problems of the world. Burkhart (1989: 168) remarks that, for the Spanish friars, "moderation meant not doing too much of a bad thing; for the Nahua it meant not doing too much of anything," and thus immoderation was (and still is) viewed as disrespectful behavior. Disrespect—for the earth and others, including the spirits—is what accounts for people's suffering. A loving God and a malign Devil as universal figures must have seemed alien, otherworldly, and singularly unbelievable to Mesoamericans who first encountered these ideas. It is possible, even before the Spanish Conquest, that indigenous priests and scholars were already in the process of modifying theological concepts in the urban centers to accommodate needs of the state. Perhaps they were redefining evil, inadvertently making it more compatible with conceptions brought by the Spaniards. In any event, it is unlikely that such changes affected people in the thousands of small remote communities like Amatlán where the ancient beliefs and practices survive.

The conquest and its aftermath represented a cataclysm that changed the lives of the peoples of Mesoamerica. The new context opened up the possibility of novel beliefs and redefinitions of old ones. The European sorcerer, aligned with the Devil as well as the African sorcerer, found a place in the magico-religious systems of villages throughout the culture area. To outsiders such as ourselves, the sorcerer's role and practices appear to contradict basic tenets of the Native American world view. However, seeming contradictions found in most philosophical and religious systems do not cause apparent discomfort for most believers. Examples include free will and the omniscient deity of most Christian faiths, or the unity of *samsara* and *nirvana* in sects of Buddhism or Hinduism. A species of evil existed in pre-Hispanic religion, but it is articulated within the belief system in ways that are very different from Christianity. The Nahua of today who carry on the traditional practices may see the sorcerer simply as a figure that sharpens the distinction between good and evil without threatening the pantheistic foundation of their beliefs. It is interesting that the

contemporary curing specialist (an ambivalent figure in any case) is thought to be potentially the most dangerous root of sorcery. These warriors who place themselves in danger to protect the community from disease and disorder can, through circumstances unknown, become curers who kill. They exemplify the best—and the worst—of social life, an unending agonistic struggle true to the Nahua pantheistic world view.

We undertook this study in order to address what to us seemed an anomaly in Huastecan Nahua religion and world view, namely the evil sorcerer. If additional research reveals that the Nahua *tetlachihuiquetl* does indeed have a salutary side, then the new findings will match those of Nutini and Roberts (1993) in Tlaxcala. They will also better reflect beliefs reported from the highlands in the sixteenth century. All of our information to the present, however, reveals the Nahua sorcerer to be oddly out of place in the array of positive and negative figures in the Nahua magico-religious system. It is evident that many contemporary Nahua beliefs, spirit entities, ritual practices such as paper cutting, and conceptions of the layered divisions of the cosmos trace to the ancient era. The core ideas of the Nahua cosmos and the place of human beings within it clearly predate the conquest; even the sorcerers themselves share names and attributes with their pre-Hispanic counterparts. But the contemporary sorcerer seems to have come from another reality. We confirm the suggestions by Aguirre Beltrán, Musgrave-Portilla, and other scholars of contemporary Nahua religion that the concept of sorcerers and sorcery indeed comes from worlds, namely Spain and possibly Africa, unimagined by the people of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica.

Authors' Note

The information in this chapter was first presented March 2, 2007, at Princeton University Art Museum in a slide show–lecture entitled “Curers Who Kill: Medicine and Sorcery among the Nahua of Northern Veracruz, Mexico,” in association with the exhibition “Sorcerers of the Fifth Heaven: Nahua Art and Ritual of Ancient Southern Mexico,” curated by John M.D. Pohl, January 27–April 28, 2007 (see Pohl 2007). We want to thank Frances Berdan, Kata Faust, Alessandro Lupo, James Maffie, Kim Richter, Jesús Ruvalcaba Mercado, Esther Sandstrom, John Sandstrom, and James Taggart for offering comments and corrections on earlier versions of this chapter.

Notes

1. The Huasteca is a well-known region in east-central Mexico, the precise borders of which are a matter of dispute. The large territory of the Huasteca comprises parts of six states—Veracruz, San Luis Potosí, Hidalgo, Puebla, Tamaulipas, and Querétaro—encompassing ninety-two *municipios* in 1990 (Sandstrom 1995: 194) that, by the same definition in 2000, is divided into ninety-four separate *municipios*. The name “Huasteca” derives from the Nahuatl for the Maya-speaking people who occupied much of the region from ancient times. These people refer to themselves as “Teenek,” although they are known throughout Mexico and in many published sources as *los huastecos*.
2. Our spelling of Nahuatl words corrects past practice and conforms to the orthographic system adopted by the team of indigenous lexicographers working at the University of Zacatecas (see Sullivan et al. 2016). Reflecting the usage of contemporary Huastecan Nahuatl speakers in the same region where we have conducted long-term field research, the

recently published monolingual dictionary largely complements the orthography in Karttunen (1983), although we persist in not marking vowel length.

3. Hugo Nutini and John Roberts (1993: 12–38) provide a useful overview of the classic anthropological literature on witchcraft and sorcery. Timothy Knab (1995) offers a personalized case study of Nahua sorcery in the Sierra de Puebla. Compare definitions of sorcery, witchcraft, magic, and shamanism by Phillips Stevens (1996), Roy Willis (1998), Hugo Nutini (2001), Laura Lewis (2003), Isak Niehaus (2004), and also Donald Joralemon (2001), who calls for greater precision in terminology.
4. For readers not familiar with the Nahua, they are Native Americans who speak the Nahuatl language—the same language spoken by several well-known groups in Mesoamerica that included the Mexica (Aztec), Tlaxcalans, and probably the Toltecs. Nahuatl is related to languages spoken in the American Southwest, including Ute, Paiute, Shoshone, Hopi, and Comanche. In Mexico today Nahuatl (or its dialects) is the most prevalent indigenous language, with between 1,376,026 speakers five years and older and upwards of 2 million people living in households headed by a speaker of Nahuatl (INEGI 2009: 35, 37). In 2000, 460,736 people who reported speaking the language lived in the ninety-four *municipios* that formed the Huasteca region (see the tabulation from INEGI 2006 in Sandstrom 2000a). Today Chicontepec and Ixhuatlán de Madero in Veracruz are among the ten *municipios* in the country in which the number of speakers exceeds 20,000, and the nearby *municipio* of Huehutla de Reyes, Hidalgo, tops the list (INEGI 2009: 37). See Sandstrom (1995) for 1990 census figures and a cultural and demographic survey of the Huastecan Nahua, Sandstrom (1991) for an ethnographic account of the community of Amatlán, Sandstrom (2000a) and Sandstrom and García Valencia (2005) for surveys of contemporary Gulf Coast cultures, and Sandstrom (2010) for a concise overview of the Nahua in Mexico and Central America.
5. The relationships between pre-Hispanic and contemporary Mesoamerican belief systems cannot simply be assumed but must be demonstrated. Florescano (2000), for example, provides a fruitful discussion of the relationships between the cosmovision of ancient and modern peoples, and Báez-Jorge and Gómez Martínez (2000) offer a detailed summary of the cosmovision of the Nahua in neighboring Chicontepec, Veracruz. Leopoldo Trejo Barrientos and his coauthors (2014) continue this discussion of world view in finer detail, offering comparative case studies from throughout the central Huasteca region and a framework for understanding commonalities within the religious complex of *el costumbre* as expressed by Totonac, Nahua, Otomí (Ñähñu), and Tepehua practitioners.
6. In some parts of the world, sorcery and witchcraft as well as ritual countermeasures have been linked to disruptions caused by economic and social changes accompanying processes of globalization; see, for example, Per Zachrisson (2007) writing on Zimbabwe. We do not have sufficient historical or ethnographic information on the Nahua of the Huasteca to be able to assert similar connections.
7. We know from ethnohistorical records dating from the sixteenth century that ritual paper cutting was practiced by all major groups in Mesoamerica during the pre-Hispanic period and that the Spaniards outlawed papermaking and paper cutting in their efforts to abolish traditional Native American religions (Sandstrom and Sandstrom 1986). The southern Huasteca and neighboring Sierra Norte de Puebla are the only areas in Mesoamerica today where the craft continues and paper cutting plays such an important role in traditional rituals. In addition to being cut by the Nahua, the paper images are produced by Otomí (Ñähñu), Tepehua, and Totonac peoples of the region. Today recognized ritual specialists cut the images using scissors, but in pre-Hispanic days we presume that they cut the paper using razor-sharp obsidian blades. Although traditional handmade barkpaper, called *amatl* in Nahuatl (in Spanish, *amate*), is still used by some ritual specialists, most practitioners now cut images from industrially manufactured paper (*papel revolución*, *papel lustre*, *papel de china*, and other types) sold in local and regional markets. Some of the key sources on pre-Hispanic and contemporary ritual paper cutting, discussed in Sandstrom and Sandstrom (1986), include Hans Lenz ([1948] 1973), Roberto Williams García (1963), Alain Ichon (1969), and Bodil Christensen (1971). Sources for additional or updated information on the Mesoamerican paper complex include James Dow (1986, 2003), Arturo Gómez Martínez (2002), and Guy Stresser-Péan (2009).
8. Monaghan finds in Hermann Beyer's essay (1965: 398) on Aztec antiquities—first published in 1910 and a source for Hunt's own work—an early statement on pantheism, which he paraphrases in his own translation: “the 2,000 gods of the ancient Mexicans, rather than being an exaggerated polytheism, are so many manifestations of the One” (Monaghan 2000: 27). In his chapter examining a great range of evidence in support of his claims for a pantheistic basis of an Aztec process metaphysics, Maffie (2014: 116–121) addresses a number of noted scholars' objections to these arguments and offers a fine, clear explication of the differences between pantheism and animism.
9. For a comparison of conceptions of the divinity expressed in *teotl*, see Hunt (1977: 233); Burkhart (1989: 37); Sandstrom (1991: 241–242, 247–248); Cervantes (1994: 41); Levine (1994: 1–4, 7–8); and Maffie (2007: 16; 2014: 21–23, 93).

10. James Taggart (pers. comm., December 2009) provides an excellent example of the peripheral nature of witchcraft/sorcery practices among the Nahuatl of Huitzilán de Serdán in the Sierra Norte de Puebla. He writes: “Some mestizos in Huitzilán have claimed to be witches who had the power to prevent evildoers from killing loved ones in Nahuatl families. These mestizos have used their self-proclaimed powers to extort livestock and money from Nahuatl whose loved ones are ill.” In short, individuals at the periphery of the Nahuatl social world exploit their status differences by claiming special knowledge to deflect acts of sorcery.
11. In northern Veracruz today a curing specialist is called in Spanish *curandero/a* (“curer”), *adivina/o* (“diviner”), or sometimes by the general term *bruja/o* (“witch”), as noted. In contemporary Nahuatl the terms are *tlamatiquetl* (“person of knowledge”) or, alternatively, *pahchihquetl* (“medicine person”) and *tlachixquetl* (“diviner”) (Sandstrom 1991: 233). In the central highlands, the sixteenth-century chroniclers described various types of curing specialists, each with their own designation, many of whom underwent rigorous training and deserved to be called doctors in every sense of the word (Viesca Treviño 2001: 48). They worked on behalf of their clients’ health and well-being, and their medical beliefs and practices were in no sense inferior to the systems of healing brought by the Spaniards to the New World. Some of the pre-Hispanic names for practitioners, their techniques, and many of the ancient skills are perpetuated by today’s curing specialists. However, it is important to understand that the role of *curandero* that we find throughout Mesoamerica today was transformed to some extent in the sixteenth century and is a product of colonialism (Viesca Treviño 2001). Curing beliefs and practices throughout Mesoamerica are an amalgam of indigenous, Spanish, and African influences. Each of these traditions in turn is a combination of multiple antecedent traditions. Therefore, it is not unusual to find throughout the region today medical treatments originating among the Persians, Arabs, Greeks, Europeans, sub-Saharan Africa groups, and the peoples of the New World before the conquest (Hernández Sáenz and Foster 2001).
12. In the Spanish original: “El curandero es médico y hechicero, cura y daña; la ambivalencia de su conducta lo presenta a cada paso como un individuo francamente antisocial” (Aguirre Beltrán 1963: 83).
13. In the Spanish original: “El curandero . . . no sólo dispensa salud sino que, además, tiene la capacidad de provocar la enfermedad y la muerte” (Aguirre Beltrán 1963: 92).
14. In the Spanish original: “hechizero que hechiza a algunos” (Molina [1571] 1944: 108). Compare Sahagún ([1575–1580?] 1950–1982, bk. 10: 31), whose translators gloss *tetlachiuiani* as “enchanter,” and Nicholson (1971: 442), who defines the term as “inflicter of something on someone.” López Austin (1967) provides an extended discussion of more than forty conceptions of Nahua magicians and soothsayers; also see Bernard Ortiz de Montellano (2001: 219), who offers a list of terms for Aztec and Maya sorcerers.
15. For discussions of related concepts among neighboring Nahua communities, see José de Jesús Montoya Briones (1964: 153–158, 175–176), who worked in Atla in the Sierra Norte de Puebla; Edgar Martín del Campo (2006), who wrote a dissertation on the *nahualli* among Nahua of Chicontepec, Veracruz; Anuschka van ’t Hooft (2007: 63–67), who reports on Xochiatipan, Hidalgo; and Kristina Tiedje (2008: 35–39), who conducted research among the Nahua of San Luis Potosí. Dow (2003) writes about Otomí sorcery in the Sierra Norte de Puebla.
16. See classic works by Daniel Brinton (1894), George Foster (1944), and Lucille Kaplan (1956), and compare statements by Aguirre Beltrán (1963: 105–108), Nutini and Roberts (1993: 43–47), or López Austin (1988, 1: 362–375), who also provides a “minimal bibliography of nagualism” (283–284). Other summary statements include Báez-Jorge’s (1998) exploration of *naguales* as protectors, Josef Paz’s (1995) analysis of the encounter between ancient pan-American totemistic beliefs and Mesoamerican tonalism, and Roberto Martínez González (2006), who traces the evolution of the concept among nonindigenous groups from colonial times to today’s use of the internet by *neonahuales*.
17. We wish to clarify that the information presented from Sahagún is taken from Charles E. Dibble and Arthur J.O. Anderson’s English translation of the Nahuatl text of the *General History of the Things of New Spain* (Sahagún [1575–1580?] 1950–1982). The text differs somewhat from the Spanish version and probably more closely reflects understandings of his Nahua assistants.
18. Taggart (1983: 67–82) offers an analysis of the role of the Devil in the oral narratives of Nahua living in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, and see Martín del Campo (2009: 138) on the Huastecan Nahua Devil.
19. *Tezcatlipoca* (“smoking mirror”) was one of the most powerful deities in the pre-Hispanic pantheon: “the archsorcerer, associated with darkness, the night, and the jaguar, the were-animal *par excellence* of the Mesoamerican sorcerer-transformer” (Nicholson 1971: 412).
20. In the Spanish original: “Entre los nahuas de Chicontepec, el Bien y el Mal no son concebidos como absolutos éticos en oposición, sino como contingencias cuyo sentido negativo o positivo depende del contexto en el cual se desarrollan

las conductas, de acuerdo al patrón del pensamiento prehispánico; en este marco ideacional se explican las creencias en torno a *Tlacatecolotl*” (Báez-Jorge and Gómez Martínez 1998: 15–16). See Báez-Jorge (2002: 49–76; 2003: 465–513) for close examinations of the ethnohistorical and ethnographic sources treating good and evil. Stresser-Péan (2009: 521–22) also offers a comparative analysis of contemporary indigenous beliefs about the Devil, demons, and other supernatural beings. David Lorente Fernández (2015) documents beliefs among Nahua of Texcoco linking the Devil with disease-causing winds.

21. Figures 3.1a and 3.1b were cut by a male ritual specialist, figures 3.1c and 3.1d by two different female ritual specialists in the community of Amatlán. Figures 3.1e was cut by a Nahua ritual specialist from Cuatsopotitla, Veracruz, and collected by Arturo Gómez Martínez. Figures 3.1f, produced in the Otomí community of San Pablito, Pahuatlán, was purchased in 1977 in a folk art shop in Mexico City. The drawings in figures 3.1 and 3.2 were rendered by IPFW graphic artist Jim Whitcraft, and Michael A. Sandstrom produced the diagram in Figure 3.3.
22. Martín del Campo, an ethnographer who worked among the Nahua and Otomí in the southern Huasteca, writes of the bloodsucking witch: “Modern discourses on vampirism in the Huasteca lowlands of northern Veracruz, particularly through the Nahua *teyollohcuani* supernatural, represent a dynamic synthesis of these multiple strands of vampirism and witchcraft from Mesoamerican, western European, African, and twentieth-century media” (2009: 109). He also concludes that the ability of this creature to send out its *tonal/yollo* soul substance derives from West Africa (2009: 132).
23. Taggart (2007b: 52) examines food sharing in the Nahuatl “moral economy” and shows (2007a: 189) how families demonstrate respect through food. Compare Monaghan’s (1995: 37–39, 225–226) analysis of the role of food in sustaining emotional bonds among the Mixtec.
24. For these brief excerpts from the story cycle of the maize spirit Seven Flower, we rely on the narrative told in January 1986 by Jesús Bautista Hernández of Amatlán, supplemented by versions recorded in Amatlán in 1990, available on the AILLA website as narrations nos. 3, 5, 19, 25, 39, 40, 41, 47, 56, 57, 64, 69, 70, 74, 88, 92, 96, and 97 (see Sandstrom and Sandstrom 1990).
25. A good example of the ambiguous nature of the Devil’s minions is evident in an observation Alan Sandstrom made during Carnival celebrations in the 1970s during which sick children were submitted to brief cleansings performed by the masked dancers (*mecos*) who, as the servants of *tlacatecolotl*, are believed to possess enhanced curative powers (Sandstrom 1991: 86, 289–290). See also Jacques Galinier (2004: 157–158) for discussion of the ambiguous nature of the Devil among the Sierra Norte de Puebla Otomí.
26. Jesús Ruvalcaba Mercado and James Maffie (pers. comm., December 2009) both brought up an interesting problem regarding pantheistic religion and human conduct. They pointed out that, in seeming contradiction to a pantheistic world view, officials in pre-Hispanic times would put certain people to death as if they behaved badly without any possibility of redemption or reconciliation. This point presents a paradox, because if such conceptions of absolute evil were indeed indigenous, then the contemporary Nahua sorcerer would be merely another example of a pre-Hispanic survival. However, in the pantheistic system, it is conceivable that a person or being could behave so immoderately as to upset the delicate social and cosmic balance upon which human life depends, and thus should be eliminated for being dangerous, although not evil in the Christian sense. Some of the sorcery figures described by Sahagún were certainly capable of murder and yet still seemed to have positive attributes. Both the sixteenth-century and contemporary Nahua put malefactors to death, but it is beyond the scope of the present study to sort out the complex motivations that lie behind such acts of retribution.
27. In the Spanish original: “cosa circuncidada, o cortada, cosa abreviada, o cosa cogida, asi como fruta, espiga, o cosa semejante, o esclavillo” (Molina [1571] 1944: 119). The remainder of Molina’s full definition apparently refers to items cut and gathered, but see Karttunen (1983: 42) for glosses of the related transitive verb, *cotōn(a)*.
28. See Sandstrom (1989) for a description and photographs of a typical Nahua curing ritual organized by a curer who determined that a family’s illness was caused by *ehecatl* spirits attracted by a neighbor’s envy.
29. In the Spanish original: “La medicina indígena, la negra y la española, entran en contacto en el momento del descubrimiento y conquista del Anáhuac” (Aguirre Beltrán 1963: 78).
30. See Herrera Casasús (2004) for an account of the enslaved peoples from sub-Saharan Africa, brought by the Spaniards to the New World to work on the sugarcane plantations. Providing evidence of Afro-Indian syncretism, and following Aguirre Beltrán, Lewis (2003: 147–153) recounts a number of cases of newly arrived African slaves tried by the Inquisition as “black-Indian witches.” See also Garma (2013: 43), who links belief in the Devil in Veracruz to African influence.
31. In the Spanish original: “La cultura indígena no es ya la original cultura precortesiana, aunque siga siendo una

cultura plena y fácilmente identificable como indígena” (Aguirre Beltrán 1963: 273).

32. In the Spanish original: “El *nagual*, a partir de la Conquista, perdió sus antiguos atributos socialmente productivos; en cambio, conservó las particularidades malignas que le había asignado el temor sublime de un pueblo ansioso por las contingencias de una agricultura de temporal” (Aguirre Beltrán 1963: 99).
33. In the Spanish original: “*Nagual, brujo, chan, tona, y sombra*, fueron, primitivamente, complejos que tenían características definidas en las sociedades donde estas representaciones cumplían una función específica. Al sobrevenir la dominación española, la inmigración negra y, consecuentemente la formación con la nativa de una población de mezcla que participaba de formas de cultura en conflicto, los complejos referidos fueron conjugados y reinterpretados, dando nacimiento a nuevos complejos que, en la actualidad, se nos presentan todavía con los viejos nombres originales, pero con un contenido en tal forma modificado que a duras penas es posible desentrañar los conceptos que les dieron el ser” (Aguirre Beltrán 1963: 114).

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Witchcraft in a Mixtec and Tlapanec Municipality of the Costa Chica of Guerrero

A Sociocultural Epidemiology

Lilián González Chévez

An Indigenous Municipality in the State of Guerrero

San Luis Acatlán is an ethnically and culturally diverse municipality located along the route between the interior mountains of the Sierra Madre and the southeastern coastal plain of the Mexican state of Guerrero, called the Costa Chica. The majority of the inhabitants speak an indigenous language, principally Mixtec (*Na Savi*) and Tlapanec (*Me'phaa*). San Luis Acatlán is ranked as the eightieth most impoverished municipality in Mexico, according to an index that measures level of access to health care, education, clean water, electricity, sanitation, and transportation infrastructure.¹ For the Secretariat of Social Development (SEDESOL) it is one of the zones in Guerrero that is considered a priority for aid and development.²

This municipality was the first settlement founded by Spaniards on the Pacific watershed of Mexico. Soldiers of Pedro de Alvarado arrived in the region in 1522, just a year after the conquest. They were looking for gold, which they discovered when they panned in the San Luis river. Soon after this, they founded a village in that location (INAFED 2009). However, in 1531 the indigenous inhabitants of that region, called Yopes, rebelled against the Spaniards and killed many of them, as well as their Indian allies. In retaliation, the Spaniards killed many of the Yopes, and those who were captured became slaves. Because of this conflict, the Villa of San Luis was abandoned by 1535, and very few people remained in the region (Dehouve 1994).

Until Mixtec, Nahuatl, and Tlapanec people from the eastern mountains began to migrate into the area in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, opening up farmland and establishing towns. The town of Mixtecapa, of Mixtec origin, was founded in the low-lying lands of San Luis in 1763 (Dehouve et al. 2006: 114, 133). Around that same time, other Mixtecs arrived from the mountain town Coicoyán across the border in Oaxaca. In 1766 there was a migration of Nahuatl into the region from Xalpatlahuac, and indigenous herders from the Acatlán, Puebla, area began to arrive with their goat herds, living at the junction of the Rio Grande and Chiquito among the ruins of the early Spanish settlement (INAFED 2009). Pueblo Nuevo, Buena Vista, and Horcacasitas were all established between 1850 and 1870; about the same time the Mixtec-speaking town of Yoloxótil was established by people from

the Tlapa area, and the Tlapanec-speaking towns of Tierra Blanca (today Pueblo Hidalgo), Cofradía (today Tuxtepec) and Vista Hermosa by people from Malinaltepec. The mestizo town of Miahuichán was also established in San Luis (Dehouve et al. 2006: 114, 133). It is important to highlight, in the context of this relatively recent migration, that the customs that govern the social life of the indigenous communities of the area to this day are in part derived from traditions, collective memories, and symbol systems that have very deep roots. As founders of new communities, these indigenous migrants not only brought with them their families and household goods but also distinctive values, knowledge, norms, and world views that they preserve today.

Witchcraft in Mixtec and Tlapanec Communities

In the Mixtec and Tlapanec communities of the Costa Chica Guerrero, witchcraft is frequently considered a main cause of sickness and misfortune. Witchcraft affects not only health but also the size of harvests, the fertility of farm animals, the ability of children to do well in their studies, the arrival of remittance payments by migrants, as well as matters related to work, love, opportunities, and so forth. In short, nothing escapes its influence.

Witchcraft is also responsible for a high level of psychosocial stress in the indigenous communities of the region, as it is considered one of the greatest risks people run in their daily lives. It is therefore a cause of feelings of vulnerability. It affects not only one's physical and emotional states but also one's material well-being, as it disturbs one's ability to be and exist in the world. Or as De Martino puts it, it creates a "crisis of presence" in the individual because it undermines one's sense of security and permanence in the physical and social world (De Martino 2004: 138).

According to Mary Douglas, some cultures are more likely to have a developed witchcraft complex than others (Douglas 1976: 68). For the Tlapanec and especially the Mixtec communities of the Costa Chica, witchcraft is firmly rooted in their view of the cosmos³ and constitutes a basic proposition in their communal ethos—that is to say, the moral and aesthetic aspects of their culture, which is expressed implicitly in their way of life (Geertz 1995: 118). As Geertz indicates, that which a people most value, as well as that which they most fear and hate, is inscribed in their world view, which in turn is symbolized in their religion and expressed in their daily life. In this sense, there is a tacit social consensus in the Tlapanec and Mixtec communities of the Costa Chica with regard to the problem of evil. Negative events, including some that might be regarded as "natural," like the loss of harvest, or sickness, but also homicide, poverty, and even oppression, are attributed to the use of witchcraft by people who act out of malice (see Knab, this volume). In other words, witchcraft reflects an interpersonal hostility, where hate, a wish for vengeance, envy, even a grudge are acted upon through the intermediary of the witch, who brings supernatural forces to bear in order to cause harm.

We lack statistical data on the occurrence of incidents of witchcraft in the region. While it is associated with health, it is not problematized in epidemiological studies, since it is only recognized as a social or cultural problem. One of the few studies of witchcraft based on

aggregate data in Mexico is derived from the responses of 13,067 traditional cures located in rural and marginalized settlements in the country. Among the ten most frequent reasons clients have for visiting a traditional curer are evil eye, fright, mal aire, and witchcraft (Zolla et al. 1992: 72).⁴ Another four of the top ten reasons a patient has for a consultation are ones that would be found in the statistics gathered by health professionals: diarrhea, dysentery, angina, and sprains. Traditional curers function as first responders to common illnesses (Lozoya et al. 1988: 64), showing both the durability of traditional classifications of maladies and the way the boundaries of categories become complicated when different medical traditions intersect.

Witchcraft has such an impact on the Costa Chica that the Policía Comunitaria of Guerrero and its security and judicial organ, the Coordinadora Regional de Autoridades Comunitarias (CRAC-PC),⁵ identifies witchcraft as one of the principal causes of interpersonal conflicts that end in violence and homicide—even though in its directives witchcraft is not recognized as a crime. Rather, the charges of witchcraft are processed in local commissions, where witchcraft—alongside fights, public disorder, drunkenness, family violence, adultery, petty theft, acts of revenge, and land disputes—is one of the top reasons for criminal complaints. Witchcraft, alcohol abuse, and gossip are also considered the most important motivating factors for other kinds of violence.

As has been noted by Maribel Nicasio, because witchcraft is not recognized or sanctioned by the state, accusations of witchcraft in the hands of local authorities, the comisarios, are treated in conformity with local usages and customs (Nicasio 2004: 395). In some cases, the Comisario will order that the person suffering from illness be cured. Nonetheless, if the case went to the local prosecutor, it would not be resolved, given that witchcraft is not recognized as a crime, and it could not be sent to the state attorney general's office for review, because they would simply ignore it. In fragmented, factionalized, and conflictive Mixtec communities, vigilante justice moves into the space opened up by the lack of judicial oversight. The community of Buenavista and its annexes is a case in point. Buenavista has a registered population of 5,000;⁶ it has a doctor and a nurse assigned by the Secretary of Health, seven curanderos, and some thirty reputed brujos as well as some twenty young people who are being trained in the arts of witchcraft. According to the Comisariado Ejidal, "The young people see witchcraft as a kind of business, so that even the dullest of them are involved in it. They are looking for easy money, taking advantage of believers who are ill, since the sick person will offer them a turkey and before you know it, they've got themselves a meal! But they are not there to do good. . . ." Young people who practice witchcraft look at it as a way to gain power and money with little effort. As a young truck driver on the route to San Luis Acatlán once told me: "[T]hese apprentices might threaten young women with their spells if they don't give in to their sexual advances. Or they can get on the truck and get off without paying, threatening the driver if he tries to charge them." He said: "This guy, every time he comes, he wants to fuck you up! 'How much did your car cost you?' I better keep quiet. 'I will have to owe you twenty pesos!' I better keep quiet. You know what you do, don't you?"

In placing the analysis of witchcraft within a specific cultural context, one cannot,

however, ignore the structural conditions in Mixtec communities of San Luis Acatlán like Buenavista that have left them highly marginalized. To begin, these communities have been isolated from transportation routes for centuries. Paving of the Buenavista turnoff from the Tlapa to Marquelia road was only begun in 2005 and not finished until 2010; even today its annex settlements have no paved roads and no public transport services. Added to the lack of transportation infrastructure is an almost total absence of basic services: 90 percent of the houses have dirt floors, one-third have no electricity, and 95 percent lack sanitation facilities. The main cash crop in the community is coffee, and while there is some production of brown sugar and rum, agricultural production has been severely impacted by the neoliberal policy of eliminating subsidies and a devastating decline in price on the international market, resulting in a drop in earnings for producers. Although there have been times in the past when the price of coffee has risen substantially, low prices and a coffee blight have led to farmers abandoning their trees. To all this one can add that basic food items such as corn have to be acquired outside the community, and these have consistently risen in price, because subsistence farm plots yield very little due to a lack of modern agricultural technology and their small size, which do not exceed, on average, two hectares, although many farmers barely sow even a half hectare. The result of all this is that in terms of the exchange of goods, services, and work, people are in a subordinate and highly unfavorable position. The ongoing nature of this situation—an unequal exchange with the outside coupled with the many factors that produce uncertainty, such as those found in nature—elevates the economic and social vulnerability of workers and their families (Muñoz 2008: 173).

Another example that highlights the impact of witchcraft practices in the region occurred in March 2010 during the election of new *Coordinadores Regionales*, the highest judicial officials in the *Policía Comunitaria*. In the Regional Assembly six individuals were elected as *Coordinadores Regionales*, whose candidacies had to be ratified in an assembly held in each of their home communities. One of those elected was from the community of Yoloxóchitl, whose assembly would not ratify him because he was a witch, blaming him for a murder in which he supposedly removed the tongue of his adversary through black magic.

In the intercultural context of the region, the Tlapanecs affirm that the Mixtecs practice more witchcraft than they do, as indicated in the following interview with a midwife of the Tlapanec community of Pascala del Oro, in the municipality of San Luis Acatlán, in 2011:

As for the Mixtecs zone, they don't want for brujos! Over there in Buenavista one hears a lot about brujos because spot on there are about one hundred, in Yoloxóchitl there even more, the Tlapanecs not so much. Because right away people warn you, "Go with the Mixtecs!" Some with the mirror, some with the candle, some with the scissors, others with the basket, if not, go to Colombia de Guadalupe [a Tlapanec community]. Now there, there are a lot! And it's because there it has been that way for a long time, as if it were a root, they are people who learned to do many bad things. Also they suck you, they take things out of you, or they pull things out of you. They throw worms into you, you will see your mouth, your nose, full of worms! Those brujos, this is what

they do to you, throw a snake into you, a toad in your belly. . . .

For their part, the Mixtecos affirm that “they are amateurs” while the Tlapanec have book learning:

Los Tlapanecos are much better at witchcraft because they use the book of magic to make black magic, while the Mixtec are just lay people. You ask why? Because San Marcos never studied, right? It’s like the musicians down below [the coast] all self-taught music, and from Mixteca to there [the region of La Montaña] all music from [published] scores.

Without trying to determine if the Mixtecs or Tlapanecs are the better witches, or who is skilled and who is an amateur, what is certain is that unlike the Tlapanecs, the Mixtecs of the Costa and those of the Montaña of Guerrero have in their ritual geography a sacred place of pilgrimage for both ordering a work of witchcraft (called “to tie someone up”) and for removing a curse. The place is Chalcatongo, Oaxaca, a large Mixtec town near Tlaxiaco in the Mixteca Alta in the western part of the state. The link between the Mixtec towns like Buenavista and Yoloxochitl of the Costa Chica of Guerrero with Chalcatongo, Oaxaca, is a historical phenomenon. On the one hand, the Montaña de Guerrero has deep ties to Chalcatongo.⁷ Some of the Mixtec towns on the coast, like Buenavista, were founded by people from the Montaña, who carried with them their church bells, their *ñuhu cijo*,⁸ and their customs. One of these may have been the articulation with Chalcatongo in matters of witchcraft. On the other hand, during the pre-Hispanic period, the Mixtec communities of the Costa de Guerrero were not under the dominion of the kingdom of Tututepec on the Pacific Coast of Oaxaca, since its border was the Amuzgo region of Guerrero, located east of the region that we are discussing. Rather, the towns of Zacatepec and Jicayán were frontier settlements that were dependents or had been dependents of Tilantongo, a kingdom of the north, so with that the ties to Chalcatongo in the Mixteca Alta were solidified (Caso 1996: 137, 146). Chalcatongo’s sacred status probably developed over a long period of time. Barbro Dahlgren, citing Burgoa, indicates that in a mountain near Chalcatongo there was a cave with the mummified remains of their kings and nobility and that this royal tomb was venerated by all the towns and kingdoms of the Mixteca (Dahlgren 1966: 238, 303).

Causal Factors of Witchcraft in the Region

For the Comisariado de Bienes Comunales of Buenavista, witchcraft is intimately associated with problems related to the inheritance of land. He says that threats, physical violence, and witchcraft are directly derived from the vagaries of succession, the lack of documents, or the ambiguity of boundaries. In this case, the user of witchcraft has the goal of eliminating the side of the dispute that impedes the use of a good. As the Comisariado indicates, referring to witchcraft, “People take the easiest [path] so that they have few problems with the other; they

simply use witchcraft so that they might die quickly.” In both the Mixtec and Tlapanec communities, cases where land is held under a communal or ejidal regimen, witchcraft is frequently associated with problems over land tenure, disputes over land tenure, and limits.

In 2011, in the community of Buenavista, municipality of San Luis Acatlán, in our role as physicians, we were asked to visit a patient who had been bedridden for several years. She was a woman of fifty-one, and it was evident she suffered from malnourishment of the third degree. Upon attempting to touch her to carry out the examination, she moaned and said that even the most minor physical contact caused her pain. During various visits to this patient, we obtained her confidence and she divulged the cause of her sickness. She attributed it to witchcraft on the part of her brother. The plot of this drama began in 1998. Her husband and her brother had sown sugarcane on a parcel of land that her grandmother had given them to work together, since the land had been left idle. They sowed sugarcane and built a sugar press, but when they got set to harvest, the brother met them on the land and threatened them with a machete, telling them if they returned to the plot, he would kill them. She berated him, reminding him of everything she had done for him when he was a child, since he was her baby brother and she had taken care of him. Her brother’s reply was “It would be better if you died! Since once you die, your husband won’t come around here!” In order to ensure that his brother-in-law and his sister did not return, he destroyed the sugar press and sold the sugarcane, using the land to build a house, since his was at the point of falling down.

One year after, in 1999, the patient took to bed, where she has spent the ensuing fifteen years. She accused her brother of having bewitched her, but he denies it. A formal accusation was made before the Comisariado, but the woman and her husband were only able to get seven hundred pesos in a settlement from her brother for their part of the sugar press. Only on one occasion over the fifteen years that she has been ill did she seek biomedical treatment in the community hospital of San Luis Acatlán, where doctors carried out a number of studies that remained inconclusive; she stopped going to the hospital and gave up this treatment. Over more than a decade, she has seen around fifty curanderos and brujos, who have treated her for fright, anger, shame, “convivencia de la casa,” and, of course, witchcraft. The brujos have charged her between 5,000 and 15,000 pesos to cure her, with no improvements; nonetheless, convinced that she has been bewitched, she is again intent on putting together 5,000 pesos in order to see a brujo in Mexico City who is said to be the best.

The only time that she was able to get up on her own was a brief period of several months seven years ago. This happened after her husband traveled twelve hours in a bus to Chalcatongo, the town in the Tlaxiaco district that is the Mixtec central place for carrying out witchcraft and for stopping it. In Chalcatongo her husband was able to find out that there was a wax doll with the name of his wife pierced by many nails and covered with chili in a clay pot, buried underground. The curandero charged 12,000 pesos to burn the doll, and with this the patient seemed to get better. Nonetheless, a while later she relapsed, which she feels is because they did not burn all her personal items that were part of the spell. Today, in spite of our insistence that she see a specialist, she only asks for economic help so she can see another brujo.

In the same community of Buenavista a man told us that he had inherited a plot of land

from his father, but his uncle did not want to give it up. Since his uncle was a brujo, he tried to harm his nephew. He prayed every night naked (with this, he “offered himself,” “he gave of himself”). The nephew went off his food and would writhe in pain. Because of this, he sought medical attention but without any positive result. This led him to consult multiple curanderos and brujos, who consistently diagnosed him as having been bewitched. A brujo of Yoloxóchitl, even identified the cause of the evil and its location—a charm under his uncle’s wood stove! In order to cure him, the charm had to be unearthed.

The victim and his relatives sought out the Comisariado of the community so that he would authorize the search of the uncle’s house. The Comisariado agreed. But he warned them: “If we enter [the uncle’s house] and we don’t find anything related to witchcraft, all of you will go to jail for being liars and gossipers!” With the help of the auxiliary police, they surrounded the house and requested the owner’s permission to dig up under his wood stove. The owner agreed, with the condition that his son supervise the excavation, so that nobody has the opportunity to throw an evil charm in and then falsely accuse him of witchcraft.

We began to excavate. Around seventy centimeters in was a rock, and underneath was an owl. The owl was dried up because it was under the hot wood stove, so it did not rot. Its belly was full of chilies and thorns. And metallic needles were placed throughout its whole body and head. It also had dog poop and chicken poop. That’s how this brujo worked!

They put him in jail, he was sent to reeducation with the Policía Comunitaria for a year, he paid all the fines. Around nine, ten at night that day, the patient asked for something to eat. Instantly the illness left him! Within a month he was well recovered, his body had healed, and he began to eat. But the disease returned in a month! A roadrunner passed by, it came out right over there, from the house of his uncle. This guy cursed him once more! The next day he fell ill once again!

In 2011, in the Tlapanec community of Pueblo Hidalgo, the owner of a property found the remains of a ceremony that had been held on his lands. Determined to find who was responsible, he asked for the help of *Batzó* (“fire”), a deity very important to the Tlapanec, to identify his adversary. In his dreams he had seen that an uncle with whom he had had difficulties over inheritance attempted to take a machete that he had in a corner of his house, but it slipped and his uncle cut his hands and was bleeding profusely. This dream helped him to identify his adversary and to take vengeance. Aided by *Batzó*, his uncle became ill (this can be deduced from the bleeding hands in the dream), and as he concluded, “My uncle was the one who really lost.”

In another case, a woman from Pueblo Hidalgo went to consult the *meso*, a ritual specialist, so that he would help her interpret a dream. Her twenty-year-old daughter repeatedly had a dream in which she went on a trip. Among the Tlapanecos, this type of dream is interpreted as a bad sign. The curandero dealt a card and said, “There is a man who is cursing you over a land question. He thinks you are doing bad things to him, and for this

he does them to you, so that you get what you have sent him.”

In November of 2010 on a plot of land in the Tlapanec community of Pascala del Oro, hamlet of Tierra Azul, four wax dolls appeared with their heads pierced by nails, spines, pieces of glass, and pins and covered with clots of blood. Soon after they were discovered, the wife of the owner of the plot died: “One morning a man found them laid out in the road; he saw that they did this at night, but yes, the wife of the owner of the land died!”

In almost all the Mixtec and Tlapanec communities of San Luis Acatlán, illnesses are attributed to the envy of neighbors, relatives, and brujos who can’t stand others’ good fortune or well-being. As a man from Cuanacaxtitlán told us, “People envy you for land, for money, for cattle, for goats. People don’t want to see that you have something or are prosperous, because they want everyone to be poor and screwed up! So that when you become hungry, you must go beg them for something to eat! Ha, ha!”

In the community of Buenavista a resident told us the following:

When the Nissan pickup came it was new. Above us lives a man who, when he drinks, shouts pure nonsense! He began, “Damn truck, whore of a mother! Don’t even try to believe that people are going without something bad happening! It’s going to turn out bad for them, bastards! Sometimes when I’m drunk things come to me . . . I have feelings and sensations of when they cried out.” Later these people began to send curses so that one begins to drink chronically, and so one may not work and that you go driving and you turn over.

People feel that when a brujo finds out that a person has money, he takes it on himself to harm him and drain his assets, as was told to us in the community of Buenavista:

If you have a little money, the warlock chases you. He makes you sick himself; he doesn’t do it to kill you; just so you don’t get better. So, for example, since I don’t know if he is my enemy and he is casting the spell himself, I naively say to him: “Listen, I’m sick, come [to attend to me]!” He pretends that he is going to heal you and says: “Yes, it is a scare.” He is taking my money, he is taking my money. . . . There are others who say to you: “Hey, listen, you know what? It is a sorcerer who is making you sick! I will fight for you!” Start praying and you get a little better. How much are you going to charge? Five hundred [pesos]. And the next day he does the same thing to you! And again your money is gone! Yes, he’s really screwed, not?

A similar case occurred in Pueblo Hidalgo, when a brujo found out that his neighbor had gotten several transferred payments from her son, who had migrated to Mexico City. The brujo started “working” so that the son might become ill and stop sending money to his mother. As Guido Münch points out, “There are many people who suffer various illnesses

caused by envy and hidden aggressions. The envious person perform witchcraft that, according to their beliefs, turns the spirit of the individual over to the saints or to the devil. The objects that they use for the spells are buried on paths near the house with the intention that the victim remains trapped, sick, buried alive. When the victim falls ill, their enemies rejoice and delight in their pain” (Münch 1993: 164).

On the one hand, witchcraft specialists are in a profession that commands the highest payments for its services in the region. But, on the other hand, they have the greatest risks, as victims often seek revenge for their curses and spells. In 2011, three brujos were killed in the municipality of San Luis Acatlán, and in some communities the tally of executed brujos in the last decades is in the dozens. Between 1998 and 2001, fifteen individuals who were said to be brujos were murdered in the community of Buenavista. The Fiscal commented that “the very people who suffered from the spells of the brujos killed them with the aim of destroying them. Since then, things calmed down. But today, geez! Many people who don’t want to work normal jobs prefer to dedicate themselves to witchcraft.”

An example of this is a case that occurred in 2011 in the Mixtec community of Yoloxóchitl (which was under the auspices of the Coordinadora Regional de Autoridades Comunitarias de la Policía Comunitaria). A presumed brujo was murdered in revenge for the suspected killing of an infant with his black arts. The murderers decided to remove the head of the brujo, which is a practice widely used among the Mixtecs in ritual contexts associated with witchcraft.

People who are not witches have been killed for being accused, in the context of a healing session, of having hired a witch, as happened in the Tlapaneca community of Pueblo Hidalgo in 2002:

It happened that a man got sick and then the medicine man said to him: “Oh, sir, you are sick because his daughter’s father-in-law is making him sick!” Then the man said, “Very well, if you are making me sick, I will deal with it.” He told them what was happening to his children, and they said, “We are going to take revenge for the illness that his compadre [sister’s father-in-law] is causing.” They went to wait for him outside his house, and the man and his wife went out alone and killed them on the way. They said they were killed because the man was doing customs; he burned copal. But it was for healing purposes; it didn’t do bad things!

Brujo Performance and Their Ritual Paraphernalia

The objective of a ritual action of a *ta ti ‘va* (“the person who knows,” or ritual specialist) is to counteract a work of witchcraft. If the person is a “curandero,” he or she undoes the spell. If the person is a “brujo,” a *ta taxi*, he or she will turn the spell back on to the person who was responsible of it on the first place. Both specialists free the patient from the hex, but they act under distinct ontological principles. The first appeals to the forces of good to undo the

evil; the second appeals to the forces of evil to transfer the harm to another.

The following dialogue is the verbatim transcript of the brujo narrative and plea to the “most powerful man” (he is a superior evil force): an example of how the brujo transfers damage:

1. Visit to a Mixtec Brujo (*ta taxii*)

The patient in his house: “Oh my God! I hurt so badly! My heart is burning! This could not be but sickness caused by an evil work!”

After consulting a curandero (*ta ti'va*), they go to the house of the *ta taxii* (brujo): “Look sir, do us a favor and we are ready to pay. My father is sick, with ‘this type of disease’ [refers to witchcraft]. We consulted a person who could ‘ask the question’⁹ [to diagnose the problem], and that man [*el curandero*], with the oracle and the candle [paraphernalia ritual to make the diagnosis], told us that you were going to be able to cure him.”

The witch asks: “Who is the person who ordered you to come here? Who is the person who opened the way for you to reach this house?”

The patient responds, asking who sends him [the *curandero*].

“Oh God! Then I too ‘will ask the question’ to see if I can do it or not!”

The *ta taxii* consults.

“Oh, I see! It seems that . . .” Then he says to the patient: “It is something that is buried” or “They put a hex on your house.”¹⁰

“And then, can you do something to help me?” asks the patient

“I will try,” he replies. “Look, if I can make it, I’ll send the disease where it comes from. So look here, I’m going to need a black chicken, a turkey, copal, the bark of the copal tree, a small candle, a candle, a large candle, rum, flowers, the bark of the tree in the forest called Espino de Gallo (*tu iñu duyu*) and you put all this on a banana leaf for me . . . have it ready for me! Oh, and that other special leaf for this . . .”

2. Counteracting Witchcraft by Transferring the Curse: The Ceremonial Language of the Mixtec Brujo (*ta taxii*)

On the ninth day, the bad day,¹¹ a door of a house quietly closes. When all is silent, a chair is set up and all that the ritual specialist requested for the offering is at hand.

The husband is the only one who stays with the *ta taxii*, “because he is the most potent.” The wife stays inside because she “is weaker.” “Although there are some women who also are potent! The woman has to be ready to provide everything that is needed, but no one else can be there, especially the children.”

The brujo then begins to prepare. He sets a banana leaf on the ground and

squats down in front of it. The banana leaf represents the space where he will invite various guests in a ritual of commensality. On top of the leaf he places the taper candles and votive candles, while preparing the counted bunches¹² of leaves of *Commelina erecta*, in this case six bundles of six leaves each. Prior to this, he made the string of flowers that also conform to a specific numerology.

First step. The Ritual Specialist (brujo) addresses his appeal to the “Most Dangerous Man”:¹³

In this important day, great day, important hour
The asked me to use my voice to transmit the ideas, the prayers
What these people have charged me to do.
Look, someone told this man to come to consult me
To inspect his body, to inspect all his mind
There where it burns him, there where it eats him
So that someone speaks, and tells him if there are brujos
If there is itching, and well, if there is evil!

Second step. The beginning of the commensal ritual and the making of the petition

As soon as I arrive
I will furnish all that you need
So that you relieve the person who is sick
Here is the chair, the mat¹⁴

(He then counts out six bunches of six leaves, which represent the chair; he counts another six bunches of six leaves, which represent the mat, each bunch is set over the banana leaves, which represents the main table, each guest has their chair and their mat, along with a string of flowers).

All right now, I’m going to attend you
To give you to drink, to eat
And to give you all that you deserve, your offering.
In order that you don’t keep playing with this man,
So that you take away this evil!
So that, you clean him, you wash him!
All these bad things
Take them to where they came from!
Return them to the place they came from!
So that they suffer too!
There in his house, there where they live,
There in the house of his mother, of his father

and all his family, [the house] of all these people.
There you go to touch him!
So that here, see!
We are going to give him to eat, to drink.
[On the banana leaf the bunches are set].

Third step. The invitation to the table of the supernatural entities that cause the evil of witchcraft. First, the “Most Powerful Man,” a god, then later, his followers, entities that are able to cause harm.

As each one is named, six bunches of six leaves are set over the banana leaf, representing the chair, and six bunches of six leaves that represent the mat for each of the invited guests. As a good host, the brujo begins the fiesta giving them drink, splashing mescal over the banana leaf, which represents the table around which they are gathered. He burns copal incense, sacrifices a black chicken by cutting its throat over the “table,” and offers the guests a drink of its blood; later he does the same with a turkey.

For you, the most dangerous Man
For you, drunken Man
Man that has had an attack
Rebel Man
Man who is screaming [who is crazy]
Lost Man [who has rage]
Upset Man [that his breath is gone, if he is eating, his food rises and he
dies of that]
Gentleman who eats, Man who transforms [nahual]
Man whose mouth sounds [he scares, he calls you on the way]
Man who has rheumatism [bones ache]
Rabid Man
Man that itches
Man who has been scratched by thorns
Man who is pricked [that burns]

Fourth step. Now comes the invitation of the ancestors [dicavicó] to the table who were senior brujos (great figures).

Diabolical Julian
Ancestor Manuel Jacinto (here is your offering)
Ancestor Copio (here is your offering)
Ancestor Pedro
Ancestor Juan

Fifth step. The souls of those who have died violently are invited to the table.

Now I call on the dead,
those who have been assassinated on the road.
Now I order you to call them.
You that died by being hit by rock, by sticks, or they drowned you in a
river.
You died from gunshot, you died from a machete
Now I don't need you to accompany me
with another four or five,
You tell this to so-and-so:
Just as what happened with the other, so will happen with so-and-so!

Sixth step. A wax effigy is made; it is stuck with nails, thorns, spines, covered with chilies and dog or chicken excrement in order to transfer the evil (so that it aches, burns, itches and rots). At this point they also make effigies of sugar so that the victim is consumed by diabetes. They also stick thorns, spines, nails into owls, which they cover with chilies and excrement of chickens or dogs.

Seventh step. The witch buries an effigy in the cemetery, a road where a violent death occurred, or in a house of the person who is to be bewitched (under the stone where they do the wash, or where they sleep, or in the outside patio of the house).

Severed Heads and Brujos' Tongues

Skulls are a common element in the paraphernalia of the Mixtec brujos. But these are not just any skulls; they are the skulls of former brujos. The appropriation of skulls and tongues of people who in life were brujos or who had a special connection with evil is one of the ways the brujo apprentice acquires greater power and eloquence. In 2011, in the Mixtec community of Yoloxóchitl, under the jurisdiction of the Policía Comunitaria, a man was murdered, presumably for being a brujo who had killed an infant with his black arts. The murderers took advantage of the situation to remove his head and convert it into the skull of a brujo.

In 2010, during the campaign for new Coordinadores Regionales, the highest judicial authority within the sphere of the Policía Comunitaria, six new people were elected by the Regional Assembly. These, in turn, had to be ratified in an assembly of each of the communities in the region. One of those elected, a member of the community of Yoloxóchitl, was not confirmed by the community because he was reputed to be a brujo and was implicated in a homicide where the tongue of the victim had been taken for the purpose of black magic. The taking of skulls has been analyzed by the archaeologist García Payón, who described the mortuary rituals of the Matlatzingas, who, like other groups in the Americas, kept the skulls of men who in life were powerful witches in order to retain their vital force and magical power on behalf of the group to which the deceased belonged (García Payón

1941).

Among the multiple cases of removal of heads that have occurred in the region, some have been reported in the local press, like the one that occurred in the Mixtec community of Buenavista in 2005. A person who had been accused of having a skull in his house was arrested by the Policía Comunitaria because the use of this object was to “cause harm to people.” The accused was brought before the communal assembly, and the skull was found to have a paper inside that listed the names of ten people from a neighboring Mixtec community. The *Periódico el Sur* newspaper reported:

When the skull was presented before the assembly [Mixtec community of Buenavista] it was observed that there was blood in the eye sockets and the mouth—which indicated that they offered it the blood of some animal—and within the skull they found a list with the names of ten people of Yoloxóchitl, and they confirmed that all of them had had something bad happen to them, for example one went crazy, another died, and the others have illnesses that Western doctors can’t diagnosis and that are incurable through allopathic medicine. (*Periódico El Sur*, June 3, 2005, p. 10)

The person blamed was sent for reeducation by the Policía Comunitario, which also imposed a sentence of remedying the damage caused to those harmed, although the alleged perpetrator refused to comply. The victims, from the community of Yoloxóchitl, appeared, along with their Comisariado, in the offices of the Policía Comunitaria of San Luis Acatlán to demand that the brujo divulge who had solicited his services and sent him the list of names. They argued that some of the people on the list had become sick, and one even died, presumably due to witchcraft.

The removal of the tongues of those considered to be accomplished brujos is based on the idea that speech is a primordial component of action, so that the tongue of a person who is skilled in the verbal arts, like sacred or ceremonial language, is considered an extremely valuable object. García Leyva makes this observation:

In the villages there are people who have learned, through practice and experience, a special eloquent speech and “they know how to orate.” Individuals who “use language well” function as counselors, marriage ambassadors, and in a variety of tasks. Ceremonies, festivals and rituals are led by prayer makers, men of substance, or “specialists in the word.” (García Leyva 2012: 120)

Conclusions

In the cases of witchcraft discussed here, it is clear that competition for scarce resources like land, water, material goods, and affections are determining factors. It is also clear that in

many cases the attention of medical specialists is not what it should be and that the lack of resources, diagnostic equipment, and medicines in order to offer first-class treatment opens a space for witchcraft accusations.

In order to explain how these social conditions favor the use of witchcraft, Foster proposed his theory of limited good, whereby the conduct and attitudes of peasants are based on the idea that resources are scarce and limited and that all members of the community have an equal right to them. It follows from this that any betterment or incremental gain in the possession of a good comes at the expense of others, no matter if it is due to a run of good luck or through agreeing to economically profitable but morally devastating agreements with the Devil (Foster 1972; Uzeta 2004: 43). As Foster (1972: 125) notes:

The rural agrarian nature of the economy, the scarcity of material resources, and the correlation of social relations that have a high degree of individualism and competitiveness, characterized by conflict and frustration over the impossibility of achieving material benefits, brings with it envy and criticism of those who enjoy well-being. (Foster 1972: 125)

The zero-sum game in the theory of limited good—that is, if someone profits in the community, others suffer to the same extent (Lomnitz 2013)—serves to underline how the social and cultural dynamics of each community emerge out of the interactions among structural conditions that are constructed on the basis of a common history and unique foundational assumptions, what we call the communitarian ethos (Bibeau and Corin 1995). Basic services in the region, such as education, health, and employment, which determine many of the structural conditions, have been historically underserved. This has given rise to diverse scenarios of risk, including the risk created by biomedical inattention, where it is joined by a community ethos culturally sensitive to witchcraft practices; in epidemiological terms, witchcraft functions as one of the structural pathogenic vectors that is most relevant.¹⁵

In order to restore the health of the patient, the brujo expels the sickness from the body of the sufferer, transferring the evil to the supposed attacker or their family group. As Leach (1993) suggests, it is through ritual that experiences are communicated and shared, that information is codified (in a combination of signs and symbols) and incorporated, and that the meaning of events is determined. The forces of evil, represented by entities such as “the Most Powerful Man,” his malign henchmen, brujo ancestors, and the souls of those who have died a violent death, are considered supernatural forces that exist on the earth. The brujo is capable of summoning them and then acting as a mediator between those supernatural forces at the level of the gods (the overworld) and those at the level of the dead (the underworld) and living humans through a ritual of commensality. The objective is to insinuate oneself with these entities so that they “let go” of the victim, channeling or directing these forces so that they cause the aggressor sickness, bad harvests, and death, as well as the uncertainty that comes with these unfortunate events. Evil in the hands of the brujos, like the laws of physics with regard to matter, is never created or destroyed, only transferred. The brujo provides, through a ritual of expulsion, the recovery of their patient (see Dehouve 2012).

The brujo acts magically, adhering to the two magical principles indicated by Frazer (1981). First, through the magical intrusion of animals (nahuales) “that eat one from the inside” and that cause in the bewitched insanity, alcoholism, attacks, and rheumatism, all sicknesses that have the peculiarity that they are representative qualities of the henchmen of the “Most Powerful Man” and constitute what Frazer calls contagious or intrusive magic. This becomes concrete when the brujo announces to the patient, “They sent an evil here into your house,” almost always through the food consumed by the victim. The second is through sympathetic magic, in that the act occurs reciprocally at a distance, through imitative or homeopathic magic, which is expressed when the brujo declares, “It is something that is buried,” referring to the wax doll that represents the victim. When it is penetrated by sharp objects, like thorns, the victims feel they are being pricked; when chilies are placed inside, the victims burn; when it is filled with excrement, the victims break out in hives or suffer internal rot; and when made of sugar, the victims suffer from diabetes.

Under the same principle of sympathetic magic, the brujos take control of skulls and tongues of those who in life were exceptional practitioners of witchcraft and/or had a successful record of negotiating with evil entities, since this control allowed them to acquire these qualities, becoming more powerful and eloquent. This practice also underlines the strong causal nexus that communities with indigenous roots have with the world of the dead (see López Austin 1995: 211).

The basis of this epidemiological reference lies in what Bonaventura de Sousa Santos (2005: 160) calls the naturalization of a Western cultural logic that produces “nonexistence,” through which witchcraft apparently disappears. How, as researchers, do we confront these dominant logics that erase the existence of a phenomenon that is patently so important? Santos indicates that we must focus on that which has been silenced, emptied, and excluded, as much as on specific topics (like witchcraft or the indigenous people of Mexico) creating a “Sociology of the Nonexistent.” As researchers, it falls on us to preclude these silences and undermine the productive logic of nonexistence by preserving the voices of people in an organized way, gathering empirical evidence and, of course, reconstructing the historical and cultural trauma of the communitarian ethos that favors certain representations and practices. By so doing, this complex mechanism can be understood in social terms, where the causal factors like ethnicity, class, gender, and territory operate in an organic and enduring way. A sociocultural epidemiology cannot ignore these cultural frameworks, even when their existence is put in doubt, or, of course, ignore their emancipatory potential.

Author’s Note

I would like to offer my sincerest thanks to John Monaghan for translating this article from Spanish to English.

Notes

1. This is according to the Programa para el Desarrollo de Zonas Prioritarias or PDZP (SEDESOL 2014).
2. *Indices de Marginación Estatal y Municipal* (CONAPO 2005).
3. The Codex Vindobonensis, one of the most ancient of the Mixtec books, contains iconographic elements associated with witchcraft, such as on folio 52, where a skeleton appears (Dahlgren 1966: 262) and also on folio 24, where a funeral ceremony is represented in which Ehecatl Quetzalcoatl scrapes a skull with some bones.
4. The ten causes were, in order of frequency, the evil eye, indigestion, fright, *caida de mollera*, dysentery, aires, diarrhea, sprains, witchcraft, and angina.
5. The Policía Comunitaria de Guerrero is an indigenous organization governed by traditional usages and customs; it forms part of the structure of regional governance that provides protection and defense of communities under its jurisdiction.
6. Government census figures indicate it has 2,700 inhabitants.
7. Nicasio makes reference to the link between the Montaña of Guerrero with the Mixteca Alta of Oaxaca: “Owing to the fact that they consider the community of Chalcatongo, of the district of Tlaxiaco, some thirteen hours from Metlatonoc, to have the best brujos who are very knowledgeable, *na naku*, and many people go there to seek their services” (Nicasio 2004: 397).
8. *Ñuhu cijo* are stone gods that the inhabitants of Buenavista brought with them in sacred bundles during their migration from Mixtecapa, their place of origin. *Ñuhu* is the name Mixtecs use for their sacred beings. *Ñuhu* is known as the spirit of the earth that lives in nature and can appear in rivers, spring, rocks, roads, or in the milpa. It is also known as a protector of crops, since it is the owner of mountains and rocky outcrops. Its meaning is “holy thing” (Hermann 2008: 78).
9. “Sacar la pregunta,” indicates that the diagnosis should be carried out through divination. The curandero or brujo uses Spanish cards, the casting of corn kernels, the flame of a candle, or books specifically used for divination, like El Oráculo or El Libro de los Destinos. This latter, which is said to have been found in an Egyptian tomb during Napoleon’s expedition and which Napoleon himself consulted before making decisions, is a very popular book in Mexico, sold in stores that specialize in magic and divination.
10. When the brujo warns that “they sent a hex into your house,” almost always in the food consumed by the victims, the warning refers to the magical intrusion of nagual animals “that eat one from the inside,” driving one mad, provoking seizures, rheumatism, and frenzy, through the magical principle called contamination or intrusion by Frazer (1981: 63). On the other hand, when the brujo announces, “It is something that is buried,” the hex has operated according to sympathetic magic, according to Frazer (34).
11. For the Mixtecs, the number nine is associated with death and the underworld.
12. The ritual usage of a series of bunches of leaves and sticks follows a complex numerology (Broda 2008). I agree with Danièle Dehouve that “the numbers are not just a way of creating semantic categories, that is, they don’t just represent language, but are also invested with a magical efficacy” (Dehouve 2001: 107).
13. The petition is in Mixtec.
14. This is a *disfrasismo*, or parallelism, where the combination of two terms generates a new meaning, generally more abstract (García Leyva 2012: 122).
15. Gilles Bibeau (1992) observed that it is important to identify structural pathogenic vectors through which illness and other problems develop, especially when these problems affect so many people in a society.

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Ah Mak Ikob yetel Ah Pul Yahob

Yucatec Maya Witchcraft and Sorcery and the Mestizaje of Magic and Medicine in Colonial Yucatán, 1570–1790

John F. Chuchiak IV

Introduction

On January 24, 1724, Joseph de Zavala, a mulatto *curandero*, or healer, made a fatal mistake in coming to the aid of a Spanish citizen of the town of Tenabo in the province of Yucatan. According to the later denunciation of the Spaniard, Thomas Ordoñez, the mulatto had come to his house and, seeing that he suffered from a broken arm and a high fever, told him: “I can cure you of that arm easily. . . . all you must do is buy a hen so that I may offer it to the *Yum Cimil*, the Lord of Death, in my cornfield, and there I will make the drink *balché* and then I will come with it and cure you and only by this means and the offering will you be cured . . .”¹

According to his denunciation, the outraged Spaniard shouted at the mulatto *curandero*, “Even though I should lose this damned arm I will not be cured by this means . . . I only believe in God and his Holy Mother Church . . . not in these abominable superstitions of the Indians . . .”²

Shortly after his denunciation, the local commissary of the Holy Office of the Inquisition in the province had Joseph de Zavala secretly arrested and taken into custody. As a mulatto, he came under the jurisdiction of the Inquisition and he would face a trial for practicing sorcery, magical incantations, and using native Maya remedies and rituals in his curing practices. According to later testimony against him, Joseph de Zavala divined the cause of the diseases of his patients by using: “A little colored stone that the Indians call *Sastun*, a stone of their idolatries, and he also uses the ritual beverage *balché* and other implements such as copal incense to discern the causes of the illnesses . . .” The mulatto told the witnesses that he conducted these ceremonies and others in order to expel the cause of those illnesses, which he attributed to “an evil air called *Ix Hunyopolik*”³ The mulatto *curandero* furthermore chanted incantations to the Maya Lord of Death, *Yum Cimil*, who he claimed gave origin to all diseases and evil airs, invoking him to come and receive the food and drink offerings in order to cure the diseases. He also conducted ceremonies at the entrances to caves and cenotes, calling both *Yum Cimil* and *Ah Puch*, the lords of death and disease, to take back the evil winds they had sent.

The early eighteenth-century case of Joseph Zavala is illustrative of the impact of

traditional Maya sorcery, witchcraft, and herbal knowledge on the practice of colonial medicine in Yucatan. From the first contacts with Spanish colonizers, Yucatec Maya sorcery, witchcraft, medicinal concepts, and medical practices became the focus of attack from Spanish ecclesiastical authorities. However, as this 1724 case of Joseph Zavala illustrates, colonial medicine and healing practices in the Yucatan peninsula, even among non-Maya inhabitants, had become openly infused with a great amount of Yucatec Maya sorcery, ritual, and indigenous healing ceremonies. In this case, a mulatto or *pardo* curandero, or healer, practiced a type of medicinal ceremony that was heavily influenced by pre-Hispanic Maya magical concepts and ritual knowledge. The mulatto curandero's use of indigenous magic and religious practices shocked the colonial clergy and the inquisitors more than any other evidence they considered against him.⁴ Zavala's healing practices contained elements of Maya witchcraft and sorcery, and he directed his ritual ceremonies to indigenous deities that had somehow survived more than 200 years of extirpation and persecution. But the questions of how and why remain unanswered. How did so many elements of traditional Yucatec Maya sorcery, medicine, and ritual healing survive? More importantly, why did colonial mixed-caste peoples such as the mulatto Joseph Zavala practice an almost pure Maya form of sorcery and witchcraft in their practice of herbal medicine?

It is true that little existed in terms of organized Spanish medical care in the province.⁵ Those few doctors who did practice during the early colonial period would most undoubtedly have earned the dubious epithet today of "quacks" and "charlatans." The poor state of medical care in the colony no doubt helped to preserve the continued use of traditional Maya magical, herbal, and medicinal specialists and their herbal knowledge. However, this does not explain how so many aspects of traditional pre-Hispanic Maya concepts of disease, healing, and religion survived in the medical and magical practices of even non-Maya curanderos or herbal healers.

Moreover, the racial situation in the colony became complex. From the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, with the influx of more Spanish colonists and the importation of African slaves, the racial milieu of colonial Yucatan changed rapidly. However, the very nature of the colonial system and the large numbers of Yucatec Maya in comparison with the smaller Spanish and mixed-race society made it impossible to achieve the total extinction of Maya language, culture, and ritual practices that the Catholic clergy had wanted.

During the colonial period, as we shall see, a type of reciprocal encounter occurred between Spaniard, Maya, and African.⁶ These increasing interracial contacts helped mitigate against the widespread rejection of traditional Yucatec Maya magical and medicinal practices. Instead, colonial Yucatecan medicinal and magical practices themselves would come to mirror the mixed racial environment that existed in the colony. The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the significance of Yucatec Maya witchcraft, sorcery, and medicinal practices and their impact on the development of non-Maya magical practices and colonial medicine in Yucatan. By examining several cases of colonial witches, sorcerers, and *curanderos*, or medicinal folk healers, such as the mulatto Joseph Zavala, this chapter will illustrate the cross-cultural importance and impact of traditional Maya witchcraft, sorcery, and medicinal practices in Yucatan's colonial society.

The Mexican Inquisition and Its Stance on Witchcraft

Superstitions, witchcraft, and magical rites are born out of man's attempts to explain and control supernatural phenomenon. Thus, witchcraft and sorcery have been an integral part of all human society in one stage or another. Therefore, not surprisingly, witchcraft and sorcery have played an active part in Western culture since before the days of classical Greece and Rome. Ironically, the practice and use of witchcraft and the magical arts even in classical times was condemned, being associated as a negative influence on society. The Romans punished black magic and sorcery as capital offenses under their Laws of the Twelve Tables.⁷ For the Romans, witchcraft and sorcery, if used to cause death and illness, served as acts of treason against the state.

With the rise of Christianity, and its acceptance as the state religion under the Emperor Constantine, magic and witchcraft became an even greater threat. Not only did witchcraft appear dangerous to the state, but it also threatened the pure propagation of the Christian religion. The early church leaders saw the use of magic and witchcraft as the continuation of pagan ceremonies and practices. St. Augustine in his *De Civitate Dei* said that "witchcraft arose from a foul convention of mankind with the devil."⁸ To Christianity, witchcraft called forth the direct intervention of the Devil, God's enemy, into the daily life of the world, and the Devil's aim, they believed, focused on nothing less than the destruction of the Christian faith. St. Isidore of Seville in his *Etymologiae* reiterates the words of St. Augustine, saying that "witchcraft, whether by casting of spells by a look, or formula of words, or by some other means, is all of the devil"⁹

By the time of the thirteenth century, in answer to the open challenges of several new heresies that threatened the basic precepts of the faith, Pope Innocent III in the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 founded official church dogma. Still more importantly, Pope Gregory IX, in February of 1231, through his bull *Excomunicamus et anathematisamus*, saw to the official creation of the Inquisition in order to root out heresy and other threats to the Catholic faith such as witchcraft.¹⁰ Still, the early Inquisition had as its aim the extirpation of heresy; witchcraft was not officially placed under its jurisdiction at that time. It was not until 1484 that Pope Innocent VIII's papal bull *Summis desiderantes affectibus* explicitly described witchcraft as a type of heresy subject to the jurisdiction of the Holy Office of the Inquisition.¹¹ The pope believed that witches, having been baptized, invoked devils to do evil things, and in doing so, the witches became apostates to their faith. Thus, the practice of witchcraft and its tacit pact with the Devil was then defined technically by the church as a heresy and therefore under the domain of the Inquisition.

By the time of the sixteenth century, witchcraft became a growing problem throughout Europe, and many theologians denounced it as a form of idolatry and apostasy. The Spanish ecclesiastic Pedro de Ciruelo, in his famous treatise on witchcraft first published in 1530, *Tratado en el qual se repruevan todas las supersticiones y hechizarias*, defined witchcraft as "apostasy and idolatry: a worshipping of false gods, and a violation of the first commandment."¹² Ciruelo further elaborated on the growing sixteenth-century preoccupation with witchcraft, stating, "If a heretic or a believer in false gods is not punished with a rod of iron, there will be no remedy to extirpate them." Consequently, the Spanish inquisitors also

claimed jurisdiction over “all witches, diviners, necromancers, and in short all who practiced any kind of divination, if they have once professed the Holy faith” on the basis that they invoked devils and thus “were apostates, and consequently heretics, subject to the court of the Inquisition.”¹³ The Mexican Inquisition in particular proclaimed a special edict of the faith against all superstitious practices, sorcery, magic, and witchcraft in 1616.¹⁴

Therefore, the Spanish Inquisition in both Europe and the New World claimed jurisdiction over the crimes of witchcraft and sorcery and the subsequent right to punish them accordingly. With these precepts in hand, the Spanish inquisitors set out to extirpate the remnants of pre-Christian witchcraft and sorcery as well as to prevent Jewish, Islamic, and Gypsy magical rites from contaminating the purity of the Catholic faith.

The Situation in Colonial New Spain: The Mestizaje of Witchcraft and Sorcery

The Inquisition of New Spain, founded in 1571, came to the colony armed with the legal precedents and knowledge of witchcraft in the Old World.¹⁵ Arriving late in the process of colonization, the early inquisitors came unprepared to deal with the realities of witchcraft and sorcery in the increasingly mestizo culture of New Spain. Furthermore, King Philip II’s decree of 1569, which established the Mexican Holy Office, removed the Indians from its jurisdiction.¹⁶ Thus, the early inquisitors, among them Dr. Pedro Moya de Contreras, came unarmed to root out pre-Hispanic practices of witchcraft and sorcery that increasingly began to mingle with European practices, corrupting the society of New Spain.

In Spain the Jews and Moors had been expelled or converted by force, reducing the direct influences of their sorcery and its further diffusion into the Christian population. In New Spain the Inquisition and the civil state had no such power at their disposal. On the contrary, they were reliant upon the labor and tribute of the indigenous people. Thus, they were faced by the more difficult task of rooting out European and African witchcraft and sorcery as well as the influences of pre-Hispanic witchcraft. This task was further complicated in a mestizo society in which they had no official jurisdiction over the Indians, who many times served as the major practitioners and propagators of many magical practices in New Spain. The Mexican Inquisition, while attempting to punish and root out witchcraft and sorcery, became forced to come to terms with the unique “mestizo” form of witchcraft that evolved in New Spain almost as soon as the military conquest ended.

Consequently, in order to examine witchcraft and sorcery punished by the Mexican Inquisition, we must first briefly examine the two opposing cultural views of witches and sorcerers upon which colonial Mexican magic developed.

Spanish Views and Definitions of Witchcraft and Sorcery

They are all apostates from the faith, by reason of a pact made with the devil, either in word when some invocation is used, or by some deed . . . For no man can serve two masters.

As mentioned above, Spanish ideas of witchcraft, sorcery, and superstitious healing practices emanated from the dogma of the Catholic Church. The church saw witchcraft and sorcery, and both their impacts on superstitious medicinal practices, as a direct threat to the faith. Nevertheless, even in Christian Spain, many Spaniards practiced pre-Christian forms of witchcraft and sorcery well into the sixteenth century. The church saw these continued practices as ignorant superstitions, used mainly by the peasantry, but they still posed a serious threat to the church. Vicente Navarro, a judge of the Inquisition, in the preface to the 1628 edition of Pedro Ciruelo's *Reprovacion de las supersticiones y hecizerias*, stated: "I find continually that one of the most necessary things in a Christian republic is the censure and extirpation of both superstitious individuals and witches, because their malignant evil undermines, spreads and extends itself in a manner which reaches out to pervert even the hearts of true Catholics . . . unless such a great evil is destroyed, more serious evils may occur every day."¹⁷

Pedro Ciruelo himself equated witchcraft with idolatry and also superstition, stating that both of them "are most displeasing to God, and most harmful to men."¹⁸ For the Catholic Church, superstitions were thought to be vices that remained in direct opposition to good Christian religion, for the church believed that these superstitions led to the "squandering of worship daily where it is not owed."¹⁹ In the Spanish view, superstition served as a term used to describe a wide variety of offenses to the church, among them necromancy, divination, witchcraft, and sorcery. Furthermore, Pedro Ciruelo describes the Spanish belief that witchcraft involved a pact or contract with the devil: "The things that witches perform are so marvelous that it is impossible to give explanations for them based on natural causes . . . Since no natural cause can be found to explain how they do these things, it is necessary to say that the cause is spiritual . . ."²⁰

Basing their theories on Holy Scripture, Ciruelo and other Christian theologians attributed the spiritual causes of witchcraft to the Devil, who "has discovered and taught men all superstitions and vain witchcraft, therefore all those who learn and practice these superstitions are disciples of the devil."²¹ It was a witch's expressed pact with the Devil that so shocked and frightened the inquisitors and clergy. The church thus strongly urged all good Christians to avoid vain superstitious practices in which the inquisitors perceived the presence of a pact or agreement with the Devil. Anyone who made such a pact, in their opinion, damned their immortal soul to the fires of hell.

On this basis, the Catholic Church viewed the practices of witchcraft and sorcery negatively as evils, and considering their implicit pact with the Devil, they might be construed as treasons against Almighty God. Nevertheless, many people in Spain continued to practice witchcraft. In Spain and later in colonial Mexico and in Yucatan, witchcraft was used to obtain knowledge, wealth, success in love or games, or a cure to a disease. The Spanish term for a witch, *brujo*, usually denoted someone who used magic not only for their own benefit but also to harm or kill someone.²² Furthermore, a European witch could either request to be instructed in the practices of witchcraft or be recruited by another witch. Thus, in the Spanish view, men or women did not have to be children of witches in order to practice

the black arts; rather they freely chose to become witches.²³

Still, regardless of how a person became a witch, the church always equally condemned the use of magic involving either *hechicería* or *brujería*, no matter what the intended outcome or effect. In the eyes of the church even good ends like the curing of a disease, if obtained through witchcraft or sorcery, were considered evil. Traditional healers in Spain who used Catholic prayers in their healing spells often found themselves condemned by the Holy Office, for the inquisitors thought that they used them to cover up their evil means. Generally the church thought that due to their pact with the Devil, witches and “all of their works, even when they appear to be good, are rather of an evil nature.”²⁴

Therefore, the basic Christian ideas of the existence of a sharp contrast and division between good and evil, God and the Devil, forged the Spaniards’ negative views of all types of superstitions, especially those of witchcraft and sorcery. In this framework, all uses of magic, whether they were derived from pre-Christian, Jewish, African, or Islamic traditions, were equally condemned as evil and marked for eradication.

The Pre-Hispanic Indigenous Views on Witchcraft and Sorcery

There is no religion without magic any more than there is magic without at least a trace of religion . . .

—Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (1962: 221)

In pre-Hispanic Mexico the various Indigenous cultures had an entirely different view of witchcraft and religion. To the pre-Hispanic Aztec or Maya no sharp contrast existed between good and evil. In fact, pre-Hispanic Aztec and Maya religion developed to a large degree based on the idea of a sacred duality that existed in the cosmos. Even their deities and spiritual intercessors had this dualistic nature. Having both good and evil aspects, the indigenous people could appeal to their gods to help or harm. Thus, to the Aztecs, Tezcatlipoca was the god of war and sorcery. He could be called on to aid in gaining victory in war, but a sorcerer could likewise call on his aid to injure or kill someone.

The gods of the Aztecs and the Maya were fickle gods, working either good or evil as their whims saw fit. This duality in the nature of their gods made it necessary to offer sacrifices to them for their favor. There was no security that a god who was normally benign, such as Quetzalcoatl/Kukulcan, might not seek vengeance for some affront. Thus, it became necessary to consult priests, witches, and sorcerers in order to divine or ascertain the humor of the gods and discern the remedy for their anger, which manifested itself in many forms.

The pre-Hispanic people also believed in a dual nature of the human soul. The Spanish ecclesiastic Hernando Ruíz de Alarcón, writing in 1629, tells us that for the Aztecs at birth each person received two souls, one associated with a guardian animal, called a *Nahualli* (*Chulel*—Maya), and another similar to the Christian concept of an immortal soul, associated with their date of birth.²⁵ This second soul, called *Tonalli* in Nahuatl and *Pixan* in Yucatec Maya, was seen to be the essence of life and the object of malevolent magic.²⁶ Oftentimes if someone were ill, they believed the cause of this illness was the theft or loss of this soul.

Furthermore, it is not surprising that this indigenous idea of duality also affected their view of witchcraft and sorcery. Magic and its varied uses remained an integral part of pre-Hispanic religion and daily life. The native priests were especially trained in the arts of magic, but there also existed other specialists who practiced witchcraft and sorcery to achieve various results.²⁷ Thus, the indigenous people looked upon the use of magic with respect and fear. To them, witchcraft could be used to achieve either positive or negative results. The knowledge of the herbal healer, the *ticitl* of the Aztecs or the *Ah men* of the Maya, could also be used to poison someone. The sorcerer who was asked to retrieve a lost “soul” might also take the “soul” from another. Also there existed witches or sorcerers who could transform themselves into the form of their guardian animal. These Aztec *Nahual* or Maya *Uaayben uinic*, were capable of changing themselves into the form of their familiar animal spirit in order to work malevolent magic.²⁸ Therefore, various indigenous specialists in herbs, spells, and incantations among the Aztecs and Mayas used their knowledge to divine the future, cure or cause illness, and secure the help of the gods in various activities.

The final difference between the pre-Hispanic and Spanish views of witchcraft concerned the way in which people came to practice the arts of magic. As discussed above, the Spaniards believed that people freely chose to become a witch for their own purposes. However, the Aztec and Maya believed that people had no choice in the matter, for the gods chose who would become witches and sorcerers. The pre-Hispanic ideal of fate and destiny played a large part in their lives, ordaining that people born under certain signs were predestined to be sorcerers and witches. Tezcatlipoca, the patron god of Aztec sorcerers, chose before birth those that he wished to practice sorcery, especially those born on the days *Ce Ehécatl* and *Ce Quiahuatl* (1 Wind, 1 Rain).²⁹ The Maya also believed that the god of death, *Ah Puch*, gave the witches their power, choosing them at birth by inserting a drop of his own blood into their veins.³⁰ It was said that those born on the Maya day *Lamat* would be sorcerers.

Consequently, in the pre-Hispanic tradition the way in which witches were created, the varied types of witchcraft and sorcery, and their uses of sorcery to achieve both positive and negative results caused the indigenous people to view the use of magic in a different way. The Aztec and Maya remained tolerant, accepting the practices of witchcraft and sorcery while being slightly wary of their practitioners. However, they attached no serious stigma to practicing witchcraft or sorcery. On the contrary, almost everyone had the need to consult a witch or sorcerer at various times throughout their lives.

Thus it can be seen that pre-Hispanic and Spanish views of witchcraft and sorcery stem from distinctly different cultural ideas and understandings of religion and the use of magic. The Spanish exclusively associated *brujería* with calamities, bad fortune, and sickness, all caused, they believed, by the unchaining of evil forces through the use of a pact with the Devil. Pre-Hispanic witchcraft, on the other hand, was seen to bring about all of these negative consequences, but at the same time it could also cure the sick, stop natural calamities, improve someone’s fortune, and bargain with the gods. Therefore, the exclusive nature of Spanish Catholicism contrasts with the more inclusive nature of pre-Hispanic religious thought. In New Spain and colonial Yucatan, these two distinct cultural views of

religion and magic and their connection to the nature of diseases and medicinal practices would quickly come to blows with the Spanish Conquest and the creation of the colony.

Pre-Hispanic Maya Ideas of the Connection between Sorcery and Witchcraft and the Origins of Diseases and Medicinal Curing

In Yucatan, as we have seen, the pre-Hispanic Maya practiced medicine and religion together in a tightly integrated system. As the Franciscan friar Diego de Landa noted, “All of the services which they performed for their gods were for no other end nor for any other purpose than that they should give them health, life and sustenance. . . .”³¹ Any discussion of Maya healing and medicinal techniques must also contain a significant amount of Maya magical and religious practices. This reality was also well understood by the colonial Spanish clergy, who, when examining Maya medicinal practices, saw in them only the “superstitious rituals of the devil” (Sanchez de Aguilar 1639: 74v–76r).

According to Diego de Landa, the Yucatec Maya held various beliefs concerning diseases, healing, and medicinal practices. Maya healers, then, were certain priests and practitioners who “utilized herbal remedies, some skilled techniques, chants, incantations, and benevolent and malevolent magic to cure diseases and ailments attributed to the gods.” Diseases themselves, as animate beings, were able to understand the commands of the shaman in the Maya tradition, and the shaman attempted to divine the causes and origins of the disease and then recounted its parentage and the life history of the disease before banishing the disease or “evil wind” from the body of the patient.³² Many of these incantations and chants are recorded in the Maya *Rituals of the Bacabs*. For instance, in confronting the disease known as “Macaw seizure,” the shaman or priest chants to the disease:

“. . . Who was your creator? Who was your darkness? Did Kin Chac Ahau, Colop u uich Kin create you when you were born. Who was your mother? Who was your begetter, father, when you were born? Ix Chel, Sacal Ix Chel, that was your mother . . . that was your begetter, your father . . .”³³

Diego de Landa also noted that the Maya shaman combined these incantations and what he termed as “other witchcraft” with a sound use of herbal remedies. He wrote:

“. . . There is in this land a great quantity of medicinal plants . . . if there were any person here who possessed a knowledge of them it would be most useful and effective for there is no disease to which the natives do not apply the plants . . . But when they are asked for an account of their properties, they give none other than that they are cold or hot, and that they are accustomed to employ them to obtain the effect for which they apply them . . . as antidotes, and on the other hand there are those which are poisonous and deadly . . .”³⁴

The Maya also had other ritual specialists called *Kax Bac*, or bone-binders, who bandaged, massaged, and applied poultices of herbs and leaves and the roots of a plant called *Xacalbac*, or “bone-remedy.” Apparently, as Ralph Roys argued earlier in his work *The Ethnobotany of the Yucatec Maya*, Maya herbal medicine was little affected by Spanish influence.³⁵

Conquest and Colonial Changes in Medicinal Practices in Yucatan

Nevertheless, nothing in pre-Hispanic Maya culture or religion had prepared the Maya for the demographic catastrophes that would occur from the middle of the sixteenth to the end of the seventeenth century. The Maya themselves noted the absence of major pandemics of mortal diseases such as smallpox and typhus:

There was then no seizure; there was then no rending of flesh for them, there was then no groaning fever for them, there was then no excess burning for them, there was then no burning chest for them, there was then no stomach pains for them . . . there was then no fatal chest weakness for them . . . in sound health then they were . . . But the actions of the foreigners who have come here were different, . . . they brought shame when they came. . . . This is the year they have caught the plague . . . its bite has come here from these foreigners . . .³⁶

Much of the archaeological and even the skeletal evidence of Postclassic sites testifies to the apparent lack of epidemic diseases among the Postclassic Maya.³⁷ Things would change with the introduction of massive epidemics of diseases of European origin, for which the Maya had no natural immunities. However, the Spanish and mixed-race population of the peninsula also remained equally susceptible to the ravages of new epidemic diseases such as yellow fever. All ethnic groups sought some means to avert death and cure the ravages of epidemic diseases.³⁸ In their desperation, the Spanish population and the mixed races in Yucatan also sought out the aid of traditional Maya curanderos or herbal healers.³⁹

Apparently, traditional Maya concepts and healing rituals survived during the colonial period, and they even thrived as non-Maya became trained in the use of Maya herbal medicines and medical ceremonies. As late as 1813, the parish priest of Yaxcaba noted that the Maya still practiced traditional methods that mixed pre-Hispanic religious practices with their medicinal ceremonies. He noted that the Maya continued offering food and drink to *Yum Cimil*, the lord or father of death. According to Father Bartolome de Granado Baeza: “They have a ritual called *Kex*, which means to change, and it is reduced to this: They hang certain offerings of food and drink around the house of the sick, as offerings to Yum Cimil, which is the name for Death, or the Lord of Death . . . with this they believe they can rescue the sick from their disease.”⁴⁰

Several cases of colonial curanderos and herbal healers brought before the Inquisition and

ecclesiastical courts included references to these *Kex* ceremonies or other practices of Maya sorcery (see [table 5.1](#)).

Regardless of these pre-Hispanic survivals, many scholars have recently argued that colonial Maya medicine and medicinal knowledge remained heavily influenced by Spanish and European concepts and styles. However, if one examines the surviving colonial documentation concerning heterodox medicinal practices punished by the Inquisition, the evidence does not totally support these claims.

The surviving colonial documents from Inquisition trials and ecclesiastical court cases in the Yucatan Peninsula reveal, moreover, that instead of an overt incorporation of European medicinal and herbal knowledge, most of the curing and medicinal ceremonies performed, even by mixed castes (*mestizo*, African, and mulatto medical practitioners), involved heavy doses of traditional Maya herbal, cultural, and religious knowledge and rituals.

Table 5.1. Colonial Maya Curanderos Processed by the Ecclesiastical Courts in Colonial Yucatan

Year	Ah Men/ Maya Shaman	Ethnicity	Town	Accusation	Tried by
1589	Francisco Cen	Indio	Ichmul	curandero, hechicero, ensalmador	Provisorato
1591	Magdalena Ku	India	Merida	curandera adivina, tomaba peyote	Provisorato
1594	Juan Pot	Indio	Dzemul	curandero hechicero, daba bebedizos	Provisorato
1597	Pedro Huchim	Indio	Tihotzuco	curandero hechicero, daba bebedizos	Provisorato
1601	Juan Pech	Indio	Peto	curandero ensalmador	Provisorato
1603	Isabel Mutul	India	Tixkokob	curandera adivina, tomaba peyote	Provisorato
1606	Esteban Uh	Indio	Homun	curandero ensalmador	Inquisition
1607	Marcos Pol	Indio	Hocaba	curandero hechicero, daba bebedizos	Provisorato
1607	Mateo Uxul	Indio	Calakmul	curandero ensalmador	Inquisition
1606	Esteban Uh	Indio	Homun	curandero ensalmador	Inquisition
1607	Marcos Pol	Indio	Hocaba	curandero hechicero, daba bebedizos	Provisorato
1607	Mateo Uxul	Indio	Calakmul	curandero ensalmador	Inquisition
1610	Felipe May	Indio	Campeche	curandero hechicero, daba bebedizos	Provisorato
1611	Pablo Camal	Indio	Becan	curandero ensalmador	Provisorato

1613	Gaspar Tzuc	Indio	Calkini	curandero hechicero, daba bebedizos	Provisorato
1613	Petra Trujillo	mulata	Campeche	curandera supersticiosa	Inquisition
1613	Melchor Xix	Indio	Holail	curandero ensalmador	Provisorato

Although European and Spanish herbolaries and medicinal texts may have influenced the writing of the colonial documents known as *Libros de Yervas y Hechicerias*, or the other medicinal passages in the Chilam Balam books of Kaua and Nah, the colonial trials reveal that in the actual everyday practice of medicinal curing ceremonies, a high degree of Maya practices, rituals, and religious incantations were used by all facets of colonial society.⁴¹

The Inquisition Cases: Colonial Curanderos and the Impact of Maya Witchcraft, Sorcery, and Medicinal Practices in Colonial Yucatan

In the light of the Spanish view of the black arts, the Mexican Inquisition began a thorough examination of the existence of pre-Hispanic religious concepts and styles of witchcraft in the society of New Spain. They soon discovered to their horror that they were dealing with not just traditional European beliefs in superstitious medical curing and sorcery but in fact a hybrid culture that practiced and intermingled aspects of witchcraft and sorcery from the magical tradition of both worlds. As mentioned above, they soon noticed the pernicious work of the Maya as the main contaminant of their mestizo society.⁴²

Their subsequent findings must have confirmed their fears of the extent and degree to which both Spanish and pre-Hispanic witchcraft and sorcery contaminated colonial society. The Inquisition took action, focusing mainly on the types of witchcraft and sorcery that it deemed the most dangerous to the purity and moral well-being of New Spain, and therefore most worthy of punishment. They singled out two types of witchcraft that concerned two issues of integral importance to the mestizo society of New Spain: namely, its beliefs concerning health and the origins of diseases as well as colonial medical practices. These areas, in the Inquisition's opinion, were the focal point of the practice of witchcraft and sorcery in New Spain, especially in the province of Yucatan.

The widespread epidemics of postconquest and later seventeenth-century Mexico are well noted by many scholars. The impact of new European diseases upon the indigenous populations of New Spain was devastating. Upward from 75 percent to 90 percent of the Indian populations in some areas perished.⁴³ The scholar Peter Gerhard estimated that from 1511 to 1551 in Yucatan alone there was a 75 percent decline in the population due to war, famine, and disease.⁴⁴ Still, diseases and epidemics such as smallpox, measles, typhus, influenza, pneumonic plague, and many other types of fever claimed the lives of Indians, mestizos, and Spaniards alike. Also, poor sanitation practices helped to aggravate the problems and made urban areas like Mexico City breeding grounds for all types of infirmities. Consequently, much of the population succumbed to diseases and other ills.

Preoccupations about health and sickness played largely in the minds of the residents of New Spain. However, the state of medicine in New Spain was, to say the least, inadequate. Although New Spain had a group of university-trained physicians, their total number was never enough to meet the growing demand for their services. From the period of 1607 to 1738 the University of Mexico issued degrees in medicine to only 438 individuals.⁴⁵ These few doctors were mostly licensed in Mexico City, restricting their practices to the metropolitan area.⁴⁶ Therefore, in the outlying provinces, the population—Spanish, mestizo, and mulato—in many cases had no real alternative than to consult a local curandero.

The mixed-caste curanderos in many instances practiced a type of folk medicine currently used in Spain at the same time. However, many also blended these practices with pre-Hispanic Maya beliefs and herbs found in the traditional medicine of the Maya.⁴⁷ Thus, the curanderos, especially in the outlying areas, practiced a type of traditional mestizo medicine that seemed heavily influenced by pre-Hispanic religion and witchcraft.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the scarcity of real physicians and recurrent medical problems made these local curanderos a necessary part of colonial society. On the other hand, in the view of the Inquisition, these curanderos were suspected in many cases of being brujos or *hechiceros*. A fine line existed between what the Inquisition considered a legitimate herbal healer and a witch who used magical rites, superstitions, and vain ceremonies in their curing.⁴⁹ In the eyes of the Holy Office, many curanderos and their herbal potions, conjures, divinations, and superstitious ceremonies smacked of idolatry, apostasy, and formal heresy. In many instances the Inquisition was proven right in its suspicions, for elements of witchcraft were indeed practiced by many of the curanderos.

Moreover, during the colonial period there existed a changing concept as to the origins of diseases. Both pre-Hispanic and superstitious Spanish ideas attributed the cause of diseases to witchcraft or sorcery. Thus, a good curandero needed to be aware of the effects of a spell or *hechizo* in a patient and consequently the appropriate cure or conjure to eliminate it.

In Spain these curanderos knew which magical amulets or Catholic prayers were to be spoken in order to break the witch's spell. In pre-Hispanic Mexico sickness was seen as a punishment from the gods, perhaps worked by a witch. The Aztecs attributed the causes of many diseases to various deities; therefore sexual diseases were associated with the god *Macuil Xochitl*, and skin diseases with Xipe Totec.⁵⁰ Hernando Ruíz de Alarcón decried the continued use of pre-Hispanic ideas of sorcery in the Indians of his ecclesiastical benefice in the 1620s. His *Treatise on Superstitions* condemned the superstitions of the natives and their curanderos or *Ticitl*.⁵¹

Likewise, the Maya attributed various maladies to a specific type of witch or sorcerer who knew how to cause them. The *Ah pul cimil* was a witch who caused deathly illness in others, and the *Ah pul abich kik* cast spells to place blood in the urine.⁵² Conversely, the Maya also had curanderos, or witches and sorcerers, who could cure diseases caused by bewitchment. Colonial Maya concepts of the origins of illnesses continued to focus on the impact and role of “evil winds” (*kakas ik*) in the spreading of diseases.⁵³

A colonial medicinal practitioner, called an *Ah mac ik*, or “evil wind stopper,” served to cure maladies instigated by the various evil winds that the Maya believed were caused by

enchantment.⁵⁴ The importance of the curandero's ritual and ceremonial knowledge of the Maya spiritual world and the origins of the evil winds in caves and cenotes meant that colonial curanderos, even those who were not ethnically Maya, had to participate in traditional Maya ceremonies that divined the cause of diseases and also served to conjure or cure illnesses caused by the evil winds. On this basis, colonial society in Yucatan, across racial boundaries, continued to believe that many diseases were caused and cured by witchcraft and the evil winds. Even up to the present day, both mestizo and Maya alike in Yucatan believe that the strong winds that occasionally blow about the peninsula bring illnesses with them.

Fearing the indigenous religious content of these medicinal practices, the Inquisition commissariat in Yucatan found it imperative to proceed against curanderos who practiced Maya forms of witchcraft in order to stop the further contamination of the religious, moral, and social order of New Spain. A commissioner of the Inquisition in one region at the late date of 1772 decried the superstitious ideas rampant in the colony: "These territories are very contaminated with similar superstitions, the people even desire to believe thus and do not wish to believe that the illness they suffer are the will of God our father, but rather they vacillate and then believe that they are bewitched . . ."⁵⁵

Interestingly, many of the mestizo, mulato, and Spanish curanderos accused of witchcraft and sorcery by the Inquisition were found guilty of practicing superstitions strikingly similar to those involving pre-Hispanic Maya sorcery and witchcraft. For instance, in 1614 one of the first cases recorded by the commissaries of the Holy Office in the province of Yucatan was filed against a mulata named Magdalena who was accused of being a *curandera adivina*. In order to divine what disease had overcome her patient and its subsequent cure, she took peyote as a divinatory aid.⁵⁶ Hernando Ruíz de Alarcón tells us that this means of divination was commonly used by pre-Hispanic sorcerers and healers in order to discover the causes of illness.⁵⁷ Later, in 1617 the Holy Office of the Inquisition issued an edict condemning the use of hallucinogens, for in their opinion the ingestion of these drugs established an implicit pact with the Devil.⁵⁸ Still, even after this early edict and Ruíz de Alarcón's later denunciations, many curanderos and innumerable Indians continued to use these hallucinogens in order to divine the causes of diseases. A second edict of faith that prohibited in particular the use of peyote and other herbs was issued again in 1620.⁵⁹

In 1748, more than a hundred years later, a similar case of a superstitious *curandera adivinadora* was brought against Petrona Trujeque, a mulata, in Yucatan. She too ingested peyote and other "hallucinogens" in order to divine the cause of the diseases that afflicted her patient. She also engaged in ritual incantations (in Maya) that apparently mirror many of those described in the *Maya Ritual of the Bacabs*. She reportedly chanted over her sick patients: ". . . . I call forth the white wind behind the north sky, black is the west wind, yellow is the south wind, and red is the wind from the east . . . Who brought these winds here? . . . From where did this disease come? . . . Come forth and tell me where you came from . . ."⁶⁰

Many other cases of colonial curanderos who used Maya methods of medicine and witchcraft also came before the Inquisition. In 1675, in the province of Yucatan, a mestiza,

María Rincon, was also tried by the Inquisition for her use of superstitions and witchcraft. She also appeared to be relying heavily upon pre-Hispanic Maya rituals such as the use of copal incense in her curing. Maria would stand over the patient and incense them, offering copal to the four cardinal directions and chanting in order, in her words, to “conjure the winds that brought forth the disease.”⁶¹

Even more infamous, as we have already seen above, was the later trial in 1724 of a mulatto curandero named Joseph Zavala, who was accused by many of his clients of being a witch and an evil healer. It seems that Zavala was indeed practicing an almost pure Maya form of traditional medicine. He was accused of, and confessed to, burning and perfuming his clients with copal incense as well as divining the cause of their diseases by the use of shark bones called *xooc* and a Maya sorcerer’s stone called a *sastun*.

It seems, through the subsequent testimony, that Zavala was a practicing *Ah mac ik*, or “evil wind stopper,” for his ceremonies revolved around the elimination of *Xhunyopolik*, an evil air that, according to Zavala, was the cause of many illnesses. Still, if this was not a clear enough sign of his guilt, he also set up altars upon which he offered the sacred native intoxicant *balché* and ordered all of those present at the curing ceremony to liberally partake of the drink along with him.⁶² This, he was quoted as saying, “returned health to the patient.”⁶³

The inquisitors trying his case, no doubt horrified by his means, denounced him as guilty of heresy by practicing the three major forms of superstitions: idolatry, divination, and vain observance. Joseph Zavala was proven guilty of witchcraft on the basis of his use of vain ceremonies in his curing, which implied a pact with the Devil, as the inquisitor proclaimed, “*et sic pertinent ad pacta signatum demonibus*.”⁶⁴

On the other hand, not all of the curanderos brought before the Inquisition were of mixed caste or race. Other European suspects also blended aspects of Maya traditional medicine with what the Inquisition labeled the European black arts. One Englishman, Ricardo Luis, a surgeon and curandero in Yucatan, was said to have cured not by good means but rather by diabolic arts. He was accused of invoking the Devil in his cures by using a small book in which were drawn figures that to one witness “appeared to be evil” and by reading words that caused the witness who saw them “to be horrified, throwing the book aside out of fear.”⁶⁵ Nevertheless, Ricardo Lewis used some aspects of Maya curing ceremonies as well. He would use copal incense to incense the patient, and he would make offerings of rum and other alcoholic beverages to the four corners of the room.

Other cases of more syncretic types of curing ceremonies occurred throughout the peninsula. In 1676 a mulata named Andrea and several others, mostly women, were accused in Yucatan of curing and harming with witchcraft involving pacts with the Devil.⁶⁶ At the same time, they all invoked the “lord of the winds” and the lord of the caves to divine the causes of their patients’ illnesses.

These and many other cases of witchcraft involving curanderos arose in the inquisitorial courts of colonial Yucatan. The problem of the scarcity of doctors, along with the persistent continuation of the practices of Maya sorcerers and shaman healers, became leading factors in the hybrid colonial population’s recurrent reliance upon curanderos who practiced traditional medicine involving a mestizo or even the purely Maya style of witchcraft and

healing.

The curanderos' practice of this mestizo witchcraft, a mixture of European and pre-Hispanic Maya forms, was singled out by the Inquisition for punishment. The Holy Office had the duty to protect the religious, moral, and social structure of colonial Mexican society, and the curandero's use of witchcraft ran contrary to that goal. Nevertheless, what all of these trials and denunciations show us is that even Spaniards and other non-Maya continued to incorporate Maya religious and medicinal concepts into their own medical practices. Regardless of the Maya's adoption of European formats for their own creation of herbolaries and herbal books, the true fact was that behind the origins of their written herbal books, the ceremonies and rituals associated with medicinal curing and healing in colonial Yucatan preserved a uniquely Maya form and content throughout the colonial period.

Sexual Magic: The Sexual Uses of Maya Witchcraft and Sorcery in Colonial Yucatan

No might of the flames or of the swollen winds, no deadly weapon, is so much to be feared as the lust and hatred of a woman who has been divorced from the marriage bed.

—Seneca, *Tragedies* VIII

The preoccupation of health in colonial New Spain in general remained one of the prime concerns of the population at large. Due to the insecure state of legitimate medicine, many colonists of all ethnicities sought out witchcraft and sorcery as answers to their continued ills. As stated above, evidence can be gathered to show that colonial Yucatecan society consulted curanderos and indigenous witches and sorcerers in order to achieve health, even when there existed legitimate and socially accepted doctors. Not surprisingly, in matters concerning erotic love and sexuality, where there did not exist any legitimate or accepted means of consultation, Maya-influenced witchcraft and sorcery must have been seen as the only option.

The archives of the Inquisition of New Spain are virtually loaded with reported cases and denunciations of the use of witchcraft and magic in the seduction of a lover or in gaining their exclusive sexual favors. Still, the use of sexual magic was not a new concept. In Spain spells and charms to secure the sexual affections of someone remained commonplace.⁶⁷ Similarly, Mesoamericans also practiced aspects of sexual magic in pre-Hispanic times, although these magical practices basically focused on curing infirmities that the Aztec and Maya believed resulted from illicit sexual activities.⁶⁸

In Spain the power of the spoken word reigned supreme as sexual magic took on the form of conjuries, spells, and incantations, with the use of seemingly Christian prayers to achieve the desired effect.⁶⁹ The main objective of this type of witchcraft focused on securing the exclusive rights of the witch to the sexual relations of a lover. This type of sorcery was done through several means, mostly involving a spell or incantation in combination with a love potion made variously from sexual fluids, menstrual blood, or other such substances.⁷⁰

However, other uses of this type of magic existed, most notably spells to make a woman's husband "stupid" so that he would not abuse her.

In New Spain sexual magic sought many of the same ends, such as the impotence of the partner, which involved a spell called a *ligation* through which the man's penis was "tied" or made useless, only functioning when he used it with the witch. However, the nature of these potions used in New Spain differed, mainly deriving from the indigenous knowledge of various herbs. Thus, once again the inquisitors found the corrupting influence of the Maya in the sexual magic of colonial Yucatan. In fact, many cases of sexual witchcraft in colonial Yucatan, even those basically European in style, involved some native herb passed on to the witch by an indigenous person.⁷¹

For example, in 1627 a Spanish woman in Yucatan, Catalina Rodriquez, astonishingly denounced herself to the Inquisition for having asked several old Maya women for a *remedio* to *amansar*, or tame, her cheating husband, who treated her badly. The Maya women gave her a type of herb and told her to rub it all over his body, saying, "With this I shall rub you so that you never part from me."⁷² The same woman also received from an unnamed Indian man an herb called *Puyomate*, which she was supposed to put in her husband's chocolate so that he would never leave her and always be filled with passion. In another case, dated 1626, Isabel Morena, a African slave in Campeche, called upon a Maya woman named Catalina Puc, known for her magical and curing powers, in order to bring back her lover who had left her.⁷³ Isabel pleaded with the Indian woman, telling her, "You must bring him back to me, as you well know how to do."⁷⁴ Another case from Yucatan in 1627 involved a mestizo woman, Melchora Gonzalez, who called upon a Maya woman named Lucía Poot, asking her for a spell or *hechizo* so that her husband would not mistreat her. Again this Maya woman gave her some powders that she was supposed to put into her husband's chocolate.⁷⁵ Yet another case, involving the same Maya Indian woman named Catalina Puc, dealt with a second self-denunciation, that of Catalina Antonio de Rojas, a Spanish woman who used herbs and, surprisingly, spells "in the language of the Indians" to cause her cheating husband to become impotent.⁷⁶

Many of the Inquisition commissaries' summary investigations into witchcraft and sorcery in colonial Yucatan were conducted against those who practiced divination, sexual magic, and the casting of spells on their lovers.⁷⁷ The many varieties of spells and incantations, and their desired outcomes, as well as their sexually explicit words, are in themselves interesting reading. However, several scholars, such as Ruth Behar and Noemi Quezada, believe that almost exclusively women practiced sexual witchcraft, arguing that since they are the oppressed sex, they attempted to use sexual magic to overturn their traditional sex and gender roles.⁷⁸ In the light of available documentation for the case of Yucatan, however, this may not be the best explanation of the use of sexual magic, for women did not apparently have a monopoly on such practices. There are also numerous cases of men using sexual witchcraft to secure the erotic love of women as well. In one case, when an accused witch's husband had an affair with another woman, her uncle, Juan de Vargas, gave her a potion in order to make her husband come to despise the other woman.⁷⁹ Similarly, another man in Yucatan used sexual magic when he obtained an amulet in order to attract the sexual affections of a servant

in his parents' house.

Also, other types of witchcraft existed, especially those that witches used to harm enemies, and this type of malevolent witchcraft (*brujería*) was more often practiced by men. Two astounding accusations of this type of *brujería* were made at different times against such prominent members of colonial society as two governors of the province of Yucatan.⁸⁰ These two exceptional cases may not, however, truly reflect actual practices of witchcraft, but rather the use of an accusation of witchcraft as a political weapon. Nevertheless, a discussion of these interesting cases is beyond the scope of this present chapter.

Considering the large number of cases of sexual witchcraft involving both men and women, it must have appeared to the Inquisition and their commissaries that the inhabitants of colonial Yucatan had become even more interested in the fulfillment and security of their sex life than their physical health. Although this idea alone may amuse modern investigators, the fact of the recurrent and systematic use of indigenous aspects of Maya witchcraft and sorcery to secure lovers, and their sexual favors, served for the Mexican Inquisition as an astonishing testimony of the state of moral decay of the increasingly mestizo society of colonial Yucatan.

Conclusion: The Inquisition and the Problem of the Influence of Maya Witchcraft and Sorcery in Colonial Yucatecan Magic and Medicinal Practices

From the first contacts with Spanish colonizers, both Yucatec Maya magic and medicinal concepts and practices became the focus of attack from Spanish ecclesiastical authorities. From the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, with the influx of more Spanish colonists and the importation of African slaves, the racial milieu of colonial Yucatan changed, and a type of reciprocal encounter occurred between Spaniard, Maya, and African. The lack of adequate sanctioned European medical services and increasing interracial contacts helped mitigate against the widespread rejection of traditional Yucatec Maya medicinal and magical practices. Instead, colonial Yucatecan medicinal and magical practices themselves would come to play a major role in the development of what can be considered a mestizaje of magic and medicine in the mixed racial environment that existed in the colony.

As shown above, witchcraft and sorcery became widespread elements practiced across cultural, ethnic, and class boundaries in colonial Yucatan. In the eyes of the Inquisition and its commissaries in the province, the practice of witchcraft and its corruption of the moral and religious climate in the colony were integrally related to several factors. First of all, the inherent superstition of the lower classes, long evident in Spain, became exacerbated by the hybrid nature of an ever-growing mestizo population. Secondly, the dangerously contaminating influences of the indigenous population on that Mestizo society seemed to augment and aid in the continued practice of witchcraft and sorcery. However, the Inquisition remained juridically incapable of rooting out witchcraft in the indigenous peoples, and the overburdened ordinary courts of the Provisor of Indians also remained incapable of meeting

the rising challenge.⁸¹ Regardless, for the Catholic clergy no matter how hopeless it appeared to successfully root out the practices of indigenous witchcraft in the Indian population, it remained imperative to root it out in the Spanish and mestizo classes. Thus, in its attempt to extirpate aspects of Maya witchcraft and sorcery from the non-indigenous colonial society, the Inquisition and its local commissaries found themselves forced to discover a solution that, while punishing witches and sorcerers, would not damage the delicate nature of mestizo society.

The Mexican Inquisition, knowing that it had no control over punishing the indigenous roots of witchcraft, developed a system of punishment that, although conservatively mild in nature, remained considerably effective in practice. We must keep in mind that throughout Europe at this same time, many royal authorities, the civil courts, and even the Protestant Church zealously executed those men and women whom they convicted as witches.⁸² Although the Inquisition seems to have popularly developed quite a bad reputation for cruelty in the historical literature, it must be noted that the Mexican Inquisition executed few if any witches in Mexico and none in colonial Yucatan. Even the use of torture the Mexican Inquisition judiciously and conservatively applied in most cases, especially those concerning accused witches.⁸³ In fact, in central Mexico alone, out of the seventy-one denunciations against curanderos for witchcraft from 1613 to 1806, only twenty-one cases were actually tried, and of those only two involved the use of torture in questioning.⁸⁴ Similarly, in the cases for sorcery and witchcraft from colonial Yucatan, out of a total number of thirty-six cases of *hechiceria*, *brujeria*, and *supersticiones* from 1558 to 1803, the Inquisition seems to have used torture only once, and that was against the curandero Joseph Zavala in 1724.⁸⁵

In contrast to the harsh practices of many European tribunals and civil courts, the Mexican Inquisition resorted to milder punishments such as whipping, imprisonment, official reprimands, fines, and public ridicule. Even the curandero Joseph Zavala, guilty of one of the most disquieting offenses, was only sentenced to 200 lashes, banishment from Yucatan, and eight years of indentured servitude.⁸⁶ Even among the other two cases from central Mexico that had utilized torture to obtain a confession, the convicted witches received similarly mild punishments of lashes and indentured servitude.⁸⁷ Considering the punishments leveled in Europe at the same time, the Mexican Inquisition, and especially the punishments meted out to the colonists in Yucatan, seemed mild indeed. However, the Inquisition, even though trying to use mild punishment, did invoke the threat of heavier sanctions upon repeat offenders.

The mild nature of the Mexican Inquisition's punishment of witchcraft and sorcery stemmed, as mentioned before, from the unique hybrid nature of the colony of New Spain. In a land where indigenous sorcerers practiced their magic arts almost without reproach, it would have been dangerous indeed to punish the mestizo and Spanish population with the death penalty for lesser offenses.⁸⁸ Thus, no matter how much the inquisitors wished to use the most severe penalties under their powers to extirpate witchcraft and its indigenous influences in the mestizo population in New Spain, in general, and in colonial Yucatan in particular, they chose not to, opting for milder punishments in order to conserve the delicate nature of mestizo society. Therefore, the Inquisition's use of punishment was meant to avoid

blatant public social transgressions and the further contamination and the supposed “moral degradation” of colonial society. The public nature of the punishments of witches, announced during the ceremonies of the Inquisition’s auto-da-fé, were used as an example so that the population at large learned from this symbolic punishment not to commit the same mistake. A testament to the effectiveness of these procedures lies in the fact that there exist few records of many repeat offenders being tried and more serious punishments inflicted.⁸⁹

Thus, it can be argued from the documentary evidence that this mild form of punishment served to discourage the further spread of witchcraft in the Spanish and mixed castes. The Mexican Inquisition’s choice of mild punishment against practitioners of witchcraft and sorcery in colonial Yucatan, considering the extent of their existence and the delicate nature of the colony’s mestizo society, appears to have been their wisest choice, and in many cases an effective one.

In conclusion, as we have seen, the 1724 case of the mulatto Joseph Zavala is not unique in its inclusion of many varied aspects of traditional Maya magical and medicinal practices and healing rituals. The increasing interracial contacts that occurred in colonial Yucatan helped ensure the survival of traditional Maya concepts of magic and medicinal curing and other medical practices. By the late eighteenth century, colonial Yucatecan medicinal practices themselves would come to mirror the mixed racial environment that existed in the colony. As this chapter has shown, and as others such as Monica Chávez Guzmán have argued, Yucatec Maya magical and medicinal practices had a significant impact on the development of colonial magic and medicine.⁹⁰ The several cases of sorcery, witchcraft, and colonial *curanderos* under examination here serve as the best examples of the cross-cultural importance and impact of traditional Maya witchcraft and sorcery on the magical and medicinal practices in colonial Yucatan.

Notes

1. For the original documents see Proceso contra un curandero, Joseph Zavala, de color pardo, vecino del pueblo de Xecelchekan, por maleficio, idolatría, y hechicería, Yucatán, 1724, AGN, Ramo de Inquisición, vol. 1164, fols. 211r–319r.
2. See Denuncia de Tomas Ordoñez in *ibid.*, fols. 276–279.
3. See various testimonies and evidence against the mulatto curandero in Proceso contra Joseph Zavala, 1724, AGN, Ramo de Inquisición, vol. 1164, fols. 273–298.
4. The inquisitors, in their sentencing, focused most of their rigor on the mulatto’s use of native religious practices, which they termed “idolatry.” See Sentencia con méritos, contra Joseph Zavala, reo que fue traído de Yucatán a México, sentenciado a la pena de azotes, y desterrado de Yucatán por ocho años, 1724, in *ibid.*, exp. 23A, fols. 316–319.
5. As Monica Chávez Guzmán has argued in her own work, little professionalization of medical practitioners existed until the later colonial period, and many of even these professionals looked to Maya herbal cures in their own healing. See Chávez Guzmán 2011: 88–90.
6. For a good example of recent work on the topic of the Afro-Maya relations, see Restall 2009 as well as Lutz and Restall 2005.
7. Summers 1970: xiii.
8. *Ibid.*, 20.

9. Ibid., 7.
10. Burman 1984: 32–35.
11. Bull of Pope Innocent VIII, *Summis Desiderantes affectibus*, published in Summers 1970: xliii–xlv.
12. Maio and Pearson 1977: 17.
13. Summers 1970: 198–204.
14. For the full text in translation of this edict of faith, see Chuchiak 2012: 110–113.
15. For a discussion of the Mexican Inquisition’s jurisdiction over the crimes of sorcery and witchcraft, see *ibid.*, 292–307.
16. See Greenleaf 1965; also Greenleaf 1991: 250, 252–256, 260–265.
17. Maio and Pearson 1977: 27.
18. Ibid., 77.
19. Ibid., 51.
20. Ibid., 87.
21. Ibid., 91.
22. Scheffler 1983: 10; also see Weyer 1991: 166–170, 760–761.
23. Shumaker 1972: chap. 2, 60–102. This chapter, titled “Witchcraft,” briefly describes the European image of witchcraft, its initiation, and those who practiced it.
24. Summers 1970: 76.
25. Coe and Whittaker 1982: 64.
26. Definition of *Tonalli* in *ibid.*, 217; definition of *Pixan* in Barrera Vásquez 1980: 659.
27. Scheffler 1983: 12.
28. The nahual is described extensively by Hernando Ruíz de Alarcón in his *Treatise on Superstitions*; see the edition published by Coe and Whittaker 1982: 63–65. The Maya version of this is described in Roys 1965: 171.
29. Sepulveda 1983: 44–47.
30. Madsen and Madsen 1969: 24.
31. Diego de Landa, *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán*, 129.
32. For more details on this type of Maya medicine and shamanic healing, see Chuchiak 2006a; also see Chávez Guzmán 2013, especially chap. 3.
33. Roys 1965: 38.
34. Diego de Landa, *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán*, 195–197.
35. Roys 1931: xix–xxi.
36. See Edmonson 1986: 148–149.
37. Marilyn Masson from SUNY Albany and her excavations of burials and skeletons from the Postclassic Maya site of Laguna de On in Belize reveal that “Infectious diseases appeared to be absent from this group . . .” (see especially p. 173 in *Belize Postclassic Project*, 2000). Similarly, the colonial cemetery at the Maya town of Tipu (ca. 1550–1638) reveals the almost total lack of remains of epidemic diseases or other pathological disorders visible in the skeletal record. Perhaps due to their limited contact with Spaniards, the Maya of Tipu remained free from infectious diseases. For more information on the burial information from Tipu, see Jacobi 2000. Unfortunately for this paper, no post-1638 burials were excavated, though a few were known to exist.
38. For a concise look at how these waves of epidemic diseases impacted the Maya and led to changes even in their burial practices, see Chuchiak 2006b.
39. The recent work of Ryan Kashanipour studies the impact of these new epidemic diseases on the development of the medical practices in the colony and the encounters that European medicine had with the medicinal practices of the Maya. See Kashanipour 2012.
40. See *Relación del cura beneficiado y vicario del partido de Yaxcaba*, 1813, AGI, Audiencia de México, 3168, fol. 4v.
41. For recent work on these colonial Maya sources see Gubler 2014 as well as Bricker and Miram 2002.
42. The evidence of the use of indigenous forms of magic and sorcery are widespread. In Yucatan the use of Maya herbs and indigenous spells and incantations is cited in a majority of the *procesos* dealing with witchcraft and sorcery. For

- several examples see the *procesos* from AGN, Ramo de Inquisición, vols. 39, 301, 322, 360, 374, 425, 516, 621, 626, 872, 911, and 919.
43. Burkholder and Johnson 1990: 98–104. For a detailed discussion of the indigenous population and the effects of contact, see Borah and Cook 1963.
 44. Gerhard 1979: 26.
 45. Burkholder and Johnson 1990: 216.
 46. For a good discussion of the role of the *Protomedicato* and the medical profession in Yucatan, see Chávez Guzmán 2009, especially 261–269.
 47. Greenleaf 1978: 319.
 48. Quezada 1991: 37.
 49. Pedro Ciruelo, in his *Treatise Reproving Superstitions*, describes the Inquisition’s stance on curanderos. Curanderos who used superstitious or “vain” spells, incantations, objects, and other various remedies were considered guilty of witchcraft. Those who used charms or spells that have no natural power to cure were guilty of a “vain” action; “If the action is vain, it can be classified as superstition and not witchcraft.” Maio and Pearson 1977: 93–99.
 50. Scheffler 1983: 22.
 51. Coe and Whittaker 1982: 219–222.
 52. Roys 1965: 169.
 53. Chávez Guzmán 2009: 171–177.
 54. Roys 1965: 169.
 55. Quoted in Quezada 1991: 54n18.
 56. *Ibid.*, 41; for the edict itself see Chuchiak 2012: 113–115.
 57. Coe and Whittake 1982: 93–94.
 58. Quezada 1991: 53n4.
 59. For a facsimile of the original edict of faith against peyote and other herbs, see Chuchiak and Guerrero Galvan 2017: 202–203; for a detailed study of this edict of faith and its English language translation, also see Chuchiak 2012: 108–110, 113–114.
 60. See *Proceso contra una mulata, llamada Petrona Trujeque*, 1748, AGN, Ramo de Inquisición, vol. 919, exp. 26.
 61. *El Señor Fiscal del Santo Oficio contra María Rincón, mestiza, por sospechosas de supersticiones y hechicerías*, 1675, AGN, Ramo de Inquisición, vol. 626, exp. 10.
 62. For a complete study of the Maya belief in the supposed curative and purgative properties of *balché* and the Catholic Church’s battle against its consumption and propagation, see Chuchiak 2003.
 63. *Proceso contra un curandero, Joseph Zavala, de color pardo, vecino del pueblo de Xecelchekan, por malefico, idolatría, y hechicería*, Yucatán, 1724, AGN, Ramo de Inquisición, vol. 1164, fols. 214r–215v.
 64. *Sentencia definitiva*, 1724, in *ibid.*, fol. 316r.
 65. *Testimonio de la causa original contra un ingles llamado Ricardo Luis*, 1672, AGN, Ramo de Inquisición, vol. 621, exp. 1, fols. 2v–3r.
 66. *Proceso contra una mulata llamada Andrea, y otras personas*, 1676, AGN, Ramo de Inquisición, vol. 627, exp. 6.
 67. For references to such spells see Sánchez Ortega 1991; also see Pedro Ciruelo’s *Treatise* in Maio and Pearson 1977 as well as Sprenger *Malleus Maleficarum* in Summers 1970.
 68. Coe and Whittaker 1982: 191; Roys 1965: 3–5, 11, 17, 40–66, 166–171. Also see Quezada 1975.
 69. Sánchez Ortega 1991: 59.
 70. *Ibid.*, 81.
 71. Behar 1989: 129.
 72. *Testificación contra Catalina Rodríguez por usar polvos para hechicerías*, 1627, AGN, Ramo de Inquisición, vol. 360, exp. 90, fols., 253r–253v.
 73. For a good recent discussion of love magic practiced by Africans in colonial Yucatan, see Bristol and Restall 2009.
 74. *Testificación contra Isabel, negra esclava*, 1626, AGN, Ramo de Inquisición, vol. 360, exp. 92, fols. 243r–243v.
 75. *Testificación contra Melchora González*, 1627, AGN, Ramo de Inquisición, vol. 360, exp. 94.

76. Testificación contra Catalina Antonia de Rojas, por usar hierbas para hechicerías, 1627, AGN, Ramo de Inquisición, vol. 360, exp. 95.
77. Sepúlveda 1983: 114.
78. For these views see Behar 1989; also Quezada 1987, 1989.
79. Behar 1989.
80. Información contra Don Guillen de las Casas, 1583, AGN, Ramo de Inquisición, vol. 125, exp. 76; also see Información contra Don Carlos de Luna y Arellano, Gobernador de Yucatán, por brujo, 1611, AGN, Ramo de Inquisición, vol. 290, exp. 2.
81. For a complete study of the jurisdiction, nature, and campaigns of extirpation of the Provisorato de Indios and its increasingly difficult task of controlling indigenous heterodoxy in colonial Yucatan, see Chuchiak 2000, Chuchiak 2005, and Chuchiak 2014a.
82. Estimates vary, but most likely from 1484 until 1700 over 300,000 witches were put to death. Statistics found in Shumaker 1972: 61.
83. For further discussion of the nature of torture and its prohibition in sorcery cases and cases of witchcraft without the presence of a demonic pact, see Chuchiak 2012: 132–135, 292–307.
84. Quezada 1991: 41–46.
85. This is based on an examination of the cases cited in the references; the only exception is found in Proceso contra un curandero, Joseph Zavala, de color pardo, vecino del pueblo de Xecelchekan, por malefico, idolatría, y hechicería, Yucatán, 1724, AGN, Ramo de Inquisición, vol. 1164, fol. 245r.
86. The sentence is also found in *ibid.*
87. See the table in Quezada 1991: 41–46.
88. For a recent discussion of the nature of crimes against the faith committed by mestizos, mulattos, and Spaniards in colonial Yucatan, including the crimes of sorcery, witchcraft, and idolatry, see Chuchiak 2014b.
89. Quezada 1991: 50.
90. For the most recent studies concerning the nature of Maya medicinal practices and their influences on colonial medicine in Yucatan, see Chávez Guzmán 2013; see also Chávez Guzmán 2009.

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1583 Información contra Don Guillen de las Casas, Gobernador de la provincia de Yucatán, por brujo y hechicero, Yucatán.

AGN, Ramo de Inquisición, Vol. 290, Exp. 2

1610 Denuncia de Fr. Pedro González, contra el gobernador Don Carlos de Luna y Arellano por varios capítulos que se exponga aquí, folios 79v–86v.

AGN, Ramo de Inquisición, Vol. 360, Exp. 90

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AGN, Ramo de Inquisición, Vol. 360, Exp. 92

1627 Proceso contra Isabel Morena, mulata vecina de Campeche por hechicerías.

AGN, Ramo de Inquisición, Vol. 360, Exp. 94

1627 Proceso contra Melchora González, mestiza por hechicerías con unos polvos.

AGN, Ramo de Inquisición, Vol. 360, Exp. 95

1627 Proceso contra doña Catalina de Rojas por sospecha de brujerías y hechicerías.

AGN, Ramo de Inquisición, Vol. 621, Exp. 1

1672 Testimonio de la causa original contra un inglés llamado Ricardo Luis, Cirujano y Don Alonso de Osorio por sospechosos de herejes y palabras malsonantes, Mérida, 24 folios.

AGN, Ramo de Inquisición, Vol. 626, Exp. 10

1675 Proceso por bruja supersticiosa contra la mestiza María Rincón, Mérida.

AGN, Ramo de Inquisición, Vol. 627, Exp. 6

1676 Proceso contra una mulata llamada Andrea, y otras personas por brujerías, Yucatán.

AGN, Ramo de Inquisición, Vol. 629, Exp. 5

1674 Autos remitidos por el comisario de Yucatán, contra Baltasar Martín, Manuel Canche y Nicolás Lozano, mulatos, por idlat on ras.

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1724 Proceso contra un curandero, Joseph Zavala, de color pardo, vecino del pueblo de Xecelchekan, por maleficio, idolatría, y hechicería, Yucatán, folios 211r–272v.

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The Jaguar's Line

Witchcraft and Sorcery in Mesoamerica

Timothy J. Knab

Witchcraft is and always has been serious business in Mesoamerica. It is not something to be taken lightly as mere superstition, sympathetic magic, or hocus-pocus. It involves not only the manipulation of fundamental beliefs and symbols but also the manipulation of social and political power by any and all means possible. It may involve subtle physical, chemical, or biological means of eliminating a problem or attacking a victim directly, along with the manipulation of fundamental beliefs about the nature of life on the earth, in the earth, and in the heavens.

What I propose to show here is that witchcraft, at least since the time of Motecuzoma, and probably well before, has been, and still is, a concrete method of exercising social and political power. Many of the techniques of witchcraft are as deadly today as they were in colonial times, and it is not unusual for practitioners of witchcraft to have considerable power in their communities or be employed by individuals with considerable power.

Unfortunately, in Western traditions witchcraft has been relegated to mere superstition, the simple manipulation of symbols and ideology in a social context. In Mesoamerica this is not, and never has been, the case. Witchcraft and sorcery involve concrete techniques that have been passed from practitioner to practitioner since at least the earliest part of the colonial period. These techniques involve physical, chemical, and biological methods of causing harm to a victim. What I hope to demonstrate is how the structure and organization of loosely affiliated groups maintain and transmit these beliefs and practices, and how such groups have successfully maintained and probably even augmented these practices and beliefs since at least the early colonial period.

The first myth that we have to get rid of when looking at Mexican witchcraft and sorcery is that it involves simply the symbolic manipulation of a belief system. Witches and sorcerers today, as they probably did in the time of Motecuzoma, have a whole repertoire of concrete physical, chemical, and biological techniques, as well as social and symbolic and psychological methods, of causing their victims considerable physical harm. For what reasons do practitioners seek to cause harm to others? Power. So it was in the time of Motecuzoma when he sent his witches and sorcerers to offer Cortez a repast on his way to Tenochtitlan, and so it is today.

Chapter 8 of book 12 of the Florentine Codex, which recounts the tale of this first dinner, is generally taken to show Motecuzoma as a foolish and superstitious man, which he was not.

A close reading of the Nahuatl text along with an understanding of the techniques of sorcery and witchcraft (Knab 2010) will show that this was rather a shrewd move on the part of Motecuzoma to stop the advancing conquistadores, which was only thwarted by a massive lack of cultural understanding on the part of both the conquistadores and Motecuzoma's retainers.

Chapter 8, like most of the Florentine Codex, consists of two parallel texts, one in Spanish and the other in Nahuatl. Many think that the two texts are merely translations of one another. They are not. They constitute two different texts written for two distinct audiences.

The Spanish text of chapter eight thoroughly obscures Motecuzoma's intent. Even in the title of the chapter, where the Spanish text states that Motecuzoma sent his *encantadores y malificus* (Knab 2010: 12), the Nahuatl text specifies what types of practitioners were sent, the *Nanaoalti*, the *Tlacateculo*, and the *Tetlachivianime*. The *Nanaoalti* are the transforming sorcerers who through their *naguales*, in Spanish, or *nahualli*, animal alter egos, seek to cause harm to a victim. The *Tlacateculo*, or "owl men," are metaphorically the bringers of death, professional assassins of the night who operate with the stealth of the owl. The *Tetlachivianime*, or "those who do things to someone," are experts in poisoning or incapacitating victims. Motecuzoma was clearly not sending these individuals along as part of the welcoming party to make sure the conquistadores had a good time on their way to Tenochtitlan. These were his fifth column—or perhaps better, Special Forces.

Motecuzoma commanded his emissaries to provide the Spaniards with whatever their hearts desired, and a great feast was laid out before the conquistadores. Just in case the Spaniards might be deities, Motecuzoma's emissaries had brought along captive sacrificial victims who were sacrificed on the spot and whose blood was liberally spattered on the great feast that had been prepared. There were probably two distinct motives behind this: first, to honor the conquistadores if they were deities, which I suspect Motecuzoma and his emissaries seriously doubted at this point, and to show the Spaniards clearly what happened to captives in the Aztec world.

The Nahuatl text of chapter eight quite graphically describes the Spaniard's reaction to this great honor:

Auh in jicuac oqujtaque: cenca motlaeltique, chichicha, ixtetenmotzoloa, ihicopi, motzontecovivixoa: auh in tlacialli eztica catzelhujque queezvizque, cenca iniviceoac qujntlaelti: iehica ca cenca xoqujac in eztli.

Thus when they saw this: they were disgusted. They spat, they blinked their eyes, held them tightly shut and shook their heads. The food was completely bloodied; it was sprinkled and spattered with blood. It sickened them and it reeked of blood.

To say the least, the Spaniards surely passed on that first repast offered by Motecuzoma. This probably saved both Cortez and his troops, for the practitioners sent were experts in slow-acting poisons and the transmission of biological pathogens.

Having little time to gather highly specialized poisons and biological pathogens, the emissaries produced a second repast of Mesoamerican foods that while, incapable of killing the Spaniards, was certainly capable of causing massive cases of “Montezuma’s revenge” if the troops sampled all of the delicacies offered that are listed in the text.

Moteczuma’s intention in sending his sorcerers is put in a very tentative way in the text (Knab 2010: 15), and this, in Nahuatl, is the proper way to speak about witchcraft for the results are never certain. The symbolic system for bringing a desired outcome to fruition is complicated and tentative. Today, in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, Oaxaca, Chiapas, San Luis Potosí, and many other regions of Mesoamerica where the techniques of witchcraft are still practiced, the outcome of an act of witchcraft is never certain, and all of this is couched in a complex system of beliefs and practices. The actual techniques of witchcraft are closely guarded secrets, especially the most effective and lethal varieties of witchcraft.

Spells and incantations are rather easily revealed, as are acts of sympathetic magic, but the complex knowledge required to extract poisons and transmit pathogens without succumbing to them when attacking a victim is another matter. There are several reasons for this in addition to the ethical fact that many of these techniques constitute murder.

First of all, the very act of witchcraft is couched in a complex metaphorical framework designed to absolve practitioners of the moral stigma of their acts. Some practitioners in the Sierra Norte will spend long nights praying in front of their altars to the lords of the underworld, *talocan*, cajoling and convincing them that their cause is just, for it is the underworld lords who actually grant or deny a practitioner’s petition. Other practitioners will engage in complex rituals, which, if not carried out properly, will be inefficacious, all the while offering the intended victim tacos laced with pathogens or dropping some little pathogen-laced packets in the intended victim’s house or in front of it. Often a brush fire or a garbage fire can be started near the intended victim’s house laced with toxic leaves, and if the wind obliges and the victim is at home and there are enough toxic leaves, the practitioner’s spells will become quite efficient.

In general practitioners who engage in witchcraft will universally deny their knowledge of the subject at first but are generally known in their communities as practitioners of witchcraft. The offer to share information about techniques, though, will often pique the practitioner’s interest, and much of the time at first both I and the practitioner will couch our discussions in the third person. As a practitioner gains confidence, he or she will no longer rely on third-person narratives but will “swap” information about practices. This is always after a long and metaphoric discussion of how when and why these practices are needed.

Second, the complex knowledge required to carry out acts of witchcraft, even involving direct attacks on the victim, are not always effective. Perhaps an insufficient amount of poison is administered, or a potential victim is resistant to a pathogen, or a fickle breeze will not waft toxic smoke directly at a victim’s house; then the witchcraft is ineffective. A witch cannot attack a victim in the open, or it is clearly a case of murder. Even if the attack is direct, the practitioner must wait, often in ambush, and should the intended victim walk by at the opportune time, the attack can be swift and deadly, but should the victim be wily and difficult to attack, the witchcraft cannot be accomplished.

Despite a practitioner's best efforts, witchcraft may not be effective, and all the incantations and sympathetic magic in the world may not make it effective. The metaphoric and symbolic matrix surrounding witchcraft may not be correctly carried out, and the witchcraft may be ineffective. The outcome of witchcraft is never certain.

Third, complex knowledge may not be sufficient, as many of the techniques are often little more than sympathetic magic. Many of the potions are ineffective, and in many cases the intent to transmit a specific pathogen is met with biological limitations such as temperature, moisture, or the age of a pathogenic agent. Practitioners often have little idea why specific techniques work. They simply know that they do work, and even researchers, until a potion or pathogen is analyzed, have little idea either whether a specific technique is going to be effective (Davis 1988) or if it is based on belief—no more.

This brings us to the matter of how this complex knowledge is transmitted, how it is learned and who can learn it. Anyone who has the ability to cure must understand in concrete terms the cause of specific maladies. This requires a practical clinical knowledge of disease and the theoretical framework to understand it and to cure it. Thus those who claim to cure witchcraft must also possess sufficient knowledge to do witchcraft. This can be part of a complex cosmovision, a theory of practical knowledge, or simple faith in a particular practice. It is not a system that requires empirical testing. A curer's or a witch's reputation is the nearest such practices get to actual empirical testing.

In Mesoamerica curers, like shamans everywhere, are recruited by the same techniques: miraculous diseases, inheritance, dreams, lightening, and so forth and then must undergo an extended apprenticeship (Tedlock 2005). The initiate is expected to learn the basic techniques of curing along with the prayers, incantations, and theories and practices while building up a solid clinical basis for applying those techniques. In the process of learning to cure, witchcraft is a theme that cannot be dealt with lightly, and in a small community a curer is expected to know whether his or her client has done something to provoke the ire of a witch and how to deal with witchcraft.

Different curers have different traditions and practices; yet the astounding similarities among these practices in Mesoamerica have traditionally been attributed to a "pan-Mesoamerican cosmovision" (Fagetti 2010), which does exist, but is not the only way that traditional knowledge is transmitted by curers to apprentices. There are numerous loosely associated groups of practitioners who share practices and traditions. These are not tightly organized groups with canonical practices and beliefs, but rather small groups of practitioners who know whom or where to ask for assistance in a particularly vexing case, or whom or where to ask to arrange a ceremony requiring multiple participants.

This complex knowledge is transmitted in small loosely associated groups that appear superficially to have no particular structure or form; yet there is an implicit hierarchy of individuals, each with his or her own network of practitioners who share specific aspects of a tradition. These individuals are, so to speak, the specialists in particular aspects of manipulating the supernatural. Some of these specialists are widely known practitioners who may even have a regional or even national reputation, or they may be individuals from simple villages who believe it is their obligation to assist their communities. There are individuals

who are decidedly middle-class Mexicans and Americans. There are urban practitioners and there are village specialists. The things that they hold in common are that they seek to serve their communities and clients with whatever techniques they can. Individuals often share practices, prayers, techniques, rituals, and beliefs that can help or harm an individual. It is the role of each individual to make sense of the complex knowledge acquired, to understand and interpret it in the context of his or her own practice. Thus, while extremely heterogeneous, these practices share many elements. In general practitioners will never confess where or from whom a particular technique was learned, but often a brief inventory of acquaintances and fellow practitioners will reveal the source of a particular technique. Though there is no fixed set of doctrines or practices and techniques shared by all practitioners, there is a common body of complex knowledge that dates from at least the period shortly after the Spanish Conquest and probably well before.

There are two fundamental reasons that I maintain this. The first is the fact that in prayers in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, Tlaxcala, and Tamaulipas individuals are mentioned who are, or were, clearly messianic leaders who emerged shortly after the Spanish Conquest. For example:

itatautia totemaquixticatzin Jesu Cristo

itatautia San Miguel Arcangel

n Juan Crecencia de dios

n Juan de la Luz

n Juan Lucero de la Mañana

sé Maria Trinidad

ñ Juan Manuel Antonio Marqués

ñ Juan Manuel Martín Ocelo

ñ Manuel Antonio Francisco Hernandez

ñ Martín Antonio Francisco Abad

ntiago Caballero

neral milagroso de la luz.

nechcahuacan in mostoc!

1 niquittaz mosantisima luz.

ir savior Jesus Christ grant this

int Michael Archangel grant this

int John Offshoot of God

int John of the Light

int John Morning star

seph, Mary, Trinity

: John Emanuel Anthony Marquis

John Emanuel Martin Ocelo
Manuel Antonio Francisco Hernandez
Martín Antonio Francisco Abad
int James Cavalier
iraculous General of Light.
ke me with the morning's light!
t me see your holy light. (Knab, field notes)

Specifically mentioned is Juan Martín Ocelotl, the Office of the Holy Inquisition's third victim in the New World. Juan Martín Ocelo (Ocelotl) is mentioned in prayers and in accounts not only of the tradition that I learned (Knab 2004: 92–94, 129), but in the traditions of mestizo and indigenous curers in both Mexico and the United States. The second reason that I maintain this is the fact that individuals mentioned in prayer as leaders or people of profound knowledge, the *Tlamatinimeh*, actually appear in village documents and inquisition processes and historical accounts throughout the colonial period.

First of all, let us examine the role of individuals like Juan Martín Ocelo, Juan Purín, Juan Antonio Abad, Juan Andrés Marqués, Andrés Mixcoa, and Manuel Antonio Francisco Hernández. In prayers they are implored for aid in solving cases of soul loss, inhabitation, and witchcraft. They are not classified as saints or as inhabitants of the underworld, but rather are considered ancestors or very powerful curers. All would come under the term *Tlamatinimeh*, or people of knowledge, as they are believed to have been real people.

Martín Ocelotl was the first in a long line of messianic leaders in late antiquity (Gruzinski 1989). But who was Martín Ucelo, as he is called in the inquisition process against him (AGN 1536: vol. 38, fols. 46–64v). The evidence is scant, and perhaps most of the witnesses against him in the inquisition proceeding brought in trumped-up stories, but what is clear is that Fray Antonio de Ciudad Rodrigo and Fray Pedro de la Gante clearly saw Martín Ucelo as a threat to the church and its efforts to proselytize the peoples of Mesoamerica. Fray Antonio observed that Martín made pointed arguments like a theologian. He also observed that he was a witch and a soothsayer who claimed to be able to become a “cat or a tiger” and that “he deceived the Indians and bamboozled them.”

Most of the testimony by native peoples in the inquisition documents is translated and sworn to by the *nahuatlato* Pedro de Molina, and there are clearly many terms that simply don't translate. A “house beneath the ground” is constantly mentioned in testimony, which is probably a translation of the term *oztocalitec*, which can be translated as “house in the cave.” But it is a common term in modern practice for entering into the underworld in dreams. When one practitioner asks another where he or she has been, the answer is usually in Nahuatl: *oztocalitec*.

Likewise, Martín Ucelo is constantly asked about his ability to transform himself into a lion, a tiger, or a dog. These are Spanish terms probably meaning jaguar, ocelot, or coyote, but besides getting the animals wrong the Spanish-speaking inquisitors probably do not understand the actual process of oneiric curing and believe that, as a “witch,” Martín can

actually become these animals rather than act like them in dreams. They also do not clearly understand that each of these animals that Martín has acquired represents concrete knowledge concerning disease and its cure as well as some rather sinister methods of dispatching individuals.

Each witness brought before the Office of the Holy Inquisition is asked about specific acts that in the view of the church constitute witchcraft in a European sense. It is quite clear in the text that the inquisitors have specific points related to European witchcraft that are of interest to them, as they are repeated with each witness. When Martín Ucelo is questioned, he clearly understands the Spanish expectations well enough to accede to certain acts and strongly deny others. From the testimony against him Ucelo was clearly an adept curer for both native and Spanish witnesses. He was said to have been among those who predicted the coming of the conquest. He was also accused of being able to return from the dead in a scene that seems right out of the *Popol Vuh* (Tedlock 1996: 130–141). Other things of which he was accused do not seem of great import, like predicting an old and infirm man will die within the year and that another will live another ten years or that there was a great famine looming and that magueys and fruit trees should be planted. With the plagues and the resultant shortage of labor this last prediction was in fact just common sense.

Martín Ucelo's power lies in his understanding of the traditional Mesoamerican belief system and his ability to manipulate it for both natives and his Spanish inquisitors. Modern belief systems indicate clearly that Martín Ucelo, while not the only person who possessed this complex system of knowledge, was perhaps one of many who possessed traditions linked to pre-Columbian belief systems who could and did pass that tradition to innumerable practitioners that today follow a reinvented version of that same Mesoamerican system. What has been called "witchcraft" is actually a system that expresses traditional Mesoamerican beliefs and practices that are used as a form of resistance and leveling scores in traditional communities.

Martín Ucelo was not just the first person accused by the Inquisition of misleading the natives of New Spain, but he was probably the first person who could articulate the differences between the Spanish interpretations of European witchcraft and what they saw in the Americas. The Spanish friars were steeped in European visions of witchcraft and had no idea of Mesoamerican belief systems. Their view of Mesoamerican religion was that it was the work of the Devil and should be stamped out at all costs, but a lack of understanding left many aspects of traditional practices that were tolerable. What resulted was a system of loosely held beliefs that were tolerated by Spanish authorities and passed down from practitioner to practitioner for hundreds of years. There were in fact few native people prosecuted by the Holy Office of the Inquisition in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Martín Ucelo was of course found guilty and sentenced to be paraded on a beast through Mexico City, its market, and Texcoco, which was done on February 10, 1537. He was then to be remanded to prison for life in the jails of the Office of the Holy Inquisition in Seville. He was thus sent to Veracruz to be shipped to Seville, but as Mendieta ([1582] 1971: bk, 2, chap. 19, 109) reported almost seventy years later, the ship sank off the port. Perhaps Martín Ocelotl escaped, as it was customary to release prisoners on a sinking ship, and it was many

months before Martin's ship could sail for Seville.

Witchcraft in Mesoamerica is serious and it works. It is a system of beliefs and practices that can effect concrete change in communities by altering permanently the fundamental equations of power. Witchcraft is all about power, whether it is based on a system founded in pre-Columbian times, or on a system based in modern *narcotraficante* belief in San Valverde or the Santo Muerte.

The loosely related groups of traditional curers and practitioners of witchcraft did not seem like a monolithic organization that could cause the Spanish authorities much problem. And it was in fact the informal nature of these groups that functioned as cells of a larger entity, which saved many from the wrath of the Inquisition. These small groups of loosely associated individuals gave authorities and the Inquisition little to work with in that virtually no one knew individuals higher up in the organization other than the individuals who had taught them the tradition.

Each of the loosely organized cells operated informally, sharing knowledge and techniques with some limited knowledge of others within the system who could be called on for assistance. Such individuals knew of some others and often would answer to those known as *tlamatinimeh*, "people of knowledge." A *tlamatini* is recognized on the basis of merit and on the ability to assist others who follow similar beliefs. The fact that an individual is known as a *tlamatini* is perhaps only recognized by a handful of others; yet to become a *tlamatini* requires not only a comprehensive knowledge of the tradition, rites, ceremonies, and prayers but an intimate knowledge of the groups sharing similar practices. As many of the *tlamatinimeh* will readily admit, even they do not know everything, or everyone, within a particular tradition.

There are innumerable people recognized as *tlamatinimeh* throughout Mexico and even in the United States. It is not unusual that the loosely organized groups may rely on more than one individual for assistance and knowledge, and often only a very few individuals in fact recognize who a *tlamatini* actually is. This probably had a very important role in preserving such organizations from the prying eyes of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, for by the seventeenth century indigenous peoples were again considered fair game for ambitious inquisitors (Ruíz de Alarcon [1629] 1984).

Within a particular tradition there may be more than one person of knowledge; in fact, there may be several, some well versed in public ceremonies and group offerings, others specializing in witchcraft, and others specializing in specific branches of knowledge like weather witches and assassins. Individuals of particular traditions may well even, so to speak, mix and match, as Julio Glockner (2000) has shown, inviting well-known *rezanderos* to villages completely unknown to them to help pray for rain.

The basic evidence for this system is that each tradition, though different, has the same basic underpinnings. Here we need an idea of what a tradition is. First of all, each tradition is a heterogeneous hybrid with multiple influences. There is one tradition based in Jalapa, Veracruz, which, given the number of Spanish migrants and their descendants, may well be based on a Spanish *cofradia*, or cofraternity, which incorporates Nahuas, Otomi, and Totonacs along with Spaniards and their descendants along with Mexicans of mestizo

descent. These group are incorporated into a single benevolent organization that not only supports public causes like orphanages but traditional curers and even witches in a single tradition of individuals who have learned the techniques of manipulating the supernatural. There are other groups based in Catemaco, Guerrero, and San Luís Potosí that similarly incorporate a wide range of heterogeneous practices.

These traditions, like those of the *Nanoaltin*, *Tlacateculo*, and *Tlachihuanimeh*, whom Motecuzoma sent out to greet the conquistadores, each have specialized knowledge that is shared from teacher to pupil in a way similar to that followed in Buddhist lineages in Tibet. All of these traditions are based on the system that was expressed by the beliefs of Martín Ucelo and his followers, as in the next inquisition process against Mixcoatl he is deemed a brother of Martín Ocelotl. Serge Gruzinski (1989) observes the man-gods of the sixteenth century, and many of them, descendents of Quetzalcoatl (López Austin 1972) perhaps, were believed to be following in the tradition of Martín Ocelotl. Now this alone may not mean that there really is a tradition specific to Martín Ocelotl, but the context of it strongly suggests that members of such a tradition are trying to maintain an association with Ocelotl as a messianic leader.

In the prayers that I learned only Juan Martín Ucelo comes through as someone who can be traced in records. I cannot trace Antonio Abad, except for a mystic abbot, and Manuel Hernandez is a mystery to me. There are individuals, though, in the tradition who pray to numerous *tlamatinimeh*. The longest listing used in prayer that I have thus far obtained is from a fellow curer in Tlaxcala who could list 126 individuals whom she sees as *tlamatinimeh*, or founders, of the particular tradition that I follow. The names are often complicated by multiple middle names, but at least six of these individuals can be found in Tlaxcalan archives named as *tlamatini* in particular villages. An additional three show up in Inquisition archives, and another four played important enough roles in Mexican independence and the Mexican Revolution to be mentioned in official documents and histories. Many of these individuals, like Martín Ucelo, were in fact real historical individuals who were considered shamans, soothsayers, curers, witches, and *tlamatinimeh*, or people of knowledge.

There are sophisticated individuals with a good knowledge of Mexican ethnohistory who are not only members of these traditions but *tlamatinimeh*, but there is no evidence that this association with the messianic leader is of recent origin. Juan Ucelo, Juan Ocelotl, Juan Martín Manuel Ocelotl is clearly mentioned as one of the founders of the tradition along with five other individuals in prayers I collected in the early seventies (Knab 2004: 129). At least some of the people mentioned in prayers are definitely real people, and there is no reason to believe that many others were not real people who were simply not well enough known to show up in historical documents.

If these people are real, and if they actually were members of these particular traditions, they constitute a concrete system of transmission of these traditions. The evidence is in fact tentative, but I believe that these traditions are descended at least from late antiquity and perhaps from even earlier in Mesoamerican history. In fact for people today it is of little import if their traditions are descended from pre-Columbian traditions. What is important is

that they believe that they are following the ancient ways, or what they call “the Good Path,” *Cualli Ohti*.

In conclusion what we can say about Mexican witchcraft today is that it is a mechanism for manipulating social, political, and economic power by social, psychological, symbolic, and physical means. It is based on traditions that can be traced at least to late antiquity, and it is a system that works. It is based on quite a bit more than sympathetic magic. Motecuzoma’s *Nanaoalti*’s bag of tricks are today just as deadly as they were at the time of the conquest. The *Tlacateculo* are still efficient assassins, and the *Tlachihuanimeh* can still cast spells that are deadly. In modern witchcraft names may change and practices evolve, but clients from drug dealers to landowners and politicians to corrupt police officials are interested in witchcraft for one reason: power.

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The *Wahys* of Witchcraft

Sorcery and Political Power among the Classic Maya

David Stuart

When considering the religious and ideological underpinnings of ancient Maya kingship, various authors, including myself, have tended to focus on a few large and well-trodden themes. These include familiar topics such as ancestor worship (e.g., McAnany 1994), the problematic concept of “shamanism” and cosmological authority (Freidel et al. 1993), the relationships of kings to particular deities or sets of deities (Baron 2016; Houston and Stuart 1996), as well as language reflected in hieroglyphic texts that focuses on the ritual prowess of elite individuals (Stuart 2005a). All of these themes are of course interconnected to one degree or another, and cover a vast array of ideas and theories about power and its underlying concepts. However, in spite of a great number of studies on these topics, it is no doubt true that other dimensions of elite Maya religion and its connection to ideology and statecraft still remain to be considered, much less integrated into the wider picture that has emerged over the past two or three decades. These “blind spots” include some rather dark and obscure themes within ancient Maya belief and ritual practice, or subjects that were perhaps not front-and-center in the more public display of history and ideology that we see so often expressed on sculpted and inscribed monuments. I believe that one such important dimension of Maya social and political power was rooted in what we would know as witchcraft or *brujería*, a topic that has very seldom been considered in the context of Maya kingship, statecraft, and elite culture overall.

This essay will begin to explore how sorcery served as an important component in the duties and practice of Maya rulership, examining its role in the expression of power dynamics among rival courts and city-states. Central to these ideas were the rather enigmatic beings known as *wahyoob* (singular *wahy*), the spooks and demons frequently depicted on painted vases of the Classic period. Long misunderstood or mischaracterized as “underworld gods” or “animal souls,” these hybrid beings should more accurately interpreted as personifications of diseases and other nightmarish forces often associated with sorcery and witchcraft. Hieroglyphic texts make it clear that particular *wahy* characters were often affiliated with individual royal courts or dynasties, almost as if they were seen as a certain subtype among the more familiar patron deities we find in Classic Maya religion. In this essay I will explore some of their variety and propose that the *wahy* beings were the embodiment of “dark” forces operating within Maya society and politics, wielded by rulers as a means of social and political control. Through their frequent depictions in painting and sculpture we can begin to see that sorcery was hardly an obscure and esoteric subject among

ancient Maya elites, but was instead a key operating principle within the dynamics of political power, warfare, and state ideology. Underlying the discussion that follows is the acknowledgment that our own scholarly discussions of ancient Maya power and politics have paid relatively little attention to their indigenous “emic” foundations, many of which are now increasingly accessible through textual analysis and better understandings of ancient categories of self, personhood, and the body (Houston and Stuart 1998; Houston et al. 2006). This essay therefore looks more closely at the cultural context of the *wahy* beings, but its larger goal is to shed light upon the underlying aspects for coercive power among the Classic Maya—something that has previously been very difficult to understand (Inomata 2004).

Refining the Understanding of *Wahy* Beings

As noted, the art of the Classic Maya includes numerous depictions of fantastic beings called *wahyoob*, appearing mostly on elaborately painted cylinder vases from the central Petén region (figure 7.1). They generally assume the form of strange animals, unnatural beasts, skeletal beings, or humans with otherwise odd or frightening features. Their nature and role in the wider system of ancient Maya religious imagery has been the subject of much discussion since their initial identification over two decades ago, based on the decipherment of a glyph commonly found in the written captions accompanying their images. This is the logogram **WAY**, standing for the both the verb root *way*, “to sleep, dream” (**war* is the proto-Mayan form, as reconstructed by Kaufman [2003]) and its derived noun *wahy*, usually translated as “animal co-essence” or “nagual,” a “dream being,” based on terms found in several Mayan languages today (Houston and Stuart 1989; Grube 1989; Grube and Nahm 1994). This hieroglyph appears in text captions for these beings, usually after a proper name, in the expression *u wahy*, “[is] the *wahy* of . . .” In such glyphic captions *u wahy* is typically followed by a reference to a named place or royal court (figure 7.2).



Figure 7.1. A series of *wahy* beings depicted on a codex-style *uk'ib* vase, Kerr 771. Photograph by Justin Kerr.

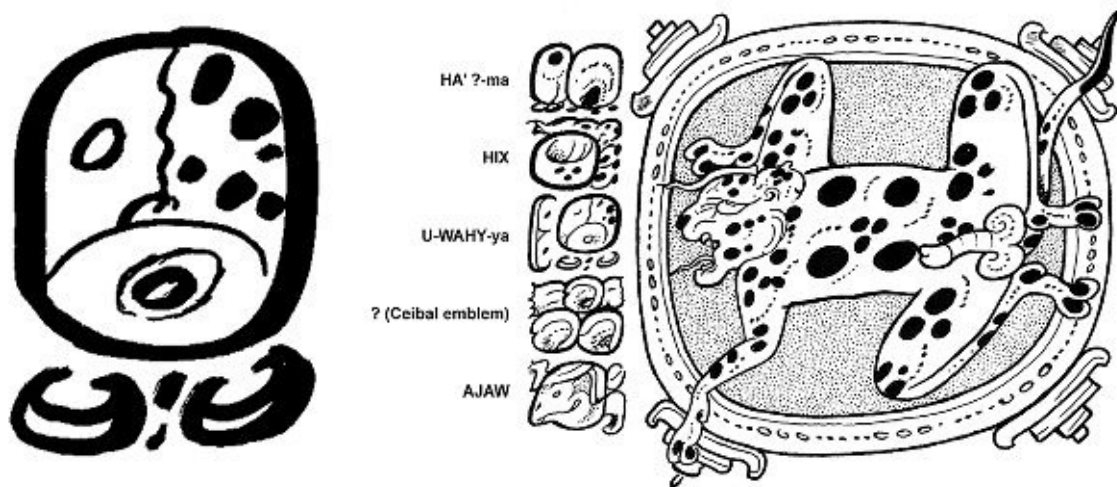


Figure 7.2. The *wahy* hieroglyph in a caption for a “Water Jaguar” on Kerr 771. Drawing by David Stuart.

Once this decipherment seemed clear, it was an easy step to link these ancient depictions of fantastical creatures to historical and modern concepts of animal companion spirits that are “owned” by individuals as a type of soul and experienced through transformation during sleep in the realm of dreams. These go by various names in modern Maya communities, including (among Ch’olan and Tzeltalan languages) *waay*, *wahy*, *wayjel*, and *chanul*. On first analysis it appeared that we were looking at images of rulers’ spiritual “co-essences.” When Houston and I first proposed this interpretation, we specifically pointed out their somewhat mundane aspect, at least in the sense that our new understanding seemed to “undermine the ‘mortuary’ or ‘underworld’ hypothesis of Maya vase painting” (Houston and Stuart 1989: 13). Before this time, the image of fantastic animals and related beings were considered to be underworld gods, the inhabitants of Xibalba (Coe 1973, 1978; Schele 1985). The decipherment of the **WAY** sign seemed to point to a more intimate view of these beings, couched in notions of the soul and emphasizing some sort of “inner self” of Maya lords and elites. Whereas they were initially described as animal companion spirits, it was nevertheless clear from the beginning that the *wahy* beings overlapped a great deal with the concept of the *nagual* in traditional Mesoamerican thought—a category with its own problems of definition and historical scope outside the narrow world of Maya decipherment. Indeed, the large body of ethnographic literature on “nagualism” and the debates surrounding its true historical nature in pre-Columbian folk religion and worldview presents a daunting range of views, often contradictory and varied among Mesoamerican communities (Foster 1944, Musgrave-Portilla 1983). This inherent complexity was, in retrospect, one reason why I believe the true nature of the ancient Maya *wahy* beings long remained somewhat vague and unsatisfactory.

Some years after the initial discussions of the *wahy* beings, Calvin (1997) proposed a somewhat different and more refined interpretation of their nature, pointing to their close association with particular kingdoms and suggesting that they served as semi-totemic symbols of community identity. She rightly questioned the equation of *wahy* figures with the animal co-essences of individual people, noting their consistent association with place-names or emblem glyphs. This led her to suggest that these transforming *wahy* figures were symbols of community-based souls, shrouded within a context of political power. Calvin was certainly

correct in questioning the simplistic outlines of earlier studies, including my own, and contributed an insightful and nuanced study of the phenomenon. In its basic thrust her study was still based upon the understanding of the *wahy* entities as akin to animal souls, though expanded to a new, community-wide dimension.

Around this same time Grube and Nahm (1994) published their important and useful tally of the *wahy* beings depicted on Maya vases—a “census of Xibalba”—tracing multiple appearances and variations or particular named beings over many examples (a more recent study of their names has since been undertaken by Shesheña [2010]). Grube and Nahm’s study pointed out the basic sets of *wahy* beings we see on vases, and only a few minor “new” characters have been identified since. In their essay they did not expand much the original interpretation of *wahyoob* as animal companion spirits, but they did note their fundamental connection to sorcery and the broad concepts surrounding nagualism and shamanism.

Many of the proper names we know for the ancient *wahy* beings are frightening and evocative descriptions of their essential strangeness: “Fire is the Mouth of the Bat” or “Fire is the Tail of the Coati.” Other categories include the macabre *K’ahk’ Winik*, “Fiery Man,” *Sitz’ Winik*, “Swollen Man” or *Ch’ak Baah Akan*, “Self-Chopping Akan.” A number of “death” figures include *K’ahk’ Yohl May Kamiiy*, “Fire-Heart Tobacco Death,” and *Ahk Ook Kamiiy*, “Turtle-Foot Death,” called *wahy* of specific places or people in the Classic period ([figure 7.3](#)).

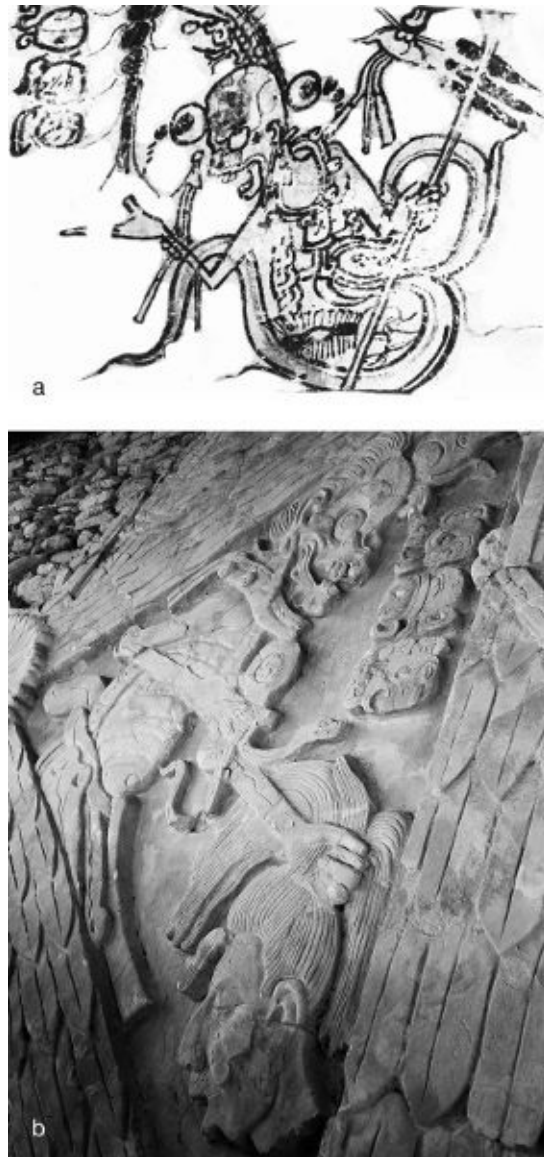


Figure 7.3. *Wahy* beings related to death and illness. (a) Ka’hk’ Yohl May Kamiiy, Kerr 1652; (b) Ahk Ok Kamiiy on the Tonina stucco frieze.

What is striking about such names is how distinct they often seem from the more benign animal companion spirits we often read of in the ethnographic literature. By and large, animal companions cited among modern indigenous communities tend to be recognizable and familiar animals, serving as extensions of the individual self into the wild and uncontrolled realm of nature—jaguars, snakes, possums, and so forth. By contrast, Classic Maya *wahy* entities are never simply animals. Rather, when in animal form they are combinations of different natural species (the “Tapir-Jaguar,” the “Deer-Snake”) or, more commonly, beasts with specifically described attributes that are either frightening or at least far outside the realm of natural taxonomy. They often are nocturnal creatures, not surprisingly, and many are also directly evocative of death and suffering, named *kamiiy* or *kamay*, “dead one.” Taken as a whole, we see in the ancient sources a group of entities that are darkly fantastic and frightening all at once. “Phantasmagorical” seems an appropriate term to describe them, but this aspect of *wahy* entities, still often considered ancient images of “animal souls,” has thus far not been studied in much depth.

We have already seen how refining semantic categories surrounding animal companions and soul concepts remains complex and a long-standing problem, in particular as it relates to the word *wahy* and its inconsistent translation in the literature. The issue was highlighted as part of a critique of shamanism as an analytical concept in pre-Columbian art history, wherein it was noted that “we still do not know exactly what the words *naqual* and *way* connoted prior to the conquest” (Klein et al. 2002: 392). However, the issues of interpretation may lie more with our own imperfect understandings of the lexical and ethnographic evidence, which when taken together offer a remarkably consistent picture. In this light, the varied interpretations of *wahy* offered over the years have emphasize different parts of a complex whole, never quite attaining a complete picture. *Wahyoob* are indeed frightening deities often associated with death and the “underworld”; they are related to animal others and “co-essences” of the dreams and self; and they are strongly associated with community identity, lineage, and places on the ancient Maya landscape. In many respects they also overlap with the demonic beings thought to inhabit the wild and dangerous forest (Taube 2003). They are probably other things too. In other words, most of the previous interpretations of *wahy* are correct as far as they go and represent increasingly refined understandings of a very complex interconnected phenomenon, even if they individually fall short of adequately explaining the intricacies of *wahy* beings among the Classic Maya.

It is also important to remember that we may not be able to cleanly or rigidly define categories among the supernatural characters of ancient Maya religion, whether we class them as *wahyoob*, gods, spirits, deified ancestors, spooks, demons, or some other term. Experience tells us that strong distinctions and boundaries between such labels are not always easy to discern, as many ethnographers have also stressed in looking at more contemporary Maya world views (e.g., Stross 1978). In investigating ancient Maya religion over the years, I have become increasingly convinced that it is impossible to rely on definitive categories of “being.” Maya concepts of the supernatural encompass somewhat loose classifications of entities that could full many roles at once, in addition to having multiple aspects and manifestations.

One example that immediately highlights this ambiguity is a *wahy* being depicted on a Codex-style vessel in the Kerr database, numbered K8608 ([figure 7.4](#)).

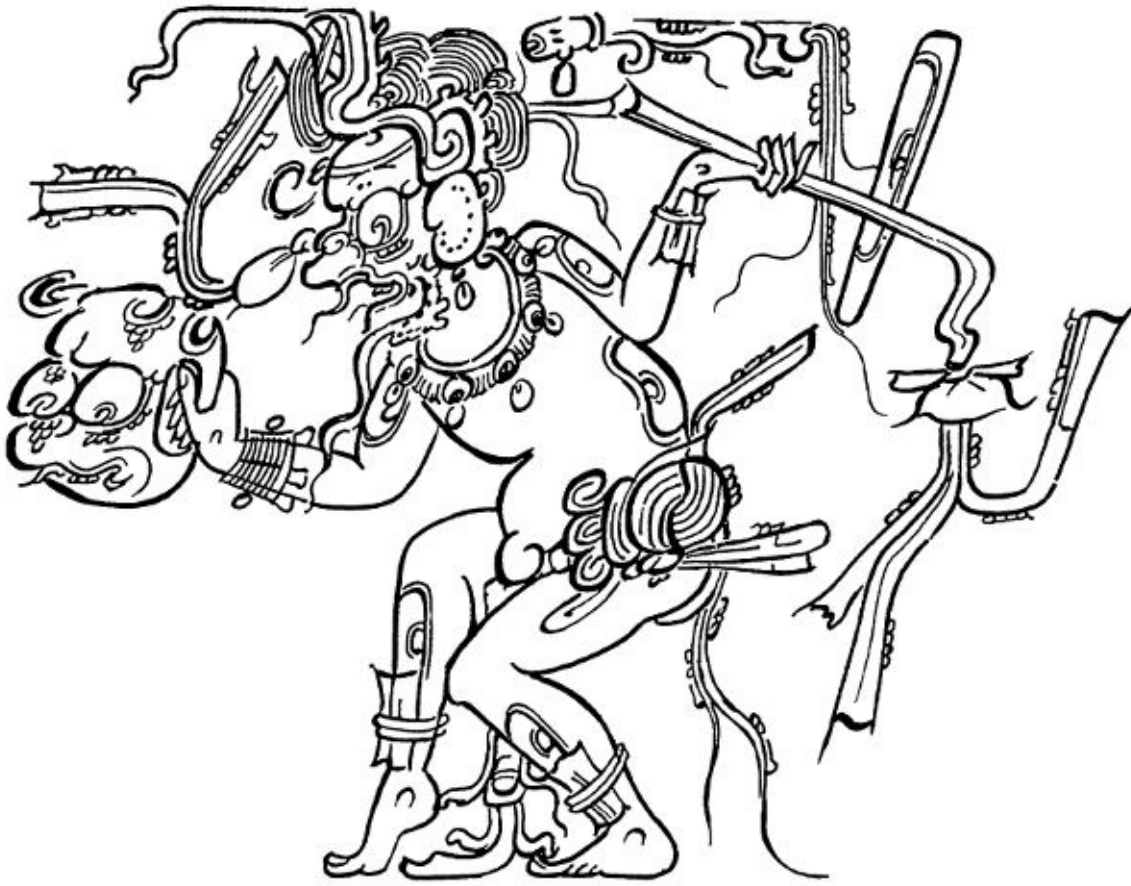


Figure 7.4. Representation of a Chahk *wahy* being, Kerr 8608. Drawing by David Stuart.

This is a magnificent representation of Chahk, the well-known storm god, wielding his standard hammer and axe. Were we to see this image in any other context we would immediately identify it as the “god” Chahk. However, in the accompanying caption he is named as a specific aspect of the deity, perhaps *Tat Bak Chahk*. He is not as a *k’uh*, “god,” but a *wahy*. Clearly some *wahy* entities could exist within a somewhat messy and fluid system of supernatural categories that can range from nightmarish spooks to gods of cosmic importance. In my view, the frightening essence of *wahyoob* may lie in their inherent difficulty to categorize. They lie outside the realms of normalcy, forming an ambiguous category that bridges intimate and cosmological extremes. Here we see how our own traditional terminology and labels for parsing the supernatural may not be up to the task, for one can readily see that Maya religious systems involve a continuum of overlapping and blurred types. In more contemporary Mesoamerican myth those beings who defy such easy classification tend to be potentially dangerous or irksome creatures (Blaffer 1972; Pitarch 2010: 40). I suggest this is the case among the Classic Maya as well.

Perhaps our own evolving ideas about ancient Maya *wahy* beings, starting from the notion of benign animal souls and leading further into darker, more demonic concepts, reflect a similar trend in the ethnographic awareness and representation of witchcraft and sorcery in Mesoamerica. That is to say, many elements of folklore and healing may have been seen by many ethnographers as more benign than they really were, not quite accessing their full importance and significance. The same might be said of our understanding of the *wahy*

entities, which has evolved over the past three decades from an emphasis on “shamanistic” animal companions—an incomplete description at best—to what is being described here, where self-transformation takes on a more negative aspect involving sorcery and dark power.

Demons and Disease in Yucatan

My own awareness of the more demonic nature of *wahy* beings first arose in the mid-1990s, when studying the colonial Yucatec document of medicinal incantations known as *The Ritual of the Bacabs* (Roys 1965; Arzapalo Marín 1987). This highly esoteric work from the eighteenth century reflects very archaic concepts concerning the human body, sorcery, and the processes of curing, many clearly based on pre-Columbian prototypes. Generally speaking, the incantations found throughout *The Ritual of the Bacabs* offer compelling illustrations of Diego de Landa’s important statement regarding “the priests, the physicians and sorcerers, who are all the same thing” (Tozzer 1941: 153–154). I was immediately struck by the names of certain supernaturals cited in the incantations against disease. One was the *Balam Mo’ Tankas*, “Jaguar Macaw Seizure,” the proper name of a malady that appeared to operate, like many others in the manuscript, as a personified entity. Most of the orations in the *Bacabs* were in fact directed at similar animate maladies, many others of which are named with similar hybrid animal designations. Note especially the name *K’ak’ Ne Chapat*, the Fire-Tailed Centipede, cited in an incantation for ulcers: “His red eruption (*kak*) would be the *Kak-tamay-monster*, the *Kak-ne chapat*” (Roys 1965: 37). In its structure this name struck me as extremely reminiscent of some Classic period *wahy* names, such as the *Kahk’ Ne Tz’uutz’*, the “Fire-tailed Coati” (see Grube and Nahm 1994: 699). Moreover, throughout *The Ritual of the Bacabs*, the word *k’ak’* (cognate of Classic Mayan *k’ahk’*, “fire”) appears in incantations and in names of maladies and is close related to concepts of “eruption,” “burning,” and pain. This planted in my mind the basic notion that the fantastic *wahy* animals and beings depicted on ancient ceramics could be strongly connected to negative forces and ideas surrounding disease.

Since colonial times the Yucatec Maya have often viewed diseases as animate beings, and Roys specifically described maladies as “semi-personified.” By this he meant that they do not seem to take outright human form; they are able to “understand commands and can be impressed by the words of a shaman” (Roys 1965: xi). He also made the key observation that “the name of a disease is an indication of the form” that the animate being is believed to take. Remarkably, the Chilam Balam of Kaua displays an illustration of one such being, resembling a parrot with a snake in its beak (figure 7.5).



Figure 7.5. Bird-snake “seizure” (*tancaz*) depiction from the Chilam Balam of Kaua. From Bricker and Miram 2002: fig. 41.

As Roys noted, the caption states: “This is a picture of spider-snake-macaw-wind-seizure; purple-macaw-wind-seizure; . . . green-macaw-wind-seizure is its name” (1965:xi). It is likely that this eighteenth-century representation of a composite “seizure” being reflects the same sort of idea that we find among the myriad *wahyoob* of the Classic period (Helmke and Neilsen [2009] present a further discussion of this connection).

To this day, animate “winds” or *aires* are considered the source of illness throughout Mesoamerica. The Maya of Chan Kom, Yucatán, view many such winds in their surroundings, “each with its particular disease-bearing characteristics” (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934: 164–165). These, too, were personified in many ways, “sometimes seen moving, dancing about one. ‘They look like many little lively children playing’” (ibid.). These beings even become merged with the more benign trickster spirits known as *aluxoob*. Specific illnesses have direct causes, as in whooping cough, thought to be caused by “three similar small personages known as *u yumil xthuhub* (‘lords of the whooping-cough’)” (167). A variety of types of winds are recognized in traditional Yucatec communities: “dug-up-stone wind,” “yellow twilight wind,” “meddling-macaw wind,” “peccary wind,” “maize-meal wind,” “shock wind,” “chocolate-beater animal wind” (i.e., a burrowing animal that sounds like a chocolate-beater), “pitiful wind,” “deceiving wind,” “whirlwind,” to name only a few. Each of these winds brings a disease (Redfield and Redfield 1940: 62).

In his exhaustive survey of Yucatec vocabulary, Bolles (2001) notes that “in spite of the Kaua passage, today the ‘macaw-seizure; spirits are not considered winds. They are still believed to be death-dealing birds that kill children. Flying over house, they vomit a substance which drops into the sleeper’s mouth and causes death.” Indeed, Redfield and Villa Rojas (1934: 165) noted an important distinction between the closely related notions of *tancaz*, “seizure,” and *ik’*, “wind,” where one seems to be more a symptom or sense, and the former the vehicle of the malady. Both ideas, however, seem to operate at times as

personified beings, evidently as manifestations of more broadly conceived evil forces.

The word for the wind-force of disease is *ik'*, usually derived as the possessed noun *yik'al*, “one’s wind-spirit,” or more precisely “the wind that occupies one’s body.”

This can describe a state of illness, as when a local *h-men* (priest, healer, or curandero) must tend to a patient by “sweep[ing] away one’s wind” (*miztal yik'al*) or “break[ing] one’s wind” (*paabal yik'al*). However, the very same word, *yik'al*, also describes the “wind” that defines the power and prestige of an elite person, as in *ah yik'al*, “a rich and powerful man,” and *ix yik'al*, “an honored woman.” This crossover suggests a conceptual relationship between the forces underlying elite social status and the powers that convey illness and maladies; it is a connection that finds interesting parallels in other Maya communities and may have considerable time depth in the past.

Parallels from Chiapas

The connections between ancient Maya *wahy* beings and illness also find special resonance in the detailed linguistic, ethnohistorical, and ethnographic data from Chiapas. In modern Ch’ol, the term *wäy* refers to one’s animal companion spirit, with or without overt connections to disease and sorcery. One of these spirits is called the *ajtso'*, a domesticated turkey, which can also be the “evil spirit of a *brujo*” (Aulie and Aulie 1978: 28). Such sorcerers can also have another companion being called a *tentsun* into which they can transform—a frightful goat without eyes and over a meter tall that can produce sickness.

In Tzeltalan languages (Tzeltal, Tzotzil, and Tojolab'al) the same root *way*, “sleep,” serves as the basis for *wayjel*, a largely ambiguous class of “dream beings” in both languages that are highly important in understanding social relations and defining social order. These include “generic” *wayjeltik* (in plural form) that conform to the idea of animal companions described earlier. Among the present-day Tojolab'al, for example, these including the *xoch'*, “owl,” *ma'ax*, “monkey,” *tz'isbajlam*, “ocelot,” or *chan*, “snake.”

Some of these have decidedly negative meanings. For instance the *tij* or *tijti* is one of the birds that “announce *chamel*” or illness and death (Campos 1983: 207). Importantly, other specific *wayjel* entities are associated with powerful curers and sorcerers. These include *Yaxal Chawuk*, “Green Lightning,” *K'intum*, a personified rainbow, *Ik'*, simply “wind,” and *Bitus*, an animate tornado. Another interesting form is named *K'ak' choj* (Fire Puma), described by Humberto Ruz (1983, II: 57) as “ser mitico, para algunos leon, para otros hombre, que posee un gran bola de fuego en el frente.” Among the Tojolab'al the *wayjel* is specifically considered the animate force wielded by *brujos* in order to spread sickness (Lenkersdorf 1979: 396).

According to Humberto Ruz (1983, II: 56), certain Tojolab'al individuals simply known as “vivos” are given special powers by God, and “mientras algunos de ellos los utilizan para ejecer el bien o simplemente para entretenerse, otros se han aliado a los personajes del inframundo para acrecentarlos y hacer daño.” He notes that these individuals are defined by their *wayjel* and that several can be owned by certain powerful people. The consumption of

deceased humans is the main form of sustenance for the most powerful *brujos*, called *pukuj* (Humberto Ruz 1982, 2: 58). This may have some connection to the curious depictions we see in many ancient *wahy* representations, where the animal beings hold grisly food dishes bearing detached hands, eyes, and bones (figure 7.6).

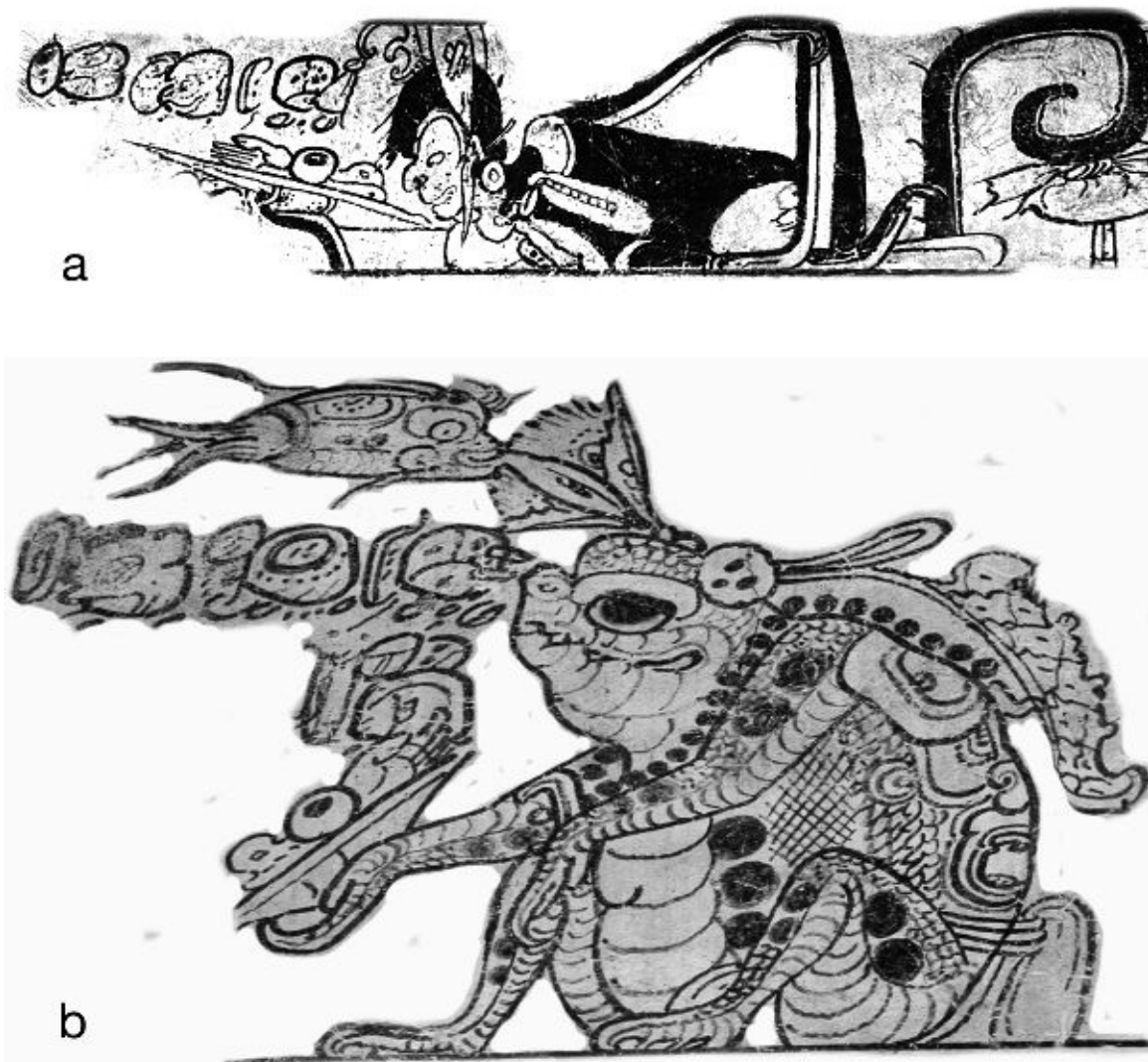


Figure 7.6. *Wahy* beings holding shallow bowls with detached body parts; (a) Kerr 1203, (b) Kerr 531.

Among the Tzotzil, dreams are filled with very similar spirits and demons that represent the causes of different diseases. In this dream world the inner soul of a person may leave the body and travel to the mountain world of the ancestors and even communicate with persons long deceased (Gossen 1975; Groark 2010; Vogt 1970). It is in these travels and encounters that many demons appear. The most common demonic being is known as the *Poslom* (or *Poxlom*), who assumes the form of a nocturnal shooting star or ball of fire that hits people, causing a bad swelling. Another demon is the *Yalem Bek'et* (“Fallen Flesh”), an evil person who leaves its house during the night, takes off its flesh, hangs it on or leaves it at foot of the patio cross, and flies about as a skeleton, rattling, squeaking, and dripping blood. Contact with the blood of a *Yalem Bek'et* is believed to be fatal (Laughlin 1975: 382). Another bizarre demon is the *Hk'ush 'Ak'al*, or “Charcoal Crusher”—a woman, most commonly, but also a

man, who detaches her or his head and is observed at night crunching up charcoal by the fire. This head may attach itself to a living person who then has two heads, or it may fly off to attach itself to a deer.

Another frightening Tzotzil demon is the *H'ik'al* ("Blackman"). In the world of Zinacantan there are two kinds of Blackmen: the black-skinned trickster of the myths and the human impersonator of this demon who figures in ritual. Both manifestations of this spook are called *H'ik'al* and refer to the same ideal type: a winged black demon with a sinister reputation for unrestricted sexuality, people-snatching, and cannibalism (Blaffer 1972: 19–20). Blaffer (1972: 55–74) observed that the *H'ikal* is likely descended from the fantastical bats depicted on ancient lowland ceramics. There can be little doubt that she was correct in this perceptive anticipation of some of the ideas presented here, for a number of such bats are identified as *wahy* figures in Classic art. The Blackmen who perform as ceremonial clowns in Tzotzil ritual appear to be synthetic combinations of the ancient bat symbol and various symbolic additions from the postconquest experience, including the mock battles between the Christians and the Moors first performed in medieval Spain and later adapted to the conquest situation in the New World, as well as representations of people of African ancestry who served in the armies of the conquering Spaniards (Vogt and Bricker 1996: 207).

Among the nearby Tzeltal of Chiapas the situation is much the same (Nash 1960). Indeed, Stross (1978) made a cross-cultural comparison of concepts of demons in Tzeltal and Tzotzil communities and noted that many are found in both language groups, which suggests that they are probably quite old and probably pre-Columbian. Among them were again the *H'ik'al*, the *Tsonte'* ("Tree Moss"); the *Hvala pat 'ok* ("Backwards Foot"), a long-haired supernatural figure whose two faces and two sets of feet point in opposite directions (see Laughlin 1975: 363); the *Shpak'in te'* ("Tree Demon"), an evil female spirit who can take the appearance of one's wife to lure a hapless drunk into a clump of magueys (the back of her head is hollow, and her hair is made of poisonous caterpillars; when the drunk touches her sexual parts, they turn into excrement; when he strikes her, she turns into a tree [see Laughlin 1975: 264]); the *Hnatikil hol* ("Long Hair"), a kind of demon who is able to fly because of his long hair; *Poshlom*, ("Fireball"), as described above; *Yalem bek'et* ("Flesh Dropper"), also mentioned earlier; as well as the *Hk'ush 'ak'al* ("Charcoal Crusher"). Stross is certainly correct to stress the antiquity of these demonic beings and concepts, at least in highland Chiapas. Indeed, Calnek (1988) notes that the same "Fireball" demon, *Poxlom*, is described in Nuñez de la Vega's account of indigenous religion composed at the end of the eighteenth century.

Witchcraft and Power

Calnek's (1988) survey of the early historical sources on the Maya of highland Chiapas makes it very clear that witchcraft was an essential element in the local power relations of that area's communities. He noted that "the concept of the *nahual* lies at the root of indigenous concepts of authority and ritual power" (Calnek 1988: 56) and that "possession of at least some of the most powerful *nahuals* would seem to be a prerequisite for actual

assumption of some office or high social rank” (57). He furthermore saw a direct connection between witchcraft and the practice of rulership: “While not documented closely for the pre-Conquest period in Chiapas, the concept of high-ranking *principales* and even rulers as exceptionally powerful *brujos* is prominently represented among rulers of Toltec descent in Yucatan and Guatemala” (56). He earlier noted that this importance of nagualism in Chiapas political culture could be ascribed to Mexican influence, which I find unlikely; nagualism as it is generally understood and described was arguably a pan-Mesoamerican phenomenon, and even a very Maya one. The importance of powerful naguals (*wayhels* in Tzotzil) exists in a temporal dimension as well. Frequently they are the principal actors in primordial mythology. Writing of one Tzotzil community, Guiteras Holmes (1961: 303) noted that “it is interesting to observe from the myths that in the past when momentous action or decisions have taken place concerning the life or institutions of the group, it has always been the *wayhels* and not the people that have played the dominant roles.”

Returning to the *wahy* depictions of the Classic period, we quickly see a number of familiar themes. Already we have touched on how the *wahy* beings seem to be far from normal depictions of animals; rather they emphasize weird, hybridized combinations of species and frightening actions such as vomiting, decapitation, and fire. That is, they conform remarkably well to the “spooks” and disease-bearing demons described throughout the ethnographic and historical literature. Their intimate connection to disease and maladies is emphasized both visually and through the meanings conveyed by their proper names, several of which, as we have seen, contain the word for “death” or “sickness,” a noun based on the root *cham* or *kam* (also cognate to the Yucatec form *kimi*). Many of these depictions were previously identified in a very general sense as “death gods”—an idea that may not have been too far off of the mark, even if imprecise. We can say now that the *wayoob* depicted on Maya vases are obviously far more than “animal souls” or “co-essences”; they are dark and powerful beings obviously meant to frighten and convey negative, even deathly ideas and forces. They occupy the darkest and most intimate regions of Maya worldview, phenomenology, and religious thought. And like the *wayjel*, who seem important in foundational myths of the Tzotzil, we will see that the *wahy* beings of the Classic period could occupy primordial time, intersecting closely with origin narratives and symbols.

It is important to stress that the Classic period *wahyoob* are not stand-alone beings. As we have known since their initial identification, *wahy* characters are explicitly ascribed to specific historical places and courtly titles, seemingly unable to exist without real-world contextualization. As an example, one *Nupul Bahlam*, depicted on the famous “Altar Vase,” is said to be “the *wahy* of the Holy Mutul(?) Lord.” Another jaguar demon named “Water Jaguar” is said to be “the *wahy* of the Seibal Lord.” In other instances, there seems to be no title involved, but instead an emblem glyph main sign. For example, a fantastic monkey depicted on a vase probably from the *Ik’a* polity (Coe 1978: 58) is simply called “the *wahy* of Baak(al),” apparently in reference to Palenque and its royal court. In this respect he seems to be a partner or “co-demon” of *Sak Baak Chahpat*, “White Bone House Centipede,” named on another vessel in connection with Palenque (figure 7.7). Seldom if ever do we encounter a *wahy* linked to a specific named individual; rather, it is always named in association with these types of impersonal titles or court labels.



Figure 7.7. Two *wahy* beings associated with the royal court of Palenque (*Baakal*).

As a result of these patterns, it is possible for us to refine our understanding of Classic Maya *wahyoob* by stressing their inherent *institutional* nature, for, rather than being named as personal aspects of one's soul, they were specifically identified as beings associated with particular royal seats and houses. Put another way—and perhaps too simply—they were the specific demons attributed to royal courts and to those in power at such named locations. I suspect that the ancient *wahy* beings represented the animate dark forces that were embedded in the complex power structures of ancient Maya society, much like the specialized *naguals* described by Calnek and others for highland Chiapas. These ancient *wahy* were possibly wielded in sorcery conducted by rulers and other elites in confrontations with certain enemies, expressing and symbolizing their unique and individualized social and political control over others.

It is fascinating that *wahyoob* were standardized to such an extent with regard to locations and royal courts. The lords of the Kaanul kingdom (Dzibanche and Calakmul), for example, tended to be associated with large fantastic snakes (often with deer antlers), whereas the kings and nobles of Mutul (Tikal) were associated with certain supernatural variations on

jaguars (as in the case of the *wahy* named Nupul Bahlam, described above). Also, some royal courts evidently had more than one type, perhaps as an indication of their distinctive political power and influence. The Kaanul emblem, for example, was associated with a distinctive deer-snake *wahy* as well as a “Sun-chested” jaguar character (see Grube and Nahm 1994: 687).

Smaller centers and courts had a wide array of problematic creatures as their *wahy*. The geographic distributions and associations of *wahy* beings may offer insights into the details of realpolitik of Classic Maya history, and how power relations were defined, represented, and understood. One illustrative example comes from the historical records of Palenque in which we read of an important military victory over its rival Tonina in the year AD 687 (Mathews 2001). At that time Tonina seems to have been a key ally of the powerful Kaanul kingdom that had once conquered Palenque (Stuart 2013). Palenque saw its victory over Tonina as the defeat of a long-standing enemy, and the episode was prominently recorded in Palenque’s Temple of the Sun, a structure that replicated the interior of a mountain and that was dedicated to the theme of warfare. The temple originally housed the effigy of the god known as GIII, the most junior of the three Palenque Triad patron deities. In the temple’s main tablet, we also read of GIII’s supernatural birth, and there it is significant that his identity seems to be fused with a number of other supernatural characters, including a possible *wahy* (figure 7.8).

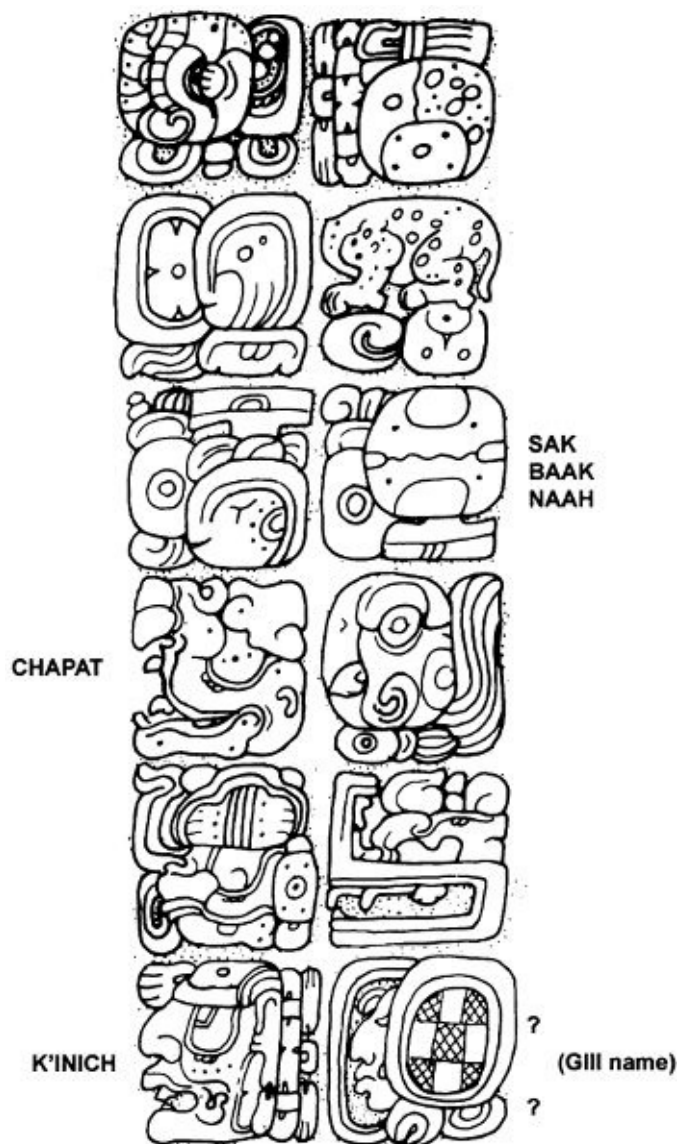


Figure 7.8. Palenque's *wahy* as an aspect of GIII of the Palenque Triad, a local war deity. From the Tablet of the Sun at Palenque.

There we read of *Sak Baak Naah Chapaht* (“Bone House Centipede”), whom we have already seen named as a *wahy* of the Palenque (*Baakal* or *Baakel*) court (see [figure 7.7](#)). The Temple of the Sun is therefore explicit in incorporating the locally prominent *wahy* into the larger theme of royal military prowess and also into the broader mythical narrative of the Cross Group itself, appropriately framing the “Bone House Centipede” in the context of warfare and caves and integrating it into the overall expression of kingship and cosmos.

The importance of sorcery in ancient Maya concepts of power and ideology is perhaps best encapsulated in the important dual term *ch’ahb ak’baal*, which I have earlier described as one of the principal operating forces underlying kingship and the ceremonies associated with it (Stuart 2005a) ([figure 7.9](#)).



Figure 7.9. Hieroglyphic expression for *ch'ahb ak'baal*, “genesis-night.”

The first of these words, *ch'ahb*, is a noun derived from a verb root with highly charged religious significance meaning “to create” or “to engender” (colonial sources emphasize a meaning of “to fast”). It is found alone in ancient texts to refer to the act of bloodletting, as in the famous tongue-piercing scene from Yaxchilan, Lintel 24. *Ak'baal* is “darkness, night,” suggesting a literal understanding of the complete phrase as something like “genesis-darkness” or “genesis-night” (see Knowlton 2012). Importantly, this phrase survived into colonial Yucatec as *ch'ab ak'ab*, repeated throughout the incantations of *The Ritual of the Bacabs*, often in connection with the generation of evil spirits and maladies. Roys believed *ch'ab ak'ab* to be a dualistic term emphasizing male and female “principles” of such spells (Roys 1965: xv). From the perspective of the more ancient Classic Maya sources, I believe it is more likely that the same term *ch'ab ak'baal* refers to two key dimensions of ritual power, one generative and positive, the other destructive, nocturnal, and negative.

More specifically, *ch'ahb* can perhaps be understood as encompassing the realms of bloodletting and procreation, two closely overlapping concepts. By contrast *ak'baal* embraces the nocturnal aspects of strength and ability, including, among other things, sorcery and witchcraft. In a vague way I believe *ch'ab ak'baal* may have worked much like the Classical Nahuatl expression *atl-tlachinolli*, “water-and-burnt fields,” another familiar Mesoamerican *difrasismo* that alluded to important and powerful attributes associated with Aztec military prowess and kingship.

Discussion

This brief essay has offered what I believe to be a new spin on ancient Maya political culture and ideology, focusing on a topic that has not been adequately explored before now—the role of sorcery and witchcraft in kingship and statecraft during the Classic period. Earlier studies, including my own, fell somewhat short of the mark in describing the nuanced concepts of the *wahyoob*, seeing them as general “underworld gods” or “animal companion souls.” I have set forth the outlines of the argument that the *wahy* beings more accurately represent demonic forces, frightening spooks, and agents of disease, all closely tied to the exercise of coercive influence among high-ranking Maya elites. In doing so I have relied heavily on studies of the power dynamics inherent in Maya witchcraft as practiced in highland Chiapas among the Tzeltal and Tzotzil and neighboring groups. This is not to say that such concepts did not (or do not) play an important part in other parts of the Maya world. In fact, I suspect the regional

bias instead stems largely from the steady focus on this region by ethnographers investigating concepts of the soul and curing. There can be little doubt that many general concepts about demons and disease among the contemporary Maya have a long time-depth and surely can be traced back to the pre-Columbian past (Stross 1978). As we have seen, the ancient *wahy* beings are best understood as manifestations of similar beings, personified diseases or at least as animated forms of other negative forces associated with individual royal stations and courts.

Disease is not a new theme in the interpretation of the fantastical “underworld” figures depicted on so many Maya ceramics. Ever since Michael Coe’s groundbreaking analyses of the imagery on Classic-period vase painting, the Maya underworld has come across as an incredibly complex place of disease and sickness, with a multitude of deities and manifestations (Coe 1978: 11; Miller and Taube 1993: 78). What is new, I think, is orienting this notion of animated death in more subtle and specific ways, moving it away from very generalized ideas of an “underworld” (a vague and problematic concept) and orienting it more toward an ethnographically informed framework, where death and disease can operate as agents in a social and political sphere.

Due to the limitations of evidence, we lack any real understanding of the actual practice of ancient Maya sorcery, much less as it related to politics and power relations. I suspect that ritual caves (natural and artificial) may have been an important venue for royal engagement with witchcraft, considering their obvious connections with the “underworld” and related concepts, such as darkness and fright (see MacLeod and Puleston 1978). The term *och ch’e’n*, “cave-entering,” used in many ancient texts as an expression of military conquest, may allude to this spatial connection, although other interpretations are certainly possible.

The close connection of sorcery and kingship is nonetheless indicated in more indirect aspects of Classic Maya texts and in their descriptions of ritual practice. For example, it is significant that several personal names of Maya royalty seem nearly identical to those of *wahy* beings, as if they were direct embodiments and manifestations of those powerful forces. Here I am thinking of the successive Copan rulers *K’ahk’ U Ti’ Chan* or *K’ahk’ U Ti’ Witz’* (Rulers 11 and 12) whose respective names mean “Fire is the Mouth (Speech) of the Snake” and “Fire is the Mouth (Speech) of the Water Serpent” ([figure 7.10](#)).

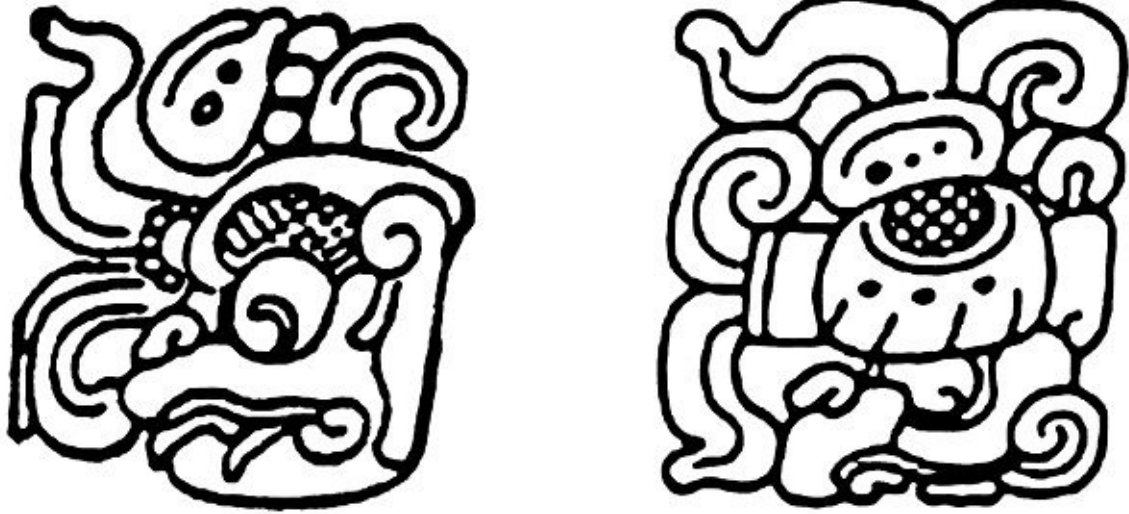


Figure 7.10. Two royal names from Copan, similar to the names of *wahy* beings.

These are structurally identical to some of the *wahy* characters we encounter on vases, such as *Kahk' U Ti' Suutz'*, “Fire is the Mouth (Speech) of the Bat.” Another *wahy* being that is cited on several codex-style vessels shares its personal name with a historical ruler from Sak Tz'i', cited on Monument 83 from Tonina ([figure 7.11a and b](#)). Again, it is difficult to escape the interpretation that this king somehow embodies the force of his own *wahy*, at least in the military context of this specific sculpture.

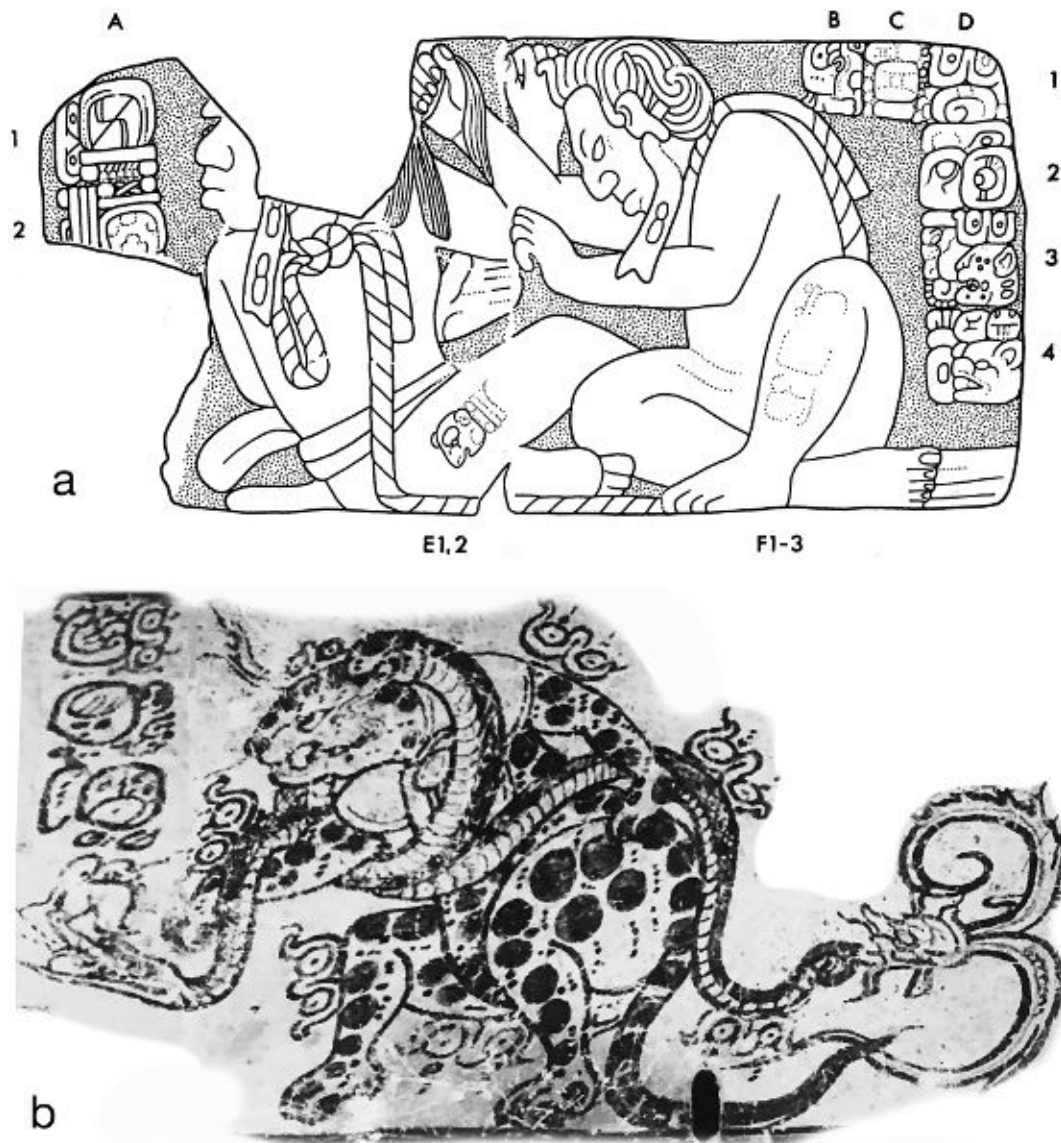


Figure 7.11. (a) Tonina, Monument 83, citing a ruler or *wahy* of the Sak Tz'i' kingdom; (b) a jaguar *wahy* depicted on Kerr 1652.

In a few cases we may also see victorious rulers engaged in sorcery as an instrument of war. On Naranjo Stela 21 the local king named K'ahk' Tiliw Chan Chahk appears with the event known as “cave-entering” on the day of a military victory, standing upon a defeated prisoner (figure 7.12a). He is dressed as the jaguar night sun, or as the so-called Jaguar God of the Underworld. On another monument, Stela 30, the same king is once more shown atop a defeated captive, holding ritual implements of burning and sacrifice but in the guise of the jaguar deity (figure 7.12b). Here the context is that of a period-ending ritual, perhaps the drilling of a ritual fire (Stuart 1998). The first few glyphs of the accompanying text notes tersely that “it is his image in the darkness” (*u baah ti ak'ab*). I cannot help but wonder if this is a direct reference to the “dark” dimension of *ch'ahb ak'baal* and to the forces of sorcery itself, with war once again being its expressive theme.

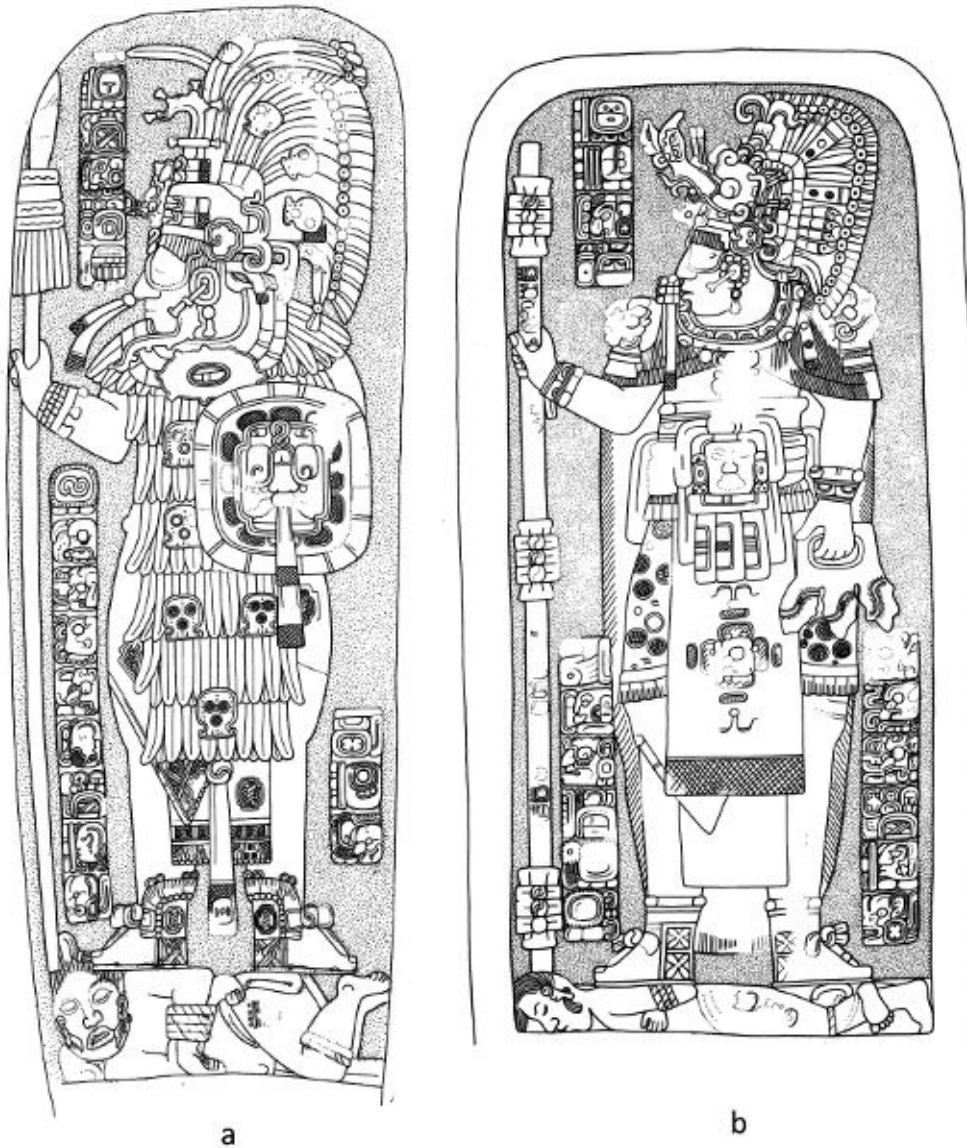


Figure 7.12. Possible depictions of sorcerer-warrior kings on two monuments from Naranjo: (a) Naranjo Stela 21, (b) Naranjo Stela 30.

Like the Blackmen of present-day Tzotzil festivals, some costumed performers we find depicted in ancient Maya art were likely embodiments of spook-like *wahyoob*, brought into courtly settings as real-world actors. On the vase K8719 we see one of the more grisly scenes of human sacrifice known from Maya art ([figure 7.13](#)).

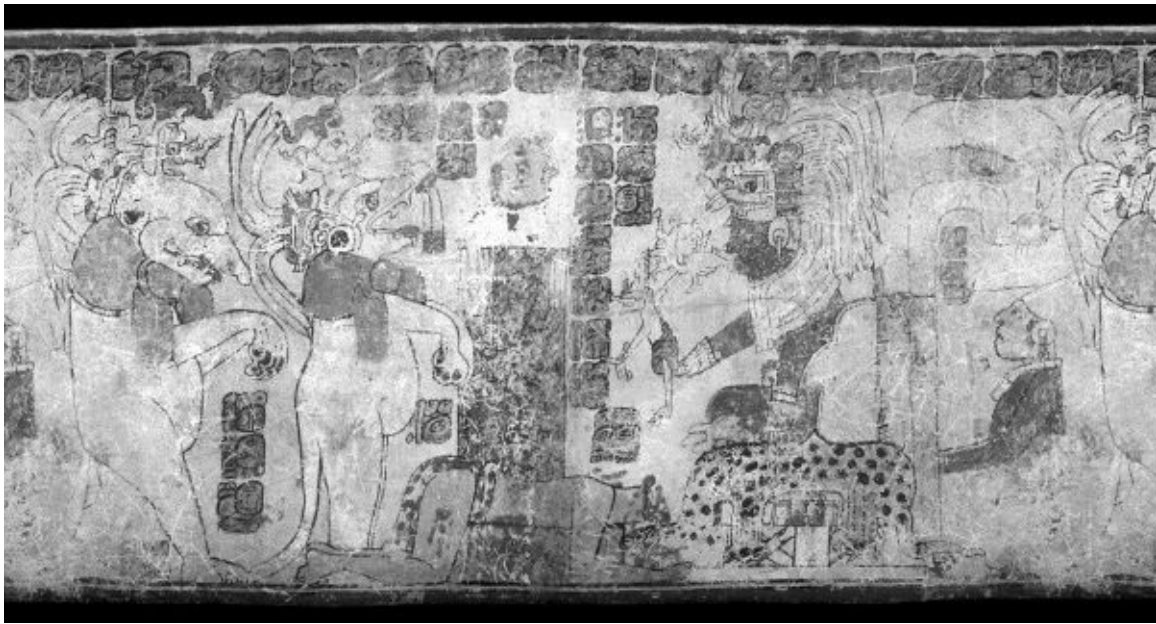


Figure 7.13. Costumed *wahy* performers in a sacrifice scene on Kerr 8719.

We can see a king seated upon what looks to be a portable throne and looking on a scene of decapitation sacrifice. The victim, perhaps a war captive, lies prone upon a stone altar and before a small stela. His head lies atop the stone monument, placed on a surface of *amate* paper-cloth (*huun*) and suggesting some sort of corporeal metaphor involving the upright stone (see Stuart 1996 for a further discussion of stela-body symbolism). Judging by similar scenes (see K8351), the familiar stela-altar pairing one so often sees at Maya sites was frequently a formal place for human sacrifice. Indeed, I suspect that a number of stelae-and-altars erected in the plazas were settings for a number of offering rites that included the execution of prisoners, much as we see on this vase. To the left of the dead victims are two performers in fantastic animal costumes, wearing red scarves. As Elliot López-Finn (pers. comm. 2014) pointed out to me, similar portly animal performers are depicted on other vessels (e.g., K1835, K4947, K4960). And elsewhere many similar clawed figures with red scarves are explicitly identified as *wahy* beings. On this vessel the costumed figures are performing in an extraordinary setting of courtly sacrifice, perhaps as executioners that embody the animated forces of the king's power and control over life and death. If this interpretation is correct, then the *wahyoob* of courts and of elite rulers were by no means hidden, opaque aspects of power. Much to the contrary, they were, while expressions of "darkness," very much out in the open for many to see and experience, even as prominent players in ritual performance and pomp.

My point of departure at the beginning of this essay was a simple observation that our understanding of ancient Maya religion, especially as it pertains to the ideological underpinnings of rule and authority in ancient Maya courts, remains incomplete. This is no doubt still the case. Nevertheless, I believe that a key component within this larger view of Maya ideology was sorcery, which has played little if any role up to now in the scholarly considerations of Classic Maya kingship. Kings and other high-ranking elites were embodiments of the social, political, and religious order wherein they ruled. Yet they were also morally problematic by definition. Their status hinged on the possession of a complex

notion of power that they called *ch'ahb ak'baal*, a combination of two important and complementary operating principles of “generation” and “darkness.” For the Classic Maya these were the two sides to power and ceremonial “magic”—one positive and creative by nature (*ch'ahb*) and the other more esoteric and nocturnal (*ak'baal*). The world of this second aspect was populated by a variety of animate *wahy* beings who were associated with individual kings and the courts where they ruled, personifying the dark forces of what we would call witchcraft and sorcery. In this way the art and writing of the Classic period emphasized how sorcery was a vital and openly acknowledged side to the practice of rulership and how such “dark arts” played a significant role in the expression of power dynamics among rival courts and city-states.

Author's Note

This essay was first developed around 2002, when working in close collaboration with my late colleague and dear friend Evon Z. Vogt. At that time, a couple of short years before his passing in 2004, Vogtie and I were coauthoring a book exploring the intersections of ancient and modern Maya culture, with the working title *Maya Souls*. Vogtie's illness prevented our book from seeing completion, but his influence and inspiration on my own thinking on this subject was profound, and it is well reflected in the current chapter.

I presented a general overview of *wahy* sorcery and its connections to disease at the 2005 Maya Meetings (Stuart 2005b). In the years since that time, others have explored many of these themes in far more detail. I would direct readers in particular to Helmke and Nielsen's (2009) excellent overview of personified diseases and their relationship to specific animal representations. A portion of the present essay appeared as a short essay on the weblog *Maya Decipherment* (Stuart 2014). I would like to thank Elliot Lopez-Finn of the University of Texas at Austin for her help with the preparation of this manuscript for publication.

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Where Children Are Born

Centipedes and Feminine Sexuality in Ancient Mesoamerica

Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos

To a modern observer, the massive maw that engulfs K'inich Janaab' Pakal in the Palenque sarcophagus lid has frightening overtones, seemingly marking the consumption of the king's dead body by a gargantuan creature. Hieroglyphic decipherment allowed Grube and Nahm (1994: 702) to identify it as a skeletal centipede, superseding previous characterizations as the "maw of the underworld" or that of an unidentified earth monster (e.g., Schele and Miller 1986: 282–285; Coggins 1988: 75). Yet the reading seemed to confirm the creature's ghastly qualities and its earthly connotations. In a thorough survey of centipede iconography, Taube (2003: 437) concluded that the arthropod's mandibles represented "the threatening, deathly entrance to the underworld."

Recent research has modified this view. It appears that, despite their deathly associations, centipede maws generated new life and were related to childbirth and the rebirth of deities and ancestors. Following an initial lead by Coggins (1988), Stuart and Stuart (2008; 2010: 175) noted that skeletal maws in Maya art served as places of cosmic emergence, and not of entrance. They interpreted the sarcophagus lid as showing Pakal's rebirth from the earth. The birth metaphor is underlined by the king's bodily posture, commonly found in representations of babies in ancient Maya art (Martin 2002). The analogy is not casual; Ruz Lhuillier (1973: 225–226) first noted that the sarcophagus portrayed the dead king with the appearance of the Maize God, and subsequent research showed that his transit to death was likened to the god's mythical rebirth (Martin 2002; Taube 1994). The scene has multiple connotations, ultimately related to the king's solar apotheosis (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2006; Stuart and Stuart 2008).

The question remains, why were the arthropods' forbidding mandibles an appropriate representation of a birth canal? How did the ancient Maya balance the blissful values of childbirth with the noxious and deathly attributes of centipedes? The species found in Central America can be large and intimidating. They are carnivorous, capable of hunting small frogs, lizards, snakes, birds, and mammals, including rodents and bats (Molinari et al. 2005). Their poisonous bite can cause severe pain and swelling in humans and may result in secondary infections. With good reason, ancient Maya artists paid special attention to their frontally protruding fangs ([figure 8.1](#)), which correspond to the centipedes' poison claws—the modified first pair of walking legs provided with venom glands that Undheim and King (2011) described as "the most obvious, and infamous, shared derived character of centipedes."

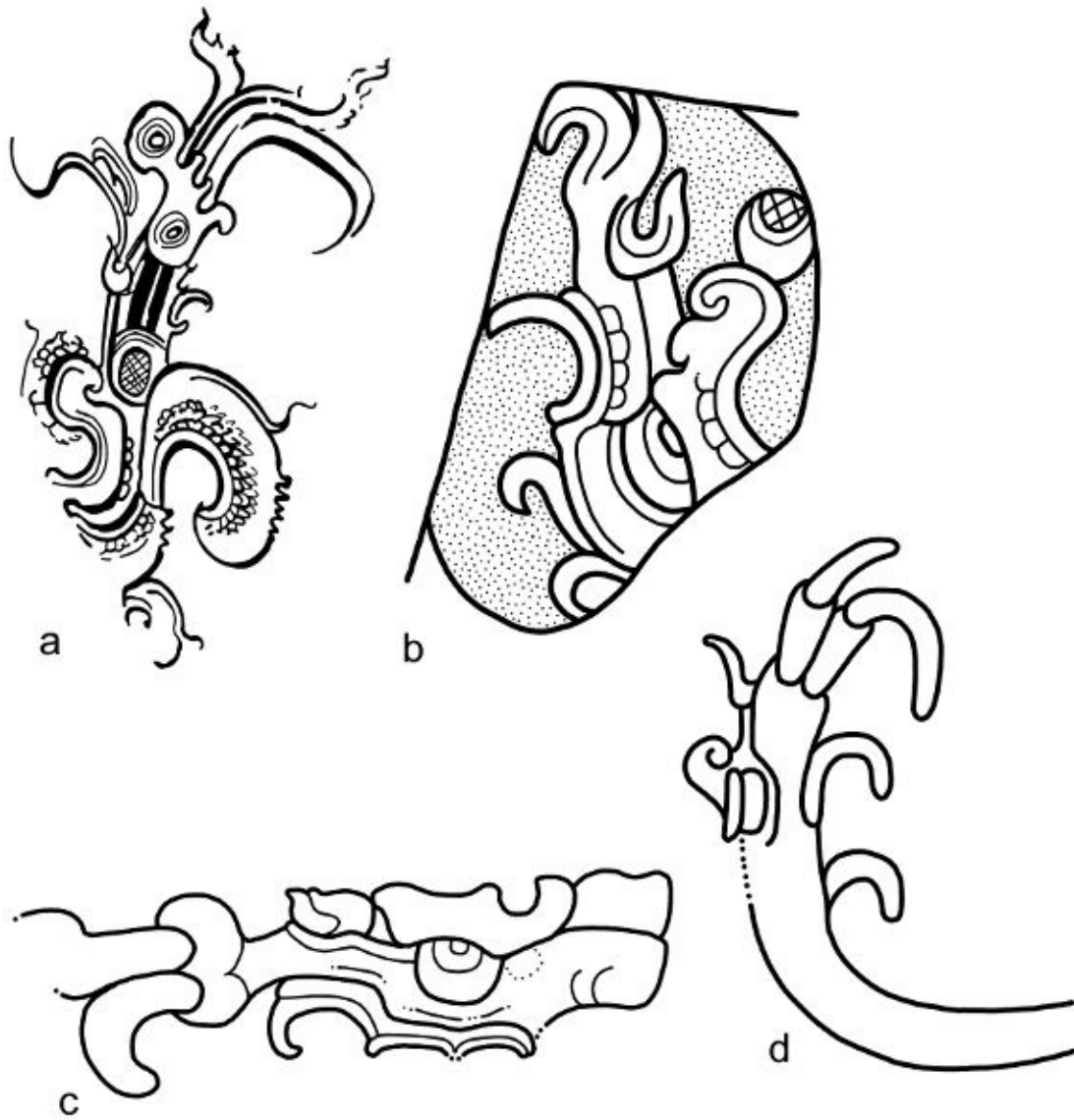


Figure 8.1. Centipedes in Maya art. (a) Detail of Cosmic Plate. (b) Dos Pilas, bench from Structure N5-21, detail. (c) Detail of inscription from Copan Temple 11. (d) Detail from Copan Stela D, glyph block B3. Drawings by Oswaldo Chinchilla.

A related paradox involved the association of centipedes with the Sun God. Deceased kings were often portrayed in the guise of the Sun God within “solar cartouches”—openings from which the Sun God emerged in full glory—with centipede heads projecting from the corners ([figure 8.2](#); Grube and Nahm 1994: 702; Taube 2003: 410–412).

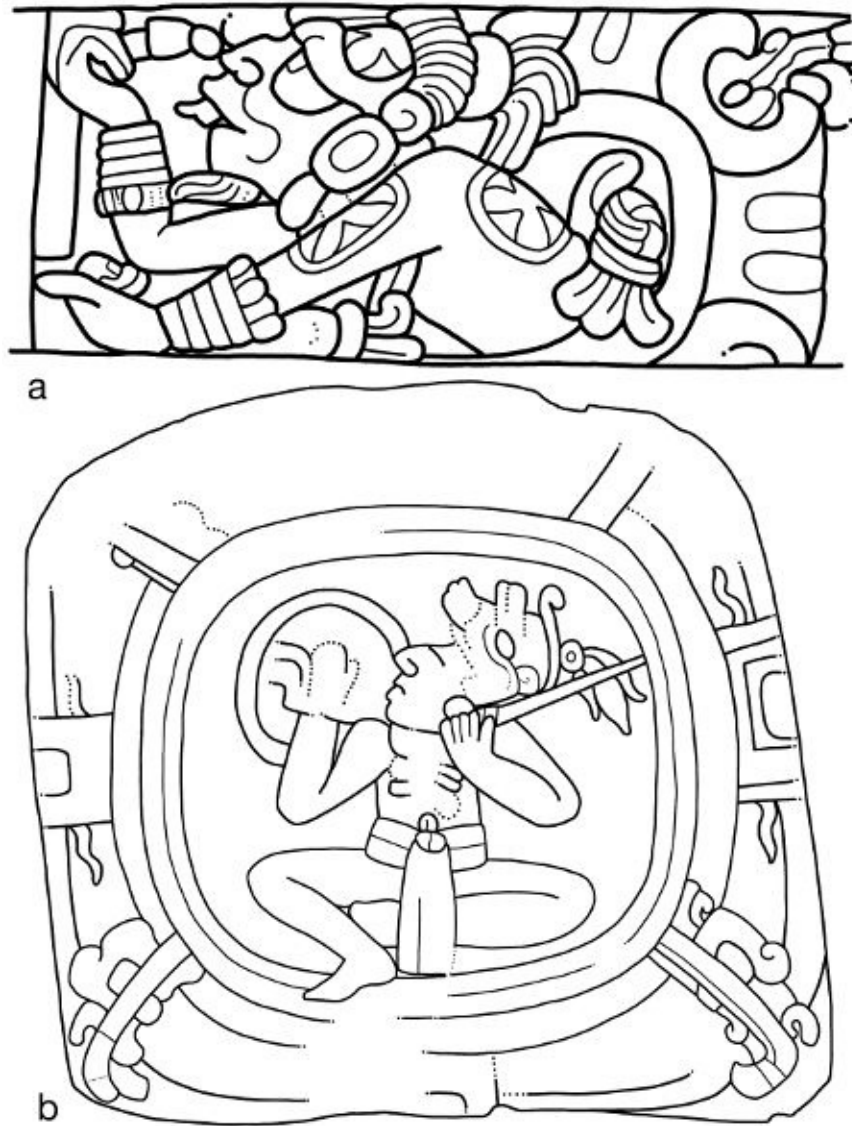


Figure 8.2. Solar cartouches with centipedes emerging from the corners. (a) Sun God emerging from a solar cartouche; detail of bench from Group 8N-11, Copan. (b) Sculpture of unknown provenance showing a warrior in a solar cartouche. Drawings by Oswaldo Chinchilla.

Yet centipedes are mostly nocturnal animals that shy away from the sunlight and require moist microhabitats found in soil, leaf litter, dead wood, rocky crevices, and caves. To explain the contradiction, Taube suggested that the centipedes' solar connotations concerned "the daily passage of the sun from the underworld to the heavens" (2003: 411). Both he and Stuart (2005a: 167–168) identified this passage with the daily rebirth of the Sun God, like a child from its mother's womb.

In this chapter I explore the paradoxes involved in the representation of birth as a passage through centipede maws. While I will concentrate on this creature, some of these observations also apply to representations in which birth was denoted by emergence from the maws of various kinds of serpents (Taube 1994: 663). After reviewing the iconographic links between centipedes and childbirth, I argue that Classic Maya images find correspondences in sixteenth-century sources from highland Mexico, where centipedes and other poisonous creatures were often associated with female goddesses, feminine sexuality, and sorcery. I

explore beliefs attested in mythical narratives that show a consistent association with femininity, menstruation, and reproduction in Mesoamerica. I suggest that the connotations of centipedes and other poisonous creatures in modern mythical narratives are significant to explain their role in Classic Maya religion and art.

Centipedes and Childbirth in Maya Art

The role of centipede maws as birth canals is apparent in some representations of the Maize God's rebirth. An elaborate example appears on a finely painted tripod plate known as the Cosmic Plate (K1609). Emerging from a water band, the axe-wielding god Chak has presumably split a submerged skull, likely representing a water-lily rhizome (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2017: 217–218), allowing the Maize God to rise. Taube (2003: fig. 6c) recognized the centipede maws that frame the underwater rebirth scene and noted their correspondence with the “black hole” place-name in the associated hieroglyphic text, possibly referring to a cenote or watery cave. The glyph itself shows the maws of a centipede, and it designates the mythical location where the portent took place (Stuart and Houston 1994: 71–72; Stone and Zender 2011: 53). The centipede maws that frame the plate's lower half allude to this mythical location, but they may have a deeper significance. Like the skeletal centipede maws in the Palenque Sarcophagus, they form an opening that allows the mythical birth of the Maize God. As such, the “black hole” is like-in-kind to feminine genital organs. Indeed, several authors have noted the symbolic correspondence of caves with women's genitalia in the Mesoamerican world view (Brady 1988; Heyden 1991).

In Maya mythology, the Maize God's rebirth is often conjoined with a previous episode that recounts his death (Braakhuis 1990; Quenon and Le Fort 1997; Chinchilla Mazariegos 2011a). Both are represented on vase K1004 ([figure 8.3](#)). In this case, the centipede maw appears to have mortuary connotations. It frames a seated lady, possibly a female manifestation of Akan, the god of death and drunkenness (Grube 2004). She stares at the standing Maize God, while offering him a shell ornament. Helmke (2012: 111) pointed out that this object likely corresponds to the composite shark and *Spondylus* shell ornament that the Maize God often wears as part of a belt assemblage and that is also commonly worn by royal women. Miller and Martin noted that this ornament carries connotations of female fertility, and added, “in body placement, color and shape (the shell is of course concave), the reference is seemingly to female genitalia” (2004: 97).

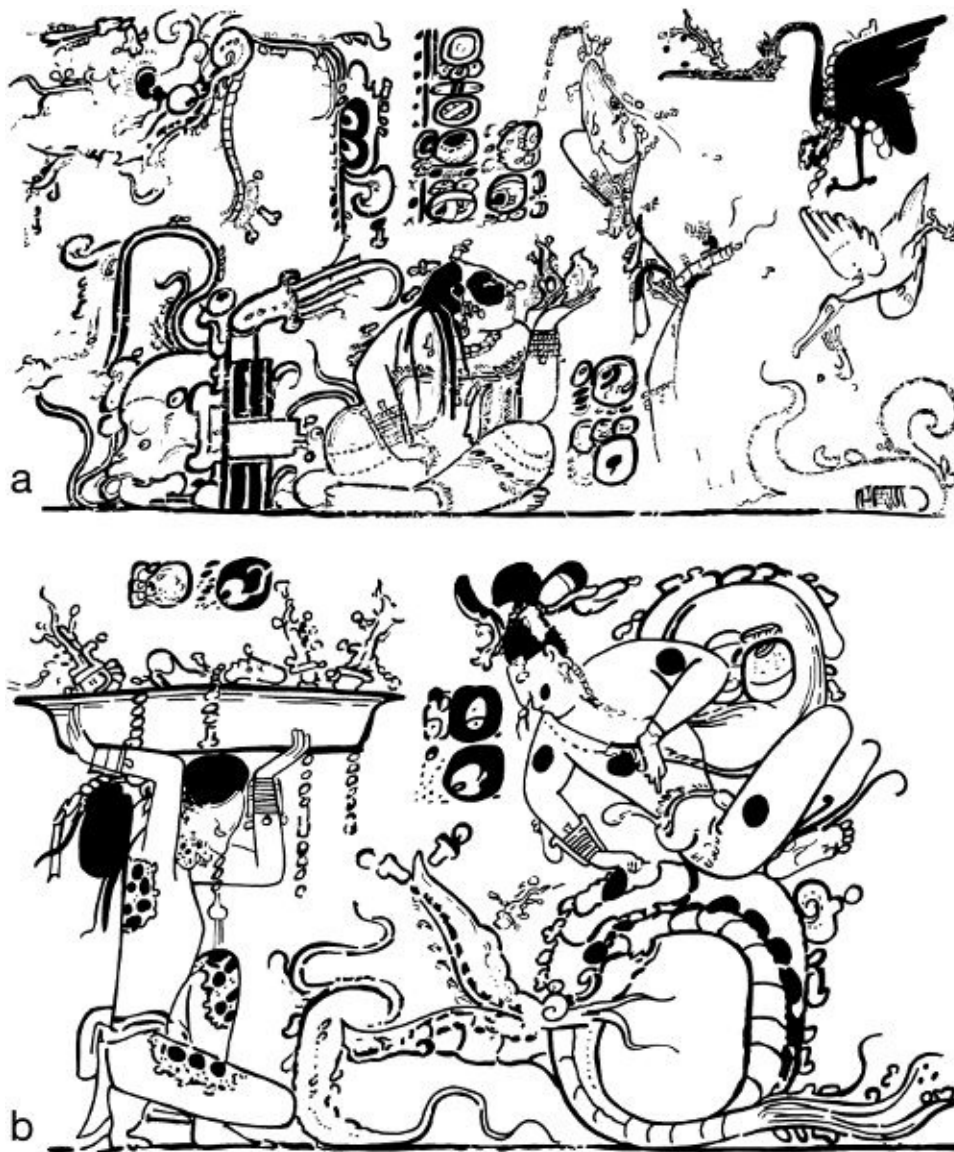


Figure 8.3. Painted designs on vase K1004 showing scenes from the Maize God myths. (a) The Maize God encounters a woman who sits by a centipede maw; the inscription records the Maize God's death. (b) The Maize God as a baby, resting on a plate held by God CH while God S seats on an aquatic serpent. Drawings by Oswaldo Chinchilla.

The genital connotations of the shell ornament are consistent with the presence of the centipede mandible and the woman herself. While fully dressed, she belongs with the lightly clad women that surround the Maize God in scenes that prelude his impending demise. In Mesoamerican myths the heroes' fall into sexual temptation normally marks their defeat and death (Graulich 1997: 178–180). The hieroglyphic text on this vase recounts the god's death, in agreement with other painted vessels that relate the Maize God's erotic affairs with women to his death (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2011a: 59–67, 2017: 195–202). The centipede maw may refer to the woman's deadly attraction, but it may also prefigure the god's eventual rebirth, a version of which was portrayed on the opposite side of the vase.

Centipede maws reappear in the Birth Vase (K5113), a square vase whose four sides present a unique depiction of mythical childbirth. As described by Taube (1994), the vase shows a group of old jaguar goddesses in the role of midwives assisting a young woman or goddess in labor. The woman is standing on a mountain and is holding twisted serpentine

ropes. Taube (1994: 658–659) noted that ropes are commonly employed for support during childbirth in Mesoamerica and pointed out their symbolic links with umbilical cords. One of the midwives embraces the woman’s waist from behind, helping her to deliver. Yet the offspring are not born from her body but from the maws of two serpents that emerge from the mouth of the animated mountain. At the base of the painting the serpents pass through centipede maws before turning upward on both sides to deliver bizarre children—old gods with baby bodies. In this composition the mountain is analogous to the woman’s body; both are capable of procreation. The birth-giving serpents have obvious correspondences with the woman’s genitals. While unobtrusive, the centipede maws at the base are significant elements, forming a birth portal for the mountain’s offspring.

Yaxchilan Lintels 13 and 14 reiterate the role of centipede and serpent maws as birth conduits, but instead of mythical beings, the protagonists are members of the city’s royalty. The inscription on Lintel 13 (figure 8.4) commemorates the birth of king Itzamnaaj Balam IV, whose parents, known as Bird Jaguar IV and Lady Chak Skull, are shown standing and holding bloodletting implements.



Figure 8.4. Yaxchilan Lintel 13, highlighting the centipede that crawls around Lady Chak Skull. Drawing by Eric von Euw, © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, PM 2004.15.6.5.13 (digital file 99320101).

Houston and Stuart suggested that the future king himself is the character that emerges as a newborn from a serpentine being that winds around his mother’s waist. They described this being as a serpent that “passes through or around her body” and asked whether the scene

could be interpreted as “an elaborate visual metaphor of birth” (Houston and Stuart 1989: 7; Stuart 1984: 19). Rather than a serpent, the creature can now be recognized as a centipede, as indicated by its segmented body with multiple appendages and by the shape of its frontal teeth, one curving markedly, and the other projecting forward. Like the serpents on the Birth Vase, the centipede fulfills the function of a birth canal for the newborn king.

Lintel 14 shows an analogous scene (figure 8.5), although the standing male is not the king himself but a nobleman that Stuart identified as the probable brother of Lady Chak Skull (Stuart 1997: 7–8; cf. Mathews 1988: 209). The scene reiterates the iconographic conventions used to denote royal birth on Lintel 13. It seems to portray the birth of a royal woman whose name caption appears in blocks A1–C1. By analogy with Lintel 13, she was likely a daughter of Lady Chak Skull. However, the main inscription contains no mention of birth. Instead, the text employs the verbal phrase *tzahkaj K’awiil*—literally, “K’awiil is conjured.” The phrase describes Lady Chak Skull’s act of conjuring a creature whose name can be partly read as Chanal Chakb’ay Kan. While the name implies a serpent, the creature portrayed on Lintel 14 is a composite that sheds its serpent skin to reveal the segmented, multilegged body of a centipede.

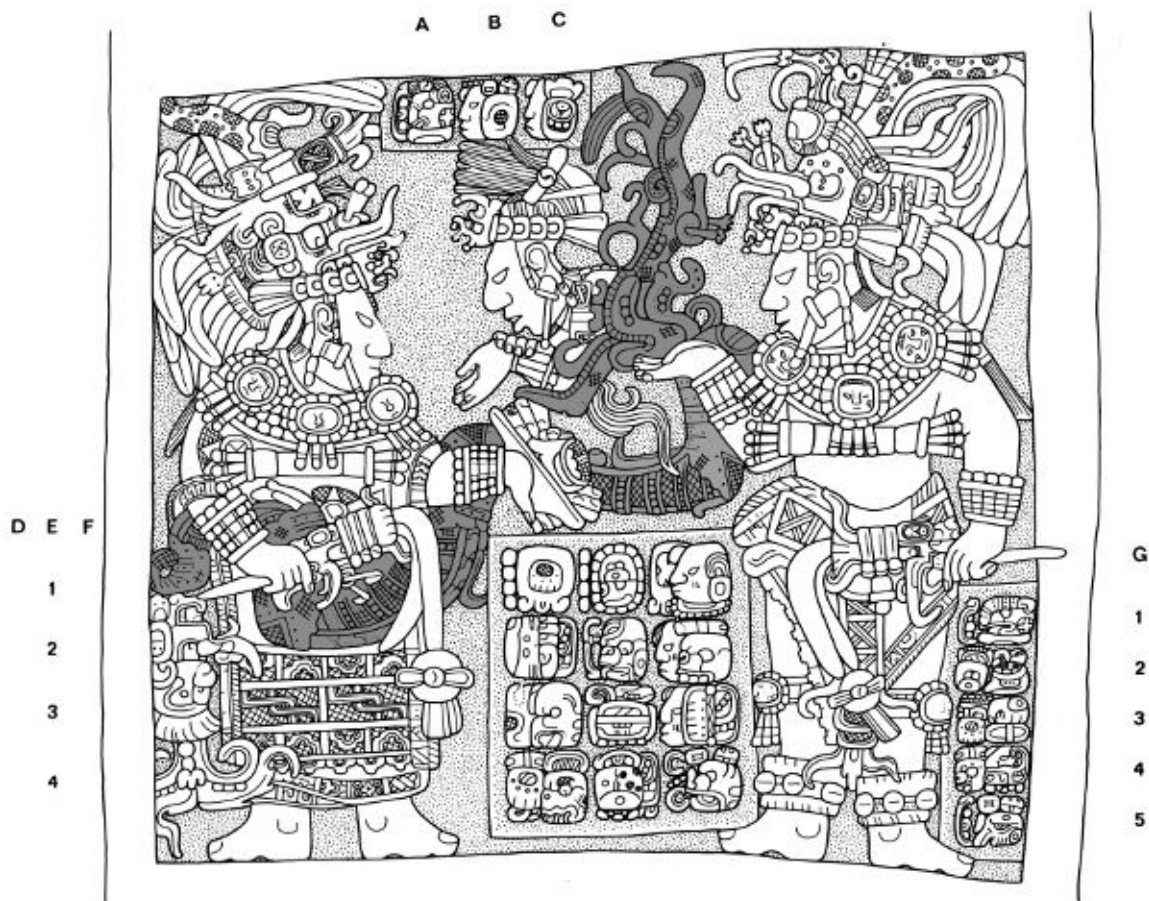


Figure 8.5. Yaxchilan Lintel 14. A serpent sheds its skin to reveal the body of a centipede while crawling around Lady Chak Skull. Drawing by Ian Graham, © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, PM 2004.15.15.144 (digital file 99280023).

The zoological distinction may prove insignificant; in modern Tzeltal zoology centipedes receive various names that include the generic term *chan*, which designates serpents but may

also apply to several kinds of bugs (Kettunen and Davis 2004, citing Hunn 1977). Likewise, the sixteenth-century Mexica informants of Sahagún classified centipedes in a chapter devoted to “the large serpents” (Sahagún 1981: 85–87). In Nahuatl centipedes are called *petlazolcoatl*, literally, “frayed mat snake,” perhaps because their numerous legs resemble a mat with frayed edges (Sullivan 1982: 18). Coto’s seventeenth-century Kaqchikel dictionary contains an intriguing entry that seems to convey a conceptual link between centipedes and the plumed serpent, a mythical creature called Q’ukumatz in K’iche’an languages: “*Ciento pies, animalejo, EuEu cumatz el cientopies*” (Coto 1983: 129; Tedlock 1996: 216). These glosses suggest various ways in which centipedes and serpents overlap with each other in Mesoamerican notions of fauna.

The hieroglyphic text on Lintel 14 adds another level of meaning. The name Chanal Chakb’ay Kan is followed by the rare collocation *u-WAY-la-ja-ya*, followed by the name of Lady Chak Skull. In their pioneering study of the *way* glyph, Houston and Stuart (1989: 7) suggested that this collocation identified the Chanal Chakb’ay Kan as the *way*, or “coessence” of Lady Chak Skull. But growing evidence suggests that the Classic Maya *way* beings were conceived as animated forms of illnesses and other dark forces that powerful individuals controlled through acts of sorcery (Stuart 2005c; Helmke and Nielsen 2009; Velásquez 2011). Helmke and Nielsen (2009: 53) analyzed the Lintel 14 collocation as *u-wa[h]y-l-aj-[ii]y*. While the translation remains uncertain, it may relate to the colonial Tzotzil *vayajel*, “*brujería*,” *vayajelal k’op*, “*nigromántica cosa*” (Laughlin 1988: 326), Tzeltal *uayaghelal*, “*brujería*” (Ara 1986: 402), and modern Tojolab’al *wayjelan* and *wayjelani*, respectively “*hechizar*” and “*brujear*” (Lenkersdorf 1979, cited in Houston and Stuart 1989: 5).

Compiled by Dominican friars, the Tzeltal and Tzotzil glosses may be tainted by their prejudices against native religion, which may also have lasting influence in modern languages. Yet there are reasons to believe that they agree with the iconographic and textual meaning of the Yaxchilan lintels. As discussed in the following section, Mesoamerican sorcerers are believed to possess the power to summon poisonous creatures, including centipedes and serpents, either for protection or harm. Therefore, the lady’s conjuring of those creatures at Yaxchilan seems to be appropriately described as “sorcery” on Lintel 14. The question is whether the birth of the future king and his probable sister were mediated by their mother’s magical powers. There is no simple answer to this question, but it appears that the propitiation of royal birth was one purpose of the rituals performed by the Yaxchilan ladies.

Tzahkaj K’awiil rituals were depicted on some of the site’s major monuments, including the renowned Lintel 25. While sometimes performed by males, most frequently they involved royal women who engaged in painful bloodletting. Male partners are sometimes present, but the serpents or centipedes are especially associated with the women. These rituals are commonly interpreted as related to the invocation of “vision serpents,” gods, or ancestors through ritual trance (Freidel et al. 1993: 207–208; Miller and Martin 2004: 100; Schele and Miller 1986: 177; Stuart 2005b: 277–281). Scholars have generally paid little attention to their sexual and genital connotations, pointed out by Stuart (1984: 19) and Stone

(1988: 77–78). Indeed, it seems that the acts of conjuring creatures that combined the attributes of serpents and centipedes—and the gods or human beings who were born from their maws—were closely related to the reproductive powers of royal ladies.

Commenting on these rituals, Stuart pointed out that “royal bloodletting was seen as a procreative act, metaphorically ‘giving birth’ to ancestors and other deities” (2005b: 273; cf. Stuart 1984). It appears that at Yaxchilan the act of giving birth was not just alluded to in a metaphorical way but also represented as a portent, in which the open maws of centipedes and serpents played the role of birth canals. Like the serpents on the Birth Vase, these creatures had intriguing affinities with the ladies’ genitals, and their coiling around their abdominal region on Lintels 13 and 14 was unlikely coincidental. An examination of visual and textual sources from other regions sheds light on the related themes of feminine sexuality, childbirth, and sorcery that are frequently associated with centipedes and serpents in Mesoamerica.

Centipedes and Serpents between the Legs

In sixteenth-century central Mexico centipedes and other small creatures living in the dirt were categorized as filth (*tlazolli*). Sullivan (1982: 18) noted that the word for centipede, *petlazolcoatl*, contained the stem *tlazol-*, “filth, rubbish.” She perceived a wordplay that referred both to the animal’s habits and to its association with sexual activity, categorized by the sixteenth-century Nahua as earthly and filthy (Sullivan 1982: 7; Burkhardt 1989: 88–89). This may explain the centipede’s close relation with the goddesses that Nicholson (1971) grouped in the Teteoinnan complex, broadly related to the earth, fecundity, sexuality, and maternity. The association of these lowly creatures with the female earth is masterfully illustrated in the underside of a stone basin that shows a feminine Tlaltecuhli, a personification of the earth with centipedes, serpents, and other stinging creatures populating her convoluted hair ([figure 8.6](#); Matos Moctezuma 1997).



Figure 8.6. Tlaltecuhlti/Tlalcihuatl with poisonous creatures in the hair. Underside of stone basin from Mexico City. Photo by Vladimir Korostishevskiy © [123RF.com](https://www.123RF.com).

Seler (1996: 334) noted the association of centipedes with Xochiquetzal, the young Mexica goddess of carnal love, fertility, childbirth, and the womanly crafts of spinning and weaving (Alcina Franch 1991; McCafferty and McCafferty 1999; Milbrath 2000; Nicholson 1971: 421–422). In mythical narratives she embodied seduction and the perils of sexual allure. According to Ruiz de Alarcón (1984: 204–205), she tempted the penitent Yappan, who was destined to become a scorpion that would kill all those he stung. After resisting other goddesses, Yappan succumbed to the call of Xochiquetzal, who climbed upon him, covered him with her huipil, and took his chastity. In punishment, he was beheaded and turned into a scorpion but was denied the capacity to kill. The myth illustrates the dire consequences that were frequently associated with sexual temptation, which in this case caused Yappan to fail in his abstinence and be punished. Sigal (2011: 170) noted that his actions were qualified with terms that referred to shame and ruin and interpreted Yappan's beheading as a metaphor for castration. The story also exemplifies the aggressive sexual behavior often attributed to young Mesoamerican goddesses who lured male partners into a fatal embrace. Those who did

not resist either died or failed in their heroic quests, although in some cases their actions led to major creational events (Graulich 1997: 52–59; 177–180).

While the myth of Yappan refers to the origin of scorpions, Xochiquetzal is more often associated with centipedes in sixteenth-century pictorial manuscripts (figure 8.7). The Tonalamatl Aubin shows her with a centipede crawling out between the legs of her seat. In the codices Borbonicus and Telleriano-Remensis she is seating on a bench with three animals. The first is a small, clawed mammal, possibly a coyote—an animal that is strongly associated with sexual instincts (Seler 1996: 193; Olivier 1999). The second animal is a serpent coming out under the goddess's legs, and the third is a centipede that emerges between the legs of her seat, together with three colorful, twisted ropes in the Borbonicus.



Figure 8.7. The goddess Xochiquetzal with centipedes crawling under her seat. (a) Detail of Codex Borbonicus, page 19; (b) Detail of the Tonalamatl Aubin, page 19. Drawings by Oswaldo Chinchilla.

Twisted ropes are symbolic of childbirth throughout Mesoamerica, and they reappear in the Borbonicus (p. 18) under the seat of Chantico, a related goddess associated with the hearth and the house. Serpents also emerge between the legs of the seats of both Chantico and Tlazolteotl in the Tonalamatl Aubin (pp. 13 and 18). A much earlier precedent for these representations appears in the Late Classic Monument 21 from Bilbao, Cotzumalhuapa, which shows an old goddess with twisted ropes under her seat and a serpent between her legs (figure 8.8; Chinchilla Mazariegos 2015).



Figure 8.8. Old goddess with a serpent between her legs and cords under her seat; detail of Monument 21 from Bilbao, Cotzumalhuapa. Drawing by Oswaldo Chinchilla.

I suspect that the space between the legs of their seats was especially associated with the goddesses' sexuality and procreative power, and perhaps more specifically with their genitals. The correspondence is apparent in representations of the water goddess Chalchiuhtlicue. In Codex Borbonicus (p. 5) and Codex Vaticanus B (p. 53) a stream of water springs between the legs of her seat. The corresponding scene in Codex Borgia (p. 65) shows a stream flowing from behind or underneath her skirt and legs; in the Codex Telleriano-Remensis (fol. 11v) and the Tonalamatl Aubin (p. 7) water springs between her legs. Miller and Taube (1993: 60) suggested a role for Chalchiuhtlicue as goddess of childbirth, indicated by the infants carried by the stream coming from her body. While she is not commonly associated with centipedes, Seler (1901–1902: 136) noted a parallel with the goddess represented in Codex Fejérváry-Mayer (p. 27), who stands on a stream of water while a centipede swims along ([figure 8.9](#)).



Figure 8.9. A possible portrait of Chalchiuhtlicue, standing in water with a centipede; detail from Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, page 27. Drawing by Oswaldo Chinchilla.

Another goddess that related to poisonous creatures was Tlazolteotl, who also had strong ties with sexuality and was portrayed giving birth in the Borbonicus with a serpent and a centipede entwined at her side ([figure 8.10](#)). Her portrait in Codex Laud shows the head of Ehecatl emerging from the mouth of a serpent that winds between her legs ([figure 8.11a](#)). Considering the analogy with Classic Maya imagery, there is reason to ask whether the scene refers the wind god's birth. In the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer the goddess has serpents coiling around her and passing by her mouth and between her legs ([figure 8.11b](#)).



Figure 8.10. Tlazolteotl giving birth with entwined serpent and centipede next to her; detail of Codex Borbonicus, page 13. Drawing by Oswaldo Chinchilla.



Figure 8.11. Tlazolteotl with serpents passing between the legs. (a) Detail of Codex Laud, page 39. (b) Detail of Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, page 4. Drawings by Oswaldo Chinchilla.

Representations of goddesses and mythical females with serpents between the legs are relatively frequent in highland Mexico. These include the female *tzitzimitl* monsters, portrayed in the Codex Magliabechiano with a rattlesnake between the legs (fol. 76r). Serpents also crawl down between the legs of the colossal statues from the Great Temple Precinct of Mexico, known as Coatlicue and Yollotlicue, which were identified as *tzitzimime* by Boone (1999) and López Luján (2012: 223–226). Following an original insight of Miller (1986), Graulich (1991: 391) explained the serpent winding between Coatlicue’s legs as menstrual blood. López Luján (2012: 194) agreed that it embodies blood, possibly resulting from childbirth or from the wounds of her severed legs.

In the mythical narratives described below, serpents, centipedes, and other poisonous creatures are indeed associated with menstrual blood. However, the serpent’s sexual connotations may be even more concrete, as they may embody the goddesses’ genital organs. In previous work I identified Preclassic and Early Classic representations of mythical characters that were believed to possess toothed vaginas in Maya art. Specifically, mythical

birds at Izapa and Copan exhibit toothed vaginas shaped as serpentine heads. Serpentine vaginas are present in narratives compiled among the Zoque and Mixtec (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2010a, 2011b; Báez-Jorge 1990, 2008; Monaghan 1995: 145). The serpent between Coatlicue's legs may represent her toothed vagina, signaling the threatening sexuality of a *tzitzimitl*. Similar explanations may apply to the serpents and centipedes that emerge between the legs of Tlazolteotl, Xochiquetzal, and other goddesses in the codices (or between the legs of their seats).

This interpretation does not exclude the serpents' links with menstrual blood. In contemporary myths from Oaxaca and Guerrero the origin of menstrual bleeding resulted from the defeat of primeval beings that possessed a toothed vagina. Multiple narratives compiled among the Mixtec, Zapotec, Chatino, Trique, and Tlapanec describe an old woman who opposed the young heroes that would become the sun and the moon. They induced her to sleep and abandoned her, but not without first raping her and, according to some versions, removing her vaginal teeth and causing her to bleed. This was the origin of sexuality, menstruation, and reproduction (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2011b: 94–95).

An ancient version of this episode is found in the story of Malinalxoch, Huitzilopochtli's evil sister who opposed him in some versions of the Mexica migration story. She was a sorcerer with the power to summon all kinds of spiders and centipedes. According to Alvarado Tezozomoc (2001: 56), she ate people's hearts and calves, and her sight caused people to die. Realizing her evil, Huitzilopochtli abandoned her while asleep (Anderson and Schroeder 1997, 1: 79; Durán 1984, 2: 31). The extant accounts do not mention sexual abuse, but Malinalxoch's story nevertheless parallels the modern myths in which the old woman was raped while asleep and then abandoned by the solar and lunar heroes. Huitzilopochtli's sister fits well with other formidable females whose aggressive sexuality had to be subdued in Mesoamerican myths (Graulich 1992, 1997: 177–180).

Another notable sorcerer was Ozomatzin Teuhctli, lord of Quauhnahuac (Cuernavaca), who employed his powers to guard the chastity of his daughter. According to the *Historia Mexicayotl*, "he summoned all manner of spiders, centipedes, snakes, bats, and scorpions; he commanded them all to guard his daughter, Miyahuaxihuitl, for she was most admirable, so that no one would intrude, no wicked one would dishonor her where she was confined" (Anderson and Schroeder 1997, 1: 121). Following the advice of the god Yohualli—an aspect of Tezcatlipoca—the Mexica king Huitzilihuitl shot an arrow into Miyahuaxihuitl's courtyard, loaded with a greenstone that impregnated her. Thus, he acquired the abundance of the land of Quauhnahuac, especially cotton, a product that was closely associated with femininity in Mesoamerica.

In this narrative the power over stinging creatures belonged to the father, but it is no accident that he used them to guard his daughter's sexuality. In fact, Ozomatzin Teuhctli's sorcery may help to explain the association of centipedes with Xochiquetzal. The goddess parallels Miyahuaxihuitl in various ways, and their stories reiterate themes from widespread Mesoamerican myths that recount the conquest of a tightly guarded maiden by a hero through magical transformation (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2010b). According to the sixteenth-century Tlaxcalan writer Diego Muñoz Camargo (Acuña 1984: 202–203), Xochiquetzal was secluded

in a bountiful garden at Tamoanchan, a mythical place of abundance that some sources located at Quauhnahuac (López Austin 1994: 46–47, 71). No men could approach her until Tezcatlipoca stole her from Tlaloc, her husband. By comparison with other versions, I have suggested that Muñoz Camargo transposed the role of the earth owner, who is normally the maiden's father, to that of her husband (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2010b: 56). From this perspective, the centipedes and serpents associated with Xochiquetzal and other goddesses in the codices acquire a new meaning—as menacing threats for potential suitors. Just like the dreary creatures that defended the entrances of Miyahuaxihuitl's palace, they guarded the goddesses' seats in the codices and, by implication, their sexuality.

Despite her fair appearance, Xochiquetzal belongs with the horrid females that were believed to possess toothed vaginas. As noted above, her aggressive sexuality is related to symbolic castration in the Yappan myth. According to the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas* (Tena 2002: 39), she was the first woman who died in war. This brings her close to the *mocihuaquetzque*, the deified women who died in childbirth, who were regarded as the equals of warriors who died in the battlefield, and who were believed to escort the setting sun in the western sky (Johansson 2006; Klein 2000). In the Vaticanus B and Borgia codices, these beings were portrayed with centipedes and serpents in the mouth. An illustration in Codex Borgia (p. 47) shows the birth of a *mocihuaquetzqui* from a jewel placed between a pair of bowls placed lip to lip (Byland 1993: xxvi–xxvii). Centipedes, serpents, and spiders crawl out as the bowls come apart. Pohl (2007: 28–31) pointed out a parallel in modern narratives from highland Guatemala that describe the origin of poisonous creatures as a result of sexual transgression. Indeed, narratives compiled in widely distant Mesoamerican communities associate the origin of centipedes and other poisonous creatures with the western realm of the night, the earth, the moon, and femininity.

The Origin of Stinging Creatures

In the cosmic diagram of Codex Fejérváry-Mayer (p. 1), west is the direction of the goddesses (figure 8.12). Chalchiuhtlicue and Tlazolteotl stand on either side of a spiny tree that grows from a moon sign at the base. This is also the direction of stinging creatures, as suggested by the composite being that upholds the moon sign, seemingly merging with it. It has the face of a spider, scorpion, or centipede—largely indistinguishable from each other—combined with extremities that may belong to some other animal, since arthropods' legs are normally segmented and provided with pincers instead of claws. Its identity is uncertain, but it is clearly a stinger.

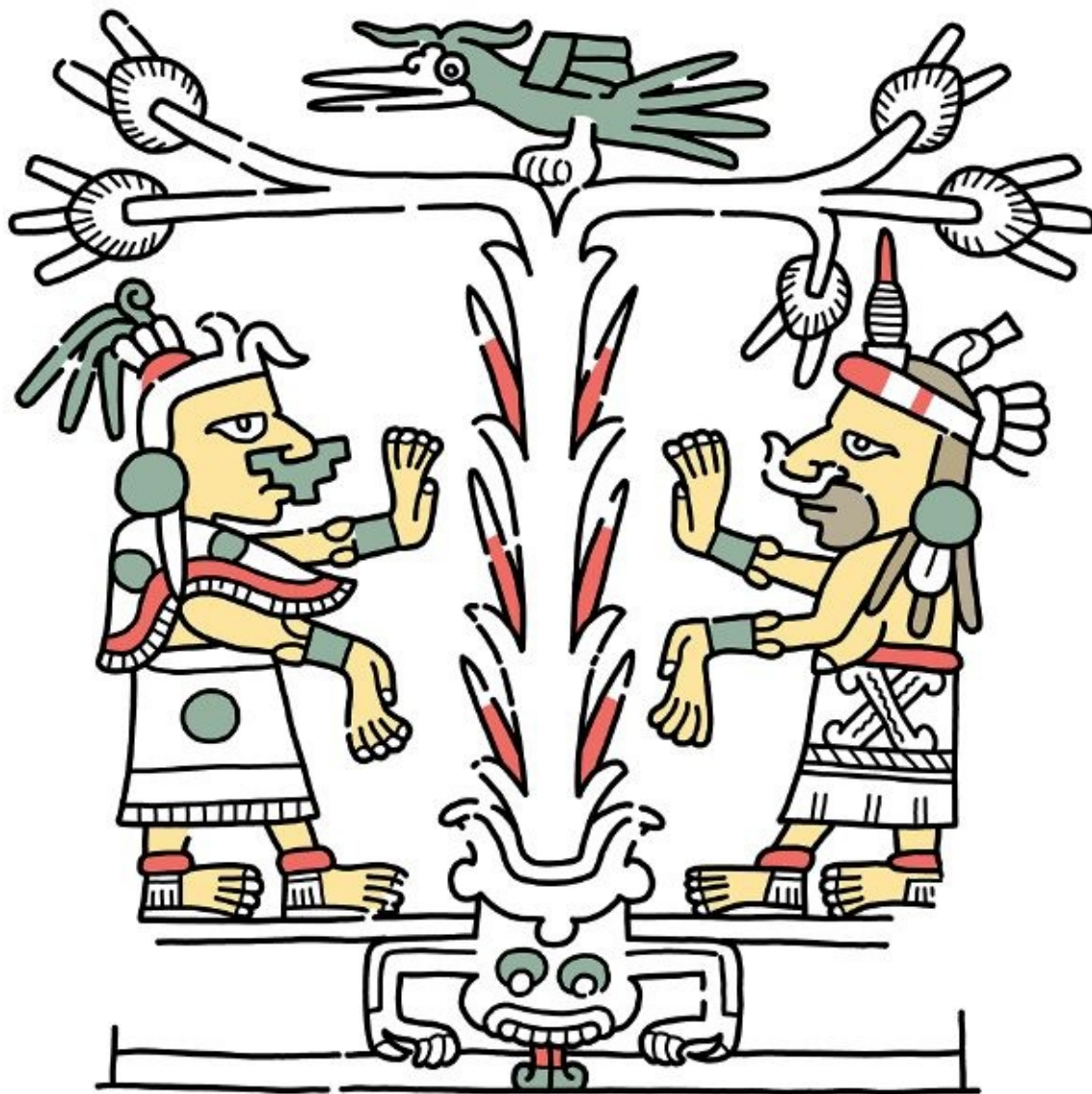


Figure 8.12. Detail showing the western side of the cosmic diagram from Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, page 1. Drawing by Oswaldo Chinchilla.

The association of thorny plants, stinging creatures, and women reappears in a modern Nahua myth from Chicontepec, Veracruz, which tells how a *tzitzimil* woman died and was buried in a remote ravine at a place called Cipactla, which according to the narrator meant “place of monsters.” Spines, nettles, and poisonous herbs grew from her dead body, while serpents, scorpions, wasps, and ants were born when it decomposed (Oropeza Escobar 2007: 184–185). In multiple stories from the Gulf Coast (e.g., Blanco Rosas 2006: 71–72; Van ’t Hooft and Cerda Zepeda 2003: 52–53), biting creatures such as wasps and horseflies originated from the ashes of the old woman who raised the maize hero but later wanted to kill him. He was able to outwit her and burned her in a field or in a sweatbath—a facility that is strongly associated with feminine sexuality and childbirth (Alcina Franch 2000: 164–214; Chinchilla Mazariegos 2017: 107–110; Groark 1997: 33).

Myths recorded in western Mexico and the Maya area explain how stinging creatures originated as a consequence of sexual intercourse, and in some versions they were born from women’s genitals. Konrad T. Preuss recorded a Cora narrative about the competition between

the brothers Hatsikan, the morning star, and Sautari, the evening star. Hatsikan, the younger, ran to the north, west, and south. He rejected the flowers of Texkame, the goddess of the earth and the moon, who lived in the West. Sautari ran south and then west. Once there, he ignored his brother's warnings about the dangers of that place. When a girl touched him and asked him to stay, Sautari accepted her offer and slept with her. "She seduced him, she took his flower. Then she let go scorpions, centipedes, spiders, and tarantulas, which will remain. They would not exist if our older brother, Sautari, hadn't lost" (cited in Neurath and Gutiérrez 2003: 311–312, English translation by the author).

While the narrative makes no unambiguous statement, it appears that the stinging creatures came out of the girl's genitals after sexual intercourse. They seem to embody the filth resulting from sexual pollution. There are echoes of the Yappan myth, which explained the origin of scorpions as the result of a hero's failure to remain abstinent. In fact, Sautari's fate seems to be sealed from the beginning, when his brother took a counterclockwise path, generally associated with the sun, while he took the opposite path that led him to the West, the region of the night, the moon, and femininity. Sexual transgression and the filth that it generated were concomitant with his downfall, which nevertheless also amounted to a creative act that brought fertility and rain (Neurath 2002, 2004).

According to a Maya narrative from Izamal, Yucatan (Monotoliú Villar 1990), poisonous creatures resulted when a young man who was looking for a wife found a woman catching fish by the sea. The couple fished together and ate the fish. Later they slept together by a flowering tree and ate avocados from another tree. María Montoliú Villar (1990: 86–87) pointed out that all these actions hint of sexual transgression rather than lawful marriage. Echoing a widespread Mesoamerican metaphor for impregnation, the woman placed inside her clothes two feathers from a hummingbird that the man tried to catch for her. Their misconduct was not inconsequential. A thunderstorm started, and they had to dive under the sea to avoid getting struck by lightning. Then they heard noise inside a stone-filled hole. All kinds of poisonous animals came out when the woman opened the hole, bringing plagues and sickness to the world. The birth of poisonous creatures from a hole in the ground, rather than from the woman's body, recalls the babies of the Birth Vase, coming to life from the maws of serpents that emerged from a mountain rather than from the parturient woman herself. Both reflect the pervasive assimilation of female bodies with the earth.

The mythical origin of stinging creatures was also recalled in the Chant for the Afterbirth, a Yucatec Maya therapeutic text from the *Ritual of the Bacabs* (Knowlton and Dzidz Yam 2019: 732–738). By performing the chant, the curer provoked the violent expulsion of stinging creatures—seven varieties of wasps—from the body of a pregnant woman who is enduring biting pain and excessive heat (*kinam*, a vital force and a kind of pain that may result from exposure to sexual activity and from pregnancy; Knowlton and Dzidz Yam 2019: 726). The woman was designated in the chant as *tzilil*, a term that appears in the *Diccionario de Motul* with the gloss "that which is unwoven, is torn, or for a woman to be corrupted" (spelled *tzijil*; Ciudad Real 2001: 165). Conceivably, the noxious pregnancy was believed to originate from sexual misbehavior, as in the Izamal myth.

More explicit, a Mopan story identifies poisonous creatures as the Devil's offspring. They

were the fruits of his wicked union with the moon, who had run away from her husband, the sun. After several incidents, the sun got her back, but she was pregnant. The sun kicked her belly, and she gave birth to many kinds of vermin: snakes, toads, lizards, and scorpions (Shaw 1971: 178).

In Q'eqchi' sun and moon myths, poisonous creatures did not originate from the moon's body but from her blood. Numerous versions describe how the sun employed a magic transformation to approach the moon, and the couple's flight from her aggravated father, who sent lightning to strike them down (paralleling the thunderstorm that caused the couple to go underwater in the Izamal myth). According to a detailed version narrated by Juan Caal more than a century ago, B'alamq'e, the sun, hid in a turtleshell and went under the sea; Po, the moon, hid in an armadillo shell and was torn to pieces (Estrada Monroy 1990; Kockelman 2007). The next day, with the help of dragonflies, B'alamq'e collected her remains, especially her blood, which floated on the water, and stored it in thirteen jars that he left in charge of an old woman. When he came back after thirteen days, something inside the jars was rattling and banging. In the first jar he found biting snakes. In the second there were salamanders, lizards, chameleons, and other nasty animals. The rest contained many kinds of wasps, bees, spiders, scorpions, and worms. Finally, Po was reborn from the thirteenth jar. There is no mention of centipedes in this or other known versions (Braakhuis 2010: 382–383), although they clearly belong with the stinging and biting creatures generated from Po's remains.

In his detailed analysis of the myth, Braakhuis (2005, 2010: 185–196) highlighted the attention conceded to Po's blood, and concluded that it referred to menstrual blood. This is explicit in a version from San Pedro Carchá, obtained by Carlos Cabarrús (Avila 1977: 21–24). The narrator explained that the sun's search for the moon's blood originated menstruation, and added that menstruating women should alert their husbands so that they abstain from having sex. Otherwise, the women can “steal” their husbands—referring to soul loss leading to illness. In Mesoamerica menstrual blood is widely regarded as a powerful and noxious substance that can bring disease and is especially harmful for men (López Hernández 2011; Paul 1974). The myth links the origin of menstruation with the origin of disease and its carriers, stinging and poisonous creatures. As explained by Braakhuis (2005), those creatures and their venoms are the domain of healers and sorcerers who are believed to control them and use them both to provoke and cure sickness.

In Caal's narrative, the lovers' flight is equated with sunset: “Already far are Lord B'alamq'e accompanied by Po. Already it has become evening. Already they have arrived at the edge of the sea.” The strike of lightning marks the onset of the night: “. . . the sun was extinguished. Darkness lowered on the earth” (Kockelman 2007: 368, 370). Although the direction of the lovers' flight is not mentioned, the references to sunset suggest that they were going west. The old woman living by the seashore who kept the jars that contained Po's blood may also allude to the western domain of the goddesses, the region of darkness and femininity, an appropriate location for the birth of stinging creatures.

Final Thoughts

Centipedes, serpents, and other poisonous creatures are consistently associated with feminine sexuality and childbirth in ancient and modern Mesoamerica. The Classic Maya portrayed them as birth canals for gods and rulers; the sixteenth-century Nahua associated them with goddesses who held sway over women's sexuality, fertility, and reproduction; modern myths recount how they resulted from unrestrained sexuality and were born from the bodies of mythical females. But the paradox that I raised at the beginning of this chapter still stands. How do the blissful values of childbirth relate with the dark connotations of poisonous creatures, which are generally associated with sorcery, sexual transgressions, abnormal pregnancies, and abortive deliveries? Why was the birth of a royal heir at Yaxchilan portrayed with the child emerging from the gaping mouth of a centipede?

The paradox relates to ambivalent views of sexuality that pervade Mesoamerica. While acknowledged as gratifying to the body and necessary for reproduction, sexual intercourse is also regarded as dangerous and polluting, potentially conducive to sickness (Taggart 2001). In a study of courtship and marriage at Zinacantán, Chiapas, Laughlin noted: “[W]hile sex is natural and inevitable, it is enveloped in shame, smacking of the bestial, perhaps basically evil” (1962: 140). The modern Ch’orti’ equate semen with blood, and the loss of semen during coitus with the loss of blood, which weakens the body and causes the blood to thin. In the past men were reported to rest for seven days after coitus, attended by their wives (López García 2002, 2: 98–99, citing information from Girard 1949). Sixteenth-century Nahua texts contain repeated admonitions to young men against the dangers of premature or excessive sexual activity, which López Austin (1988: 221–222) linked with the belief that the *tonalli* (a primary animistic force) left the body during coitus, potentially leading to illness and death. Sexual activity was also said to cover the *tonalli* with filth (*tlazolli*), a concept that applied to all sorts of deteriorated and unconnected things, such as rags, potsherds, dust, mud, or bodily excretions and also to the creatures that live down in the dirt, including insects, lizards, toads, and centipedes (Burkhart 1989: 88).

Menstrual blood is generally regarded as a polluting, powerful substance that can bring harm and illness. Menstruating women are feared as especially “hot” and dangerous (López Hernández 2011; Paul 1974). In a perceptive study Andrea Stone (2011: 173–176) explained the power of the feminine body in terms of the fluctuating amounts of heat and cold that it has at different stages in life. Women are commonly regarded as colder than men, but they are believed to accumulate heat during menstrual periods and especially during pregnancy, when they become especially strong and dangerous for men.

Similar concepts apply to childbirth and the blood associated with it. Describing childbirth in a modern Teenek community, Ariel de Vidas (2008: 184) noted the excess of pollution produced when women recover from their “illness”—a term commonly applied to pregnancy in Mesoamerica. Both the parturient and the midwife are conceived as being in a liminal, nonsocial space from which they must recover during a week of confinement. At the end of this period, “the midwife sweeps the house’s interior with purging herbs in order to flush the dirt from the domestic space and return it to the wild space . . .” In a study of childbirth among the Maya, Nájera Coronado (2000: 214–216) noted the widespread belief that women

remained in an “impure” state after giving birth. Durán (1984, 1: 251) described purification rituals performed during the Mexica feast of Huey Tozoztli for women who had had given birth during the year.

The links of menstruation and childbirth with filth and pollution cast feminine sexuality in rather dark tones, but they also grant women a quota of power over men. The magical power of menstrual blood is especially apparent in Lois Paul’s study of feminine sexuality in the Tz’utujil town of San Pedro la Laguna, where women were believed to employ menstrual blood to bewitch and emasculate men. “Men, so women say, think that any woman who menstruates is a witch . . . women know that menstrual blood is one of their own ultimate weapons against intractable husbands” (Paul 1974: 298).

The Yaxchilan royal women were portrayed as capable of summoning and handling composite creatures with centipede and serpent attributes. The power to handle such fearful, biting, and poisonous creatures was likely related to the ladies’ magical powers, analogous with those of the sorcerers and healers of early colonial and modern beliefs. The comparison with ethnographic accounts suggests that those creatures were intimately related with the ladies’ sexuality and the filth generated by menstruation, sexual intercourse, and childbirth. But the carvings show the Yaxchilan women as capable of controlling those creatures and summoning them to deliver children through their hideous maws. As conduits for the portentous birth of royal offspring, those beings seem to embody the genital organs of these powerful women, who are shown to be capable of magical control over the agents of sickness and death.

Centipedes are appropriate embodiments of the complex, ambivalent concepts associated with feminine sexuality and childbirth in Mesoamerica. Lowly beings associated with filth and pollution, they are nevertheless identified with the power and mystery of sex and procreation and are portrayed as the canals through which rulers and deities were born in glory.

Author’s Note

I thank Jeremy Coltman and John Pohl for inviting me to contribute to this volume. Their effort to keep regular communication with the authors made this book project a superb example of collaboration, raising interesting points of discussion and significantly improving the final product. I also thank Guilhem Olivier and Erik Velásquez García for their valuable comments to earlier versions of this chapter.

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“The Devil Incarnate”

A Comparative Perspective on “Deer-Serpents” in Mesoamerican Beliefs and Ritual Practices

Jesper Nielsen

Introduction

In 2008, I was fortunate enough to spend a few days in the quiet, isolated, Nahuatl-speaking village of Coatepec Costales in the northeastern part of Guerrero. Whereas the main reason for the visit was to take part in a great fiesta, one early afternoon I was accompanied to the top of the mountain above the village by Beto, one of the locals. We were searching for some pre-Columbian ruins that had been previously reported in the area. Disappointed from not finding anything, we paused and sat down looking over the impressive landscape, range after range of green hills—no other villages in sight. I then asked Beto if there were any caves nearby, and he immediately responded: “Yes, there are many caves, but we never go near them.” A little surprised by his answer, I inquired further how this could be and whether it was because one could meet the *mazacoatl* (*masaakoowaatl*) in those caves. Beto stared back at me with a stern face, looking genuinely worried: “Why do you know that name?” Explaining my interest in the culture and stories of the area, he continued: “We do not use that name anymore; we only call it the Devil. It lives in the caves, and if anyone gets too close to it, it will take you and kill you.”

In other Nahuatl-speaking areas of present-day Mesoamerica, *mazacoatl* (“deer-serpent”) is simply the name of a large snake, typically a boa constrictor, and it is seen as a sign of abundance and rich harvests; to have such snakes near one’s field or *milpa* is considered a good thing, as they are known to eat numerous pests (see Alcántara Rojas 2005: 391; Martínez González and Viñas 2007: 140). In one tale from San Miguel Tzinacapan (Puebla), a friendly boa (*masakouat*) is associated with a magic golden ring that produces money (see de los Santos Castañeda et al. 2009: 386–441). These two very different meanings attributed to the “deer-serpent” may at first glance appear to be incompatible and self-contradictory, but as we shall see, the ambivalent nature of this particular supernatural entity, as well as many of the best-known Mesoamerican deities, did in fact have what we would normally characterize as positive as well as negative aspects. Thus, major Mexican deities such as Tlaloc (Tlaalok), Quetzalcoatl (Ketzalkoowaatl), and Xipe Totec (Xipe Toteek) were both benevolent and malevolent—not only curing diseases but also inflicting them. The ambiguous or double roles of important Mesoamerican deities and supernaturals are rarely

emphasized, but would in fact seem to be common characteristic shared by several supernatural entities (see Andrews and Hassig 1984: 34–35; Sandstrom and Sandstrom n.d.; Nielsen and Helmke 2011: 359). In this chapter I seek to provide a diachronic survey of the meaning and importance of “deer-serpents” and horned serpents in general in Mesoamerica, spanning the pre-Columbian era to the present, as well as a brief synthesis of current knowledge of horned and antlered serpents in North America. I do not claim to have identified all sources and studies describing these strange creatures, and there are undoubtedly several additional examples to be found in the extensive ethnographic literature. Instead, the main purpose of this survey is to demonstrate how widespread and similar the beliefs in these serpent beings are across the North American continent, including Mesoamerica.

Scholars have long noted the importance of the belief in horned or antlered serpents, just as they have pointed out how widespread it is among Amerindian cultures (e.g., Brinton 1896; Barbeau 1952; Blust 2000; Phillips et al. 2006: 20; Martínez González and Viñas 2007; Helmke and Nielsen 2009: 78–80; Nielsen and Helmke 2011: 355–357). Some investigators rightly state that we should not automatically assume that all examples recorded across time and space refer to the exact same entity, nor that all representations were imbued with identical meanings. As noted by Christine and Todd VanPool (2007: 120): “The historical connection between prehistoric and historic horned plumed serpent traditions provides some justification for using ethnographic analogies for understanding prehistoric horned/plumed serpents, but the presence of different traditions and the changes in horned/plumed serpent iconography indicates that periods of cultural upheaval and migration may have caused significant changes in the meaning of these serpents.” While changes may indeed (but need not) have occurred, it is nevertheless striking how similar the features and associations attributed to these beings are in the ethnographic reports from the northeastern coast of North America to the southernmost parts of the Maya-speaking area of Guatemala and Honduras. Thus, I will hold that there is sufficient evidence to suggest that we are essentially dealing with the same supernatural entity. Discussing some of the same questions, Polly Schaafsma and Karl Taube (2006: 268) make the following remark in their detailed study of rain rituals in the American Southwest and Mesoamerica: “The Horned Serpent of the Southwest is a multifaceted supernatural being that functions with the rainmakers and shares many characteristics with serpent personages of Mexico, notably among them Quetzalcoatl, who brought maize from the Underworld.”

Schaafsma and Taube show how serpent entities in Mesoamerica and the Southwest serve as metaphors for lightning and rain, and in a separate work Schaafsma suggested that Quetzalcoatl, the “feathered serpent” of Mesoamerica, and the horned serpents of the American Southwest share numerous features and meanings (Schaafsma 2001; see also VanPool and VanPool 2007: 108).¹ Following this line of interpretation, most recent attempts to explain the cult of the horned and plumed serpent entities in the Southwest center either on the influence and diffusion of ideas from Mesoamerica or from the American Southeast to the Southwest (e.g., Di Peso et al. 1974: 548–549; Cobb et al. 1999; Phillips et al. 2006: 21). In contrast, the notion of a widespread Amerindian “basement” culture, as first suggested by Miguel Covarrubias, which would suggest that serpent entities with horns or antlers are a

shared feature with a long history, today seems less in favor among scholars (see discussion in Cobb et al. 1999: 79–181; Phillips et al. 2006: 20–22).

At this point, it is worth emphasizing two common features of Mesoamerican religions: (1) that we have good evidence of a number of distinct serpent beings in Mesoamerican beliefs, such as the feathered or plumed serpent, a war serpent, a maize serpent, a serpent-centipede creature, and a feminine water serpent associated with flowing water (e.g., Taube 1992, 1995, 2003; Boot 1999; Kettunen and Davis 2004; Helmke and Nielsen 2009: 65–68, 78–80; Stresser-Peán 2009: 473–774) and (2) that supernatural entities such as these seem to have had less strict and formal boundaries, as compared with the anthropomorphic gods and deities of other ancient cultures, and that some overlapping and sharing of features or attributes between deities and supernatural entities occurred. Thus, horned serpents can appear with feathers and/or wings, which may point to some shared features with Quetzalcoatl; yet Quetzalcoatl is never shown with horns or antlers. As already stated, in the present study I wish to focus on just one specific Mesoamerican serpent being, the “deer-serpent,” or *mazacoatl*, which is attested in the region from pre-Columbian times to the present. The previous dominant focus on major Mesoamerican serpent deities such as Quetzalcoatl has prevented, it would seem, scholars from fully recognizing that the horned or antlered serpent of North American mythology has a true counterpart in Mesoamerica that shares all diagnostic features with its northern variants. The serpent with antlers, or horns, thus seems to constitute a discrete creature with a deep history and wide distribution, and the compounding of the lexemes for “deer” and “snake” are known from a number of Mesoamerican languages, often designating large snakes, especially boa constrictors (Helmke 2008: 159–164; Helmke and Nielsen 2009: 78–80; Nielsen and Helmke 2011: 356–357). However, we know that to the Classic Maya the “deer-serpent” (*chij-ka’n*) was one of the feared *way* creatures of the underworld (Helmke and Nielsen 2009: 50–54, 80–82; see also below), and the story that opened this chapter indicates that deer-serpents now also have a darker, more sinister and dangerous side to them. The horned and antlered serpent may have its origin in specific species of snakes with horn-like protrusions on the head (e.g., *Crotalus cerastes* and *Bothriechis schlegelii*), as has been suggested by various scholars (see Dibble and Anderson 1963: 79; see also Taube 1995: 86). However, it is evident from the iconography as well as the myths and folktales that the mythological deer-serpent has long been considered anything but a specific, natural snake species, and I will argue that the horns or antlers and their symbolic meaning derive from the importance attributed to deer and other hoofed animals with horns.

In my view, the presence of the deer-serpent across the continent is not best explained as a result of diffusion from Mesoamerica. Rather, its wide distribution more likely points to an ancient heritage, carried with the first Paleoindian groups that arrived from the Old World. In fact, the horned or antlered serpents are also common in the beliefs and mythologies of the Asian continent, as I shall briefly describe in the conclusion to this chapter (see also Blust 2000: 520–521). Thus, I suggest that the horned or antlered serpent being, along with a selection of other mythological themes and features, form part of a core set of beliefs that are most probably part of an ancient substratum of religious thoughts and practices, very much along the lines of Covarrubias’s “basement” culture (see also work on comparative

mythology by Yuri Berezkin 1998, 2002). Roberto Martínez González and Ramón Viñas also point to these shared features between Mesoamerica and North America with regard to horned serpents, and their work gathers a number of valuable sources, some of which have also benefited the present study. The same authors suggest that the horned serpent is a symbolic union of the sky and the waters of the earth when they state that “cielo y agua terrestre aparecen simbólicamente unidos por la imagen de la serpiente cornuda” (Martínez González and Viñas 2007: 146). In a similar vein, Berenice Alcántara Rojas, based on a more narrow focus in colonial sources emphasizes that the deer-serpent was associated with the reproductive powers of the earth (Alcántara Rojas 2005: 391). From my point of view these interpretations only stress one aspect of an entity that was much more complex in nature. Thus, the data at hand rather uniformly shows that horned and antlered serpents were closely related to water, rain, wind, and violent meteorological and geological phenomena such as storms and landslides as well as disease and curing. Clearly, “deer-serpents” were entities with both benevolent as well as malevolent aspects (see also discussion in Hunt 1977: 170–171; Sandstrom and Sandstrom n.d.). In addition, in all areas the horn or antlers seem to have been attributed with special meaning and powers.

What readily becomes apparent in the ethnohistorical and ethnographic literature is that the deer-serpent soon after the conquest became associated with the Devil of the Christian tradition. This comes as little surprise considering that the characteristics of the deer-serpent or the horned serpent were shared with some of the most common representations of the Devil in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe, both in appearance and in many of its abilities, such as causing violent weather, geological disruptions, and being associated with pagan sorcery and witchcraft. I close this chapter with a discussion of this process, and how in many parts of Mesoamerica the once-polyvalent entity came to be understood as the devil incarnate, a view perhaps best expressed in the writings of the Franciscan friars Bernardino de Sahagún and Ioan Baptista at the end of the sixteenth century, beliefs still encountered in Mesoamerica.

Serpents with Horns or Antlers in Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica

Because I am specifically interested in understanding the meaning and distribution of “deer-serpents” and horned serpents in Mesoamerica, I begin this survey in the central Mexican highlands in the pre-Columbian period. It is from the heart of one of Mesoamerica’s greatest urban centers, the metropolis of Teotihuacan (ca. AD 150–650), situated northeast of Mexico City, that the first secure examples of the deer-serpent are found. As has been explained in depth elsewhere, the “deer-serpents” represented at Teotihuacan occur in a unique and fascinating context. Thus, the Plaza de los Glifos at the Conjunto de los Glifos (La Ventilla) is famous for its painted stucco floor, on which glyphic signs are placed in columns and in rows of up to seventeen glyphs (Nielsen and Helmke 2011; see also Cabrera Castro 1996). Among the glyphic compounds are two representations of snakes with deer antlers (Glyphs 9 and 11) ([figure 9.1](#)).

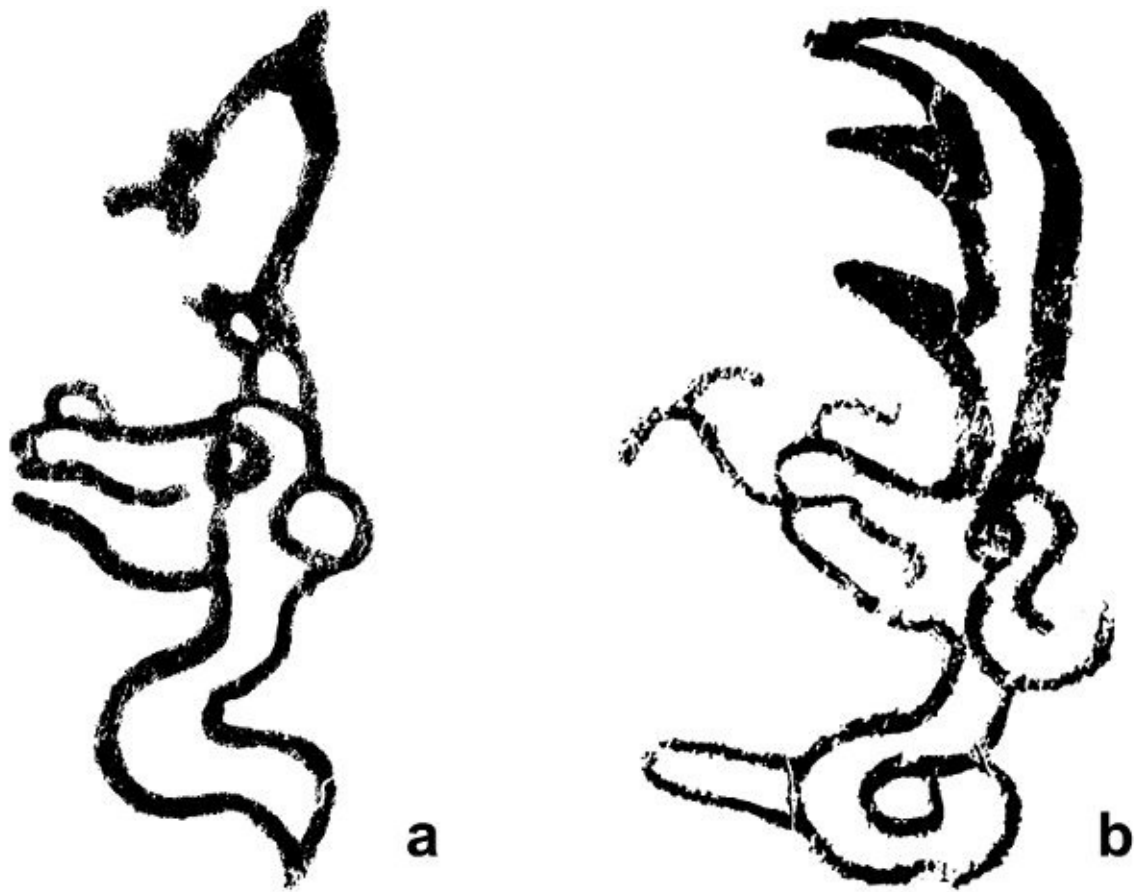


Figure 9.1. The two representations of “deer-serpents” from the Plaza de los Glifos (Conjunto de los Glifos, or Sector 2 of La Ventilla) at Teotihuacan: (a) Glyph 9; (b) Glyph 11. Dating to the Late Tlamimilolpa or Early Xolalpan phase (ca. AD 300–450), these are among the earliest depictions of this supernatural entity in Mesoamerica. Drawings by Christophe Helmke.

The majority of the forty-two glyphs of the floor has been interpreted as being related to disease-causing entities and curing rituals (Nielsen and Helmke 2011; for an earlier interpretation, see King and Gómez Chávez 2004). Although the unusual placement of the glyphs in rows on a horizontal surface is difficult to explain, this arrangement can be compared with the way in which spirit paper figures and offerings are laid out on the ground in present-day curing rituals among the Nahua and Otomí (Nielsen and Helmke 2011: 363; see also Sandstrom and Sandstrom 1986, this volume). Thus, this early occurrence suggest that “deer-serpents” were already an integrated part of Mesoamerican beliefs concerning illnesses and curing in the Early Classic.

In the time period following the demise of Teotihuacan, known as the Epiclassic period (ca. AD 650–950), we encounter a stunning representation of a horned serpent at the site of Teotenango (State of Mexico). There a large outcrop of bedrock at the northeastern corner of Structure 2D, one of the main temples of the site, was sculptured to represent the head of a serpent with a single, slightly curving horn on its forehead. Carlos Álvarez suggested that this is the Feathered Serpent (Álvarez 1983: 243–244), but the prominent single horn on the forehead leaves little doubt that this is in fact a horned serpent ([figure 9.2a](#)).

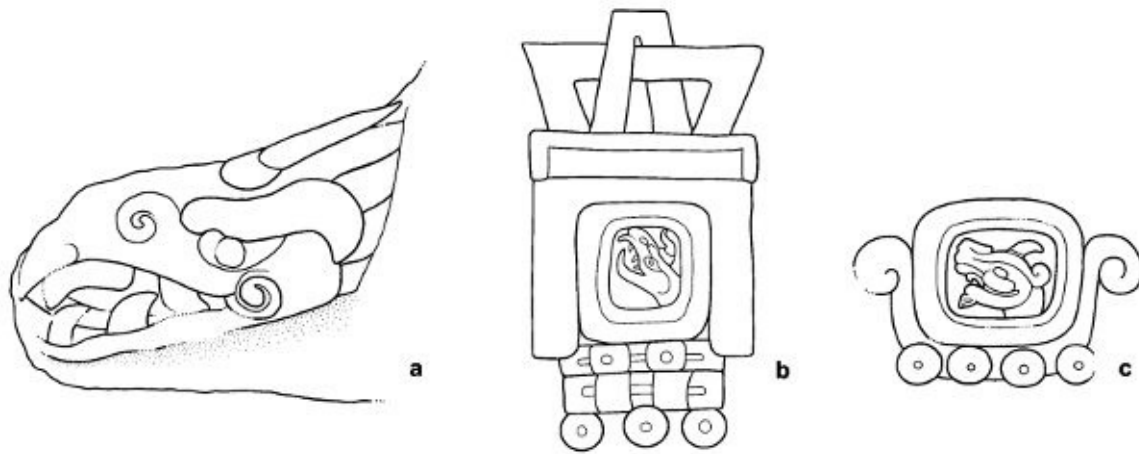


Figure 9.2. Horned serpents in central Mexican Epiclassic iconography and writing: (a) horned serpent carved on large outcrop of bedrock at the northeastern corner of Structure 2D at Teotenango; drawing by Jesper Nielsen; (b) the day sign 13 Serpent on Teotenango Stela 1; drawing by Christophe Helmke; (c) the date 4 Serpent on the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent, Xochicalco; drawing by Christophe Helmke.

It may be of significance that the serpent is carved on a natural outcrop, since many of the ethnographic accounts relate how the horned serpent either stayed close to a large rock or could move rocks with its horn or antlers (see below). It is possible that the temple was somehow associated with a myth centered on this creature. The sculpture can be compared to the magnificent sculptures of horned and plumed serpents from the Temple of the Warriors at the Terminal Classic Maya site of Chichen Itza (see below), but apart from this, it is a very rare example of a representation of this entity. In addition, as first observed by Christophe Helmke, a stela from Teotenango (Stela 1) displays an example of the calendrical day sign “serpent,” wherein the snake is shown with a curving horn with a bulbous base similar to that on the Structure 2D sculpture, once again suggesting that a specific serpent was probably intended (figure 9.2b). Worth noting here is that a horned serpent was also used in the day sign “serpent” at another major Epiclassic site in the western part of the central Mexican highlands, namely Xochicalco. On the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent the horned serpent appears with the coefficient “4,” its horn resembling those from Teotenango (see Helmke and Nielsen 2011: 21, fig. 12g) (figure 9.2c). These limited examples do not immediately suggest that the deer-serpent or the horned serpent was a common theme in the iconographic repertoire of western Mesoamerican elites in Classic and Epiclassic periods,² although the Epiclassic variant of the calendrical sign “serpent” could suggest that in some regions and in certain periods the entity became a relatively standardized and common motif. As we shall see, the “deer-snake” figures relatively often in the corpus of painted ceramic vessels of the contemporaneous Classic Maya.

Further to the north and west of the Basin of Mexico, rock paintings including a snake with curved horns have been found at the site of Banzha, Hidalgo (Martínez González and Viñas 2007: 137, fig. 10), just as representations of serpents with antlers are known from several rock art sites in Baja California in Mexico. In one particularly impressive case from the Cueva de la Serpiente the serpent is almost 4 meters long and surrounded by numerous small human-like figures (Rubio and del Castillo 2005: fig. 3; Martínez González et al. 2009). Presumably, additional examples yet to be documented are likely to exist in

northwestern Mexico, thus forming a more or less unbroken tradition of rock art representations of horned and antlered serpents stretching to the American Southwest (see below).

The Ancient Maya

Continuing our survey in eastern Mesoamerica, we find an early glyphic reference to a “deer-snake” on Stela 10 at the highland site of Kaminaljuyu, Guatemala. The impressive monument can be dated stylistically to between 50 BC–AD 100, and the glyphic compound (G6–H6) is presumably to be read *chij-ka’an*, “deer-snake” (figure 9.3a).

The spelling suggests that the text was rendered in proto-Ch’olan-Tzeltalan and provides an early form of the fifth day of the Tzolk’in calendar, known as Chikchan in sixteenth-century Yukatek Maya (see Nielsen and Helmke 2011: 356). As such, Kaminaljuyu and Teotihuacan would appear to be, based on present evidence, the earliest sites to exhibit clear evidence of the notion of “deer-snakes” and presumably their associated connotations and mythology.

For the Late Classic Maya (AD 550–850) we are fortunate to have several depictions of such *chij-ka’n*, “deer-snake,” in the iconography, some of which are accompanied by glyphic captions that confirm the identification. The glyphic captions reveal that these “deer-snakes” fall under the category of supernatural creatures known as *way*, a term derived from the widespread verb *way*, “to sleep, dream, transform by enchantment” (see Houston and Stuart 1989: 2–6; Grube and Nahm 1994: 686–687; Helmke and Nielsen 2009: 50–54) (figure 9.3b and c). As such, these *way* entities have generally been treated as analogous to the *naawalli* of the Aztecs in form, function, and meaning (Grube and Nahm 1994; Houston and Stuart 1989; López Austin 1988; Velázquez García 2009: 570–634). On the basis of additional linguistic entries for the relevant cognate forms in various lowland Maya languages, it is clear that these terms also designate “animal companion spirits” and make reference to “sorcery” as well as “contagion” and “infection” (see Helmke and Nielsen 2009: 54). In consequence, *wahy* entities such as the *chij-ka’n* are now viewed as malignant ailments that can be embodied as companion spirits in dreams and wielded against others to cause disease (Stuart 2005, this volume; Zender 2006). Helmke and Nielsen (2009) have identified a number of personified diseases in colonial Yukatek manuscripts (such as the *Ritual of the Bacabs* and the *Chilam Balam de Kaua*), including centipedes, deer, and an assortment of bird-like and other winged creatures that can cause attacks of seizures, asthma, and death.

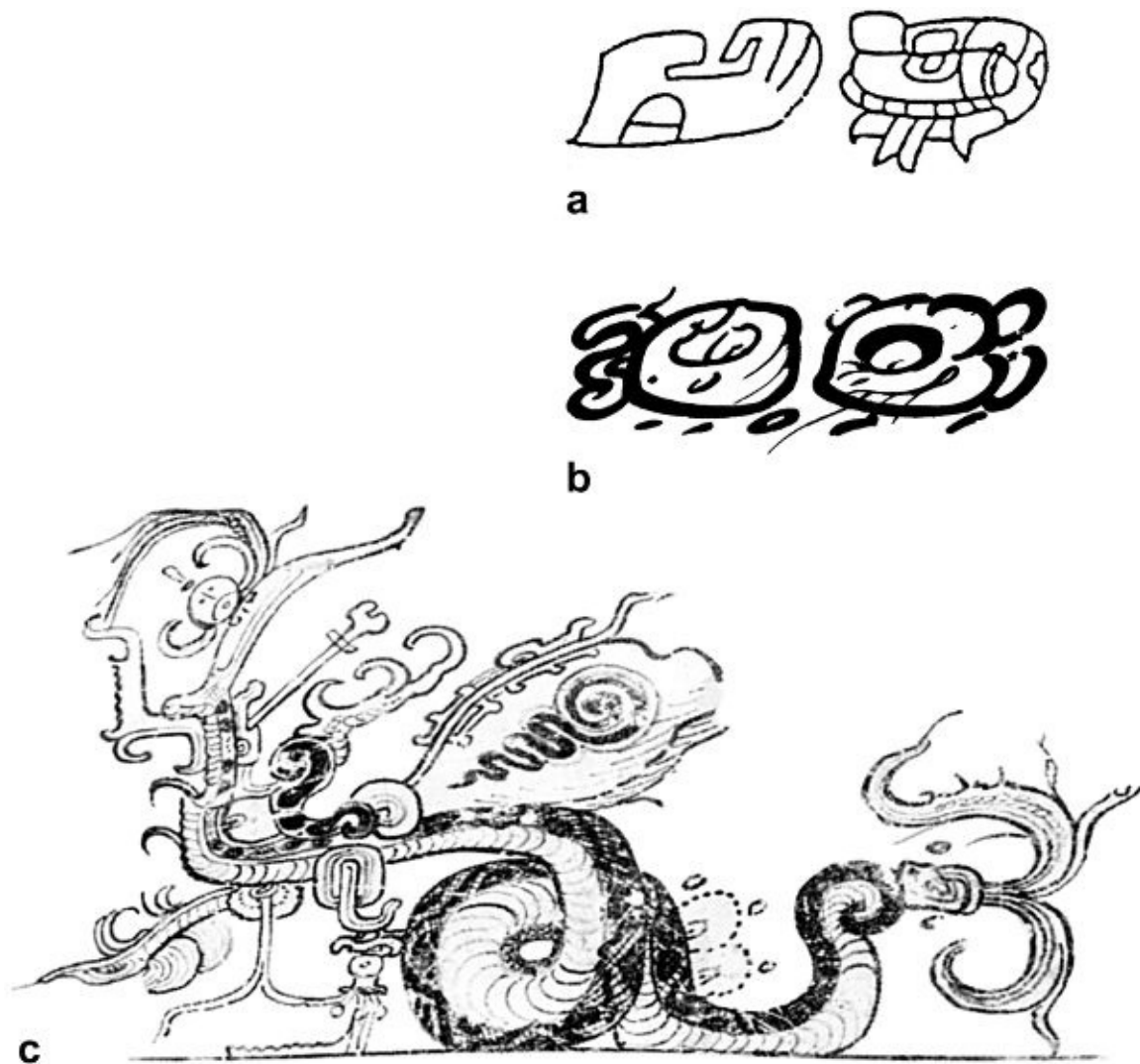


Figure 9.3. Horned serpents in Maya writing and iconography: (a) Late Preclassic glyphic reference to a *chij-ka'n*, “deer-snake,” on Kaminaljuyu Stela 10 (G6–H6); drawing by Stephen D. Houston; (b–c) *chij-k'an* on an unprovenanced Late Classic (ca. AD 650–750) codex-style drinking vessel, adapted from a photo © Justin Kerr, K0531; drawing of glyphs by Christophe Helmke.

Feathered serpents figure prominently in the iconography of the Early Postclassic site of Chichen Itza, but only in one case do we find serpents that also clearly display horns. These appear in the shape of finely sculptured serpent heads at the base of the central columns on the upper structure of the Temple of the Warriors, as first pointed out by Eric Thompson (1970: 264). They have two short, thick horns that seem to grow from the eyebrows of the serpents ([figure 9.4](#)).

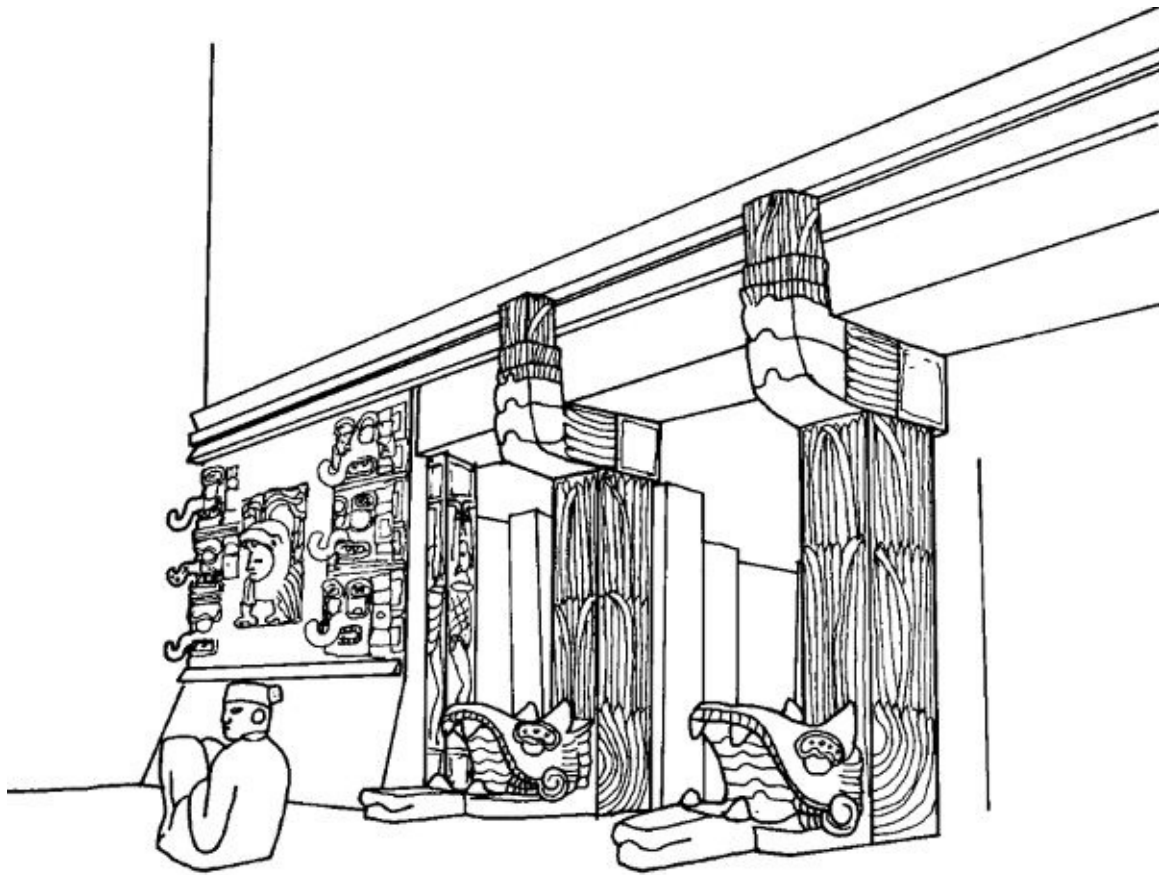


Figure 9.4. Sculptured serpent heads with horns growing from their eyebrows, Temple of the Warriors, Chichen Itza (ca. AD 1000–1250); drawing by Linda Schele, © courtesy Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.

It is remarkable that they seem to be more similar to the Epiclassic examples from central Mexico (Teotenango, Xochicalco) than the antlers of the “deer-serpents” of the Late Classic Maya, strongly suggesting that this particular version of the horned serpent appearing at Chichen Itza was part of the intense cultural contacts and exchanges between northern Yucatan and central Mexico in this time period. At present I have not been able to identify representations of antlered or horned serpents in the rich iconographic material from Oaxaca (e.g., Monte Alban and the Late Postclassic codices),³ Veracruz (e.g., El Tajin), or the Late Postclassic central Mexican cultures (e.g., the Mexica), but I suspect that they were also known in these regions of Mesoamerica in the pre-Columbian period since they figure so prominently in the myths and folktales recorded here in the colonial times as well as today.

Serpents with Horns or Antlers in Pre-Columbian North America

The importance of the horned serpents in the American Southwest has long been noted, but recent work by the VanPools and others (e.g., Cobb et al. 1999; Phillips et al. 2006; Schaafsma 2001, 2005; Schaafsma and Taube 2006) has contributed greatly to our understanding of the distribution and possible meanings of the horned serpents in the region. Thus, we have clear evidence that horned serpents formed part of Southwest mythology and religious beliefs at least as far back as the Mimbres Classic phase (AD 1000–1100). The

tradition may, however, extend much further back in time, possibly as far back as 1500 BC, as attested by rock paintings representing these creatures (Kokrda 2005: fig. 3; VanPool and VanPool 2007: 83). Horned serpent imagery is present in kiva murals, on painted ceramics, and in rock art among the Anasazi and Mogollon and other pueblo cultures from around AD 700 and into the historic period (see Schaafsma and Wisemann 1992; Schaafsma and Taube 2006; Phillips et al. 2006: 16–17) (figure 9.5a–c).

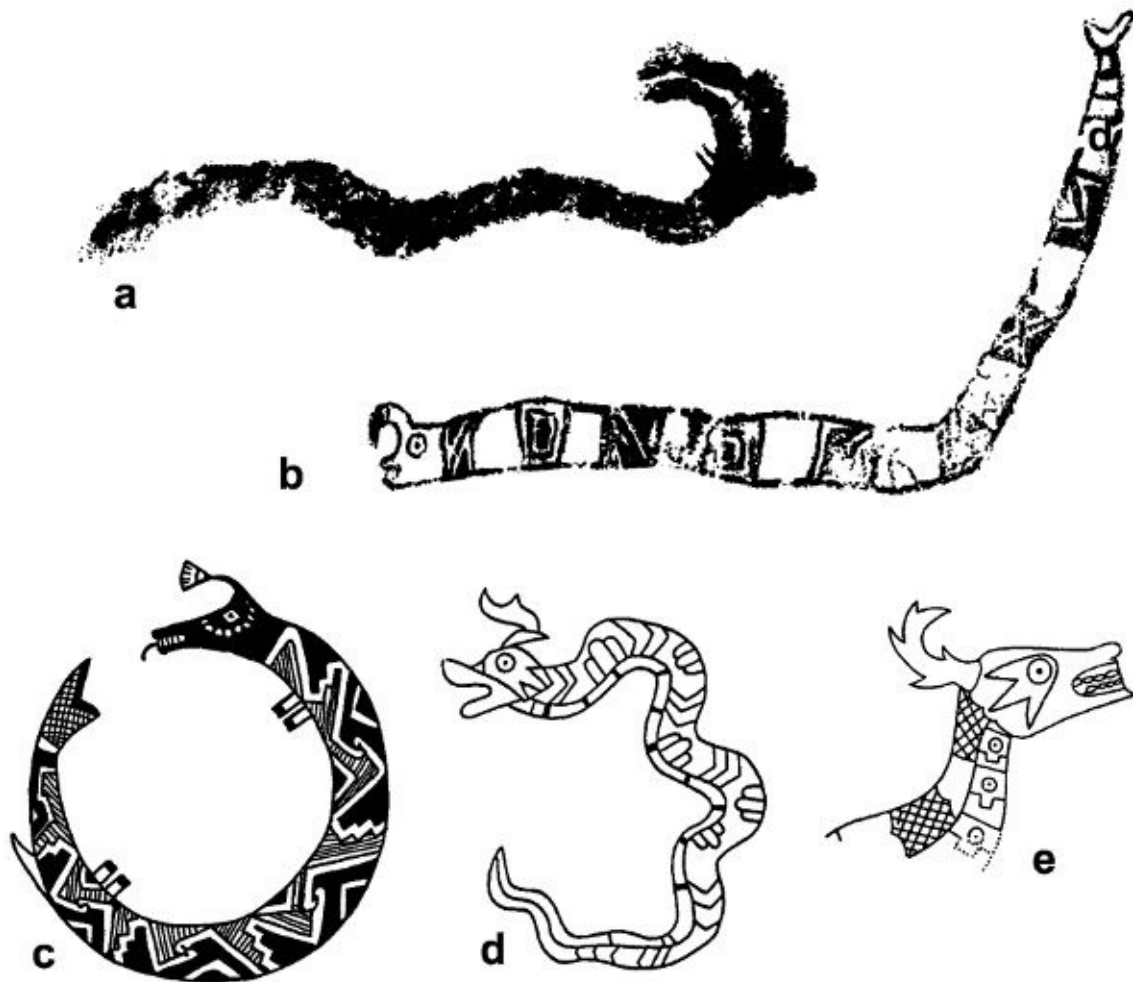


Figure 9.5. Examples of horned and antlered serpents in the American Southwest and Southeast: (a) Anasazi horned serpent pictograph from San Rafael Swell, Utah; drawing by Christophe Helmke; (b) rock painting of horned serpent in Paquime style from Picture Cave, New Mexico; drawing by Christophe Helmke based on a photo by Darrel Creel; (c) Mogollon culture, Mimbres, New Mexico (ca. AD 950–1150); adapted from Cobb et al. 1999: fig. 13.7b; (d, e) horned serpents rendered on Mississippian artifacts from Spiro, Oklahoma (ca. AD 1200–1450); adapted from Reilly 2007: fig. 3.2.; Brown 2007: fig. 4.6.

In the twelfth to fifteenth centuries horned serpents occur frequently in the iconography of Casas Grandes (Paquime) in the present-day state of Chihuahua in northern Mexico. Thus, the Mound of the Serpent, more than 150 m in length and in the shape of a horned serpent, was constructed possibly to divert water around the center of the pueblo. Associated with the mound archaeologists also discovered an incised image of a plumed or horned serpent (Di Peso et al. 1974: 477–478; VanPool and VanPool 2007: 30). If the interpretation proposed by Charles Di Peso and his colleagues is correct, it would resonate well with the widespread

associations of horned serpents with the flow of water and topographic features (see below). Horned serpents appear frequently in the Paquime rock art style (Schaafsma 2005) and are a common motif on Casas Grandes pottery, as discussed at length by VanPool and VanPool (2007). In their interpretation of the iconography, the serpent creatures represent Casas Grandes shamans who have transformed into horned serpents in order to move through different cosmic realms (VanPool and VanPool 2007: 41–73). In addition, VanPool and VanPool note: “The fact that snakes are among the most commonly depicted creatures in Casas Grandes imagery is not surprising. Serpents are vital in the cosmologies, religions and rituals of the peoples of the American Southwest and Mesoamerica, and in many cases snake symbolism is similar between both regions” (92). Schaafsma and Taube (2006: 273) express a similar point of view and show how serpents, both plumed and horned, typically symbolize the sky, water, rain, fertility, and lightning in these regions: “As with the Mesoamerican plumed serpent, the Puebloan Horned Serpent is inherently a being of travel that through its journeys brings storms and rain.” However, as will become apparent as we review the ethnographic sources, the horned serpents were powerful beings of a very complex nature, and probably the pre-Columbian cultures of the American Southwest also regarded them as beings that could also cause destruction and bring illnesses—just as their Mesoamerican counterparts.

At the other side of the continent, among the cultures of the American Southeast, some of the most wonderful examples of horned and antlered serpents are attested in archaeological contexts from the so-called Moundbuilder cultures or the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex of the Mississippian area from around AD 900 and onward (Reilly 2004: 126–128; Phillips et al. 2006: 21–22; Reilly and Garber 2007; Reilly 2011). Thus, serpents with antlers or horns are a quite common motif in the iconography of the Middle and Lower Mississippi Valley, and although the motif also shows up in the rock art of the region, it is more commonly encountered on finely carved shell objects ([figure 9.5d and e](#)). Just as the horned serpent has been the subject of several recent studies among scholars of the American Southwest, it has received renewed attention among scholars working with the imagery and mythology of the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex (e.g., Lankford 2007; Reilly 2011), and generally the serpents are interpreted as important cosmological beings associated with a watery underworld (Townsend 2004; for detailed interpretations see Lankford 2007; Diaz-Granados 2011: 91, fig. 4.15; Reilly 2011). A regional characteristic of the entity is that it often appears with wings (Lankford 2007; Reilly 2011: 122, fig. 6.1.), suggesting that they were also understood to move through the air, possibly in a manner similar to that of the various sky serpent beings of Mesoamerica (see Taube 1995). The appearance of horned and antlered serpents in the archaeological and iconographic record from the American Southeast, as well as the Southwest, coincides roughly with the Mesoamerican examples from the Terminal Classic/Epiclassic and Early Postclassic periods, which undoubtedly have prompted hypotheses that these beliefs and practices diffused from Mesoamerica northward. However, once we approach the ethnographic and ethnohistorical sources, the wide distribution of myths and tales involving such serpentine beings suggests a much earlier distribution, and one that was not related to the influences or contacts with Mesoamerica.

From the Colonial Period to the Present: The Power of the Horn

Having so far concentrated on textual and iconographic references to antlered and horned serpents in the pre-Columbian period, I now turn to the rich and varied postconquest sources. While a further division of the considerable time span from the early colonial period to the present would undoubtedly have had its advantages, I have opted for a treatment of separate areas covering the entire time frame. In so doing, I hope to show the continuities and changes in beliefs and practices more clearly.

The American Northwest and the Northeast

I begin the survey of the North American continent, and more specifically on the Northwest Coast, where among groups like the Kwakiutl (Kwakwaka'wakw) and the Nootka (Nuu-chah-nulth) we encounter a creature known as the *sisiutl*, which is described as a double-headed sea monster with a snake head at each end and a human face in the middle (Boas 1897: 371–372, 1966; Curtis 1915: 279–282; Holm 1972: 57; Jonaitis 1991: 60–61, 90–91, 182–183, 224–225). The snake heads are often represented with horn-like elements on the forehead, and Swedish scholar Åke Hultkrantz (1979: 63) pointed out the resemblance between the horned serpents of the American Southwest and the *sisiutl*. The *sisiutl* is said to be a creature of great strength: “humans who caught sights of this creature might suffer a horrible death . . . contact with a *sisiutl*’s blood is also said to petrify human skin” (Jonaitis 1991: 61); yet according to Hultkrantz shamans would use parts of the being as medicine (see also below). On the other side of the continent, on the Northeast Coast, a much more widespread and well-documented belief in horned serpents endures. In the far Northeast, among the Mi'kmaq (Lhu) it is known as the *chepichkaam* and is described as a horned dragon, ranging in size from worm to constrictor, that inhabits the lakes (Lankford 2007: 113).

Hultkrantz (1979: 63) refers to a fascinating and revealing myth of the Algonquin, who relate how horned water serpents “drowned Little Wolf, brother of the culture hero. To appease the latter the water snakes were forced to present him with their medicine secret, the great medicine lodge.” Thus, the horned serpents had a primordial conflict with the culture hero(s), which they eventually lost; they were subsequently forced to share their curing powers with the humans. The serpents are here associated with water (they drown the brother), but they are also able to cure and heal. Commenting on the traditions of the central Algonquin, George Lankford (2007: 123) in his study of the Great Serpent in eastern North America noted: “In their view, the Great Serpent [*abichkam*] did not freely give these medicine powers to humans; he was highly dangerous to people and not especially sympathetic to them.” To gain the knowledge and form an alliance with the creature was a potentially life-threatening undertaking. Thus, among the Fox Indians (Meskwaki) the horned serpent was also known to cause illness and swelling of the limbs or jaw (Lankford 2007: 119–120). Clearly, the serpents possess immense powers to inflict harm as well as to heal. In general, the horned water serpent (often appearing in groups) is a major figure in the religious beliefs of several groups of the American Northeast and the adjacent plains areas,

such as the Caddo, Chippewa, Creek, Delaware, Muskogee, Natchez, and Lakota-Dakota Sioux (e.g., Brinton 1896: 136–140; Bierhorst 1985: 203; Lankford 2007). The Seneca (Onöndowága) gave several names to the creature and described it as an underwater monster serpent equipped with a magnificent set of antlers (Parker 1923: 16–17). The Cherokee (Tsalagi or Aniyvwiya’i) referred to the horned serpent as the *utenka* and considered it an actual being, resembling a rattlesnake but much larger. Again, we find that it is an entity with complex associations and meanings. As noted by Charles Hudson (1989: 142):

It was believed to live on the margins of the known world, in deep pools of water and near high mountains passes. If a person merely saw an *utenka*, it could cause misfortune, and to smell the breath of an *utenka* brought death . . . The *utenka* was not, however, merely an evil creature from which no good could come. The Cherokee believed that the *utenka* had a blazing crest on its forehead, which, if it could be obtained, was the most powerful means of divination.

John Bierhorst refers to a Cherokee creation tale in which two boys keep a serpent and feed it with the prospect of receiving its help. It “grows to enormous size, sprouting horns,” and eventually the serpent is killed by the boys as they decide to assist Thunder in his battle with the serpent (Bierhorst 1985: 203). Similar battles between horned serpents and thunder deities are documented in other traditions as well (Lankford 2007: 124–125). The Ojibwe (Anishinaabeg) tell of a master of the Beneath World, who in one aspect can be a horned serpent (called *Mishebeshu*), and its horns are regarded as signs of extraordinary power (Lankford 2007: 110). Lankford notes how some myths “include the detail of the sawing off or breaking off of the part of the powerful horn for use in medicine, but other parts of the body will also serve” (120, 127), and he provides abundant evidence that the horns or scales of the serpent being were important parts of war amulets and medicine bags and that pieces of it were also used in healing ceremonies (Lankford 2007: 120–127; see also Brinton 1896: 136–137; Parker 1923: 368).

The American Southwest

As already noted, the importance of horned serpents in the American Southwest is attested by archaeological evidence, but they are furthermore a common figure in the ethnographic record of the region and are generally believed to bring or withhold rain (e.g., VanPool and VanPool 2007: 30, 92, 108–121). The horned serpents are associated with a watery underworld domain and are thought to live near water springs or in lakes and rivers. Among the modern Pueblo Indians they are known as *awanyu* and are known to be “quick to anger and may retaliate by withholding water, causing floods, or causing earthquakes or landslides” (Phillips et al. 2006: 17–18). In Hopi mythology the horned serpent is referred to as *Palotquopi* or *Palulukana* and is a creature intimately associated with springs. Schaafsma and Taube (2006: 269) mention specific Hopi ceremonies in which horned serpent effigies are brought to springs as ritual offerings. The Tewa tell of the *Hishavanyu* (‘ancient water

serpent’) (Parsons 1939: 185), just as the Zuñi have stories about a horned serpent, *Kolowisi*, that can bring about floods. Other Zuñi narratives relate how a woman finds a small image near a spring; she throws it into the water, where it transforms into a human baby, which later shape-shifts into a horned serpent. In this new form it becomes the woman’s lover (Benedict 1935, 1: 10–11, 312–313; see also the myth about Deer Boy, Benedict 1935, 2: 12–16). It is worth emphasizing the sexual relationship implied in the latter tale, as we will see additional examples of sexual connotations tied to the “deer-serpents.” Finally, a myth recounted among the tribes of northern California should also be mentioned. In what is essentially a cosmogonic myth, an enormous horned, dragon-like creature plays a central role in the creation of the earth. Thus, it travels underground, and the movements of its large, undulating body cause ridges and mountains to be formed (Erdoes and Ortiz 1984: 107–109; see also Gifford 1930). The direct association between the movements of the great serpent and the abrupt displacement of soil and stones as seen in earthquakes, landslides, and falling rocks is a phenomenon we also encounter among Maya-speaking groups in the highlands of southern Mexico, such as the Tzotzil and Ch’orti’ (see below).

The Central Mexican Highlands

Whereas I have not been able to locate colonial documents from North America that make mention of the horned serpents, important descriptions are to be found in the rich ethnohistorical records from Mesoamerica. I begin the survey in central Mexico, the region first conquered and since then the center of the proselytizing efforts of the mendicant orders and, prominent among them, the Franciscans. An obvious place to start is Alonso de Molina’s famous Nahuatl dictionary from 1571; the entry for *maçacoatl* informs us that this is a “gusano gordo con cuernos, o culebra grande que no haze mal” (Molina [1571] 2001: fol. 50r). The latter probably refers to a large boa, which, as we have seen, were and still are called *mazacoatl* or *masacuate* in some Nahua-speaking communities and commonly regarded as harmless and even beneficial creatures. Molina’s translation of the term as a “horned worm” is not attested in other colonial sources to my knowledge, and perhaps “worm” is to be understood as “snake,” as it is in other languages. Alternatively, Molina and his informants are targeting a category of caterpillars with horn-like protrusions on its body, possibly one of three edible species of butterfly and moth larvae that are still referred to as *gusano de cuerno*, *gusano cornudo*, and *culebra cornuda* across much of Mesoamerica because of a horn on the tail (Kerry Hull, pers. comm. 2013; see Ramos-Elorduy et al. 2011).

Perhaps the single most important source on the topic is that of another Franciscan, namely Bernardino de Sahagún. In chapter 5 of book 11 of his magnificent *General History of the Things of New Spain* (or Florentine Codex) (Sahagún 1979), which he completed in the late 1570s, we find numerous references to serpent creatures, some being precise descriptions of actual species, others less so. In Book 11 we thus find a long description of the fearsome *acoatl* (*aakoowaatl*) or *tlilcoatl* (*tliilkoowaatl*) (“water snake,” “black snake”), which lives in springs or caves and is able to attract people with its breath, only to drown and then swallow them (Dibble and Anderson 1963: 70–72). Another remarkable snake is the *coapetlatl* (*koowaapetlatl*) or *petlacoatl* (*petlakoowaatl*) (“serpent-mat,” “mat-serpent”), which is

described as several snakes that together form a mat, and according to Sahagún this being was associated with rulership: “Whoever sees it, if ingenious, if advised, has no fear; he quickly seats himself on it; as if on a reed mat he seats himself . . . it was said that he would then merit, then attain lordship, rulership as a reward. It was said he would be a lord, he would become ruler” (Dibble and Anderson 1963: 81; see further discussion in Nielsen and Helmke 2014: 125–130). With regard to the *maçacoatl*, “deer-snake,” Sahagún treats it in three separate paragraphs. The first describes it as “very big, very thick, dark. It has rattles, it has horns. Its horns are just like the horns of a forest deer” (Dibble and Anderson 1963: 79). It is related that it lives in caves and attracts rabbits, deer, and birds with its breath. The second description is quite different, the serpent here being described as thick and black, but without teeth and rattles. People are said to have tamed it, and they breed it for its flesh (Dibble and Anderson 1963: 79).⁴ The third type of deer-serpent is described as follows:

It is small, horned, blackish; not poisonous; without rattles. They who are much given to women, in order to produce semen, just scrape and drink it [in water]; they just capture the eye of two [or] three women they are about to meet. He who drinks too much continually erects his virile member and constantly ejects his semen, and dies of lasciviousness. (Dibble and Anderson 1963: 80; for the original Nahuatl and Spanish text, see Sahagún 1979, 3: fol. 83r)

Whereas the first paragraph conforms more or less to what we learn from other sources, the third description is unique and may point to more local, idiosyncratic concepts attributed to the “deer-snake.” As already pointed out, we do find indications about sexual connotations attributed to the “deer-snake” in other tales and myths, but nowhere as directly expressed as in this case. According to Sahagún and his Nahua collaborators, the snake was obviously regarded as an aphrodisiac. What is worth noting here is that we have already seen that parts of antlered or horned serpents were sought after for medicine bundles. In this particular case, Sahagún seems to be describing a case of what is often referred to as sympathetic, mimetic, or imitative magic, which aims at replicating the physical properties of specific objects, creatures, or phenomena observed in order to transmit or reproduce the same qualities. Thus, the meat of the “deer-snake,” characterized by its hard, protruding, bone-like horn or antler, will produce a similar effect on the genitals of the male person who will ingest the concoction, and, tellingly, the term *mazacoata* is used as a slang term for “penis” in parts of Central America today (Kerry Hull, pers. comm. 2013). In Maya mythology deer are also related to licentious sexual conduct, and several myths are known wherein deer couple with women and even the Moon Goddess (see Thompson 1939: 135, 146, 150; 1970: 243–244, 364, 366–367; Boot 1989; Braakhuis 2001; Helmke and Nielsen 2009: 76–77). In a wider cross-cultural perspective there is a widespread practice of eating the horns or genitalia of large, powerful animals as an aphrodisiac, such as rhinoceros horns in India, tiger penises in China, and deer antlers and penises as well as snake (and dragon) meat and blood in many parts of Asia (e.g., Visser 1913: 94–95; Donovan 2004: 96–97). Importantly, horns were also

used for their apotropaic, magical, and protective qualities in Europe in medieval times (Mellinkoff 1970: 4).

Clearly, the term *mazacoatl* was applied to more than one type of serpent with antlers or antler-like horns, and Sahagún included two different illustrations of the creature to supplement his descriptions (figure 9.6).

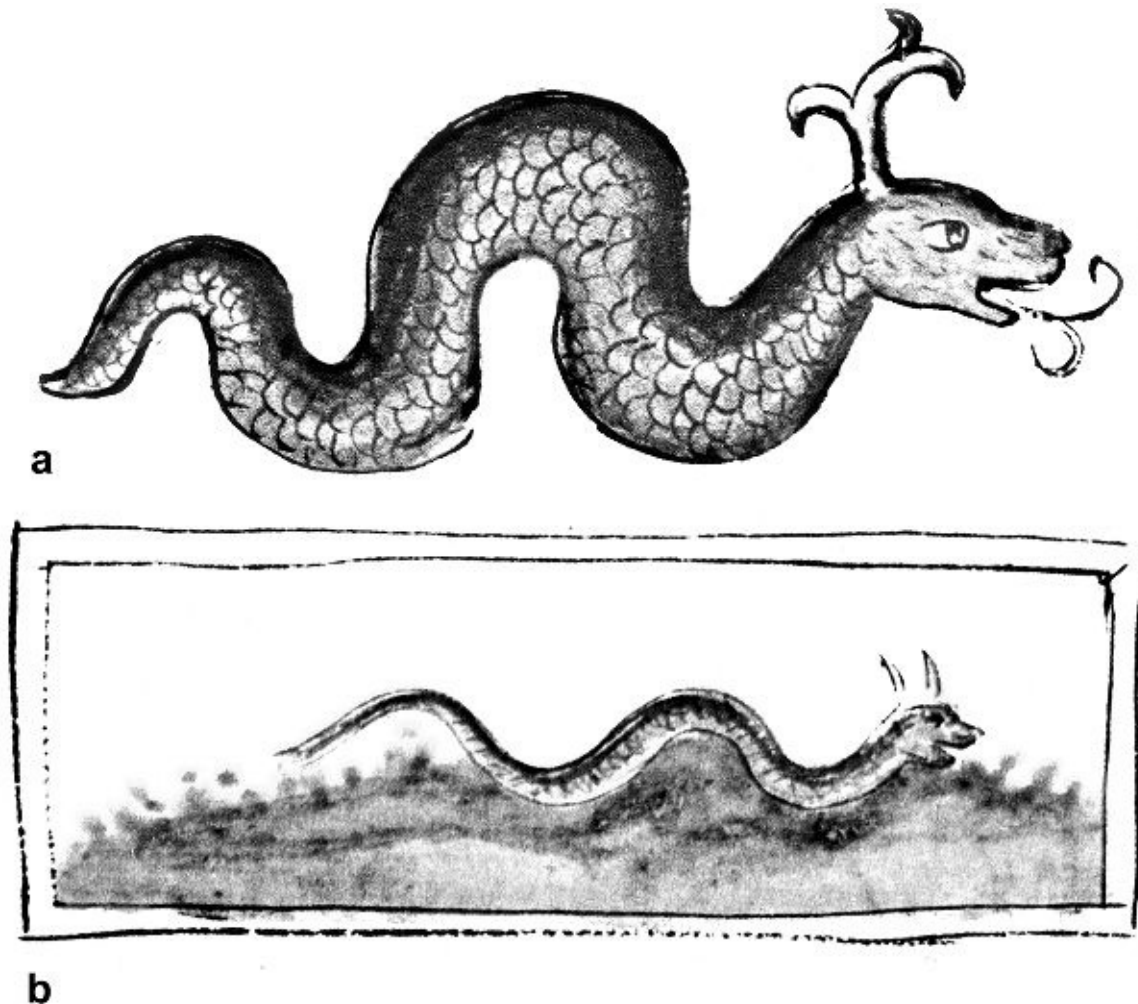


Figure 9.6. Two different types of Aztec *mazacoatl* as represented in Bernardino de Sahagún's Florentine Codex, book 11: (a) fol. 82v; (b) fol. 83r; adapted from Sahagún 1979, 3, bk. 11: fol. 82v and 83r.

In the later ethnographic sources (see below) it would appear that some of the aspects of these three types of “deer-snakes” have merged, the *mazacoatl* thus being a large, supernatural serpent with highly ambivalent powers and complex meanings. Another important but almost neglected source is the Franciscan Ioan Baptista's *Confessionario en lengua mexicana y castellana*, published in 1599. In an excellent study of Baptista's text Berenice Alcántara Rojas has shown how the *mazacoatl* merged with popular European beliefs in dragons (Alcántara Rojas 2005). Baptista's confessionary contain brief stories of incorrect behavior and the results from spiritual misconduct (so-called *exemplum*). One of the examples provided by Baptista concerns a woman who has sinned and must suffer gravely in hell as a consequence. In a vision received by two friars the woman approaches them: “montada sobre una *mazacoátl* que, junto con otra serpientes, lagartijas, comadrejas, coatíes,

zorillos, sapos, perros y otras fieras de fuego, se dedicada a afligir cada una de las partes de su cuerpo” (Alcántara Rojas 2005: 389). In another case, a deer-serpent is said to emerge from the mouth of the confessing sinner, thus embodying the sin of sexual transgressions. A stunning visual representation of the deer-serpent as associated with the Devil and with sinful behavior comes from the Augustinian *visita* chapel in Santa María Xocoteco in the Sierra Alta in Hidalgo (figure 9.7).



Figure 9.7. Detail of the demon-like figure with four deer-serpents emerging from its neck in the chapel of Santa María Xocoteco (Hidalgo, Mexico), showing the two most well-preserved deer-serpents. Note the deerlike ears and what appears to fire or sulphurous gasses emanating from their mouths (photo by Mikkel Bøg Clemmensen).

The murals focus on the torture of sinners in hell, and on each side of the chapel huge Leviathan monsters are shown with devilish creatures standing in front of their open maws. In one case a Coatlicue or a *tzitzimime* demon wears a necklace of human hands and hearts, in the other a clawed Medusa-like figure is shown with four writhing deer-serpents emerging from its neck (Bøg Clemmensen 2017: 92–97). These examples demonstrate how by the end of the fifteenth century the deer-serpent had become one of the prime examples of the evil

powers of Mesoamerican beliefs. I shall return to this in greater detail in a later section.

From a slightly later source, Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón's *Treatise on the Heathen Superstitions* from 1629, we have a rich documentation of ritual practices and incantations of the Nahua of Guerrero (Andrews and Hassig 1984). In a chapter dealing with omens Ruiz de Alarcón states: "Among the snakes they fear the most the one called *maçacoatl*, which means 'snake of beasts,' 'a snake that swallow a beast,' and it is so because they have been seen seven or more *varas* long." To encounter this snake, as well as several other kinds of snakes, would be interpreted as omens "not only about their sicknesses but even about their enmities and hatreds" (Andrews and Hassig 1984: 69). Many of the diseases and ailments reported by Ruiz de Alarcón are named *coacihuiztli* (*kooaasiwistli*), which has been translated as "gota, o perlefa" (Molina [1571] 2001: fol. 23r; see also Andrews and Hassig 1984: 178), but with a more literal meaning of "to be like a serpent," a category of disease sent by the deities of the Tlaloc complex as punishment, but also "said to derive from cold winds and winds issuing from caves" (Ortiz de Montellano 1990: 156, table 8.1). From later ethnographic records we also know of *yeyecacuatsihuiztli* (*yeyekakuwaatziwistli*), also simply referred to as "cave air" but with a literal meaning of "wind-snake" ailment with symptoms like rheumatism, paralysis, and twisted mouth (see Ortiz de Montellano 1990: 210–211). Thus, the notion of serpents as the cause of disease and associated with evil winds (*malos aires*) is well attested and further supports the idea of different categories of serpent illnesses (see also Nielsen and Helmke 2011: 358–359). However, Ruiz de Alarcón also provides us with a different aspect of the "deer-serpent." In one of several incantations for bone fractures, the power of the *maçacoatl* is referred to in another, more beneficial manner. Thus, a Nahua bonesetter would speak to the cord that he would bind around the patient's broken bone: "Come on, you my cord, who are like the snake *maçacoatl*. Serve here as guard and do your duty well. Do not be careless, because tomorrow I will be with you" (Andrews and Hassig 1984: 191). The cord is approached and addressed as if it were a deer-serpent that is able to cure the damage to the bone, perhaps in another case of imitative magic in the sense that the snake would coil around the bone as it would strangle its prey, thus keeping the fractured bone in place, unable to move.

Moving forward in time to the present-day indigenous communities of the central Mexican highlands, we encounter several of the same beliefs associated with serpents, among them the "deer-serpent." From William Madsen's (1960) seminal study of the Nahua-speaking village of San Francisco Tecospa, in particular his observations on witchcraft, illnesses, and curing, we hear of several types of supernatural reptiles able to fly, including snakes. Two of these mythological serpent creatures are highly feared by the Tecospans because of their deadly bite (which cannot be cured); one is referred to as the *tetzalcoatl* (*teetzaalkoowaatl*) ("terrible serpent") and is said to have wings, while another reptilian creature is said to fly "to sea and becomes a sea monster" when it matures (Madsen 1960: 167). A third supernatural snake played a role almost identical to that of the antlered or horned serpent, although it is not described as having such attributes. Thus, the great *yeyecacoatl* (*yeyekakoowaatl*) ("wind snake"; see Nielsen and Helmke 2011: 358), referred to as *culebra de agua* in Spanish, controls the rains in that he is "chief of the rain dwarfs, known as 'enanitos' in Spanish and 'ahuatoton' (water spirits) in Nahuatl. Tecospa's rain dwarfs are direct descendants of

Aztec rain dwarfs, called ‘tepictoton’ (mountain spirits)” (Madsen 1960: 131; see also Redfield 1930: 164–166). The *yeyecacoatl* is said to be seen in the clouds before the rains. As we have seen elsewhere, the snake can be benevolent as well as malevolent; as noted by Madsen (1960: 133): “Water snake washed out a barranca in San Pedro Actopan during the village fiesta twenty years ago.” The snake’s helpers can also cause people to fall ill with the disease known as “cave air” (caves are where they and presumably also the water serpent dwell), and in Tepoztlan the name of a similar kind of disease caused by the “winds” was simply *yehyecahuiliztli* (“wind disease”) (Redfield 1930: 164). In Atla (Puebla), another Nahuatl-speaking community, there is a distinction between *cuale yeyécatl* (*kwale yeyekatl*, “good air”) and *amo cuale yeyécatl* (*amoo kwale yeyekatl*, “evil air”). The “airs” or “winds” are considered to be supernatural entities and *dueños* (“lords,” “masters”) of the mountains where they have their home, called *caliyeyécatl* (*kaliyeyekatl*, “wind house”) (Montoya Briones 1964: 158–159). In the vicinity of Atla no less than thirty such abodes are located on mountains and hilltops, some inhabited by only good or bad winds, some by both (Montoya Briones 1964: 160–162).

In some villages of the Cuetzalan region of the Nahuatl-speaking part of Puebla the *nahuales* (the sorcerers or shamans) are referred to as *mazacame* (Nutini and Isaac 1974: 158; see also Signorini and Lupo 1989; Lupo 2001). Unfortunately, no direct translation for the term is provided, but in his book about the same region, *Mismo mexicano pero diferente idioma*, Mario Alberto Castillo Hernández (2007: 209) refers to “las creencias sobre el *amo kuali* ‘demonio’, y los *masakamej*, ‘duendes.’” The first term can be recognized as the one Montoya Briones found used for “evil winds” in Atla, but here understood literally as a “demon.” The second term, *masakamej*,⁵ is also recorded by Nutini and Isaac but is now understood as a term referring to the *duendes*, normally conceived of as supernatural owners of the land, often residing in caves. There seems to be a semantic overlap here with the helpers of the Great Water Serpent described by Madsen and the winds or *dueños* noted by Montoya Briones. The process of comparing and transforming previously important supernatural beings to the Devil or Satan is confirmed by the story that opened this chapter. It is also evident in another case from Villa Juárez Xicotepec (Puebla), where it is said that the Devil often appears near the river in the shape of a male goat and that some people have become rich after making a deal with him. Offerings such as chicken, turkey, or jars of chocolate are made to him at his cave home (Nutini and Isaac 1974: 245). In this case, it seems rather obvious that the horned serpent has become synonymous with the Devil, here in his shape as a horned animal, and as I shall describe in further detail below, the main characteristics of the “deer-serpent,” its serpentine body and horns or antlers, are readily comparable to some of the shapes and attributes most commonly associated with Satan and the Devil in the Christian tradition.

North and northwest of the central Mexican highlands ethnographic reports provide us with beliefs highly similar to those that I have discussed so far. Thus, the Tepewa of northeastern Jalisco tell of horned serpents, known as *chanes*, that are said to be malevolent serpent beings living near springs and streams and carrying water in transparent gourds (Schaafsma and Taube 2006: 250–251). Frances Toor (1947: 507–508) noted how “the Yaquis and Mayos of Sonora believe horned water serpents live in mountain springs, for

which reason they never go dry. When the serpents leave them, they go to the sea, causing floods which are necessary to their crops.” The snake is said to be black and have horns like a mountain goat; like its counterparts in the American Southwest and central highlands of Mexico, the floods that it releases can become too powerful, and different measures have to be taken to stop the water serpent. It is said that formerly illegitimate children were thrown into the springs as offerings to the water serpent. Toor also points out how the beliefs related to the horned serpents have merged with Spanish folktales and furthermore gives an interesting example of how horned water serpent mythology has even incorporated Christian ideas: “They say the water serpents are condemned souls which live in the ocean for a hundred years after they leave the springs, where they constantly increase in size. When the hundred years have expired, they are pardoned by God” (Toor 1947: 508). Apparently, the snakes have sinned and received their divine punishment, but in the end they will be forgiven. Finally, a possible depiction of an antlered serpent from the Otomí-speaking village of San Pablito (Puebla) should be mentioned. As Karl Herbert Mayer points out in his article on *amate* manuscripts from this particular village, the front cover of the Alfonso García Tellez manuscript (dating to 1981) shows a cut-paper snake with what appears to be an antler on its head (Mayer 2012: 133–134, fig. 6).⁶ The booklet contains cut-paper designs and figures and deals with “sacrificial rites involving the Spirit of the House, including the use of muñecos” (134). Unfortunately, the text accompanying the image does not cast any light on the name of or meaning associated with the deer-serpent among the San Pablito Otomí.

The Gulf Coast and Veracruz

While only a few references to ‘deer-serpents’ in this part of Mesoamerica can be included, they conform to the pattern that we have already detected elsewhere and that we shall see again in the Maya area. Serpents with horns of gold or shining metal are also known among the Huastec (Edmonson et al. 2001). Alain Ichon in his classic study of the religion of the Totonac mentions the role of a *mazacuate* or *juki-luwa* (“serpent-deer”), related to wind and representing the strong destructive winds or hurricanes in the dance of the Tambulanes (Ichon 1969: 122, 137, 360–361).⁷ He quotes Robert Gessain, who noted that among the Tepehua-speaking communities of Veracruz, Hidalgo, and Puebla a similar serpent is known in the dance of the Pastores, of which it is said: “Antes la serpiente quería ser mas ponderosa que Dios. Cuando el niño Dios nació, la serpiente quiso picarlo. Apareció entonces la primera mujer acompañada por los Pastores. Esta golpea dos veces a la serpiente, y la mata” (Gessain 1952–1953: 203). Appearing in a Christian context, it would seem once again, that the horned serpent is compared to the Devil and must be defeated. In addition, other Totonacan tales include a “Serpiente-Venado,” which can change sex depending on who encounters it and which will give money to its finder, providing it is well taken care of (Aschmann 1962).

Oaxaca

Turning now toward the present-day state of Oaxaca, we have, at present, few descriptions of “deer-serpents” from ethnohistorical sources, but in the *Relación geográficas de Antequera* a simple reference is found to the fact that some of the townspeople in the Zapotec village of

Nexapa (Nejapa) at one point had seen a serpent with horns like those of a small goat (*chivatillo*) (Acuña 1984: 356). From the excellent monograph on the Zapotec village of Mitla by Elsie Parsons we have the following tradition: “It is believed . . . that flood is caused by the water serpent that falls from the sky (probably as a water spout). This serpent has two horns on his head” (Parsons 1936: 223). The description readily brings to mind pre-Columbian iconography of heavenly reptiles with water gushing from their open mouths, such as the feathered serpents from the Early Classic murals of Techinatitla in Teotihuacan (see Pasztory 1988) or the celestial caiman on page 74 of the Late Postclassic Maya *Codex Dresden* (Velásquez García 2006).⁸ According to Parsons, one of the water serpents was called *madre de agua*, but when some ignorant goatherds once saw it and killed it, the pool where it lived dried up. In fact, prior to this disastrous event, people used to celebrate a fiesta at the same pool on New Year’s Eve in honor of the Horned Water Serpent. Furthermore, Parsons reported (1936: 223): “At Tlacolula it is believed that in the river at Mitla lives a serpent with wings, with the power to check as well as to increase the flow of water.” Toor adds an interesting aspect to our understanding of the “deer-serpent,” namely that according to the Zapotec of Villa Alta, similar water serpents as well as lightning are forms into which local religious specialists could transform themselves (Toor 1947: 508–509). Among the Mixtec we find a belief in “rain serpents” or *koo savi*, which live in lakes and are said to appear in the midst of violent tempests and to be the cause of floods (Monaghan 1995: 105–108; see also Hermann Lejarazu 2010). Interestingly, one of John Monaghan’s Mixtec informants from Santiago Nuyoo drew this particular creature twice, in both cases moving across the sky in a rain cloud, but once with wings and once with either feathers or horns protruding from its head (Monaghan 1995: 107–108, figs. 6 and 7). The Huave on the Pacific Coast and the Isthmus have beliefs in an enormous serpent with horns living inside a local mountain named Huilotepec, and from the Popoloca there is evidence of stories about snakes called *mazates* (“deer”) or *cothâma* living in springs (Martínez González and Viñas 2007: 144; see also Lupo 1997).

The Mixe of Tepuztepec provide offerings of food at so-called “serpent springs” as well as the blood of turkeys and hens after the harvest of the first maize as thanks to the water serpents (Toor 1947: 508). In this case, there are no mentions of antlers or horns, but according to Gustavo Torres, Mixe groups still relate the damages caused by heavy floods and rainstorms to a serpent with antlers (Torres 2001: 205, cited in Martínez González and Viñas 2007: 144). In his study of the religious beliefs and practices among the Mixe of San Lucas Camotlan, Walter Miller recorded stories about serpents living in caves where they guard treasures (1956: 267–268), and it is said that the Devil can transform himself into a gigantic serpent and, as one informant told Miller, “una culebra puede ser más que una simple culebra” (268).

From the neighboring Zoque region of southwestern Chiapas we are fortunate to have an important description of an event involving an initiate “sorcerer’s” encounter with a “deer-serpent.” Thus, in an inquisitional process that took place in the 1580s, a Nahuatl-speaking woman related how her father had brought her to a cave in order to learn “witchcraft” and forget the Catholic faith. In the cave she had received a nagual that transported her to the interior of the mountain where she one night saw a big serpent with horns like those of a deer

(see Martínez González and Viñas 2007: 141). The Zoque of Chiapas also have a belief in the *tsahuatsan*, a huge serpent with seven heads (but without horns or antlers) that lives among the mountaintops. The serpent is driven across the sky by the *moyó* or thunderbolts and their serpentine whips. The *tsahuatsan* travels with “big clouds and makes a whishing sound. Wherever it falls down, a lake is formed” (Toor 1947: 502), but when chased by the *moyó* a storm arises. From the same region Norman Thomas reports that during Easter (shortly before the rainy season) it is told that mountain spirits can transform themselves into snakes with horns. He notes: “La asociación de culebras con cuernos con fenómeno-agua y fenómeno-cueva sobrepasa la imagen de correspondencia . . . La historia de la Víbora con Cuernos relata cómo un hombre que está en busca de miel describe una cueva en la cual encuentra a una enorme víbora con cuernos” (Thomas 1975: 221–223). As we have seen in several other stories about the great serpent in his mountain home, the horned serpent is thus guarding riches hidden in the mountain cave.

The Maya Area

The presence of supernatural serpents with antlers or horns is richly documented in the ethnographic records of the Maya area, a fact that is undoubtedly a result of the numerous ethnographic projects and fieldwork that has been conducted in the region in the twentieth century. The number of references thus supersedes those of any other region of Mesoamerica. In sharp contrast to this is the fact that we have next to no examples from the ethnohistorical sources. As already demonstrated, the belief in horned and antlered serpents clearly stretches into the pre-Columbian period, and we must assume that they played an important role in the colonial period as well.

Perhaps the fullest documentation of the horned serpent is provided by Robert Laughlin’s work among the Tzotzil of Zinacantan in highland Chiapas. In Laughlin’s dictionary of Tzotzil the entry *xulub chon* gives us the following gloss: “subterranean horned serpent thought to have caused earthquakes when it emerged. If the sun or moon die it is thought that animals with four horns will emerge to kill the people” (Laughlin 1975: 326). The latter provides us with a new aspect of the horned serpent in that it is associated with an apocalyptic vision, reminiscent of those known from the Aztec where monsters or giant jaguars will cause havoc on earth should a new sun not appear, but possibly also influenced by the serpents and dragons that appear in the Book of Revelation (see below). Laughlin also recorded a Zinacanteco tale, called “Saved from the Horned Serpent,” in which a horned serpent is associated with a specific rock near Zinacantan; the rock is said to have horns and is known as *Xulub Chon* (“antler snake”). People go to pray to the rock and the serpent so that it will not dig up the ground and kill people (Laughlin 1977: 157). Laughlin notes that the serpent is “supposed to have gouged out the ravines with its horns” (156). We have already seen the role of the horned serpent as an underground creature shaping the landscape. Laughlin gives us further insight into the complex connotations of the *xulub chon* in his book *Beware the Great Horned Serpent: Chiapas under the Threat of Napoleon* (2003) and presents fascinating evidence of how, during late colonial times, the horned serpent was likened to the Devil. Thus, in a fierce proclamation against Napoleon written by the

Columbian creole Joaquín Mosquera y Figueroa in 1812, and later translated into several indigenous languages, including Tzotzil (presumably by a friar), Napoleon and his spies are described as “horned serpents, whirlwinds, and jaguars” (Laughlin 2003: 11). According to Laughlin, phrases like these come from the hand of the anonymous translator, since they clearly reflect local beliefs in supernatural powers. At one point the friar also refers to Napoleon as a “fatal thunderbolt” and finally as “the great horned serpent in Hell” (Laughlin 2003: 160). It would seem, then, that the friar was using local Maya terminology for religious concepts and beings, involving some of the most powerful and important creatures and phenomena (beneficial and/or malevolent), which had since been demonized. Hence Napoleon is essentially being characterized as an evil sorcerer and devilish creature.⁹

From the Tz’utujil of highland Guatemala, Allen Christenson reports how in the sacred cave of Paq’alib’al a snake guards the throne of Francisco Sojuel, a legendary Tz’utujil priest-shaman; according to one traditional priest: “The body of the snake is more than a thousand meters long extending back into the cave. He has a beard and antlers” (Allen Christenson, pers. comm. 2012). Apart from safeguarding the throne, the antlered serpent also protects the saints and the *nuwals* who live in the cave. *Nuwals* are deified ancestors who can bring rain and fertility to the earth, and Paq’alib’al is said to be where winds, clouds, and rain are formed. The snake is referred to as *ruxkab’ ruxuwachiliw*, “the head winding of the earth” (Christenson 2008; see also Christenson 2003: 86–87). The Tz’utujil appear to emphasize the positive powers of the “deer-serpent,” not only as a rain-bringer but also as the protector of the most important religious figures of the local community. From other highland Guatemalan sources we once again learn that horned serpents reside underground and cause earthquakes, landslides, and the movement of large rocks (Shaw 1971: 26). In one Achi’ Maya story a horned serpent made its way down a dry riverbed carrying a large rock in its horns. A hunter appeared, saw the serpent and tried to kill it. Unsuccessful in his attempts, the serpent brought down a landslide upon the hunter. Yet the hunter survived and ultimately the serpent was killed by lightning, and the river resumed to flow again (Shaw 1971: 43–45). In this tale we see a direct association between the supernatural snake and the movement of the river; much like the rivers swell in the rainy season and carry silt and trees and move stones and boulders, so too can the horned serpent displace large rocks and gouge ravines. Similar notions are documented further south in present-day Honduras.

It is from the Ch’orti’ Maya of western Honduras that we have some of the most detailed and complex accounts of the deer-serpents, here known as *chijchan* (Wisdom 1940: 392–397; Thompson 1970: 262–264; Fought 1972; Hull 2003: 217–221; see also Girard 1949, 1995: 140). Charles Wisdom, in his classic study of the Ch’orti’, provided one of the fullest descriptions of the “deer-serpents” in Mesoamerica, stating that the “Chicchan is the most important of the native deities” (Wisdom 1940: 392–393). Whereas reports on the appearance of the creature vary, one characteristic feature is its antlers or horns: “two small ones in front and two large ones at the back” (393). There are four so-called sky *chijchans* living at the bottom of a lake at the four world directions, and they are said to be responsible for “sky phenomena”; the northern snake is considered the chief of the four and is referred to as the *noh hijchan* or “great deer-serpent” (393). Complementing the sky serpents are the numerous earth *chijchans* that “produce earth phenomena”; “One or many of them live in

every body of water, being its spirit or essence. The earth *chijchans* live in streams during the rainy season and in hills during the dry season” (394). When they move they can cause floods, landslides, and earthquakes, but at the same time they are seen as a source of water and rain. Thus, they produce the water of lakes and seas and ascend to the sky in the shape of clouds and form rain clouds. As noted by Wisdom (1940: 395): “Thus, the Chicchans are responsible for both the beneficial and the harmful conditions of the earth and sky.” According to Wisdom’s Ch’orti’ informants, the horned serpents are not only associated with illnesses or curing. Illness and disease is, however, brought by the wind gods, the *ah yum ikar* (“masters of the winds”), who are equally beneficial and destructive (397), suggesting a concept of the origin of certain diseases comparable to what we have seen previously, but are here separated from the “deer-serpents” and attributed to another category of supernatural beings related to the winds. Importantly, Wisdom also notes: “Deer horns are baked in a fire, ground on the metate, and the powder taken in a potion to relieve *aigre* of the stomach and to expel the placenta” (359). This practice mirrors one described in the colonial document known as the Chilam Balam of Kaua, where a remedy for spasms is ground deer antler (Bricker and Miram 2002: 410; see also Helmke and Nielsen 2009: 71–82). The use of the ground antlers and horns is comparable to the magic, medicinal, and aphrodisiac properties attributed to the horn or antlers of the deer-serpent that we have already seen.

In the 1960s John Fought recorded several Ch’orti’ stories in and near Jocotan (eastern Guatemala) that in one way or another related snakes to water and mountains and, in many cases, riches (Fought 1972: 122–124). In one story horned serpents are living inside the mountain of Sese kmil, but when they emerge from the mountain to go out to look for mates, they make great mudslides and landslides that may destroy houses in the nearby villages. It is also told that the serpents’ horns are full of money (Fought 1972: 83–85, 122–124). Another story is told about the town called Ocotepeque, which was once destroyed by a major landslide: “The people say that—that town was destroyed because a serpent came out of the mountain. And therefore today, the serpent, the people say that,—the serpent is the Snake, the Great Snake lying inside the mountain. And when they come out, then they cause great avalanches” (Fought 1972: 99). Yet another story relates how there are both male and female snakes that appear with the river and move toward the sea (thus replicating the movement and flow direction of rivers); of one snake it was said: “It was as big around as a house. And its horn was very large. And with it she plowed the earth as she went, and all the water with it” (Fought 1972: 110–111).

More recently, Kerry Hull has examined some of these accounts in detail and has been able to document a continued widespread belief in the *chijchan*. Generally, the beliefs are the same as those described by Girard, Wisdom, and Fought, and the serpents are still considered responsible for life-giving rains, but also the destruction that can occur during heavy rainstorms, thus being highly ambiguous beings (figure 9.8).



Figure 9.8. Contemporary Ch'orti' rendering of the *chijchan*; adapted from López de Rosa 1998; drawing by Mayra Lorena Estrada.

However, Hull notes: “The powerful mythology relating to their roles in the production of rains has decreased from what I see in Wisdom and Girard . . . Today they are mainly associated with their destructive powers” (Kerry Hull, pers. comm. 2013). Thus, stories often emphasize the havoc the serpents create when they move across the landscape, destroying villages and towns. In one story:

It came and was ripping through the hill.

It ripped through the hill, and water was coming along with both of its horns.

It, they say, is thinking that it wants to go, to go until the sea in the west.

In this, they say, it passed where we are here.

And it appears to be true that it passed there because the river still lies there today.

And we see that where it passed above the big rock, everything goes down over there where we are.

It's amazing because it appears where it cut through the surface of the large stone passing with its horns.

And thus it did, going to all the places where we live. (Hull n.d.a)

The *chijchan* continued its path, ripping through rocks and big hills until, near the town of Zacapa, one of its horns broke off and got stuck in the surface of a large rock called Puente Negro, where it is still to be seen. In addition, Hull (n.d.b: 1) describes how “curing ideology is largely grounded in identifying the watery locus associated with a particular disease.”

Since the Ch'orti' believe that "these lakes are repositories of evil spirits milling about spreading illnesses to humans on earth" (Hull n.d.b: 3) while also being the principal abode of the *chijchan*, it is likely that these serpent entities are also somehow related to illnesses and curing.

Central Honduras

Southeast of the Maya area, but still within the borders of Mesoamerica, beliefs in horned serpents have been recorded among the Lenca, where the serpent is described as having horns like those of a cow. It is specifically said to have lived in a lagoon close to the border with El Salvador, and according to local beliefs the horned serpent captured and ate people who passed by. To get rid of the animal, a priest once gathered all the townspeople and made a procession to the lagoon, carrying the image of Santiago and praying and sanctifying the waters; the serpent was turned into stone. It is now said only to move around the time of Easter (Chapman 2006: 161). Once again, the immense importance of this creature is reflected in the fact that it survived for so long in the folktales and local traditions, finally ending up becoming a prime target for the representatives of the Catholic Church. Further to the east, among the Tolupa of central Honduras, serpents (no antlers or horns are mentioned) also play a significant role in a myth narrating the origin of rivers. In one story the death of one of these supernatural serpents causes the rivers of the gullies to dry up (Chapman 2007: 175–179).

From this review of the evidence and the highly similar beliefs across Mesoamerica and North America, it is clear that a common belief in horned or antlered serpents were closely tied to water, rain, storms and wind, rivers, and landslides and earthquakes as well as with beliefs related to illness and curing. These powerful beings are still encountered in many parts of Mesoamerica but are seemingly absent in others. While we have seen that in several regions the antlered and horned serpents have retained their original ambivalent character, it has also become evident from the ethnographic sources that they have been fused or conflated with the Devil and are associated with witchcraft, destruction, and death. The remaining part of this chapter attempts to cast some light on how and when this process first happened.

The Demonization of the Deer-Serpent in Mesoamerica

As outlined in the preceding sections, the deer-serpent had and still has multiple meanings and associations among indigenous groups in Mesoamerica and in several regions of North America. Yet despite the original positive and beneficial aspects attributed to the serpent creature, there is now a widespread fear of it, and as already indicated the deer-serpent has become synonymous with the Devil in several Mesoamerican communities. Such transformation of what appears to have been a powerful and important supernatural being into a devil can be seen as an indication of its enormous significance in pre-Columbian beliefs and mythology. Thus, a highly similar process of conflation occurred when

Huitzilopochtli (Huitzilopoochtli), the patron deity of the Mexica, merged with the Devil. As has been brilliantly outlined by Elizabeth Boone, during the centuries following the Spanish Conquest Huitzilopochtli was identified with the Devil and described and represented as such (Boone 1989: 67–83; see also Cervantes 1994; Thiemer-Sachse 1998; García de León 2004; Nielsen 2009). As noted by Boone (1989: 57): “Huitzilopochtli, who was clearly incompatible with a saint or one of the Trinity, was held to be an incarnation of the devil.” In time, the name of the Mexica deity was exported to Europe where it became part of the German vocabulary and eventually entered Northern European literature and language usage under a bewildering array of names derived from Huitzilopochtli, among them Vizli Puzli, Witziliputzili, Fitzeputzel, and the Danish variant Vissle Pussle (Nielsen 2009). In a remarkable poem from 1851 by Heinrich Heine, Vitzliputzli actually flees to Europe to join his devilish comrades, like Satanas, Belial, Astaroth, and Beelzebub, in order to plague his old Christian enemies. In other contexts one of the derived forms of the Mexica deity’s name was used as a reference to any kind of pagan deity. In some of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century depictions Huitzilopochtli is still shown with two of his main attributes, the shield and a spearthrower (sometimes reinterpreted as a staff or torch), but the former sun and war god now also appears with horns, a long tail, and hooves, all common features of representations of the devils and demons in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (e.g., Russell 1984; Oldridge 2012) as well as in the works of Sahagún and Durán where images of pre-Columbian deities, including Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc, are at times replaced by devils or demons (e.g., Boone 1989: 71, figs. 29 and 30; Nielsen 2009). An additional telling example can be found in a woodcut from Molina’s *Confessionario mayor* of 1565 in which a horned devil, probably representing an Aztec deity, is attempting to hold back a Nahua confessing his sins to a Franciscan (Burkhart 1989: 19, fig. 2). Special attention was undoubtedly devoted to Huitzilopochtli because of his status among the Mexica; he thus eventually became the face, body, and name representing Mesoamerican pagan beliefs and practices in wider circles in Europe.

However, as might be expected, other deities, supernatural entities, and religious practitioners were also identified as representations or embodiments of evil or the Devil himself. Thus, Alcántara Rojas (2005) gives an additional example of how the *tlacatecólōtl* (*tlacatecolootl*) (“man-owl”), a designation originally used for religious specialists, sorcerers, or shamans (e.g., López Austin 1967: 88–99; Nicholson 1971: 441–442; Báez-Jorge and Gómez Martínez 1998; see also Klein 2000), was collectively demonized and regarded as residents of hell and, as observed by Alcántara Rojas (2005: 390), “sufrió la suerte de la mayoría de las deidades y ritualistas nativos, fue satanizado, colocado en calidad de enemigo del dios que guiaba a los cristianos en su expansión sobre el mundo.” As we have already seen, Alcántara Rojas also demonstrated how the deer-serpent was likened to the Devil in the writings of Ioan Baptista in the late sixteenth century. She notes how the deer-serpent thus replaces the traditional Euro-Christian serpent or dragon, partly because of the serpent’s central role in the biblical story of Adam and Eve and the original sin and partly because, as noted previously, in indigenous Mesoamerican worldview serpents and deer could have strong sexual connotations. Thus, it appears that certain deities and supernatural creatures may have been of special interest to the friars in their efforts to demonize beliefs of

pre-Columbian origin—Huitzilopochtli being one, the deer-serpent being another. However, these two entities are strikingly different. Huitzilopochtli was closely associated with the state priesthood and formed part of a strongly institutionalized and hierarchical set of anthropomorphized deities, while “deer-serpents” were not. Yet, despite their differences, they may have received heightened attention from the friars due to their overall importance: Huitzilopochtli as the prime symbol of Mexica religion and beliefs and association with the ruling segment of Mexica society, and the deer-serpent as one of the supernatural entities responsible for major meteorological and geological phenomena and involved in curing ceremonies (which would have been equal to witchcraft to the friars), and a being known to most people in most regions of New Spain. In fifteenth-century Europe witches were also accused of destructive weather-magic that caused natural disasters such as storm, heavy rains, and hail (Russell 1980: 46). Thus, any practice of sorcery or witchcraft was closely associated with the Devil, and had been so for centuries in Europe, and the attitude toward Mesoamerican curing and weather-making rituals was no different.

An additional explanation for the demonization of the antlered and horned serpents, however, is that they had what to the friars must have been an uncanny resemblance to the great enemy in Christian theology and thinking. In medieval Europe the Devil’s appearance varied immensely, but he “was frequently identified with or associated with animals, sometimes following earlier Judeo-Christian tradition and sometimes because the animals were sacred to the pagan gods, whom the Christian identified with demons” (Russell 1984: 67, see also 130–131). The animals most frequently linked with the Devil were the serpent (or dragon), the goat, and the dog or any kind of composite monstrous being. In his book *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages* Jeffrey Russell further points out that the Devil’s “most common animal characteristic after the eleventh century was horns, which also still carried the ancient connotation of power” (Russell 1984: 211).¹⁰ Thus, the Book of Revelations (12: 3) reads: “And behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns on his heads” and later (12: 9): “And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world” (see also Laughlin 2003: 160–161). In terms of places to encounter the Devil, this would typically be places that were held sacred in a local pagan tradition, like ancient temples or in wild, uncontrolled nature: “Trees, springs, mountains, stiles, caves, old ruins, wells, groves, streams, and woods were also haunts of the Evil One” (Russell 1984: 71). These, as we have seen, are locations that the “deer-serpents” would also inhabit, and in Euro-Christian tradition the Devil was also seen as the direct cause of “natural evil”—like natural disasters in the shape of disease, earthquakes, and floods (see Oldridge 2012: 4–6). Again, there is a significant semantic overlap with the Mesoamerican horned and antlered serpents.

As the Euro-Christian tradition already operated with a horned serpent or dragon as the embodiment of evil, the equation of the deer-serpent with the Devil must have seemed straightforward and almost natural to the friars: Was the importance of serpents with antlers or horns not a confirmation that the indigenous population had been deceived by Satan? Thus, Bernardino de Sahagún ([1583] 1993), in his *Psalmody Christiana*, written in Nahuatl, made precisely this connection, as has been pointed out by Louise Burkhart (1989: 43), who notes that “the dragons vanquished by Saint Phillip and Martha, and Lucifer’s manifestation

of the *draco* of Revelation 12: 7 vanquished by Saint Michael, are all called *mazacoatl*.” Turning to Arthur J.O. Anderson’s 1993 translation of the *Psalmody* we first encounter the *maçacoatl* in a battle with Saint Philip: “A constrictor-like snake had suddenly killed the young son of a priest of the devil . . . and with its breath the constrictor gravely sickened all who here there” (Sahagún [1583] 1993: 141). Saint Philip eventually overcomes the snake and orders it to go far away.¹¹ Anderson’s choice of translating *maçacoatl* as “constrictor-like snake” does not, however, convey the deep significance of “deer-serpents” in Nahua world view and religious practice and why it was such a strong image to invoke in the minds of the new converts. The *maçacoatl* appears again in the Fourth Psalm of Saint Martha, who succeeds in killing it (Sahagún [1583] 1993: 213).¹² The most powerful description, however, is to be found in the First Psalm to Michael the Archangel, in which we read:

The mighty devil Lucifer started a great battle there in Heaven. Lucifer exceeded all the other angels, [and] he was their chief . . . and the mighty captain, Saint Michael, then confronted Lucifer . . . Saint Michael, along with all his angels, fought the great constrictor serpent Lucifer. (Sahagún [1583] 1993: 287)

In sum, Sahagún seems deliberately to have chosen the term *mazacoatl* for these serpent and dragon-like creatures, which all played central roles in Euro-Christian traditions as embodiments of pagan beliefs and Satan, thereby emphasizing the church’s view of pre-Columbian deities and beliefs. As Burkhart (1989: 43) points out, the Devil was sometimes given other Nahuatl names, such as *mictlan cuetlachtli* (*mictlaan kwetlaachtli*) (“the wolf of hell”) or *mictlan coatl* (*mictlaan koowaatl*) (“serpent of hell”), thus associating the Devil with some of the animals in which he could manifest himself. In the case of the *mazacoatl*, however, I suggest that Sahagún was interested in specifically targeting the deer-serpent and its many mythological and religious meanings to the Nahua rather than simply the general species of large boas.

We have previously seen that the deer-serpent retained, and still retains, some of its beneficial character in colonial and present-day Mesoamerican indigenous communities. However, the missionaries also appear to have had success in their efforts to conflate the deer-serpent with the Devil, as we have seen above. An illustrative example of this can be found in the village of Tlayacapan (Morelos), where Ingham (1986: 105) observed how the Devil appears in Carnival and the Dance of the Santiagueros as a being with horns, red skin, flaming breath, and a long tail, thus recalling the Devil from the Book of Revelations. In Tlayacapan the dragon-like manifestation of the Devil is also known as the *canícula* (“heatwave”), and it “causes diarrhea and vomiting in children during the rainy season or summer” (Ingham 1986: 106). Importantly, this devil can also manifest himself in destructive winds and violent weather that destroy the crops; he is said to live in a cave close to the village. The same cave is the abode of the Culebra de Agua, who is a “sinister, winged horned serpent who causes floods and droughts” (Ingham 1986: 112). The features of the *canícula* and Water Snake are characteristic of the horned and antlered serpents, and

Ingham's data from Tlayacapan resonates with the story from Guerrero that introduced this chapter, in which the *mazacoatl* was described as a devilish creature living in caves and causing sickness or death.

Conclusions

This broad comparative review of the myths and beliefs centered on horned serpents and “deer-serpents” from North America and Mesoamerica has shown a remarkable consistency in the meanings associated with this supernatural entity. Thus, the serpentine beings are closely related to meteorological as well as geological phenomena, such as rains, clouds and storms, earthquakes, landslides and mudslides, and the formation of the landscape in general. These phenomena comprise both beneficial and extremely destructive or malevolent powers of nature. As such, the deer-serpent shares with many other Mesoamerican deities a fundamental ambiguous set of meanings. Adding to this complexity we have also seen that “deer-serpents” form an important element within the context of disease and curing. In the case of the Classic Maya the *chij-ka'n* belongs to a group of *way* creatures that were essentially personified diseases and that could be called upon in practices related to witchcraft and sorcery. As pointed out, “deer-serpents” have previously received limited attention compared with other, better-known serpent entities in Mesoamerican religion and mythology, in particular those manifested in elite iconography and sculpture. Having reviewed the available sources, I believe there is enough evidence at hand to suggest that the deer-serpent in its varying manifestations across Mesoamerica (and beyond) was and is a distinct entity with qualities and functions separate from those of other mythological serpents. However, as mentioned above, there are occasional representations that seem to suggest an overlap, both semantically and iconographically, between the deer-serpent and Quetzalcoatl, as seen at Teotenango, Xochicalco, and Chichen Itza. These interesting examples, all roughly from the same time period, should be the subject of further research as they suggest a period in which for some reason these two entities merged. After the Spanish Conquest of Mesoamerica in the sixteenth century the horned and antlered serpents were regarded by the friars as one of the clearest examples of the influence of the Devil on the religious beliefs of the Aztec. This was undoubtedly partly due to the physical resemblance between the two, and eventually the *mazacoatl* merged with the Devil, and somewhat paradoxically this may to some degree have prolonged the life and meaning of this important supernatural. Today the “deer-serpents” are increasingly reduced to their alleged malevolent and destructive aspects, thus becoming associated mainly with the Devil, natural disasters, illness, and sorcery.

As has been noted previously, the horned and antlered serpents of North America and Mesoamerica have some resemblance with the dragons of Eurasia (Barbeau 1952; Carlson 1982). The similarities are not only physical but also include several of the meanings attached to the creatures. In Indonesia, from Sumatra to Timor, the supernatural creature known as the *ular naga* is often represented as a snake or dragon-like being with horns or antlers. Associated with origins and creation, water and fertility, it has been described as “a

world snake represented in some village art as the creature that holds up houses and human society” (Rodgers et al. 2007: 85). In China winged dragons form a broader category of important supernatural creatures, but they are typically shown with horns or antlers and appear prominently in ancient Chinese art and iconography (e.g., Birrell 2000; Jason Sun 2010: 72–73, figs. 6–9). Of particular relevance to the topic at hand are the ancient Chinese myths that tell of Ying Lung, the “Responding Dragon” that was considered a divine avenger and bringer of rain. Dragons like Ying Lung controlled not only rain and drought but also hurricanes and floods, just as their writhing bodies created rivers (see Visser 1913: 109–121; Birrell 1999: 251; 2000: 57). Commenting specifically on the resemblance between horned serpents of Amerindian cultures and the dragons of Eurasia, Hudson (1989: 142) remarked: “Why these imaginary monsters should have been structurally similar remains to be explained,” and whether horned and antlered serpents were independent inventions in the Old and New World remains to be resolved. However, Robert Blust (2000) suggests that the wide distribution is most likely an example of convergent cultural evolution. Based on his comparative research on the origin of dragons and horned serpents in mythologies and beliefs across the globe, he argues that these entities first evolved from rainbows and that they are “largely explicable as products of rational prescientific speculation about the world of real events, in this case the natural mechanisms governing rainfall and drought” (Blust 2000: 534). Viewing the distribution of serpents with horns or antlers in the Americas could suggest that this distribution forms part of an ancient Amerindian set of core beliefs and practices (also including color associations of the cardinal directions, the Indian “Orpheus” myth, and other traits) that first originated in Asia and later arrived on the North American continent with one or several waves of migrants (e.g., Berezkin 2002; Trigger 2003: 20–21, 38, 445–446; Nielsen and Sellner Reunert 2008: 52–57; see also Carlson 1981, 1982). Regardless of the historical circumstances that led to the appearance of the “deer-serpents” in the mythologies and world view of Mesoamerica, there is no doubt that they have played, and still play, an important role as powerful entities controlling some of the major forces of nature and as strange, ambiguous creatures associated with curing and disease, with benevolent magic and deathly sorcery.

Author’s Note

My sincere thanks to Kerry Hull for kindly sharing his unpublished texts and his great knowledge of the *chijchan* and for his positive and constructive comments on an earlier version of this chapter. I am particular indebted to my close colleague and friend Christophe Helmke, since several of the ideas presented in this work grew out of conversations with him as well as our joint research on the glyphs from La Ventilla. Thanks also for your kind help with illustrations, language, and many other important editorial details. In addition, I want to express my thanks to Una Canger, Karen Bassie Sweet, Mikkel Bøg Clemmensen, Allen Christenson, Robert Laughlin, and Katarzyna Mikulska for their help and advice. Finally, a warm and heartfelt thank-you to Jeremy Coltman and John Pohl for inviting me to contribute to a volume with such an exciting and chilling theme.

Notes

1. In contrast, other scholars have suggested that the horned serpent of the American Southwest represent a different serpent deity altogether (e.g., Braniff 1999).
2. In their recent study of horned serpents in North America and Mesoamerica, Martínez González and Viñas (2007: 137) suggest that the jaguar-snake on the southern pier of the portico of Structure A at Cacaxtla has a deer antler on its head. This identification is improbable, however, and the element on the serpent creature's head does not resemble the antlers occurring in the writing of Cacaxtla in the day sign "deer" (see Helmke and Nielsen 2011: 4, figs. 2e and g). Instead the plant-like protrusion most probably represents the leaf of a water lily, serving to qualify the spotted feline as a "water-lily feline" (Helmke and Nielsen 2013: 363).
3. For an interesting discussion of the (hornless) rain serpents appearing in *lienzos* and codices from Oaxaca, see Hermann Lejarazu 2010.
4. That "deer-serpents" were domesticated by the Nawa is also confirmed by Francisco Javier Clavijero, who in the second half of the eighteenth century wrote that "y la criaban en casa, donde el cuidado y el alimento llegaba a ser tan gruesa como un hombre. Guardábanla en una tina, de donde no salía sino para tomar el alimento de manos del amo" (quoted in Santamaría 1978: 701).
5. The literal meaning and etymology of this term is unclear, and although one could suspect that it was a rarely attested plural form of *mazacoatl/mazacuate*, this does not seem to be the case (Una Canger, pers. comm. 2013).
6. Mayer (2012: 133) describes the image as representing that of "a snake-like reptile with a headdress, in profile, facing right."
7. Interestingly, Ichon (1969: 137) also notes that the *dueño* of maize is a serpent known as *kitis-luwa*, which is considered the spirit or soul of the maize plant.
8. Interestingly, in the example from Teotihuacan, the water streams released by the Feathered Serpent appear to have a beneficial character, whereas the reptile in the Codex Dresden is generally interpreted as taking part in a world destruction in which it causes a flooding of the earth. Thus, these two examples seem to underline the complementary powers attributed to celestial reptiles in the Mesoamerican world view.
9. As pointed out to me by Kerry Hull, in present-day Tojolab'al Maya the term *chijchan* is also used to refer to a type of owl (Lenkersdorf 2010: 48), and owls are commonly known as the prototypical animal for death and witchcraft in Mesoamerica.
10. For a fascinating account and analysis of the highly ambiguous connotations attributed to horns in the Christian tradition, see Ruth Mellinkoff's *The Horned Moses in Medieval Art and Thought* (1970). Thus, whereas Moses was originally portrayed with horns as a symbol of strength, power, and divinity, in later periods of history this meaning was lost, and the horns were confused with those of the Devil.
11. According to Catholic tradition the apostle Saint Philip went preaching in Hieropolis (Turkey), where he found the local population worshipping a giant snake. Saint Philip killed the snake and is also said to have healed several people who had been bitten by snakes. In Sahagún's parallel version, aimed at a Nawa audience, the serpent is a *mazacoatl*; while causing sickness, it does not do so by biting but by its breath.
12. Again, as with Saint Philip, Saint Martha was closely associated with the defeat of a monster-like reptile, in this case, the *tarasque*, which was said to have a serpent's tail and horns on its head. Saint Martha is believed to have battled the creature near the town of Nerluc in Provence (southern France), where the event is still remembered and reenacted.

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Fonds Mexicains No. 20

The Sorcerer's Cosmos

John M.D. Pohl

Fonds Mexicains 20 was collected in Mexico by the Italian antiquarian Lorenzo Boturini Benaduci sometime between 1736 and 1743. After his death the manuscript was acquired by Joseph Aubin, who took it to France in 1840. From Aubin the manuscript passed into the collection of Eugene Goupil, who possessed it until his death in 1896. It is now located in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. Long recognized as a masterpiece of Late Postclassic Nahuatl-Mixteca style, it has been largely ignored by manuscript specialists due to its poor state of preservation. Nonetheless, German artist Wilhelm von den Steinen had access to the original around 1906 and after meticulous examination of the surviving details created at least two partial restorations. The author consulted both the original and the von den Steinen copies for painting the complete restoration presented in this chapter ([figure 10.1](#)).



Figure 10.1. Fonds Mexicains 20 reconstruction. Author's illustration.

Fonds Mexicains 20 measures 91 cm by 51 cm, or roughly 3 feet by 1.75 feet, and therefore differs in size and composition from the better-known screenfolds with which it is stylistically and iconographically related, such as Codices Borgia, Fejérváry-Mayer, Vienna,

and Nuttall. The original painter applied a foundation of thick white gesso to a piece of leather that had been carefully cut, dried, scraped, and cured. The representational imagery was applied to the gesso surface by outlining the figures in black line and then “puddling” in vibrant primary colors to define place signs, calendrical signs, and human figures clothed in lavish ritual dress.

The overall layout is composed of four principal quadrants that surround a largely destroyed central image. The sequence of red disks or circles around the outside of the quadrants as well as the center represent the count of a 260-day divinatory calendar. In each of the four quadrants male and female pairs are depicted standing on place signs as they present ritual objects to one another. The males hold sacrificial knives, shields, and spears while the females offer up drinking bowls on which are set instruments associated with auto-sacrifice, including small flint blades and maguey thorns. The nearly obliterated central image has been a source of debate largely because of the existence of several antique and rather poor recreations that show a fifth pair in the center, their faces directed upward at some celestial object or event overhead (Cline 1975: 90). Despite efforts to derive significant meaning from them by many manuscript specialists, the recreations are purely fabrication (see Nowotny 2005; Boone 2007: 117–120 for discussion). We know this because Boturini’s own description of the manuscript dates prior to any of the facsimiles and makes no mention of any central image but simply describes *Fonds Mexicains 20* just as it exists today: “. . . another map, that I have in a cured hide, with a circle in the middle of red disks, forming the numbers of four periods of 13 days, accompanied by a rabbit head and one can see at the corners of this map different images of very ugly idols, that were like guardians and custodians of the cycle . . .” (Boturini Benaduci 1746: 72, paragraph 30, author’s translation)

In addition, careful analysis of the details of the recreated figures of the central frame, along with the associated place sign, indicates that the later artists had little understanding of the standardized conventions of dress that distinguished gender in the Nahua-Mixteca style; therefore they randomly combined elements of both male and female clothing worn by the other four couples appearing on the manuscript.¹ In comparable fashion, the central place sign also proves to be a contrivance formed from elements located elsewhere on the sheet (Mikulska 2018).

The surviving human figures have been discussed in detail by a number of scholars, all of whom have identified them as the Cihuateteo and Macuiltonaleque on the basis of their associated day names (Seler 1963, 1: 82–83; Caso 1966; Lehmann 1966; Pohl 1998, 2007a; Boone 2007: 117–120). The Cihuateteo were believed to be the souls of women who had died in childbirth, and therefore they were venerated by midwives in particular. Invoked during the feast days for which they were named 1 House, 1 Deer, 1 Monkey, 1 Eagle, and 1 Rain, they were patronesses of the five trecenas, twenty-day divisions of the tonalpohualli, assigned to the West, or Cihuatlampa, the netherworld of female healers as well as sorceresses. The Macuiltonaleque (sing. Macuiltonal) were the consorts of the Cihuateteo, and they frequently appear in pairs in the divinatory codices. Patrons of the five trecenas assigned to the South, the netherworld of sorcerers in Nahua ideology, they were named 5 Lizard, 5 Vulture, 5 Rabbit, 5 Flower, and 5 Grass and were venerated primarily by male

diviners, healers, and rainmakers who used the codices to prophesize future events and calculate the times for significant feasts and festivals (Knab 1997: 112–113, 155, 2004; Pohl 1998, 2007a). While the day sign names of the Cihuateteo are placed adjacent to their images, the day sign names for the Macuiltonaleque appear within the surrounding 260-day count represented by the red circles, suggesting that the manuscript was specifically used by a male diviner or tonalpouqui who wished to invoke the five trecenas of the South associated with the Macuiltonaleque.

Using the count of the tonalpohualli, we can determine the sequential order for the diviner's invocation of the five directions signified by the place signs on which the couples stand. The first trecena appears in the upper-right quadrant ([figure 10.2](#)).



Figure 10.2. Trecena of the East. Author's illustration.

The place sign there consists of a celestial band within which a large solar disk appears. A band composed of black, white, and red chevrons, signifying a “path to war,” leads to a burning temple into which a spear has been shot. The second trecena appears to the left. Here the couple stands between two hills. The hilltop on the left is qualified by a black and white “checkerboard” surmounted by a fire serpent. The hilltop on the right features a split opening at the summit that is being scaled by an elderly man and woman. The warpath leads to a decapitated eagle and a decapitated jaguar pierced with arrows ([figure 10.3](#)).



Figure 10.3. Trecena of the North. Author's illustration.

The third trecena appears in the lower-left corner. Here the couple stands on a river qualified by a white mound, spotted black to signify ash. A conch and a fire serpent appear in the water pierced with arrows as well. The warpath leads to a Hill of the Mountain Lion pierced with arrows and another burning temple (figure 10.4).

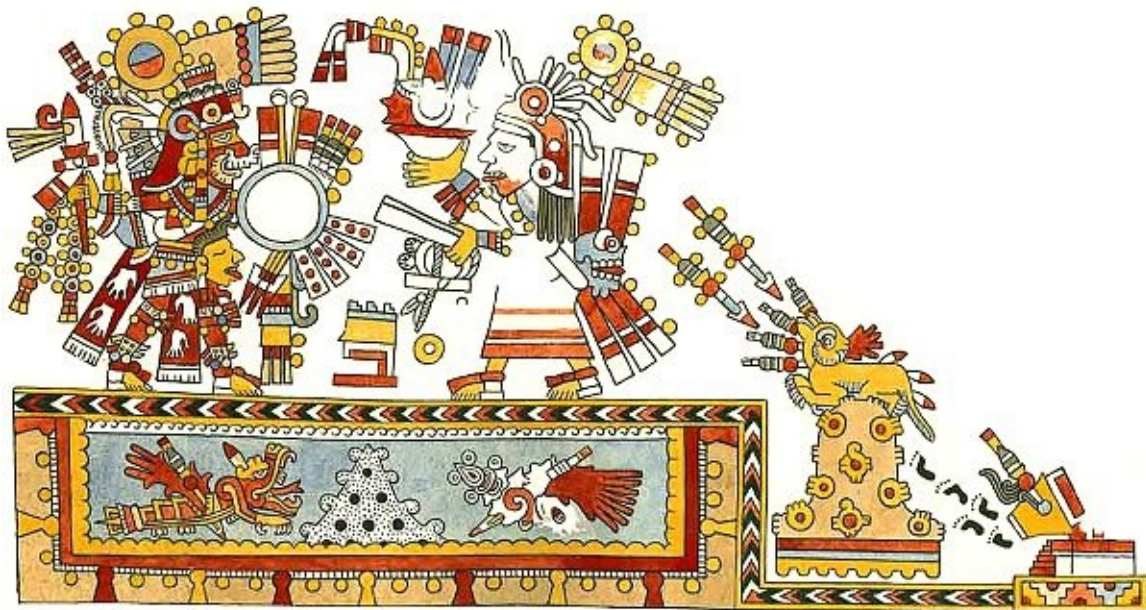


Figure 10.4. Trecena of the West. Author's illustration.

The fourth trecena is represented in the lower-right corner. Here the couple stands over a red painted court surrounded by a blue wall. Three anthropomorphized and bejeweled hearts appear together within the court, which extends from a rock surmounted by a temple formed from a human skull. A warpath leads to a burning temple pierced with an arrow very much like the one appearing in the place sign in the upper-right corner of the manuscript just above

(figure 10.5).



Figure 10.5. Trecena of the South. Author's illustration.

The fifth and final trecena of the Macuiltonaleque, signified by the sign 5 Rabbit, appears in the center. While it is impossible to determine exactly what the substantive would have been, surviving fragments of the jaws of an earth monster can be seen at either end of a platform, bridged by a warpath. A small portion of a sign for a mountain may appear below, together with a qualifier symbolizing a heart.

The place signs on which the five couples stand are distinctly Mixtec in character (Pohl 1995: 74–78). They appear in remarkably similar form in Codex Vienna, for example. Vienna pages 25–23 describe a significant event in which Mixtec gods and heroes engage in octli drinking and hallucinogenic mushroom consumption, after which a sun god rises through a cascade of sacrificial blood to bring his life-giving properties to the Mixtec landscape for the first time (Furst 1978: 215–221; Pohl 2005). On pages 22–10 five foundation rituals are enacted at place signs that are directly comparable to the toponyms on Fonds Mexicains 20 (Furst 1978: 229–256; Pohl 1995). These include the Checkerboard Hill (pp. 22–21), Hill of the Sun (pp. 17–18), the River of Ash (pp. 17–16), and Mountain of the Skull (pp. 15–14). Comparing the layouts between Fonds Mexicains 20 and Codex Vienna, Karl Nowotny first proposed that they represented the ritual establishment of the four cardinal directions and a sacred center (Nowotny 2005: 160). In fact the toponyms have correlates in the Mixtec language, suggesting that the actual landscape portrayed lies somewhere in Oaxaca or southern Puebla. For example, a colonial dictionary composed by Dominican friar Pedro de Alvarado (1962: 159, 156, 171, 192v) gives names for the four sacred directions that include:

East: Sayocanandicandij—“Where the Sun Emerges”

North: Yucu Naa—“Dark Hill”

West: Yaa Yuta—"Ash River"

South: Huahi Cahi—"Large House"

All but the fourth, Rock of the Town of the Skull, are clearly descriptive as place sign qualifiers appearing on *Fonds Mexicains* 20. It may be that Alvarado's informants preferred not to name south more specifically than the location of a major temple, as its invocation was obviously equated with the cults of the dead that the Dominicans were attempting to eradicate. Some scholars attribute these directions to the actual boundaries of a Mixtec nation (Jansen 1982, 1: 224–232, 244–268; Brotherston 1995: 147–149, 210; Boone 2007: 117–121). This scheme associates east with a community named Apoala, west with San Mateo Nejapa, and south with Chalcatongo, all of which are located in the Mixteca Alta. North is associated with Tepexi in southern Puebla.

The problem with this thesis is that it suggests that the Mixtecs thought of themselves as an ethnically based landholding state with national boundaries. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that the Mixtec elite ruled over an ethnic nation, nor were the Mixtecs in any way confined to the core territory the scheme invokes. Rather, Mixtec nobles were members of a multicultural elite who intermarried with their foreign counterparts, particularly the Nahuas and Zapotecs, together with the peoples they dominated, to form factional alliance corridors extending from coastal Oaxaca to the Plain of Puebla (Pohl 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2003d). In other words, they thought of themselves as one large extended family, despite local ethnic differences. This would explain why neighboring groups could share the Mixtec directional system. Codex Porfirio Diaz, for example, portrays a scheme comparable in many respects to *Fonds Mexicains* 20, but the manuscript was produced by a Cuicatec kingdom that tended to be more Eastern Nahua affiliated. It therefore features scenes from the Eastern Nahua-based Borgia Group as well as the Mixtec Group (Van Doesberg 2001; Pohl 2003a).

Evidence that directional symbolism was more locally applied is obvious in the multiple place sign variants that appear in other pictographic sources as well as contemporary place-names located throughout Oaxaca (Brotherston 1995: 210). For example, the legend of Lord Eight Deer portrayed in Codex Colombino depicts the hero's performance of rituals dedicated to sacred trees associated with two sets of cardinal signs. The signs in the first set (pp. 4–5) are associated with his claim to Hill of the Tobacco Bundles and are visited on four sequential days following his meeting on day 6 Serpent with the oracle Lady Nine Grass: 8 Deer (East), 9 Rabbit (North), 10 Water (West), and 11 Dog (South). Obviously it would be impossible for Eight Deer to visit these directional place signs if they were located around the entire Mixteca Alta and Baja, as other scholars have proposed (Troike 1974: 145–146). The second set (p. 16) appears after his arrival at Tilantongo and probably relates to a local directional system in the southern end of the Nochixtlan Valley. While East and South are clearly represented, West and North appear to be local variants because they lack the qualifiers for yaa or ash, although the substantive for "river" appears on the one hand and naa or dark on the other.²

Two manuscripts associated with the Coixtlahuaca Valley depict directional signs that also clearly vary from the *Fonds Mexicains* 20 system. North appears as a Hill of the Knot in the

Selden Roll, a toponym signifying the kingdom of Tlapiltepec, while West is portrayed as Platform of Ash rather than Ash River in the Lienzo de Tlapiltepec. The implication is that the place sign variants are associated with locations lying adjacent to, if not actually within, the Coixtlahuaca region itself. Terms related to the four directions also appear in the names for actual communities located throughout Oaxaca today, but like the pictographic place signs, they have no relationship to any recognized Mixtec ethnic boundaries. Yucunaa or Dark Mountain is the name of Santo Reyes Yucuná, located in the Mixteca Baja. It appears as such glyphically in at least one Mixtec manuscript (Smith 1979: 32; see also Bradomín 1992: 86 for the name San Juan Yucuná as well). Nejapa, the Nahuatl name for Ash River, is the name of a Mixtec community located in the vicinity of Zacatepec on the Mixteca Costa while another community also known as Nejapa is located in the Sierra Zapoteca (Bradomín 1992: 205). The latter is specifically named Yutanuyaa in Mixtec, or River of the Place of Ash, a term that matches the name for West almost exactly, even though it is actually located in a predominantly Zapotec- and Chontal-speaking region (Smith 1973: 177). Nejapilla, or Little River of Ashes, is located near Teposcolula (Bradomín 1992: 251).

With regard to Apoala as the direction East, there is in fact no Mixtec place name for “sun,” or dicandij, known for the valley. On the other hand, Yucundij, or Hill of the Sun, is a name for the community of Tonaltepec (Hamann 2011: 147–148). A dialectical variant, Yucu Gandi, is associated with a prominent archaeological zone in the Achiutla Valley (Smith 1973: 176; Pohl 2007b: 18–19). Teotitlan del Camino in the Tehuacan Valley of Oaxaca appears as Temple of the Sun in Codex Mendoza (Caso 1959). It is possible that a celestial band of stars alone may represent the direction East, but the term for “sky” or “heaven” is found in relation to many different place signs in the codices, and it is so well known as a toponym throughout Oaxaca that it is very difficult to assign it to any single geographical area.

While Chalcatongo was known as Ñuu Ndaya in Mixtec, or Town of Death, the configuration of a skull temple located atop a promontory in Fonds Mexicains 20 fits the place sign configuration for the kingdom of Mitlatongo or Dzandaya, meaning Place of Death, just as closely (Smith 1973: 176; Pohl 1994: 74–77). The Fonds Mexicains 20 place sign is more specifically marked with the multicolored striations that stand for “stone” or toto, suggesting its more precise name in the Mixtec language would be Toto Dzandaya or Toto Ñuu Ndaya, a location that remains unidentified.

Finally, the sacred centers featured in the directional layouts appearing in Mixtec manuscripts are also variable, indicating that different kingdoms maintained different conceptions of an axis mundi while invoking localized sets of the cardinal directions as well. Generally place signs for “center” are qualified by the maw of an earth monster that symbolizes a large cave. Fragments of the maw of such a monster appear in Fonds Mexicains 20 at either end of the warpath in the central frame (Byland and Pohl 1994: 81–85; Furst 1978: 251–252). Codex Vienna (pp. 11–9), for example, depicts the maws of four earth monsters that appear in conjunction with a broad ridge surmounted by the signs for hills surrounding the vicinity of Yucuñudahui, the paramount Classic-period citadel located in the northern end of the Nochixtlan Valley (Pohl 2004).³ By comparison the cardinal directional

scheme appearing in the manuscripts associated with the Coixtlahuaca region, such as Selden Roll and the Lienzo de Tlapiltepec (discussed above) as well as the Lienzo Seler II, portray a central place sign that features a mountain together with the maw of an earth monster that can be identified with the Tepelmeme archaeological zone at the northern end of the Coixtlahuaca Valley (Pohl and Urcid Serrano 2014). It is renowned for its tunnel-like caves located along the principal trails that pass through the mountains and link the Coixtlahuaca Valley with the Tehuacan Valley.

Each of the cardinal directions was also endowed with particular meteorological and spiritual qualities as well. The Dominican chronicler Francisco de Burgoa wrote that the Mixtecs believed that the East was associated with fertility and health, the North could be variable, the West was associated with human propagation, while the South was associated with famines, plagues, and wars (Burgoa [1674] 1997: 135–136). These differ in some respects with those recorded by the Nahuas. Diego Durán stated, for example, that while the East was also associated with fertility, the North was associated with drought and famine; the West was considered evil, and the South could be variable (Durán 1971: 392–393).

Reconstructing the Central Image

Having deciphered the reading order of the calendar, identified the personages who appear in the painting as the patrons of sorcerers represented by the Macuiltonaleque and the Cihuateteo, and interpreted the context of the scenes in which they perform in a mythic act of cosmic creation, we can reconstruct, through a contextual analysis, much of what had appeared within the central image of Fonds Mexicains 20 from a few surviving details.

What is significant is that he leans backward to fire a spear with his atlatl at three warriors who fall from the heavens while four of his comrades not only assist him in the fighting but capture and decapitate the celestial enemies as well. The thematic elements that are shared between the Nuttall 21 scene and the central image of Fonds Mexicains 20 are unmistakable. Both Nine Wind and Five Rabbit wear a unique flint helmet that distinguishes them from nearly any of other creation heroes in the Mixtec codices. Both are engaged in an act of war with the heavens. Both stand within an architectural frame known as a *yuhua*, the Mixtec term for the crenelated walled enclosure that appears as part of the place sign in Fonds Mexicains 20 as well as the ballcourt at White Hill of Flints in Nuttall 21 (Smith 1973: 49; Pohl et al. 1997). While we will never know more specifically how Five Rabbit and One Monkey were engaged with the celestial event that appeared above them, we can assume that it was something equivalent to Nuttall 21 since these scenes are virtually unique in the extant corpus of pre-Columbian manuscripts. Given the limited space, it seems unlikely that any star warriors appeared, so the artists probably designed a more basic allegorical composition such as the simultaneous appearance of the stars, the moon, and the sun, symbols of both eclipse and world renewal (Hamann 2002; Pohl 2005).

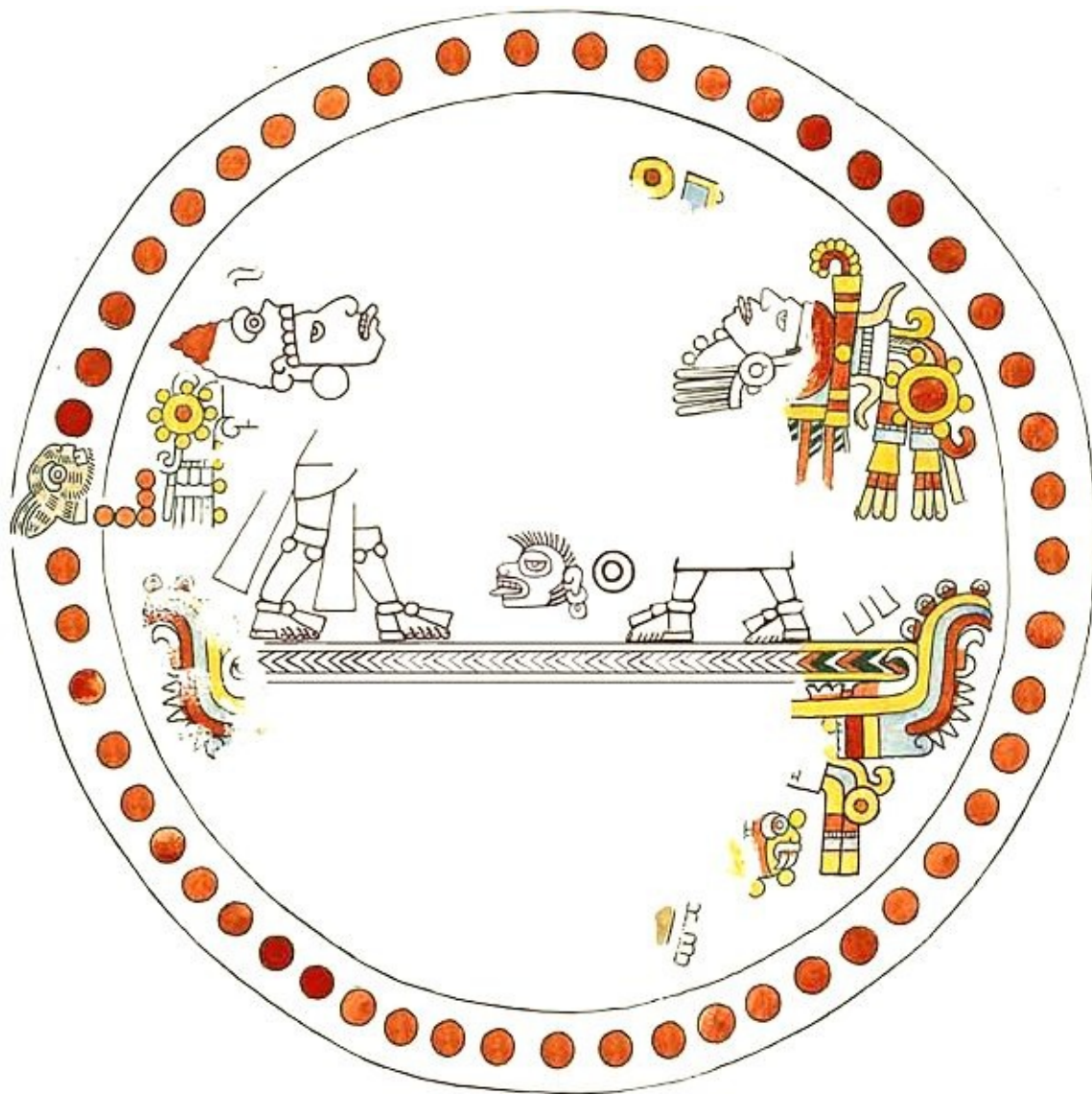


Figure 10.6. Reconstruction of the central image of Folsom Mexican manuscript 20. Author's illustration. First, the name Five Rabbit was painted adjacent to the personage to the left indicating that this must have been the Macuiltonal known by that name. Enough of his headdress survives to indicate that Five Rabbit was wearing a flint helmet. The figure facing him at right should therefore be his consort, the Cihuateotl One Monkey. This is confirmed by a surviving fragment of her headdress, which shares details in composition with the other four Cihuateteo appearing in the painting. The perpendicular orientation of their headdresses indicate that both Five Rabbit and One Monkey are directing their attention at the heavens, but there is little else to suggest what the action in the scene may have entailed, other than the fact that they are standing on a chevron band that signifies an act of conquest. Fortunately, comparisons with ritual events appearing in other pre-Columbian codices give us some significant insights.



Figure 10.7. Detail of the culture hero Nine Wind in Nuttall 21. Author's illustration.

The Macuiltonaleque, the Cihuateteo, and the Sacred Directions

The Macuiltonaleque and the Cihuateteo represented a subcategory of Nahua spirit forces known as Tzitzimime. In general, Tzitzimime were frightening creatures with fleshless jaws or skulls and claws for hands and feet (Pohl 1998: 191–197, 2007a).⁴ Punishers or protectors, they exemplified an indigenous axiom that what caused misfortune could also reverse it. They were considered to be the source of diseases, and yet they were invoked by curers. They could incite murder, drunkenness, and lasciviousness, but they were also the castigators of overindulgent sinners. They brought torrential storms that destroyed crops, and yet they were petitioned by the rain-bringers. In short, they represented a blend of the positive and negative qualities that composed both human social order and universal chaos.

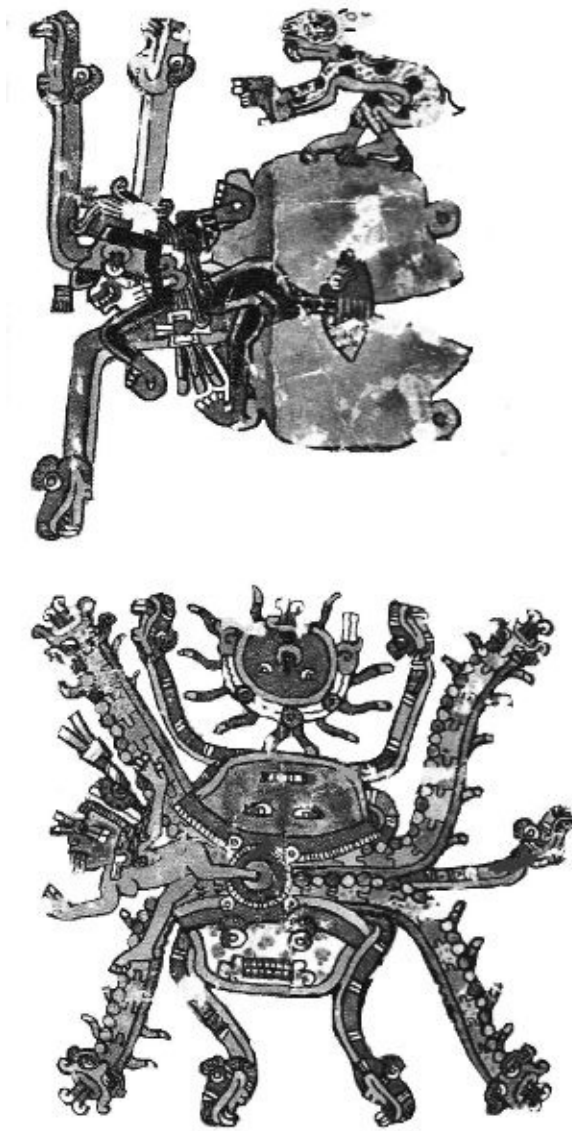


Figure 10.8. Birth of the Macuiltonaleque and the Cihuateteo together with noxious insects and poisonous snakes from ceramic feasting vessels. Author's Illustration.

Codex Borgia depicts a remarkable story that relates to the supernatural origin of the Macuiltonaleque and the Cihuateteo. In the upper register of page 47, a Macuiltonal emerges from a personified flint knife concealed within two ceramic basins of a form used to prepare large quantities of octli, an intoxicating beverage made from the maguey plant. The basins are set rim to rim and placed within a box composed of human bones.

A dog leaps over the top of the construction while five snakes slither out from the sides. The background of the scene is painted gray-blue to indicate a darkened sky, and it is marked with *u*-shaped signs that signify rainstorms. Five day signs appear within the scene: 4 Deer, 4 Monkey, 4 Rain, 4 House, and 4 Eagle, and these signify the nights that precede each of the birthdays of the Macuiltonaleque who appear in the procession that follows.

In the frame below, a Cihuateotl emerges in much the same way as the Macuiltonal but steps forth from a large jewel placed between two smaller drinking bowls. The bowls are set on a black and red skirt decorated with lunar signs and unspun cotton. A red spider crawls over the bowls while four snakes and four centipedes appear at the sides.



Figure 10.9. Reconstruction of a plate depicting a Cihuateotl, preserved in the American Museum of Natural History. Note the short skirt, deshevelled hair, and bare breasts, iconography associated with the Cihuateteo that appear in Codex Borgia. Author's illustration.

The darkened sky may signify twilight, but the rain does not appear. The day signs given for this event are 13 Wind, 13 Death, 13 Flint, 13 Dog, and 13 Jaguar, and these signify the nights that precede the birthdays of the Cihuateteo who follow in the procession across two pages of the codex directly below their respective consorts of Macuiltonaleque.

The first appearance of the Macuiltonaleque and the Cihuateteo was a miraculous event, while the significance of their strange appearance with twisted limbs, extruded eyeballs, and distorted mouths, along with the slithering creatures who accompany them, is found with variant religious stories recorded throughout southern Mexico (Pohl 2007a: 28–29). According to various versions of the legend, a sun god fell in love with a woman, but her father disapproved of the relationship. The sun god therefore devised a scheme to visit his lover and transformed himself into a hummingbird. The father allowed the girl to keep the bird as a pet, and she took him into her bedchamber. When she awoke to find that the hummingbird was actually the sun god, she was frightened for what her father would do, and

the couple fled across the sea. When the father realized what had happened, he commanded the storm god to seek out and destroy the couple. The sun god saved himself by becoming a turtle and swimming under water, but the storm god killed his lover with a bolt of lightning. When he resurfaced and saw the woman's blood everywhere, the sun god was consumed with remorse for the death that he had caused.



Figure 10.10. Penitent confessing his sins manifested as noxious creatures before a priest, depicted in the Florentine Codex, book 6. Author's illustration.

The sun god asked dragonflies to collect the woman's remains in thirteen ollas. After waiting for thirteen days, he reopened the jars and found that twelve contained snakes, spiders, and other poisonous insects, but the thirteenth contained his lover, who had been resurrected and transformed into the moon. By one account, the dog was then charged with destroying the other twelve containers, but it was tricked into releasing the snakes and insects into the world to plague mankind. Other legends describe either a man or a toad as being responsible for the deed. Nevertheless, the connection between the general outline of such stories and the creation legend portrayed in Codex Borgia is clear in illustrating that the Macuiltonaleque and the Cihuateteo were magically brought into existence together with disease, sin, and other catastrophes at the creation of the world.

Following their supernatural birth, Codex Borgia (pp. 47–48) continues by illustrating additional characteristics for the Macuiltonaleque and the Cihuateteo. As in Fonds Mexicains 20, their calendrical names are included within the counts of the trecenas of the tonalpohualli associated with the South for the Macuiltonaleque and the West for the Cihuateteo. Variations in the body colors black, blue, yellow, red, and green for the Macuiltonaleque also link them

individually to each of the four directions. Most are depicted either vomiting or consuming liquids from vessels that include blood, either smoke or a black fluid, and excrement. In one case the Cihuateotl One Rain is vomiting a centipede. Cognate scenes in Codex Vaticanus B depict both a centipede as well as a snake issuing from the mouths of two of the Cihuateteo. We have seen that these creatures are symbolically linked to both sin and disease in the creation story. Excrement was also metaphorically associated with sin (Klein 1990–1991, 1993). For example, a procession of the five avatars of the goddess Tlazolteotl appears below the images of the Macuiltonaleque and the Cihuateteo (Seler 1963, 2: plate 48). Names for the goddess were translated literally as “dirt eater” or “filth eater,” with respect metaphorically to her role in consuming the sins of those petitioners who invoked her with prayers and ritual acts of penitence through sacrifice, while inflicting disease on those who disregarded their spiritual obligations (Sullivan 1983). Clearly, the Macuiltonaleque and the Cihuateteo were attributed a comparable role.

Pages 49–53 of Borgia depict the establishment of the five sacred directions. They indicate that the Macuiltonaleque and the Cihuateteo were specifically associated with sacrificial rituals of penitence. In each of the scenes the spirit forces descend from the sky as couples carrying sacrificial banners, binding ropes, stones, axes, and other objects associated with acts of castigation for sins that ranged from adultery to drunkenness (Taube 1993: 11–13). Many of these same objects are presented by the paired Macuiltonaleque and Cihuateteo in Fonds Mexicains 20. The males carry spears and shields but wield sacrificial knives rather than atlatls, for example, while the females carry binding ropes and sacrificial banners together with small bowls within which are set sacrificial knives and maguey thorns.

Notably, the latter are associated specifically with scenes appearing in the Mixtec codices. Codex Vienna depicts the founding of the four sacred directions in scenes in which a culture heroine named Lady Eleven Water, accompanied by a possum, makes offerings of bowls of blood with flint knives set upon them. The same goddess appears in Nuttall 3 with the possum and three female attendants presenting the same bowls with knives at the outset of the War of Heaven and the Five Sacred Directions as it took place in and around the northern end of the Valley of Nochixtlan (Pohl 2004).

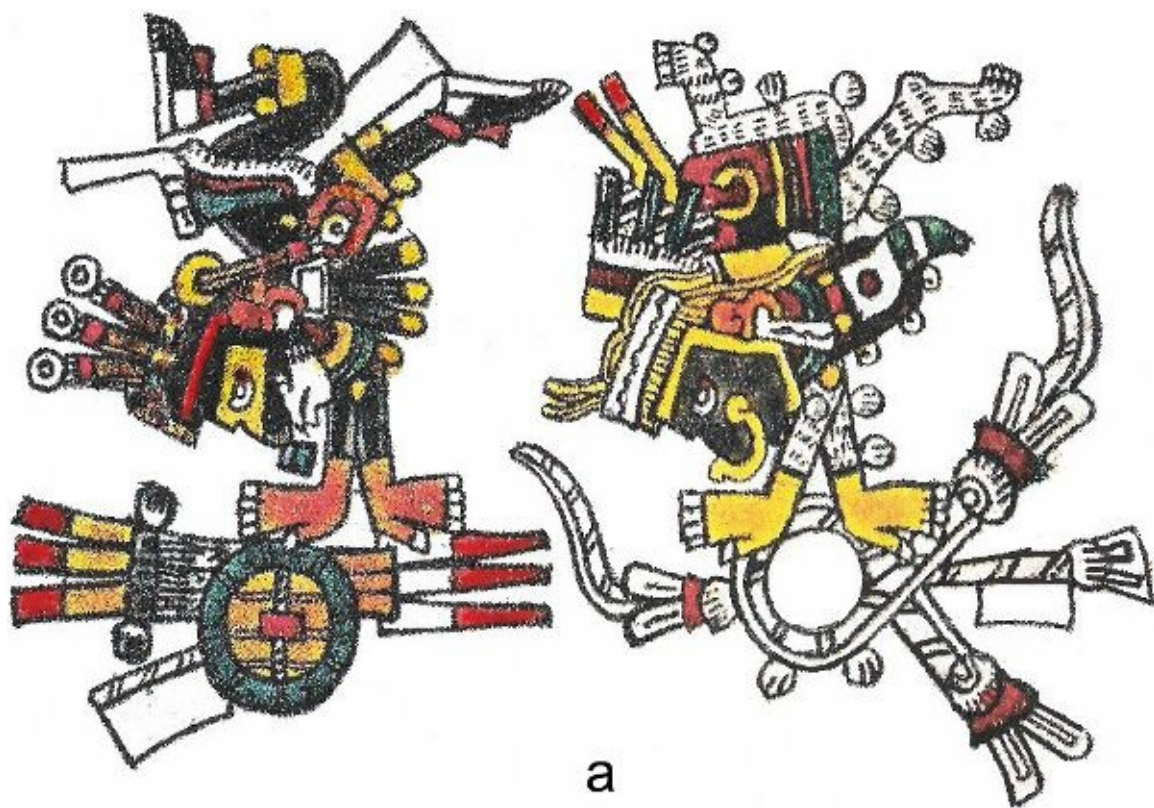




Figure 10.11. (a) Borgia 49 depicts the Macuiltonal and the Cihuateotl of the East descending with sacrificial banners, weapons, and ropes; (b) Vienna 20 depicts Lady Eleven Water carrying bowls with flint knives. This is a uniquely Mixtec form of ritualism further supporting a Mixtec culture source for Fonds Mexicains 20. Author's illustration.

Discussion

Much research has been dedicated to the study of indigenous literacy of the Americas (Boone and Urton 2011). For the most part, scholars have tended to focus on particular media such as monuments, frescos, painted ceramics, codices, or other devices like khipu. Highland Mexican specialists rely heavily on a remarkable corpus of colonial writings and pictographic manuscripts as their “rosetta stones” to interpret pre-Columbian codices. However, this approach implies that our ability to understand a codex is only as good as our ability to find a colonial source to interpret it. Furthermore, we must take into consideration that although many colonial sources were created by indigenous people, most of these documents are hybrids that reflect just as much, if not more, about European ways of thinking and organizing information as Native American, regardless of their graphic appearance.

It is equally important to consider how an indigenous pictographic writing system functioned within a broader communicative environment and to consider the behavioral context within which the Late Postclassic Nahua-Mixteca International style might have evolved. By showing how a manuscript like *Fonds Mexicains 20* worked together with associated objects that augmented its ritual use within an archaeological setting, we gain a more profound appreciation for its effectiveness as a communication system as well as attain some surprising insights with regard to the mantic complexity of its indigenous world view.

Image sorcery was a fundamental part of the invocation of the supernatural that extends to other pre-Columbian codices. C. A. Burland (1950) first proposed that *Fejérváry-Mayer 1*, with its diagram of the four directions of time and space, could be directly compared to a Navajo sand painting and suggested that it functioned in an analogous manner as a device for conjuring gods and other potent spirit forces. The similarities in composition are unmistakable. The four cardinal directions are painted in representative colors and laid out in the form of a cross with the intercardinal directions looping out between them (Boone 2007: 114–117). The 260-day calendar is assigned to the directions in a manner comparable to *Fonds Mexicains 20*, except that each trecena is marked by the day sign that it begins with. Sacred trees are placed at each direction, and many are accompanied by an emblematic avian creature. A pair of deities, the nine lords of the night, stand on either side of the trees at each of the cardinal directions. At the sacred center stands the fire god *Xiuhtechtli* wielding an atlatl and spears.

Many of the ritual pages of *Codex Borgia 29–46* are comparable in composition as well. They have been interpreted in different ways, ranging from the narrative of an heroic journey, a sequence of ceremonies carried out within the precincts of a major ceremonial center, and a myth of cosmic creation, for example (Seler 1963, 2: 9–61; Byland 1993; Byland and Pohl 1994: 150–165; Pohl 1998; Nowotny 2005: 26–34; Boone 2007: 171–210; Milbrath 2013). Although some scholars propose these as contrasting interpretations, the fact is that one does not preclude another, for the images are derived from multiple narratives that have been carefully integrated into complex orthogonal constructions in much the same way as *Fonds Mexicains 20* and *Fejérváry-Mayer 1*. While many of the people, places, and things depicted are the subject of their own religious stories, the primary objective is to compress the images into the parameters of a single page. In this way the painting becomes a kind of battery that is loaded with the inherent energy of the spirit forces that are represented and then released into a transcendental ritual space in which the painting is displayed through the recitation of prayers, songs, and incantations together with associated ritual objects fashioned in other media. It is the visual intensity of the diagram that is the immediate and primary expression in the art while the narrative is referential. Consequently, we are dealing with two fundamental, even ageless forms of artistic experience that have been ingeniously combined: the experiential, even ecstatic, on the one hand and the narrative on the other (Schaeffer 2000: 214–216). It is significant that the art style that characterizes *Fonds Mexicains 20* has its origins in image sorcery and conjuring in feasting wares rather than the commemorative historical monuments of earlier cultures. It is only after the style is adopted by over fifteen different language groups that we see it transformed into a new and entirely distinctive form of picture writing.

Notes

1. The male Maquiltonal Five Rabbit is wearing a skirt while the female One Monkey is wearing a loin cloth, for instance. Other elements in the scene are simply nonsensical, such as a stand-alone yellow and red disk, a free-floating flower with feathers attached to it, and a bundle of sticks flying overhead with eight dots attached to it and finished with a small red disk with a quetzal feather tail.
2. In two publications I proposed that directional systems were local and even suggested that they might apply to the southern end of the Nochixtlan Valley as a directional scheme deployed by the kingdoms of Jaltepec and Tilantongo (Pohl and Byland 1990; Byland and Pohl 1994: 82). Two signs, Hill of the Sun at Achiutla and Hill of the Skull at Mitlatongo, certainly conform to this proposal as East and South. Two others, Monte Negro and Jaltepec Mountain as North and West, were more conjectural. If colleagues do not find these satisfactory, it does not mean that directional signs for North and West are nonexistent in the environment; we just do not know where they might be at the present time, or they may be represented by variant signs other than the ones depicted in *Fonds Mexicains 20* and *Vienna*. I never advocated that *Fonds Mexicains 20* referred to a directional system for the southern end of the Nochixtlan Valley specifically. My main point therefore stands that cardinal direction place signs are found in many places and are therefore localized. They do not constitute the boundaries of a Mixtec nation as Brotherston and Boone, following Jansen, have advocated.
3. Brotherston (1995: 147) identified the central place sign in *Fonds Mexicains 20* as representing Coixtlahuaca on the basis of the two fragmentary heads of an earth monster, which he suggests are actually serpent heads that represent qualifiers for place signs of Coixtlahuaca in Colonial lienzos. While I might agree that *Fonds Mexicains 20* comes from Coixtlahuaca, I don't recognize his identification as proof of this, since the earth monster is really only used to qualify place signs that represent a cave at a sacred center in general (Byland and Pohl 1994: 83–85). They do not represent serpent heads. Tututepec was ruled by an ethnically Mixtec elite that dominated a local Chatino population. Eight Deer of Tilantongo had ruled there, but Tututepec nobles also invoked Tolteca-Chichimeca migration legends linking them by sea with Jalisco and by highland trade routes with Acatlan. Consequently, they used Nahuatl names and titles. Tututepec is known for its highly refined Nahua-Mixteca-style ceramic tradition with figurative imagery depicting historical narratives. We shouldn't be surprised, however, if imagery more typical of Tzitzimime ritualism is found in this region, where the elite were deploying multiple ritual agendas.
4. Michael Lind (1994) originally identified the patterns of alternating disembodied hands, hearts, skulls, crossed bones, and other objects as being diagnostic of the sacrificial imagery associated with the polychrome ceramic tradition from the Plain of Puebla. Klein (2000) and Pohl (1998, 2007b) have discussed the association of this pattern with the Tzitzimime, a generalized term for gods and other spirit beings who are related to death and sacrifice. This is because they have not been able to correlate the pattern with any specific god or goddess exclusively. Therefore the cults of the Maquiltonal, Cihuateteo, Tezcatlipoca, and Cihuacoatl, for example, are seen by these scholars as subcategories of a broader Tzitzimime theme to which the pattern applies in general.

Hernández Sánchez (2005: 159–175) ignores the Tzitzimime identification in favor of Jansen's vacuous cult of "night and darkness" (Jansen 1997) but then goes on to equate the symbolism with the worship of Tezcatlipoca on the basis of imagery that I have demonstrated from a number of sources as being representative of the Maquiltonal subcategory of Tzitzimime. For example, the Maquiltonal Five Grass, patron of the South in *Fonds Mexicains 20*, wears a black kilt with crossed bones, but he is obviously not Tezcatlipoca. The fact that he also wears a skeletal jaw should be sufficient to identify the Cholula drinking vessels, which Hernández Sánchez refers to as her primary evidence for Tezcatlipoca being a death deity, as one of the Maquiltonal. Nevertheless, I recognize an iconographic relationship between Tezcatlipoca and the Maquiltonal and have discussed it in detail in my articles.

Boone and Collins (2013) have proposed that patterns of alternating disembodied hands, hearts, skulls, and crossed bones, among other objects, are diagnostic of the cult of Tezcatlipoca. This might be true in regard to the temalacatl of Motecuhzoma I. I note that the images of the Toltec warrior on the stone is missing a foot, while Codex Magliabechiano shows a jaguar warrior attacking a captive standing on a temalacatl wearing the face paint of Tezcatlipoca. I also support the idea that the pattern represents a prayer because Urcid and I both proposed this many years before Boone and Collins did with regard to polychrome drinking vessels (Pohl 1998: 198, Urcid 2004).

Nevertheless, imagery appearing in polychrome ceramics, codices, and frescos from the Plain of Puebla and the Tehuacan Valley clearly indicates that the pattern is *not* indicative of a cult of Tezcatlipoca exclusively. Both Klein (2000) and I (Pohl 1998, 2001, 2007b) have discussed the imagery with regard to a number of categories of gods and spirit forces, including the Maquiltonal and the Cihuateteo as well as Tezcatlipoca, among other deities, but Boone

and Collins just ignored this. Altar-Ofrenda A at Tizatlan associates the pattern with Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli, for example—another member of the broader Tzitzimime category. The problem is that Boone sees Aztec imperial influence through the cults of the standardized pantheon of gods like Tezcatlipoca as the primary generator for the origin and spread of Nahua-Mixteca iconography together with its associated ritualism while dismissing the Maquiltonal as “poorly understood,” which is simply incorrect, as this volume on sorcery demonstrates (Boone 2007: 119).

Tezcatlipoca is the Aztec pantheon version of a Maquiltonal, a man-god as sorcerer and culture hero, not the other way around (Pohl 2007b: 11). A Maquiltonal is not a deity but more of a personification of a numerical day sign, something along the lines of Maya full-figure calendrical glyphs and way beings. A generalized term in American Indian theology is spirit force. This chapter demonstrates that the origin of the Maquiltonal cult extends back into the Classic period among the Maya, as does Tzitzimime iconography with its pattern of disembodied hands, skulls, eyeballs, and such, long before the invention of the Aztec pantheon.

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Nahua Sorcery and the Classic Maya Antecedents of the Macuiltonaleque

Jeremy D. Coltman

Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's magnum opus, the encyclopedic *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España*, or Florentine Codex, remains our most important resource on the subject of pre-Hispanic and colonial-period Nahua religion. While much of this information relates to a standard pantheon of gods and the *veintena* ceremonies in which they were venerated, there are other slightly more esoteric and obscure beings and rituals that gain mention from time to time. In his classic study of more than forty practitioners of magic, Alfredo López Austin (1967: 87–113) mined the Sahagúntine corpus and divided these practitioners into categories, the largest of which was that of the *tlatlacatecolo*. This group comprised thirteen practitioners of esoteric forms of magic used for maleficent ends, primarily in inflicting harm on others. There has been surprisingly little emphasis by researchers regarding these negative aspects of Mesoamerican religion (Helmke and Nielsen 2009: 84). As Louise Burkhart (1989: 37) notes: "Negative forces were not construed as enemies of goodness, nor as a turning away from good, but as functional components of the cosmos." These functional components would fit "the theory of the unity of knowledge," which was used to show that those who could cure could also kill (Douglas 1991: 728). Signorini and Lupo (1992: 81) offer an explanation as to how this works: "Significantly enough, the instruments used for healing action are the same as those used to do harm. The reasoning is that the way to cure the victim of a spell is to strike the one responsible for sending it; and the cure employs the same means that person used."

Despite the ambiguity of sorcerers and healers, there were some who lacked any redeeming qualities. One particularly maleficent group of Nahua sorcerers, the *Temacpalitotique* ("those that make one dance in the palm of their hand") desperately sought the severed arm of women who died during childbirth for use in their various spells, enchantments, and other nefarious misdeeds (Sahagún 1950–1980: 10: 39; Serna 1953: 169).¹ The severed arm of these women served much like a fetish object yielded by this group of sorcerer-thieves. As Leslie Sharp (2000: 294) notes, "Body fragments can harbor the ability to harm or heal, charged with powers that exceed those of the bodies from whence they came. As the intertwined realms of magic, sorcery, and healing attest, bodies are frequently targets of aggressions, fragmentation, and subsequent commodification."

Such notions are well worth exploring in Late Postclassic Nahua art and ritual. One such set of symbolism in the Late Postclassic International style concerns disparate parts of the human body, particularly hands, hearts, skulls, and crossbones. The articulation of these motifs seen over and over again constitutes a theme that has been generally associated with

death and human sacrifice. While not completely incorrect, such an interpretation says very little as to the exact social behavior with which that emblematic complex is rooted. As will be subsequently shown, the hand was associated with Tezcatlipoca, the paramount sorcerer who was also counted among the Temacpalitotique. One group of spirit beings known as the Macuiltonaleque, patrons of palace sorcerers and the five-day signs of the southern directions, had a hand decorating their mouth as a primary diagnostic attribute.² As a powerful appendage that had the capability of autonomous action, the hand was particularly associated with divinatory and healing practices. This feature may very well derive from certain aspects of Classic Maya religious belief, particularly embodied in the nightmarish *wahy* beings, some of whom feasted on human body parts while others used parts such as the hand as a diagnostic attribute, thereby anticipating its later use by the Macuiltonaleque in Late Postclassic central and southern Mexico.

Nahua Sorcery

The artistic style of the Eastern Nahua is a regional style in the Mixteca-Puebla tradition, which is typically considered one of the definitive artistic styles of the Late Postclassic period in Mesoamerica (CE 1350–1521). This term was first coined by George Valliant (1938) and was described as a widely diffused “culture.” Expanding on Valliant’s definition, Henry B. Nicholson (1960, 1966, 1982) argued that the style could best be defined in stylistic and iconographic terms. Indeed, a trademark of this style includes a geometric precision in delineation with vivid coloration, leading some authors to draw similarities with Disney caricatures (Nicholson 1982: 229; Pohl 2003: 201). A unique feature of the Mixteca-Puebla style is its ability to transcend various visual media and appear on altars and benches, mural paintings, polychrome pottery, and in codices as well as being rendered in stone, metal, and bone. One of the more extensive sources of Mixteca-Puebla art was compiled in the dissertation of James Ramsey (1975). While he all too liberally applied the ethnic-linguistic term “Mixtec” to the style in general, he also noted considerable variation in themes, especially with the art of Puebla and Tlaxcala. Another feature unique to this style is its wide geographic distribution, causing Donald Robertson (1970: 88) to favor an “International” style, with more recent definitions opting for a “Postclassic International style” (Smith 2003: 182), which accounts for subsets of Aztec, Mixteca-Puebla, coastal Maya murals, and the strikingly similar artistic traditions of highland Guatemala. In a further attempt to clarify this concept, John Pohl (2003) has argued that Nahua-Mixtec be used since those two cultures were most responsible for its production and usage. For the sake of clarity, this study will use the term Eastern Nahua, as it will primarily be concerned with Catalina, Cholula’s elite polychrome that was also present in the Valley of Puebla and neighboring Tlaxcala and was being produced from CE 1350 to 1550.

In his seminal analysis of the Mixteca-Puebla artistic-iconographic style, Nicholson (1960: 614) noted that a frequent and diagnostic symbol set specific to Nahua groups in Puebla and Tlaxcala is one composed of alternating skulls and crossbones, often in combination with hearts, eyes, and severed hands. According to Karl Taube (2010: 154), this emblematic

complex was fully articulated among the Classic Maya, as can be seen on a fan or parasol depicting alternating hands, feet, eyeballs, and crossbones (figure 11.1a).



Figure 11.1. Classic Maya and Eastern Nahua depictions of disparate body parts: (a) detail of a fan or parasol from Late Classic Maya vessel depicting spiral mirror in center surrounded by eyeballs, crossbones, hands, feet, and long bones (after Taube 2010: fig. 6e); (b) bowl depicting hand, eyeball, and long bone (detail of K1181); drawing by author; (c) bowl depicting hand, eyeball, and long bone (detail of K1380); drawing by author; (d) ceramic cache lid depicting hand, skull, and eyeball as wrapped bundle; drawing by author after slide in the H. B. Nicholson Slide Archive, California State University, Los Angeles; (e) Late Postclassic polychrome plate depicting skull, hand, and crossbones, attributed to Cholula Puebla, Weltmuseum Wien, Vienna; photo by Christian Mendez, © KHM-Museumsverband Wien; (f) plate from Cholula depicting hand as central motif (note rope and crenellated fringe edging around rim of plate); photo by author; (g) Eastern Nahua vase depicting eyeballs, hands, hearts, and skulls, Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution; artwork by John Pohl.

Phantasmagorical spirits known as *wahy*, the nightmarish animal beings of the forest, feast on bowls of hands, long bones, and eyeballs, a similar conception to the Aztec death god Mictlantecuhtli and other beings who were said to feast on feet and hands in Mictlan (Nicholson and Quinones Keber 1997: 177) (figure 11.1b and c). The Eastern Nahua mastered this emblematic complex in their polychrome ceramics, a tradition that may have

derived from Late Classic Maya polychrome traditions and technologies (Lind 1994: 98; Pohl 2003: 201). A Mixteca-Puebla ceramic textile lid attributed to Cholula (possibly from a cache vessel) depicts a skull, hand, and disembodied eye painted as a wrapped bundle (figure 11.1d). Known as *tlaquimilolli*, a Nahuatl word meaning something wrapped or bundled, this generally refers to a group of objects that act as divine images wrapped in cloth mantles (Olivier 2007). Plates and serving dishes also depict this complex. A dish from Cholula depicts a skull, hand, cross bones, and mirror motif, recalling the contents of such dishes held by the Maya *wahy* creatures (figure 11.1e). In at least one case, a plate from Cholula depicts the hand as the sole motif, again with the idea that this is a textile being represented (figure 11.1f). One well-published vase stands out as typical of this Eastern Nahua subset of the Mixteca-Puebla artistic style (Westheim 1972: 241, fig. 278; 243, fig. 280; Pohl 1998, 2003) (figure 11.1g). It is decorated with human skulls, hearts, eyeballs, and human hands. Currently housed in the National Museum of the American Indian at the Smithsonian Institution, this vase also depicts the black vertical lines and stripes along the exterior rim. Black and white stripes on vessels and this specific iconography may be associated with Tezcatlipoca and perhaps even prayers that invoked this deity (Hernández Sánchez 2004: 17–18; Boone and Collins 2013). The pattern occasionally becomes more complex. For instance, incense pans from Tenochtitlan have broad bands decorated in sections with white disks on a black background as well as the characteristic black and white stripes (Hernández Sánchez 2004: 21–24; Peperstraete 2006: 19–20). These patterns are strikingly similar to the altar mural at Ocotelulco, with its black background patterned with white disks and netting. The black and white banding also appears as decorated attire on Tezcatlipoca. The fringe of Tezcatlipoca's loincloth on page 17 of the Codex Borgia as well as the seat he sits on in Codex Tudela 15r confirm that this pattern is specifically related to this deity. Furthermore, a plate depicting Tezcatlipoca, excavated at Ocotelulco, is decorated with black and white banding on the rim. Part of the headdress assemblage of Tezcatlipoca also depicts black and white banding, which is also found on an image of the deity from the Codex Porfirio Diaz.

Following Hernández Sánchez's interpretation of specific bands on polychrome representing the gods of death and the underworld and even composing a prayer to the dead (2004: 17–22; 2010: 263–265), Boone and Collins (2013: 233) apply the idea of a prayer to Tezcatlipoca on Motecuhzoma's sun stone. The authors focus on the two bands framing the conquest scenes on the top and bottom sides of the monument and argue that this set of motifs is a prayer specifically associated with Tezcatlipoca. Boone and Collins (2013: 230) correctly note that this arrangement of motifs is found on the murals at Ocotelulco and Tizatlan, Tlaxcala, as well as on ceramics in the Mixteca-Puebla style found in the states of Veracruz, Puebla, Tlaxcala, and Oaxaca. The sites of Tizatlan and Ocotelulco provide the closest parallel to Motecuhzoma's sun stone. These sites depict altar murals decorated with skulls, hearts, hands, and a stylized encircled eyeball motif (Caso 1927; Pohl 1998). The "encircled eye" motif has proven problematic. As Boone and Collins (2013: 231) note, this motif has been interpreted by various researchers as a shield (Caso 1927: 153), large *chalchihuitl* (Olguín and Macías 1995: 32, 36), bulging eye (Hernández Sánchez 2004: 18, 21), and mirror (Peperstraete 2002: 23–24, 2006: 27–28). I find it plausible that it is both an extruded eyeball and a mirror, as sight and mirrors go hand in hand in ancient Mesoamerican

art and lore. In at least one case this motif is specifically associated with Tezcatlipoca. A polychrome ceramic effigy head of the deity in the Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna depicts this motif on the back of the head. Its association with the preeminent sorcerer of central Mexico seems to indicate its role as an object of reflective darkness and divination (Coltman et al. 2020).

The ambivalent Tezcatlipoca “Smoking Mirror” was the archsorcerer of Late Postclassic central Mexico. Described by Nicholson (1971: 412) as an “omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient deity,” he is the embodiment of chaos, associated with darkness and his animal alter-ego, the jaguar, and seldom depicted without his primary diagnostic attribute, a smoking mirror, which often appears in place of his foot or as an element attached to his head (Olivier 2003). Tezcatlipoca embodied Nahua ambiguity at its finest; a sorcerer deity who could inflict any number of maladies but who was prayed to and petitioned as *yohualli*, *ehecatli*, “night, wind,” one of his many manifestations (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 6: 51). Various mythic acts involving Tezcatlipoca are described in book 3 of the Florentine Codex. One such myth may be describing him as the original source of the pollutant and malevolent disease-causing winds that are so well known throughout modern-day Mesoamerica.³ According to Sahagún (1950–1982, bk. 3: 27–28), Tezcatlipoca went to the marketplace of Tollan in the shape of Tlacahuepan, or Cuexcoch, with the Aztec patron deity Huitzilopochtli as a small child dancing in the palm of his hand. The sorcerer then calls for him to be stoned, which in turn causes his body to rot, with the winds carrying the foul stench that causes many to die (Sahagún 1950–1980, bk. 3: 25–26). In book 6 Tezcatlipoca is therefore described as arbitrary, capricious, and a mocker: “He willeth in the manner he desireth. He is placing us in the palm of his hand; he is making us round. We roll, we become as pellets. He is casting us from side to side. We make him laugh; he is making a mockery of us” (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 6: 51).

Aside from just being a source of malevolent and polluting wind, the action of Tezcatlipoca mentioned above is characteristic of the Temacpalitotique ([figure 11.2a](#)). These sorcerer-thieves followed the day sign 1 Wind, an evil sign in which offerings were made to the god of wind, Quetzalcoatl. They adorned the image of the wind god:

And the ones known as men who danced with a dead woman’s forearm, who crazed people, when perhaps they would commit a robbery somewhere and spirit something from someone’s home, would adorn the image of One Wind [Quetzalcoatl]. It went as their guide, at their head, guiding, marching in front. And they went bearing with them the forearm of a woman who had died in childbed, and could not give birth to what was in her womb. When they took it from the one who had died, they only stole it during the night; they cut it off at midnight. (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 4: 102)

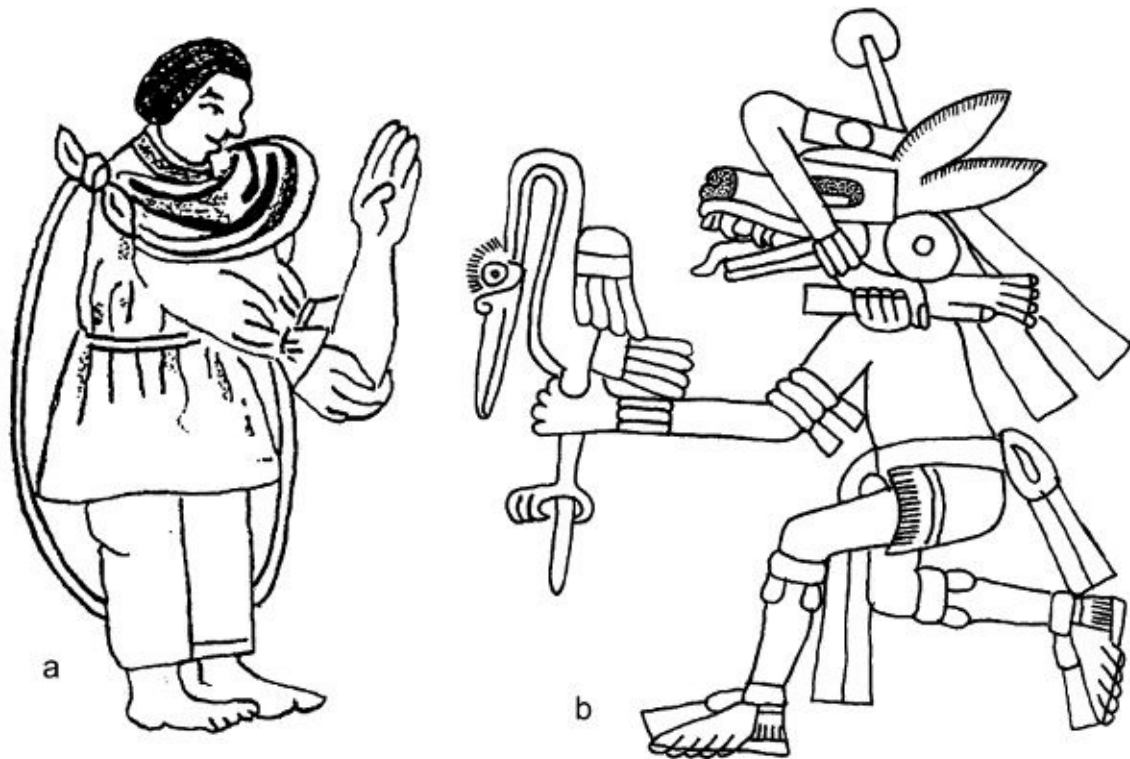


Figure 11.2. The Temacpalitotique: (a) detail of Temacpalitoti holding severed arm of woman who died in childbirth, Florentine Codex; drawing by author; (b) possible nahual as Temacpalitoti dancing with a severed arm, Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, p. 32; drawing by author.

While the word is often translated as “those that dance with the arm of a dead woman,” Temacpalitotique literally translates as “those that make one dance in the palm of their hand,” and although in this case one took all of the forearm and hand, the power was apparently located in the internal part where one makes contact with the grasped people or things (López Austin 1966: 101). This dancer with a dead woman’s forearm, those known as *temacpalitoti* and *macpalitoti*, were also said to be the guardians of secret rituals that were used to put spells on people to induce sleep so that they could be robbed (Sahagún 1950–1980, bk. 10: 39; Serna 1953: 169).⁴ Furthermore, he carried the arm of a woman who had died during childbirth around as a potent fetish object or magical charm whose powers brought on sleep when it was hit upon the courtyard or against the lintel or hearth of the household of those about to be victimized:

And when those who danced with the forearm would somewhere destroy or rob people, one person carried and bore the forearm of the woman who had died in childbirth, on his shoulder. It was the one on her left, her left forearm. When he came to reach one’s home, but had not yet entered the house, first of all he struck the mid-point of the courtyard with the forearm. Twice he struck. On reaching the entrance of the house, he struck the portal, the lintel, and then he passed by the square, wooden pillar. Then he once again struck there before the hearth (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 4: 103).

The two actions of the Temacpalitotique involve both enchanting with the severed arm of a woman who died during childbirth and making one dance in the palm of their hand. While images of these sorcerers outside of the Florentine Codex are quite rare, one probable image of a Temacpalitoti appears on page 32 of the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer (figure 11.2b). In this case, an animal, possibly in nahual form, is engaged in dancing about with a severed human arm.

Aside from the indispensable work of Sahagún, another ethnohistorical source provides some useful information. The treatise written by the Spanish ecclesiastic Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón is a unique resource for the study of Late Postclassic and colonial-period Nahua religion. Unlike other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century missionary-ethnographers, he recorded a number of Nahuatl conjurations and incantations that were employed by native practitioners (Serna 1953; Coe and Whittaker 1982; Andrews and Hassig 1987). Within this treatise, Ruiz de Alarcón describes a spell for casting sleep (Coe and Whittaker 1982: 109–111), which is the provenience of the Temacpalitotique who carried severed arms of women who had died in childbirth and who cast spells to make the charmed ones fall asleep so they could be robbed and violated. Interestingly, the description of this spell from Ruiz de Alarcón does not mention the Temacpalitotique specifically but instead invokes various names for Tezcatlipoca, including *ninoyoalitoatzin* (“I am the One called Night”), *nehuatl niyaotl* (“I, I am the adversary”), and *ninoquequeloatzin* (“I am the Mocker”). One spell or charm is used for the sleeping mat where a prayer is made toward one’s bed when one is about to go to sleep. This is done so that the potential victims will not be enchanted or have a spell cast on them while they are sleeping. Once again, it is not the Temacpalitotique that are specifically invoked by name but by various names known for Tezcatlipoca: *auh ye huitz yn tlahueliloc* (“But now comes the Hated One”), *yn tecamocac ayahua* (“who mock people”), and *yollopoliuhqui* (“The Madman”). Commentary from Ruiz de Alarcón tells us that Martin de Luna, who was attributed as the one using this prayer, declared that while wizards and sorcerers had come with the intention of harming him on his bed and had even managed to lift up part of his clothing, they were not able to get around his invocations (Coe and Whittaker 1982: 111–112).

There can be little doubt that these sources imply that Tezcatlipoca was counted among the Temacpalitotique. Iconographic evidence from the Borgia group of pre-Hispanic codices strengthens this identification even further. On page 18 of the Codex Borgia, a turkey with the black and white striping characteristic of Tezcatlipoca descends with a severed human arm clutched firmly in its beak (figure 11.3a). A figure below, wearing the face paint of Tezcatlipoca and the white and red striped body paint of someone bound for sacrifice, decapitates himself. According to Nicholson (1971: 412), Chalchiuhtotallin (“precious turkey”) was a common theophanic form of Tezcatlipoca, and he is illustrated as such on page 17 of the Codex Borbonicus. Furthermore, there are a number of accounts describing Tezcatlipoca’s feet as being like that of a turkey or rooster (Olivier 2003: 236–237). The most telling example that Tezcatlipoca was a Temacpalitoti comes from page 44 of the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, where he holds a severed human arm to his face with the palm placed directly over his mouth (figure 11.3b). As Seler (1901–1902: 206) originally noted long ago, this is strikingly similar to another image of the Red Tezcatlipoca from page 11 of the Codex

Borgia, where he again holds a severed human arm to his face. A comparable image is found on page 30 of the Codex Vaticanus B. There are probably two significant ideas at work here. The first naturally concerns the Temacpalitotique. It should be recalled that it was not just any ordinary forearm that was of interest to the Temacpalitotique, but the forearm of a Mociuaquetzqui, a woman who had died during childbirth (Seler 1901–1902: 206). The other possibility, and one that need not be mutually exclusive with the latter, is that this hand from a dead woman's forearm may be invoking the male counterparts to the patrons of women who died in childbirth. Known as Macuiltonaleque, they were spirit patrons of palace sorcerers and curers whose distinguishing feature was the *motemacpalhuiticac* (“hand covering the mouth”).

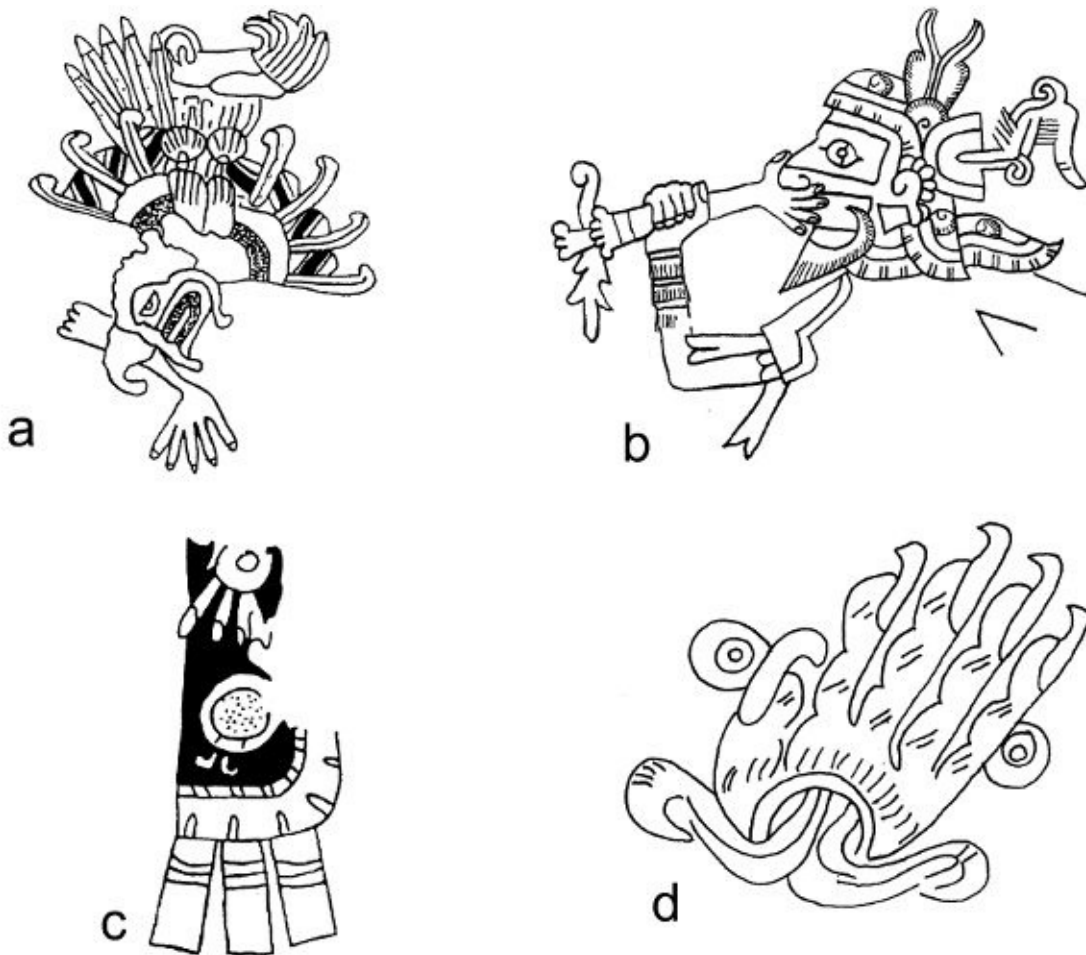


Figure 11.3. Tezcatlipoca with severed arm and hand symbolism: (a) Chalchiuhtotallin, a theophanic form of Tezcatlipoca, descending with a severed arm clutched in his beak, Codex Borgia, p. 18; drawing by author; (b) Tezcatlipoca holding a severed arm to his face with palm placed directly over mouth, detail of Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, p. 44; drawing by author; (c) textile garment decorated with hand and smoking mirror hanging from arm of Tezcatlipoca, Codex Borgia, p. 17 (after Taube 2010: fig. 6a); (d) severed hand conflated with a smoking mirror, detail of a large basin attributed to coastal Veracruz; drawing by author after object in Los Angeles County Museum of Art

The Macuiltonaleque

The display of human body parts is quite common in Amerindian adornment and ritual (see

Chacon and Dye 2007). The hand in particular seems to have been one of the more favored body parts used to decorate shields, staffs, eyes, and faces (Rands 1957; Palka 2002). According to Sahagún (1950–1982, bk. 1: 32) a white hand adorned the mouth of Macuilxochitl and Xochipilli, two closely related deities who emphasized a more festive and pleasurable side of life in activities such as gambling, feasting, and music (figure 11.4a–b). They are iconographically similar to Tezcatlipoca, in some cases almost indistinguishable (Jansen 1998). This has even on occasion led to confusion regarding just who was being represented, as is the case with a plate excavated at Ocotelulco (Pohl 1998: 196n8). On page 18 of the Codex Borgia, the five southern day signs of the Macuiltonaleque appear with Tezcatlipoca, who in theophanic form descends as a turkey with a severed human arm clutched in its beak (figure 11.3b). This unique scene would seem to invoke Tezcatlipoca as a Temacpalitoti as well as the Macuiltonaleque of the South. An image of Tezcatlipoca on page 17 of the Codex Borgia depicts him with a textile garment hanging from his arm that is adorned with a hand and a smoking mirror (Taube 2010: 153) (figure 11.3c). A large basin attributed to coastal Veracruz depicts crossbones, a skull, heart, and hand with a smoking mirror attached, the latter being a clear allusion to Tezcatlipoca as paramount sorcerer (figure 11.3d). This textile garment worn by Tezcatlipoca is similar to the altars of Tizatlán and Ocotelulco since both are painted with crenellated edging as if they were meant to be permanent renderings of textiles. As mentioned above, Eastern Nahuatl ceramics are also frequently painted with the crenellated edging of textiles.

The most elaborate representations of both these deities are xantiles from the Tehuacan Valley, Teotitlán de Camino, and Coxcatlán, with probable small-scale copies from Zacachila and Miahuatlán (Ramsey 1982: figs. 14 and 15). Several of the Nahuatl xantil censers are known to depict a Macuiltonal, with the most outstanding examples being from the Museo Rufino Tamayo, the Princeton University Art Museum (see Pohl 2007), and the Cleveland Museum of Art (figure 11.4b).

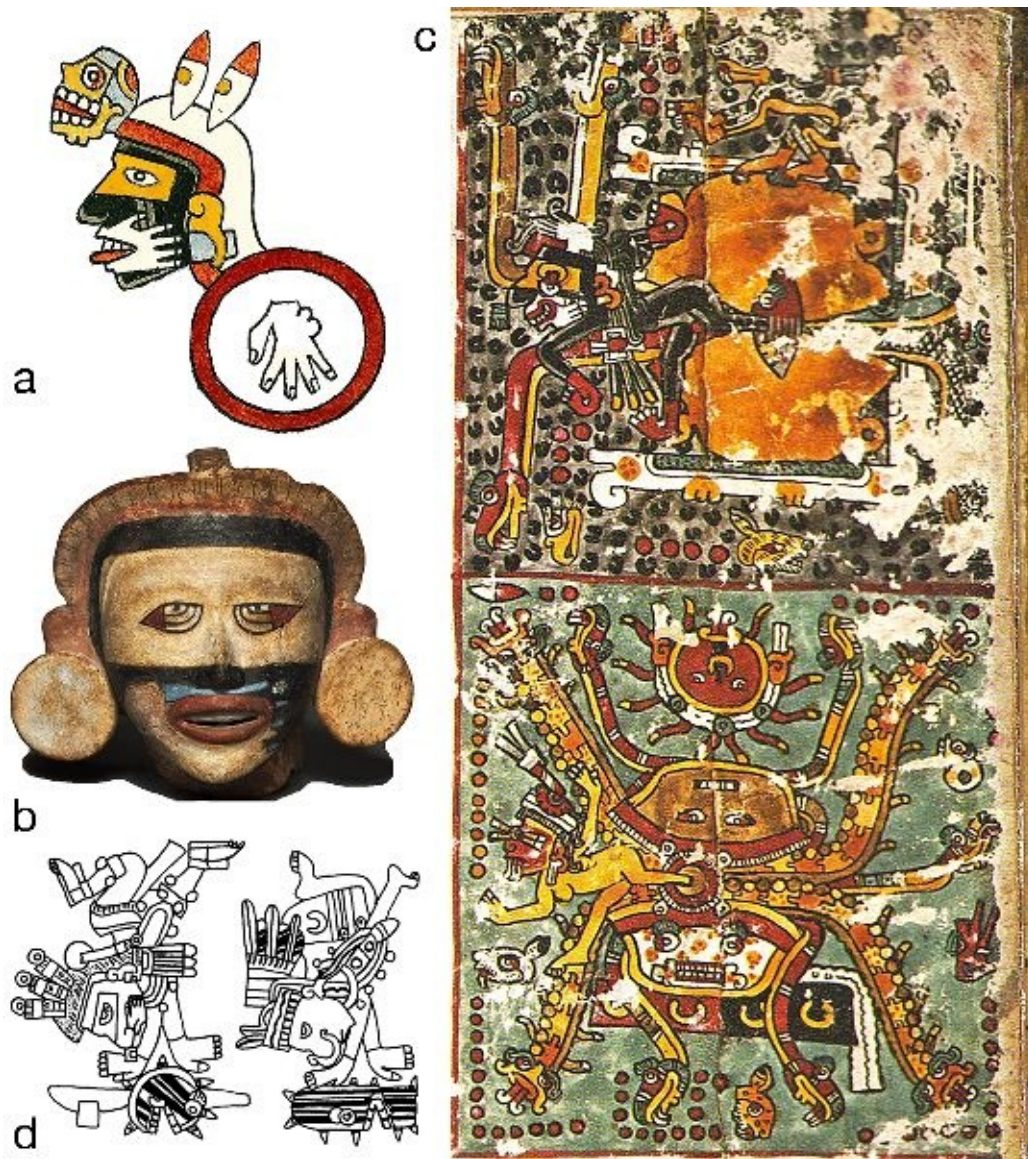


Figure 11.4. The Macuiltonaleque: (a) Macuiltonal with diagnostic hand covering mouth (also note hand on shield); detail of Codex Fonds Mexicains 20; artwork by John Pohl; (b) head of Macuiltonal xantil, attributed to Veracruz; Cleveland Museum of Art; (c) The birth of the Macuiltonaleque and Cihuateteo, Codex Borgia p.47; (d) Macuiltonal and Cihuateotl as descending Tzitzimime pair (note stone and ax, accoutrements of punishment and castigation), detail of Codex Borgia, p.52; drawing by author

The Macuiltonaleque bore calendric names of the five *tonalpohualli* days of the South and were known as Five Lizard (Macuilcuetzpalin), Five Vulture (Macuilcozcacuahtli), Five Rabbit (Macuiltochtli), Five Flower (Macuilxochitl), and Five Grass (Macuilmalinalli). The primary diagnostic feature of the Macuiltonaleque was *motemacpalhuiticac* (“hand covering the mouth”) (figure 11.4a–b). While Sahagún noted that Xochipilli and Macuilxochitl shared the hand over the mouth as a common attribute, this was more of a diagnostic marker for Macuilxochitl and his four companions. In other words, xantiles appearing with the hand over the mouth mark these not as Xochipilli but as a Macuiltonal. The number five signified “excess” and therefore ceased to represent the joy, music, dance, and abundance characteristic of Xochipilli but instead reverted to the domain of the Macuiltonaleque, which was one of excessive pleasure and punishment for such over indulgence (Seler 1963, 2: 76–77).

The Macuiltonaleque formed the male counterparts to the Cihuateteo. The two calendrically oriented groups are frequently depicted together, often with physical deformities indicating their ability to inflict and cure illness. For example, page 47 of the Codex Borgia depicts the probable birth of these blind and crippled spirit forces from bowls and basins amid various noxious creatures such as snakes, centipedes, and spiders (see Pohl 2007) (figure 11.4c). This birth or creation event of the Macuiltonaleque and Cihuateteo continues onto pages 48–49, where they appear vertically lined up together (see also pages 77–79 of Codex Vaticanus B) with five manifestations of Tlazoteotl forming a third vertical line. In a masterful blend of Nahuatl-Mixtec iconography, the single page Aubin 20 depicts the Macuiltonaleque appearing with full-on accouterments of war and once again accompanied by their female consorts (see Pohl, this volume). On Codex Borgia pp. 49–52, the Macuiltonaleque and Cihuateteo descend as paired couples with weapons of sacrifice and castigation (figure 11.4d).

The strong bond between these male and female spirit forces continues well into the colonial period. Regarding midwives, Ruiz de Alarcón tells us that when the time comes to carry out delivery, they cast a spell in which their fingers are addressed as Macuiltonaleque (Coe and Whittaker 1982: 220). Midwives could speak to the divinities of birth “and to the fingers of her own hands,” which in the magical process would be independent from her as “beings capable of autonomous movement” (López Austin 1997: 154).⁵ Quato and Caxcoch are two probable Cihuateteo frequently invoked with the Macuiltonaleque to assist the patient in giving birth (Coe and Whittaker 1982: 220–221, 221n11). Another invocation used in divination is as follows:

Please come forth (*tla xihualhuian*),

Those of the cochineal-dyed skirts (*nochparcueyeque*),

Those of the snake-skirts (*coacueyecue*),

Those of the Five Signs, (*macuiltonalleque*) (Coe and Whittaker 1982: 211)

There are two names of interest here being invoked with the Macuiltonaleque. “Coacueyecue” is clearly Coatlicue, “Snakes-Her-Skirt.” According to the *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas*, before light was created Tezcatlipoca created four hundred men and five women to provide nourishment for the sun. These five women outlived the men and died the day the sun was created. One of these women was Coatlicue, or “Snakes-Her-Skirt” (García Icazbalceta 1891: 241). In a recent reinterpretation of the monumental Aztec Coatlicue statue, Cecelia Klein (2008) has argued that Coatlicue among other Aztec goddesses represented the personified mantas or skirts of these five women that selflessly gave their lives during creation. Klein (2008: 236–237) relates this to another colonial account in the *Leyenda de los soles* (Bierhorst 1992: 149), which describes the self-sacrifice of five deities, several of them women who have the word “skirt” in their names. Among these was Nochpallicue, clearly the “nochparcueyeque” mentioned in Ruiz de Alarcón.

Hands were closely linked to the supernatural world by providing the essential means of

curing and conjuring, casting and enchanting, and for these reasons are a frequent motif in ancient Mesoamerican art (Ladrón de Guevara 1990; Mikulska Dąbrowska 2007; Palka 2002). According to the Florentine Codex, the nourishing waters of the earth were said to flow from the water goddess Chalchihuitlicue's hands, an act recalling several well-known images of female deities from Teotihuacan (López Austin 1997: 218). The Mural of Divine Hands at Teotihuacan depicts disembodied hands casting maize like grain, as if in the act of divination through maize casting.

Sahagún (1950–1982, bk. 5: 190) mentions that merchants sought and cherished a monkey's hand that served as a sort of good luck charm in selling their goods. While Sahagún does not mention whether it was the right or left hand of the monkey that brought such good fortune, for many cultures from around the world the right hand was accorded a higher status than the left. Among the Yukatek Maya, the right hand, *noh*, is “great,” “true,” and “just,” in contrast to the left hand, whose root is *ts'ik*, meaning “angry and vicious,” and signifying “lame, stupid, and disgraced one” (Barrera Vasquez 1991: 572–573, 883–884; Hanks 1990: 91; Palka 2002: 437). In Nahuatl thought, there was also a notable difference between the right hand (*maimatca* and *manematica*) and left hand (*maopoch*) (López Austin 1988, 2: 160–161). While the right hand “was linked to daily activities, especially those demanding dexterity, the left hand was closely associated with the world of the supernatural” (López Austin 1988, 1: 165), with the internal part of the hand, the palm (*macpilli*), holding special importance as a conduit for supernatural power. Among the Nahuas of Atlatlan the palm is where the *tonalli* manifests itself; thus curers focus on the palm of the hand when examining their patients (Montoya Briones 1964: 177). Ruiz de Alarcón tells us that the curer or diviner would often prepare by rubbing his two palms together with a mixture of tobacco with lime. He then begins his invocation by addressing his hands:

Please come forth,
My men,
Those of the Five Signs,
Those of one courtyard,
The pearly-headed Tzitzimime (Coe and Whittaker 1982: 202–203)

In this particular invocation, “Those of the Five Signs” is translated as Macuiltonaleque, and they are invoked no less than eighteen times in this work, often with “the pearly-headed Tzitzimime” representing the fingernails (Pohl 1998, 2007).

The most common methods of curing involved the use of the forearm and hand whereby the curers used the left forearm from the elbow to the fingertip (Coe and Whittaker 1982: 199, 202–209). They would stretch out their right hand and measure with handspans. The exact prognostication was determined in the measuring with handspans on the left forearm. For instance,

. . . if the divination is to reveal whether some patient will become well or die,

and the final span finishes flush with the fingers, they prognosticate that he will soon die, and that now there is no remedy which will help him. If the final measure greatly surpasses the arm being measured, for example by the fingers or half-hand of the measured forearm, they say that the sickness still has a long way to go. (Coe and Whittaker 1982: 204)

Classic Maya Antecedents

While the hand was clearly linked to curing practices among the Nahua, the Yukatek Maya also held the hand in high esteem. In contemporary Yukatan *noh k'ab*, “great hand” or “right hand,” is invoked in prayers, while the colonial *Historia de Yucatan* mentions a great right hand in Izamal that was venerated as a deity that could heal (Love 1988). A woman in childbirth is carved on a stone column at San Miguel, Cozumel, with red handprints over her body (Holmes 1895: 65). As Miller (2005: 70n20) notes, these hands likely refer to the hands of the midwife assisting with the delivery. Hands that could heal and are linked to childbirth recall similar functions among the ancient and contemporary Nahua.

The hand painted over the mouth of the Macuiltonaleque was one of their defining attributes and may have had an antecedent among the Classic Maya. Nikolai Grube (2004: 70) noted that this possible antecedent may be found with a depiction of a woman with black banding across her eyes and a hand covering her mouth (figure 11.5a). The black banding and hand over her mouth are characteristics of two distinct yet closely related deities. One of these individuals is known in texts as Mok Chih, “pulque sickness,” whose name emphasizes the relationship with *chih*, the fermented beverage made from the maguey plant. One image of Mok Chih depicts him vomiting while holding an enema syringe, a scene clearly associated with alcohol consumption and the nauseous aftereffects (K927). Both the woman and Mok Chih can be identified as part of the Akan complex, a group of individual sorcerers and spirit beings who embodied different themes such as over indulgence, castigation, and death (see chapter 1, this volume).⁶ Major characteristics of hkan include a black horizontal band across the eyes, which contrasts with the whiteness of the rest of his face, the “percentage sign” that labels his face and body, a cape decorated with crossbones, a lower skeletal jaw, a human femur in his hair, and the Ak’ab (“darkness”) sign on his forehead (Taube 1992: 17; Grube 2004; Stone and Zender 2011: 5). The Mok Chih aspect of Akan also appears with noxious insects that are associated with his pulque jar (K2284; Grube 2004: fig. 17b, K3924). Another variant of Akan, Jatz’on Akan (“striking Akan”), is frequently identified in texts by a logographic sign of a hand grasping a stone (Zender 2004). Iconographically, Jatz’on Akan wields a stone as a boxer engaged in gladiatorial combat, as if about to strike a deadly blow to an enemy (Taube and Zender 2009: 202–203). The stone-in-hand glyph and this variant of Akan may also be related to castigation. In Late Postclassic central Mexico, stoning was a common form of punishment. For instance, in the Codex Borgia New Year pages (49–52), diving pairs of Macuiltonaleque and their female consorts hold accoutrements of castigation, including stone and wood (*in tetl*, *in quahuatl*), the quintessential form of Nahua punishment (figure 11.4d). Stone throwing can have a far more

maleficent meaning. In several contemporary Maya accounts, a sorcerer can cast disease by throwing stones at his victim or his victim's effigies (Thompson 1930: 74; Bunzel 1959: 368).

In ancient Maya art and texts, the hand over the mouth is most characteristic of the so-called God Zero, whose other attributes include the “percentage sign” and “death collar” of eyeballs (figure 11.5b). God Zero is closely related to individuals in the Akan complex and sometimes they overlap, as is the case with the woman with the black banding of Akan and the hand over the mouth. Another conflation of these two beings occurs on Stela D at Copan, where this individual appears with the characteristic hand over the mouth and the bone femur and eyeball that are diagnostic of Akan (figure 11.5c). In fact, this may be the same individual as the one that Grube (2004: 70) discussed as a member of the Akan complex.



Figure 11.5. Akan and God Zero: (a) female member of the Akan complex with black banding on face and hand covering her mouth; drawing by author; (b) bust of God Zero with characteristic hand covering the mouth; drawing by author; (c) female with attributes of both Akan and God Zero, Copan Stela D; drawing by author.

God Zero is associated with the ballgame and appears on the La Esperanza ballcourt

marker and the central marker of the Copan ballcourt (Kowalski 1989; Fash and Kowalski 1991). It is possible that he was a patron of games and perhaps even controlled the outcomes.⁷ Given the association with gaming and hand symbolism, God Zero may very well be equated with Macuilxochitl, the central Mexican patron of games and principal member of the Macuiltonaleque (Thompson 1970: 328; Fash and Fash 2012). However, given the darker attributes, the relationship to gaming is probably secondary to excess and its aftereffects, which are endeavors more characteristic of the Macuiltonaleque. I would suspect that hand symbolism in ancient Maya thought represented similar themes within the intertwined realms of sorcery and curing and were therefore expressed in visual culture through supernatural beings like the Akan complex and God Zero, with a similar yet culturally distinct emblematic complex developing later in Late Postclassic central Mexico.

Conclusion

Nahua sorcery took many forms, and to review them all would involve a study well beyond the scope of this chapter. This study has focused instead on certain individuals and groups of spirit beings or entities whose power seems to manifest itself in disparate parts of the human body, particularly in the use and display of the arm and the hand. The hand was associated with the paramount sorcerer of central Mexico, Tezcatlipoca, and the five spirit beings of the southern directions, the Macuiltonaleque. As the paramount sorcerer, Tezcatlipoca seems to have bridged the gap between the world of the nefarious Temacpalitotique and the ambiguous Macuiltonaleque. While severed arms and disembodied hands characterized these individuals, other parts of the human body, such as skulls and disembodied eyeballs, frequently appeared as part of this symbolic package that partially characterized Eastern Nahua art. In Eastern Nahua ceramics, hands, eyeballs, and crossbones can appear within the dish as if they were the actual offering, recalling Classic Maya scenes of bowls filled with hands, eyeballs, and bones held by ghastly *wahy* creatures.

The bodily context in Mesoamerica requires an emphasis on part/whole relations. An example occurs in Maya glyphs for hands where concentric circles appear where there should have been a wrist, a convention also known in Nahua depictions of disembodied hands (Rands 1957: 249, fig. 3e–g; Gonzalbo 2005: 22, 24). As Houston et al. (2006: 13, fig. 1.3) note, ancient Maya scribes could not conceive the hand as being separate from the body it once belonged to. In a study of reliquary arms, Cynthia Hahn (1997: 28) notes, “The part thus becomes more powerful in that it infers a larger and truly glorious whole. These body parts forcefully insist upon their fragmentation in order to evoke a whole beyond the individual.” Indeed, a fragmented body may be seen as a form of ritual disorder. But fragmented bodies may also bring forth creation from such chaos, as can be seen on page 1 of the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, where the dismembered and bloody body of Tezcatlipoca is placed to the four cardinal directions.

It is likely that the Eastern Nahua conception of the Macuiltonaleque had a Maya predecessor in the Akan complex, particularly in the individual known as Mok Chih, who was associated with drunkenness, disease, and noxious insects, which are all themes shared

with the Macuiltonaleque. The Akan complex of spirit beings belong to the category of supernaturals known as *wahy*, who represent personified disease, curses, and other nightmarish forces (Stuart, this volume). In a surprising number of scenes on Late Classic Maya vases, *wahy* beings hold bowls of disembodied eyeballs, hands, and bones (figure 11.1b–c). The closely related God Zero with his characteristic hand over the mouth and another variant of Akan, Jatz’ on Akan (“Striking Akan”), may have also contributed attributes to the Macuiltonaleque. It seems less likely that the Macuiltonaleque derive from one single individual but instead represent an amalgamation of characteristics and attributes of these closely related personages.

Hand symbolism was important in many Amerindian societies. One of the more outstanding examples is in the southeastern United States. Southeastern art associated with Moundville has often been compared with that of Mexico, specifically Tizatlan, Tlaxcala, where there was a shared focus on hand and bone symbolism (Moore 1907; Rands 1957). In southeastern art, vessels depict representational motifs in combinations of skulls, forearm bones, hands, hands and eyes, and human heads. According to David Dye (2007), these motifs appear prominently on vessels that were used to serve the black drink in purging rituals prior to war. In other words, this symbolism was associated with the concepts of purity and pollution related to war rituals. Similar symbolism decorating elite polychromes from Cholula, Tizatlan, and Ocotelolco were used to serve pulque, while Late Classic Maya drinking vessels were decorated with the symbolism of *wahy* beings and were used to hold cacao, and perhaps pulque. Drinking cults were naturally tied into this “otherworld” of spirit beings who are invoked through the symbolism of the vessel and inebriating effects of the beverage contained within, many of which would have traversed the worlds of sorcery and healing in the ancient Mesoamerican world (Coltman et al. 2020). These motifs appear in certain contexts with different deities and spirit beings who occupy the forefront of ancient Mesoamerican ritual and belief. While in some cases they are related to the dark and dangerous world of sorcery, these motifs are also indicative of curing and childbirth, thereby underscoring the complex ambiguity of sorcerers knowing both the art to harm as well as that to heal.

Notes

1. Since Sahagún, there has been very little academic inquiry into the *Temacpalitotique* with the notable exception being the work of Alfredo López Austin (1966). This can be explained at least in part by the predominance of scholarly interests in the state pantheon.
2. Eduard Seler (1902–1923, II: 913–952; 1963, 2: 63) referred to these five southern deities as Ahuiteteo, a name that is still occasionally used in the literature (Grube 2004: 70). The origin of this name is uncertain, and because Macuiltonaleque appears in the written sources, it seems that this is the more correct terminology for these beings.
3. There are a number of striking correspondences between Tezcatlipoca and the highland Maya figure known as Maximon. Aside from physical deformity, Klein (2001: 219) notes that Maximon is “a wanderer, who reeks of odors that spread in all directions, and is therefore likened to the darkness and the wind. As such, he represents lack of direction, unpredictability, and cosmic disorder.” One of Maximon’s names is Mapaar (“Lord Skunk”) (Robert Carlsen, pers. comm. 1996, cited in Klein 2001: 218–219). Maximon shared this characteristic with Tezcatlipoca. According to the Florentine Codex (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 4: 171), the skunk was the likeness of Tezcatlipoca, and

when it loosed a foul odor, it was said that “Tezcatlipoca breaketh wind.”

4. Severed arms appear on two Escuintla-style censers, each displaying an avian figure within a temple that is adorned with five severed human arms hanging from the doorway (Chinchilla 2010, 2011). On Stela 25 at Izapa a large bird clutches the severed arm of an individual engaged in battle, a scene well known from the sixteenth century K'iche Maya Popol Vuh. A stucco bird from an Early Classic ballcourt at Copan depicts a large macaw with a plumed serpent in its loins clutching a human arm with a single dot that possibly refers to the Classic-period form of Junahpu (Fash and Fash 1996: 132). Given these accounts, it appears that there is a Mesoamerican myth of considerable antiquity involving a large macaw-like bird and the severed arm (or arms) of one or more culture heroes (Helmke and Nielsen 2015).
5. The notion of hands operating independently from the body is present among the contemporary highland Maya bonesetters, whose hands are thought to “know” the body (Hinojosa 2002: 26).
6. A modern version of Akan may exist among contemporary Maya in the village of Chichicastenango. Known as the “Lord of Sickness,” this malevolent being brings death and destruction through alcohol, vomiting, and a variety of diseases (Bunzel 1959: 145).
7. According to the Cherokee Swimmer Manuscript (Mooney and Olbrechts 1932: 91), success in the ballgame was more dependent upon the conjurers trying to spoil the strengths of rival teams, with victory and loss being attributed to the power of the conjurer.

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From Clay to Stone

The Demonization of the Aztec Goddess Cihuacoatl

Cecelia F. Klein

At the time of the 1521 Spanish conquest of central Mexico, the Aztec imperial government, headquartered on a small island in Lake Texcoco, was promoting a large pantheon of deities through its state-sponsored artworks and religious rituals. Within the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, and among its nearest neighbors, each of these deities had its own name, possessed its own miraculous powers, had its own priests or attendants, and was honored at its own temples. Most importantly, given that the Aztecs left us relatively little by way of written information, each of these deities had a distinctive, relatively standardized, and usually recognizable physical appearance.¹

But had this always been the case and did these gods' roles and reputations within the imperial Aztec state's official ideology extend far beyond the capital's outer limits? Where had their cults come from and how had their roles, reputations, and physical appearances changed over time? In this study I address these questions in regard to one of the most important Aztec supernaturals at the time of the conquest, the goddess known as Cihuacoatl, "Woman Snake." I do so by taking a historical approach to the surviving visual images of Cihuacoatl—that is, by paying special attention to the formal and iconographic changes that took place over time as well as their geopolitical contexts. It will become clear that at the time of the conquest, Cihuacoatl was still remembered by many as a primordial creator deity, founding ancestor, and divine protector of childbearing women and their midwives. This study will also show, however, that she always had a dark side. The Aztec state placed increasing emphasis on that dark side in the final years of its supremacy, its artists depicting the goddess as increasingly wrathful and macabre at the same time that they added more and more graphic signs of fatal injuries. By depicting Cihuacoatl as a highly dangerous enemy that it had successfully defeated and at least temporarily brought under its control, the government was able to justify its increasingly repressive political dominance.

Cihuacoatl in the Early Colonial Period

Thanks to the Spaniards' largely successful attempts to destroy all preconquest manuscripts in central Mexico, we are heavily dependent on colonial sources for an understanding of Cihuacoatl's reputation and appearance in 1521. Working under the assumption that the earliest postconquest sources are likely to be more reliable than later ones, I begin this study

by focusing on the visual images of Cihuacoatl in four pictorial manuscripts thought to have been painted within the first four decades following the conquest. All of these early manuscripts—Codex Tudela, its cognates Codex Magliabechiano and Codex Ixtlilxochitl, and Codex Borbonicus—were produced for Spanish patrons. It was also Spaniards who wrote the alphabetic glosses and commentaries that accompany them. Nevertheless, scholars are convinced that the information in the manuscripts was largely based on native testimony and that their pictures were painted by native artists (Robertson 1959).² After establishing Cihuacoatl's appearance and reputation shortly after the conquest, I will look back in time at images of the goddess produced in the Aztec capital before the conquest. From there I will delve even further into the past to propose that an older genre of images, which were made of clay and always found outside Tenochtitlan's limits, embody ordinary peoples' original beliefs about the goddess.

Cihuacoatl appears twice in both Codex Tudela and Codex Magliabechiano, and once in their cognate manuscript, Codex Ixtlilxochitl. All three belong to the group known today as the Magliabechiano Group or the Grupo Tudela (Boone 1983: 5; Batalla Rosado 2002: 157, 2010: 8).³ Although Juan José Batalla Rosado and Elizabeth Boone disagree on the exact genealogical relationship of Codices Tudela and Magliabechiano, they agree that Codex Tudela is the earliest of the three and that it was painted within forty years of the conquest. Batalla Rosado (2002: 159–165; 2010) thinks that Codex Tudela was the original of the group and that it was painted as early as 1540, whereas Boone (1983: 5) thinks that it was copied around 1555 from a lost prototype made sometime between 1528 and 1553.⁴ Codex Magliabechiano, both scholars agree, was probably painted in the second half of the century from a different, likewise lost copy of the original. Although Boone sees the poorly drawn Codex Ixtlilxochitl as being later in date than the Codex Magliabechiano, Batalla Rosado (2010: 9, figure 1) charts it as being roughly contemporary with it.⁵

On Codex Tudela 27r and its cognate folios in Codex Magliabechiano (45r) and Codex Ixtlilxochitl (102r), Cihuacoatl appears as the divine patron of the Aztec month Tititl. There she is depicted in profile, assuming the customary kneeling pose of an Aztec woman ([figures 12.1, 12.2](#)). That it is Cihuacoatl we see is asserted on the folio (44v) opposite the Magliabechiano image, where the commentator wrote, “This feast they called Tititl . . . The demon whom they feasted during it was called Cihuacoatl, which means serpent woman . . .” (Boone 1983: 199).



Figure 12.1. Cihuacoatl during Tititl, Codex Tudela 27r, ca. 1540 (from Tudela de la Orden 1980); Courtesy Museo de América, Madrid.



Figure 12.2. Cihuacoatl during Tititl, Codex Magliabechiano 45r, ca. 1550 (from Nuttall [1903] 1978); Courtesy Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze.

On Magliabechiano 45r and Ixtlilxochitl 102r, Cihuacoatl wears a red skirt with a distinctive row of white shells at the hemline, which, as we will see, identifies her as a female supernatural. On all three folios the goddess has a circle on her visible cheek that in Tudela 27r and Magliabechiano 45r is painted blue, and her face has pronounced skeletal features that further identify her as a deity.⁶ Although her round eyes are wide open, her nose and lower jaw are fleshless with the teeth fully exposed up to the gum line. From between her teeth her tongue distinctly protrudes.

These figures' skeletal features, as I (Klein 2000: 19) have suggested elsewhere, may point to Cihuacoatl's presence at the beginning of the universe when, according to one colonial writer, the oldest and most powerful creator deities were still "in their bones."⁷ Skeletal features, however, like protruding tongues, also imply death and human sacrifice, both of which are further connoted by the disembodied skulls and human hands decorating the Tudela figure's skirt (Klein 1976: 203–206, 1988: 241).⁸ This is important: Batalla Rosado (2010) contends that because Tudela is the earliest—in his opinion the original—manuscript

in the group, its figures best replicate the preconquest appearance of Aztec religious figures. As we will see, in Tenochtitlan in the last fifty years preceding the conquest, Cihuacoatl's skirt was always decorated with skulls and/or crossbones. Aztec creation stories usually feature one or more sacrifices of primordial deities, for sacrificial death was prerequisite for the creation and maintenance of life. All three of these cognate figures hold a large shield decorated with eagle feathers of the kind used in warfare, one of the primary purposes of which was to procure enemy captives for sacrifice.

Additional evidence that Cihuacoatl was associated with death and sacrifice comes from the fourth colonial pictorial manuscript that was, in all probability, painted within four decades of the conquest. Donald Robertson (1959: 86–93) thinks that the Codex Borbonicus may have been painted even earlier than the Codex Tudela; he places it in the “first stage” of what he calls the School of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, which he dates from 1521 to 1541.⁹ On pages 23, 26, 28, and 36 of Codex Borbonicus we see a figure with Cihuacoatl's skeletal face and long red skirt hemmed with white shells, who holds a large war shield decorated with eagle feathers (figure 12.3). Because the Borbonicus figures appear on pages generally agreed to depict Aztec rituals, most scholars assume that they represent the same being at different moments in time. I (Klein 1988) have previously argued that the subject is not the goddess Cihuacoatl per se, but instead the living government official in charge of her cult. That man's official title, *cihuacoatl*, was taken from his divine charge, whose costume he was entitled to wear on certain state occasions. I will return to this political office and the significance of the Borbonicus figures further on. In the meantime, suffice it to point out that the *cihuacoatl* of Tenochtitlan was the Aztec state's highest-ranking, most politically powerful sacrificial priest (Klein 1986, 1987, 1988).¹⁰ A Spanish gloss next to the figure on Borbonicus 26 is accordingly glossed *papa mayor*, “head priest.”



Figure 12.3. The *cihuacoatl*, “high priest,” Codex Borbonicus 23, ca. 1540 (detail from Novotny 1974); Courtesy Bibliothèque Assemblée Nationale, Paris.

As has been noted by a number of scholars over the years, several of Cihuacoatl’s features also appear on two larger, full-page cognate figures, one on Tudela 46r and the other on Magliabechiano 76r (figures 12.4, 12.5). There is no comparable figure in the Codex Ixtlilxochitl. Like the kneeling profile figures of Cihuacoatl discussed above, these figures have a fully fleshless face with bared teeth and an open mouth. From the mouth in the Magliabechiano image, a long tongue protrudes in the form of a bloody sacrificial knife. Evidence that these figures are associated with human sacrifice comes with their bloody necklaces and the fillets in their hair, both of which are decorated with human hearts and hands. The figures also have a sacrificial paper inserted in each earlobe, which in the Codex Tudela image is accompanied by a dangling human hand, as well as a crescent-shaped row of sacrificial paper banners embedded in their dark, tousled hair.



Figure 12.4. Tzitzimicihuatl, Codex Tudela 46r, ca. 1540 (from Tudela de la Orden 1980); Courtesy Museo de América, Madrid.



Figure 12.5. Tzitzimicihuatl, Codex Magliabechiano 76r, ca. 1550 (from Nuttall [1903] 1978); Courtesy Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze.

Unlike the profile figures on Codices Tudela 27r, Magliabechiano 45r, and Ixtlilxochitl 102r, these figures are depicted *en face*—that is, in the seldom seen full frontal view that, as we will see, was characteristic of Cihuacoatl in artworks made shortly before the conquest. Unlike those profile depictions of Cihuacoatl as well, they represent a fully skeletal creature with bony, outspread, and bent arms and legs, and their hands and feet take the form of the claws of a giant bird of prey.¹¹ The joints are animated by monstrous profile faces symbolic of their extraordinary and potentially dangerous magical powers.¹² Although, unlike Aztec women in the capital, they wear no clothing above their waist, their skeletal form precluding any indication of breasts, the figures, as I (Klein 2000: 3–4) have previously pointed out, are clearly female.¹³ Not only do they both wear short, red, shell-hemmed skirts, but the Tudela figure also wears a red, shell-tipped back apron of a kind that in preconquest imagery (although not always in postconquest imagery) is seen only on women.¹⁴

Additional evidence that these frightening *en face* figures are female lies with their so-called “displayed,” or “hocker,” pose, which has long reminded scholars of a position

commonly assumed by Nahua women during childbirth.¹⁵ Indeed, something emerges from between the legs of both of these figures, although in neither image is it a healthy human infant. A large serpent, bent in the middle, seems to descend from underneath the skirt of the Magliabechiano figure, whereas blood gushes from the loins of its Tudela counterpart. The blood in the Tudela 46r image implies a miscarriage, an unsuccessful delivery, or a severe wound in the womb or genital region, the last of which could have been responsible for either kind of tragedy.

The meaning of the serpent in Magliabechiano 76r is less obvious. It is possible that the snake, the Nahuatl word for which was *coatl*, was intended to help the viewer think of the figure's name, Cihuacoatl, "Woman Snake." But it may also have symbolized the goddess's association with sexual and childbearing problems. Aztec artists often depicted snakes to represent blood, which could again allude to a miscarriage. The Aztecs believed that the adulterous behavior of a parent could cause a difficult birth as well as the death or deformity of the infant. The only way for a woman enduring a dangerously prolonged labor to resolve her problem was to confess her sexual indiscretions. If she died anyway, it was said that she had not revealed all of her sexual "sins."¹⁶ The snake was a common symbol of the deadly misbehaviors that caused such problems (Sahagún 1950–1982, 10: 125–126; 1977, 3: 270–271). Gerónimo de Mendieta (1971: 91), for example, in his 1596 *Historia eclesiástica Indiana*, wrote of an Aztec supernatural resembling Cihuacoatl who could change into a serpent at will in order to entice men into sexual intercourse and then kill them.¹⁷ Sahagún (1950–1982, 6: 125–126, 11: 80; 1977, 3: 270–271) records a father's advice to his son to beware of "haters of men," clearly identified as women in his Spanish text, who try to slip a horned snake called *maçacoatl* into man's food or drink. The snake functioned as a deadly aphrodisiac, inducing men to have illicit sexual relations with women other than their wife by causing them to have a continual erection and ejaculate over and over again. Eventually they died.

The cognate *en face* figures on Tudela 46r and Magliabechiano 76r therefore in some way represent Cihuacoatl as extremely dangerous, even threatening and angry, yet severely damaged. Why? Alas, there is no commentary or gloss accompanying the figure on Tudela 46r that might help us to answer this question. On the sheet (75v) opposite Magliabechiano 76r, however, the commentator wrote, "This is a figure that they call Tzitzimitl, which means an arrow. And they painted it like a dead man already fleshless with only the bones remaining and full of hearts and hands around its neck and head."¹⁸ In later sixteenth-century sources the Tzitzimitl (pl. Tzitzimime) is described as a stellar demon that descended to earth during critical, often unusual periods of darkness such as eclipses. There they wreaked havoc on the living, especially pregnant women and young children. Although most of the Tzitzimime in those later texts are male, I (Klein 2000: 3–4) have previously pointed out that the earliest colonial sources describe the Tzitzimime as female and suggested that Cihuacoatl was, in some capacity, one of them.¹⁹

It therefore appears that whereas the Codex Magliabechiano commentator mistakenly assumed its "Tzitzimitl" was male, his native artist knew better. Why the commentator got it so wrong is unclear, but the word Tzitzimitl, the etymology of which is unknown, does

contain the word *mitl*, or “arrow.” Guilhem Olivier (2004a: 319, 2009: 264; cf. Dakin 1996: 315) has shown that the Aztecs sometimes referred to a war captive as their “arrow” and that a real arrow could stand in for the unrecovered body of a dead warrior.²⁰ That it was largely men, not women, who fought on the Aztec battlefield may therefore explain the Spanish commentator’s assumption that the Tzitzimitl on Magliabechiano 76r was male. I will return to the importance of the arrow further on.

No colonial source specifically states that Cihuacoatl was a Tzitzimitl. Nonetheless, one writer does say that she could transform into one. The account appears in Juan de Torquemada’s (1975, 1: 80–81) *Los veinte y un libros rituales y Monarquía Indiana*, for which, although he wrote comparatively late, between 1592 and 1613, he drew on earlier sources. One of the earliest of Torquemada’s sources seems to have been André de Olmos’s lost *Libro de las antigüedades de México, Tezcoco y Tlaxcala* of 1533 (Gibson and Glass 1975: 353). Because the section of Torquemada’s manuscript that interests us here does not appear in any of his other known sources, he may have drawn it, directly or indirectly, from Olmos.

The relevant passage in Torquemada’s (1975, 1: 80–81) work relates that among the migrant ancestors of the Aztecs, there was a great sorceress (*era grande Hechicera*) named Quilaztli, “Plant Generator.”²¹ This woman bragged to two captains that she was very powerful and manly and that she could transform at will into four other personas, each with its own name.²² One of Quilaztli’s alternate names was Cohuacihuatl [Cihuacoatl]—that is, “Woman Snake”—which implies that Quilaztli could transform into a serpent. As we will see, Cihuacoatl is often referred to as Quilaztli or Quilaztli-Cihuacoatl in colonial texts. As a sorceress, Quilaztli would have been envisioned as encouraging lascivious behavior, including promiscuity and sexually seducing people.²³

Another of Quilaztli’s names, however, was Tzitzimicihuatl.²⁴ Best translated as “Tzitzimitl Woman,” the name implies that Quilaztli could also transform into a Tzitzimitl.²⁵ This, I propose, echoing Carmen Aguilera (2003: 235–237), is exactly what we see in the full-page figures on Tudela 46r and Magliabechiano 76r, where the powerful, potentially dangerous, shape-shifting sorceress Quilaztli-Cihuacoatl has assumed the physical features and demonic powers of a Tzitzimitl.

Quilaztli’s other two names, Quauhcihuatl, “Eagle Woman,” and Yaocihuatl, “Warrior Woman,” like the shield that Cihuacoatl carries in colonial manuscript paintings and the eagle feathers in her hair, referred to her fighting spirit. In Torquemada’s (1975, 1: 80–81) account Quilaztli transforms into an eagle to challenge the two captains to engage her in battle.²⁶ In real life, however, her bravery was directed at parturient women, their midwives, and the spirits of women who died in childbirth, for childbirth, as many have noted, was characterized as a battle. According to Sahagún (1950–1982, 6: 194), a woman who had just successfully given birth was told, “Thou hast made war, thou hast skirmished, thou hast exerted thyself, thou hast taken well, seized well thy shield, thy club.” Quilaztli-Cihuacoatl was the principal patron of women in labor and their midwives, who commonly beseeched her for assistance during a difficult labor. Women who died in the process might themselves be addressed as Quauhcihuatl (Sahagún 1950–1982, 6: 160, 164, 180, 185).

Because Aztec supernatural beings had the potential to do both good and bad, however, the same divinity that could assuage or cure a hurt also had the power to cause it.²⁷ Quilaztli-Cihuacoatl was therefore held responsible for the deaths of women who died trying to give birth and was considered to be the leader of their unhappy, vengeful spirits. In his Florentine Codex Sahagún refers to these spirits in places as the Cihuateteo (“Divine Women”) (sing. Cihuateotl) and in other places as the Cihuapipiltin (“Princesses”) (sing. Cihuapipilli). Although he often uses the two names interchangeably, Sahagún (1950–1982, 1: 164) in one passage specifically identifies the Cihuapipiltin as the sun’s older sisters and describes them as “always, forever glad, content, joyous,” and “happy.” In contrast, the Cihuateteo, he repeatedly states, were “only the youngest ones, the sisters,” and “the lesser Goddesses” (1: 64, 72; 2: 127, 189; 4: 107–108; 6: 161). It must have been those miserable and angry “lesser goddesses” who, Sahagún repeatedly tells us, were—like the Tzitzimime—inclined to descend at midnight at crossroads and other shrines to inflict illness and deformity on pregnant women as well as mothers and children.²⁸ Indeed, it must have been in her persona of divine leader and chief representative of the Cihuateteo that Cihuacoatl appeared as a Tzitzimitl. As Tzitzimicihuatl, leader of the Cihuateteo, she not only personified the adulterous acts that caused the deaths of women in childbirth, but was believed to have tempted the offenders to commit them as well. On folio 271r of our earliest surviving illustrated prose manuscript, Sahagún’s (1993) *Primeros Memoriales*, compiled between 1559 and 1561, the Cihuateteo are described with a single word: *tetlamimaliztli*, “adultery” (Sullivan 1997: 122).²⁹

Although native manuscript painters began in the second half of the sixteenth century to downplay or omit altogether the goddess’s frightening features, the Tzitzimitl aspect of Cihuacoatl remained at the forefront of people’s memory.³⁰ This may explain why, whereas Sahagún’s artists always depicted Cihuacoatl as a healthy, fully human, seemingly harmless woman, some of his native informants described her as “a savage beast and an evil omen.” This was apparently because she brought misery, hard labor, poverty, and death in war (Sahagún 1950–1982, 1: 11, 69–70). Diego Durán’s (1971: 210) native informants accordingly departed from the model followed by Sahagún to describe Cihuacoatl as a creature of disheveled appearance whose statue in the Aztec capital had “a huge open mouth and ferocious teeth.” Unlike Sahagún’s artists, moreover, Durán’s artists depicted the goddess with long, unkempt hair and a furious facial expression, her missing lips revealing her large teeth and gums and her tongue protruding from her mouth. In one picture the goddess waits in her bloodstained temple for her next meal as four priests roast a man over a large fire. They do so, Durán (1971: 211, 216–217) ominously wrote, because she was “always famished.”

On the basis of the depictions and descriptions of Cihuacoatl in sources produced shortly after the Spaniards’ arrival, then, it seems safe to say that, by that time, in the capital and its nearest satellites, her association with combativeness, human sacrifice, death, and sexual excess, in particular, adultery, was occupying center stage. Cihuacoatl is portrayed in the early postconquest years as a dangerous practitioner of black magic, a frightening, shape-shifting, lascivious sorceress with monstrous faces at her joints and the hands and feet of a giant bird of prey. She was also portrayed as bleeding heavily from a vaginal wound, alluding

to her defeated motherhood. In her manifestation as Tzitzimicihuatl, Cihuacoatl therefore personified both the cause and the result of a woman's reproductive loss, her vanquished form a stunning visual expression of misery, anger, and eagerness for revenge.

Cihuacoatl before the Conquest: Tenochtitlan

But was this terrifying image of a defeated Cihuacoatl in place in Tenochtitlan before the conquest and, if so, how long had it been there? Where did it originate, how widespread was it, and to whom was it important? The sixteenth-century *Relación de Cuzcatlan* (Cozcatlan, now Coxcatlan), a Nahuatl town in Puebla, reports that Cihuacoatl had come there from its people's mythical homeland, Chicomoztoc ("Seven Caves"), along with its other founding ancestors (Acuña 1985: 94).³¹ Similarly, in the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas* (García Icazbalceta 1891: 239), written ca. 1535, possibly by Olmos, Quilaztli is identified as a deer or stag brought to "Culuacan" (Culhuacan) from "Azcla" (Aztlán, near Chicomoztoc). The deer was transported by the god Mixcoatl, "Cloud Snake," a counterpart of the creator god Quetzalcoatl. The hymn to Cihuacoatl in Sahagún's (1993: fol. 278v) *Primeros Memoriales* accordingly addresses her as both the "Deer of Colhuacan" and "our mother" (Sullivan 1997: 144).³² In other sources she is described specifically as the mother of the community's tutelary god. For example, the *Relación de Ahuatlan*, a sixteenth-century Spanish report on a Nahuatl town in Tlaxcala that remained hostile to Tenochtitlan up through the conquest, identifies Cihuacoatl as the mother of Quetzalcoatl (Acuña 1985: 73).³³ Thus in Nahuatl towns on the mainland Cihuacoatl was said to have arrived peacefully along with their first inhabitants as a primordial creatrix, a divine first mother, and an ancestral founder.³⁴

The manner of Cihuacoatl's entry into the Aztec capital was quite different. She was not carried there by, nor did she lead, the migrants from Chicomoztoc who founded that city. Instead Tenochtitlan's first inhabitants, a group known as the Mexica, brought with them—or, according to some early colonial sources, were led by—their patron god, Huitzilopochtli ("Hummingbird Left"). It is Huitzilopochtli, not Cihuacoatl, who dominates accounts of the Mexicas' lengthy and periodically fractious migration into the Valley of Mexico as well as their founding of Tenochtitlan, and it was for Huitzilopochtli that the first temple there was erected (Durán 1994: 46).

Instead, as I (Klein 1988: 239) have pointed out previously, the Aztecs took Cihuacoatl by military force from several southern mainland cities where her cult was already well established. This occurred in the early 1430s, when the fourth Aztec paramount ruler, or *huei tlatoani* (pl. *huei tlatoque*), Itzcoatl (1427–1440), was facing serious food shortages incurred by Tenochtitlan's rapidly growing population. Itzcoatl decided to address the problem by appropriating the rich farmlands along the southern lakeshore. As was so often the case in Aztec imperial history, however, he had to reconquer the area, for according to Codex Mendoza 2v, both cities had been previously subdued by Tenochtitlan's first *huei tlatoani*, Acamapichtli (1375–1395).³⁵ Itzcoatl accordingly charged his top military officer (and half-brother) Tlacaelel with waging yet another war against the two principal communities in that region. The first to fall to Tlacaelel's warriors was Xochimilco, which was soon followed by

Cuitlahuac. Importantly, neither of these cities would ever have to be retaken. For that reason, Tlacaelel's defeat of Xochimilco and Cuitlahuac marked the new Aztec government's first significant permanent imperial victories, conquests that would be thereafter viewed as the foundation of its subsequent consolidation and expansion of the Aztec imperium.³⁶

Although the Mexica had long before made peace and intermarried with the Culhua, who had also held Cihuacoatl as their patron deity, it was not until shortly after Tlacaelel had conquered Cuitlahuac that the Aztecs began constructing their first temple for her in their capital (Torquemada 1975, 1: 150).³⁷ This strongly suggests that Cihuacoatl and her cult had been forcibly "taken" from those cities by the Aztec government. Acquisition of a conquered community's tutelary deity and its cult was a common practice in Aztec Mexico. According to Spanish reports, the Aztecs had built a *coateocalli*, or "Snake God House" (*coacalco*, *coatlan*), in the main ceremonial precinct that, like a prison, housed statues of deities forcefully taken from subdued enemies (Klein 1988: 243).

It was not, however, until the reign of Itzcoatl's successor, Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina, or Moteuczoma I (1440–1469), that Tlacaelel was rewarded for his earlier military triumphs. It was at this time that he was granted full control of Cihuacoatl's lucrative cult, permission to use her name as his title, and the right to wear her costume on state occasions (Acosta Saignes 1946: 177–178).³⁸ Such privileges were not atypical (Klein 1988: 246, 251). It was customary for victorious war leaders to receive titles and political offices appropriated from the regions they conquered (Acosta Saignes 1946: 178; see also Seler [1904] 1960–1961, 2: 509–512). Moreover, the practice had an important mythohistorical precedent, for Huitzilopochtli himself, in the course of the Aztec migration from Chicomoztoc, had taken for himself, "as his due," the costume and insignia of his slain enemies, the seditious Centzonhuitznahua ("400 Southerners") (Sahagún 1950–1982, 3: 4–5; Klein 1986, 1988).³⁹ When Tlacaelel and his successors appeared in public in Cihuacoatl's ceremonial costume, their dress, like their official title, not only would have reminded people of Tlacaelel's early victories over Tenochtitlan's southern enemies but would have also signified the state's current and growing military power (figure 12.3).⁴⁰ Given these historical circumstances, it is no wonder that the goddess Cihuacoatl came to portend war, death, and sacrifice to the ordinary inhabitants of Tenochtitlan.

There are no surviving images of Cihuacoatl from any of the southern mainland cities conquered by Tlacaelel. The earliest surviving depictions of her as the tutelary deity of those two cities were carved in the Aztec capital. There she appears twice, in high relief, on the side of a large, circular basalt monument from Tenochtitlan that dates, not surprisingly, to the reign of Moteuczoma I (1440–1469). Discovered in 1988 and known today as the Stone of Moteuczoma I, the monument is thought to have served as a sacrificial platform (figure 12.6).⁴¹ The carvings on its upper surface and around its outer edge are typical of the fairly simple, planar carving style characterizing the early years of what Emily Umberger (1981: 224–241; 2007: 169–173) calls the late imperial Aztec art style, which she dates to the years 1431–1469.



Figure 12.6. Stone of Moteuczoma I (also known as the archbishop's stone) (1440–1469), showing conquest of Cihuacoatl as patron deity of Culhuacan; Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City. Courtesy Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia. Photograph by Debra Nagao.

Wrapped round the sides of the Stone of Moteuczoma I and beneath a giant solar disk carved on its upper surface are eleven pairs of figures, each with its head in profile, its upper torso and legs in frontal view. Each pair depicts a warrior grabbing the forelock of another, more scantily dressed figure. Because the image of a person grabbing another person by the forelock is a well-known Aztec graphic convention for defeat and capture, the pairs are generally agreed to symbolize key past military conquests. A similar configuration, albeit with more rounded and polished forms, is seen on the sides of the later, considerably larger sacrificial stone known today as the Stone of Tizoc in reference to the huei tlatoani Tizoc, who commissioned the stone during his short reign from 1481 to 1486 ([figure 12.7](#)). Whereas each of the captors on the Stone of Moteuczoma I is identical in pose and dress to the others, and none is named, this not the case for one of the captors, which have increased to fifteen, on the Stone of Tizoc. That figure is distinguished from the others by his hummingbird helmet, which identifies him with Huitzilopochtli; a missing foot, associating him with the Toltec god Tezcatlipoca (Mirror Smoking); and—behind his head—the name sign of Tizoc himself.



Figure 12.7. Stone of Tizoc (1481–1486), detail showing conquest of Cihuacoatl as patron deity of Xochimilco; Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City. Courtesy Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.

The places conquered on both of these monuments are referenced by glyphs located next to the captives, each of which is distinctive in appearance. There is a difference of opinion as to whether the glyphs refer to specific towns, broader districts, or the ethnic groups that inhabited them.⁴² Despite this, there seems to be general agreement that the captives, directly or indirectly, represent the patron deities of these conquered groups or places. This is important because on both monuments there are two captives that are clearly identified as female by their bare breasts and short skirts. One female captive appears in front of the place glyph for Culhuacan, the other next to the place glyph for Xochimilco. We know that the patron deity of both towns was Cihuacoatl, although, as was the case at Cuiclahuac, she was often referred to as Quilaztli.

All four of these captive women must represent Cihuacoatl (Klein 1988). On the Stone of Moteuczoma I the figure identified with Culhuacan holds the weaving batten later carried by Cihuacoatl in colonial manuscript paintings, as do both of the female captives on the Stone of Tizoc. All four of the figures also sport eagle feathers in their hair. Although the skull

attached to the back of each figure's waist on these monuments does not appear in the earliest colonial images of Cihuacoatl, it would become, as we will see, a common feature of later preconquest Aztec stone reliefs representing the goddess. On the earlier of the two stone monuments, moreover, the faces of both women are divided horizontally into two zones, and there is a circle on their visible cheek like those we have seen on Cihuacoatl as a Tzitzimitl on Codices Tudela 27r and Magliabechiano 45r.

Because the female captives on the Stones of Moteuczoma I (1440–1469) and Tizoc (1481–1486) are our earliest known preconquest depictions of Cihuacoatl from the Aztec capital, it is notable that they lack the skeletal facial features and the war shield that she carries in the early colonial manuscripts. In fact, their only military attribute here is the darts or the atlatl they hold in one hand. Nonetheless, like the terrifying Tzitzimicihuatl on Codex Tudela 46r and Magliabechiano 76r, their upper torso is bare. Moreover, Tzitzimicihuatl's name, it will be recalled, includes the word for arrow, *mitl*, and William Barnes (2008: 187) notes what look like two stylized arrowheads projecting from the back of the headdress of the captive representing Culhuacan on the Stone of Moteuczoma I. I suggest, therefore, that these are our earliest surviving images of Cihuacoatl from the Aztec capital and that they portray the goddess as Tzitzimicihuatl.⁴³ The state's artists have here grafted onto Tzitzimicihuatl's failure to successfully give birth a second kind of defeat: that of the state's most important enemy.

The process of further demonizing Cihuacoatl was gradual. Sometime during the reign of Moteuczoma I's successor—and Tizoc's predecessor—Axayacatl (1469–1481), the Aztecs buried a small greenstone slab in a stone box at the foot of the stairway leading up to the Aztecs' most important temple-pyramid (López Luján 2005a: 257–259).⁴⁴ Known today as the Templo Mayor (Great Temple), the giant structure dominated the main ceremonial precinct in the heart of Tenochtitlan (López Luján 2009, 2010). The slab, which measures approximately 4'5" × 1'5" × 6", depicts, wrapped around three of its sides, a standing female figure with a conspicuous circle on each cheek (figure 12.8). The figure predicts the Tzitzimicihuatl that appeared some sixty years later in the early colonial codices (figures 12.4, 12.5) with its full-frontal viewing angle and the row of paper banners in its long hair. Like the faces of those later figures as well, this figure's face appears to be fleshless, its lips missing and its teeth fully exposed as though it were grimacing.

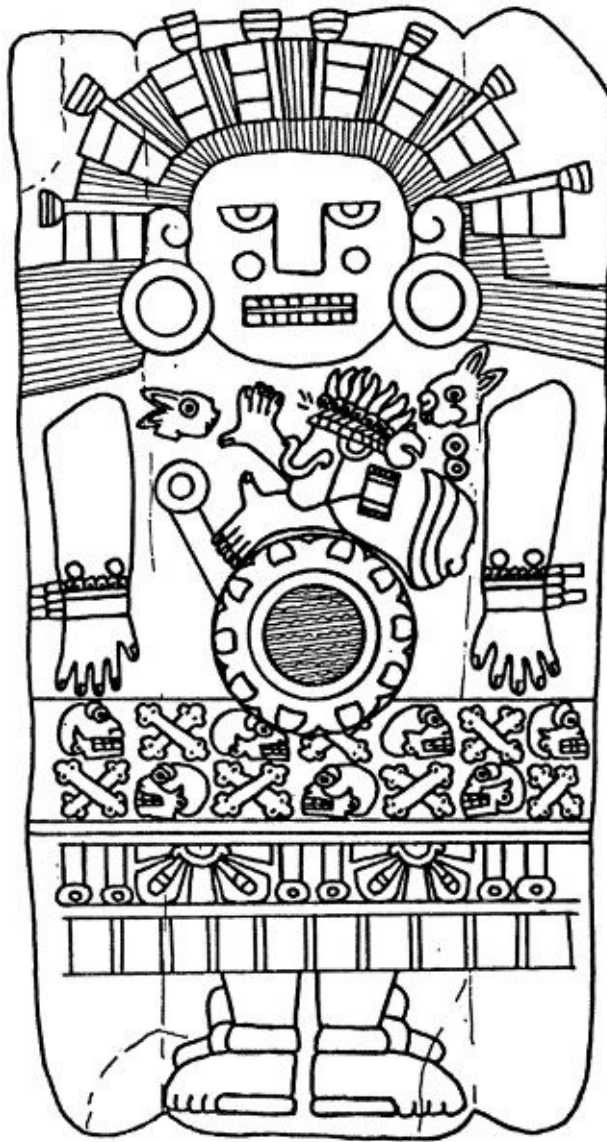


Figure 12.8. Tzitzimichuatl on greenstone slab, reign of Axayacatl (1469–1481), Museo Templo Mayor, Mexico City. Drawing by Eulogio Guzman.

The figure on Axayacatl's slab was identified in 1979 by Alfredo López Austin as the goddess Mayahuel, who figures prominently in an Aztec creation myth recorded in the *Histoyre du Mechique* (Jonghe 1905: 27–8). Written round 1543, again possibly by Olmos, the *Histoyre* credits Mayahuel, after being killed by her wicked celestial grandmother Tzitzimitl (Çicimitl), with having transformed into the first maguey plant, source of the nourishing medicinal beverage called pulque. Because a small figure wearing a crescent nose ornament of the kind often seen on pulque deities appears to emerge from a stone on the woman's torso, López Austin concluded that the larger figure is in the process of giving birth to pulque.⁴⁵ Indeed, one of the two dates flanking the smaller figure reads as 2 Rabbit (*ome tochtli*), the calendrical name of the most important pulque god, Patecatl. The interpretation is further supported by the smaller figure's location next to a large, ornate *chalchihuitl*, or precious greenstone disk, which seems to symbolize the woman's womb.⁴⁶

In 1994, however, I suggested (Klein 1994: 128) on iconographic grounds that the larger figure on Axayacatl's slab represents not Mayahuel but her demonic grandmother Tzitzimitl,

because it was she whose murderous act was responsible for the birth of the maguey plant and the first pulque.⁴⁷ Here I would like further to suggest that the figure on Axayacatl's slab is specifically Cihuacoatl in her persona of Tzitzimicihuatl. The fact that the image of Tzitzimicihuatl on Codex Tudela 46r falls in the section of the manuscript devoted to the pulque gods supports this identification. On Axayacatl's slab Tzitzimicihuatl's fleshless face and open eyes suggest that she is dying in childbirth, a process that would automatically identify her as a Cihuateotl.

On Axayacatl's slab the goddess's skirt is decorated with a horizontal row of stylized stars and Venus symbols below a row of skulls and crossbones. Both of these designs reappear, further embellished, on a figure carved and painted during the rule of Tizoc's successor, Ahuitzotl (1486–1502). In 2006 excavators discovered a huge, fifteen-ton stone slab measuring approximately 14' × 12' × 4' beneath the Stage VII platform at the foot of the Templo Mayor (Matos Moctezuma and López Luján 2007: 28; see also López Luján 2009: 430–433, 2010: 96–101).⁴⁸ The upper surface of the slab represents an upright, conspicuously bare-breasted woman who, like the woman on Axayacatl's smaller greenstone slab, has been turned to face the viewer ([figure 12.9](#)). Like that figure as well, this woman has long hair sporting a row of sacrificial banners. She also wears a short skirt decorated with skulls and crossbones that is partially covered by a red, shell-hemmed apron, here worn in front. The apron is made of contiguous pendant, probably leather, braids and is decorated with a horizontal row of white circles on a black field running above a row of Venus and star symbols. Below that are two overlapping rows of eagle feathers (López Luján 2010: 87).⁴⁹ Large blue and red concentric circles adorning the goddess's cheeks, which predict the blue cheek circles on Tzitzimicihuatl in Codices Tudela 27r and Magliabechiano 45r, confirm the figure's identity as Cihuacoatl transformed into the demon Tzitzimicihuatl.⁵⁰



Figure 12.9. Tzitzimicihuatl on Ahuizotl's (1486–1502) slab, Museo Templo Mayor, Mexico City. Drawing by Klementina Budnik.

This figure of Tzitzimicihuatl is, however, much more frightening than the one on Axayacatl's slab. Her arms and legs, like those of Tzitzimicihuatl on Codices Tudela 46r and Magliabechiano 76r, are bent, outspread, and animated at the joints with skeletal profile faces, and her hands and feet are clawed. Moreover, although the central part of the slab was found broken into multiple, mostly unrecovered pieces, the ragged inner edges of the carved disk at her navel imply that the goddess's womb has been penetrated and its contents ripped out.⁵¹ There are also visible wounds on the figure's knees and elbows and a band of ragged flesh framing her upper forehead. These signs of torn flesh indicate that the woman has been severely injured. That her wounds would be ultimately fatal is evidenced by the broad stream of blood gushing from her mouth, which recalls the one emanating from the mouth of Tzitzimicihuatl on Codex Tudela 27r.⁵² The long red stripes painted on the woman's arms and legs suggest that the figure has been either "striped"—that is, marked for sacrifice—or flayed.⁵³ Although this figure's sorry condition is further indicated by her fleshless lower jaw, her wide-open eyes, like those in the earlier images of Tzitzimicihuatl, show us that she

either is not completely dead or has the dangerous potential to come back to life.

Eduardo Matos Moctezuma (1997, 2009) and Matos Moctezuma and López Luján (2007) from the outset identified the subject of Ahuitzotl's slab as the Aztec earth goddess Tlaltecuhltli, "Earth Ruler," who is sometimes referred to in the literature as the "earth monster." Colonial sources give Tlaltecuhltli as one of the Aztec names for the earth, which they say was perceived as alive and always hungry. According to a passage based on Olmos's *Recopilación*, which Geronimo de Mendieta (1971: 81) published in his 1586 *Historia ecclesiástica indiana*, the Aztecs said the earth looked like a fierce frog with mouths at all its joints. Indeed, Mendieta's verbal description, as is frequently pointed out, conjures up the image of a figure in a displayed, or so-called "hocker," pose, its limbs outspread and bent, and its joints animated (Gibson and Glass 1975: 341).⁵⁴

Identification of the figure on Ahuitzotl's slab as Tlaltecuhltli has also been based on Matos Moctezuma's exhaustive 1997 study of all Aztec displayed figures with "joint marks" that were known at that time. Seldom exceeding four feet in height or width, with some measuring less than a foot, those images are all considerably smaller than the figure on Ahuitzotl's slab, which remained undiscovered in 1997. Unlike it as well, the majority of the smaller reliefs are hidden from view on the underside of the objects they decorate. Matos divided the entire corpus into four types, identifying all four as Tlaltecuhltli. Lucia Henderson (2007) subsequently reidentified one of the four types as another, albeit closely related, terrestrial deity but agreed with Matos Moctezuma that all of the remaining images, which she divided into two groups, represent Tlaltecuhltli.

Matos Moctezuma never mentioned my (Klein 1988) argument that one of Henderson's two figure types should be identified not as Tlaltecuhltli but as Cihuacoatl, and Henderson rejected it. Henderson's primary criterion for dividing the images into two groups was the form of the creature's head. The images in the first group, which I agree represent Tlaltecuhltli, are distinguished by a large, toothy, bestial head that is often covered with reptilian scales (figure 12.10).⁵⁵ The head is formed by joining, at the nose and mouth, two large, profile serpent heads rising from the creature's neck. Justino Fernández (1990: 134) long ago suggested that the two serpents that come together to form the bestial head of the famous Aztec statue of the goddess Coatlicue symbolize streams of blood gushing from the two arteries in her severed neck. She has, in other words, been beheaded. As I argued back in 1988 (Klein, p. 243), this is what we are seeing in the stone reliefs as well. Moreover, the majority of the figures in these reliefs are depicted in dorsal view with the bloody snake heads upturned so it appears that the creature's new "head" is hanging upside down over the upper part of the back.⁵⁶ The two examples of the bestial-headed figure depicting her in front view resemble both Ahuitzotl's huge slab and the greenstone slab of Axayacatl in having a large disk at the abdomen. In contrast to the womb of the Ahuitzotl slab figure, however, Tlaltecuhltli's womb never shows any sign of injury.⁵⁷



Figure 12.10. Tlaltecuhltli on underside of stone box, probably reign of Moteuczoma II (1502–1520); Museum für Völkerkunde, Hamburg (from Seler 1904, 2: 735, Abb. 25).

Henderson's second type of displayed figure, which I identified in 1988 as Cihuacoatl, is distinguished primarily by its human, rather than bestial, head ([figure 12.11](#)).⁵⁸ Invariably seen in dorsal view with their severed heads hanging upside down, these figures, like the dorsal images of Tlaltecuhltli, wear a short skirt decorated with skulls and crossbones and a back apron of braided strips hemmed with shells. The back apron closely resembles the frontal apron worn by Tzitzimicihuatl on Ahuitzotl's slab and in some cases is further embellished with rows of stars like the skirt of the figure in Axayacatl's slab. The human-headed figures also bear a large skull at the small of their back, which recalls the skulls at the back of the female captives on the Stones of Moteuczoma I and Tizoc. That we are seeing Cihuacoatl in these human-headed reliefs is reinforced by the presence on most of them of conspicuous cheek circles.

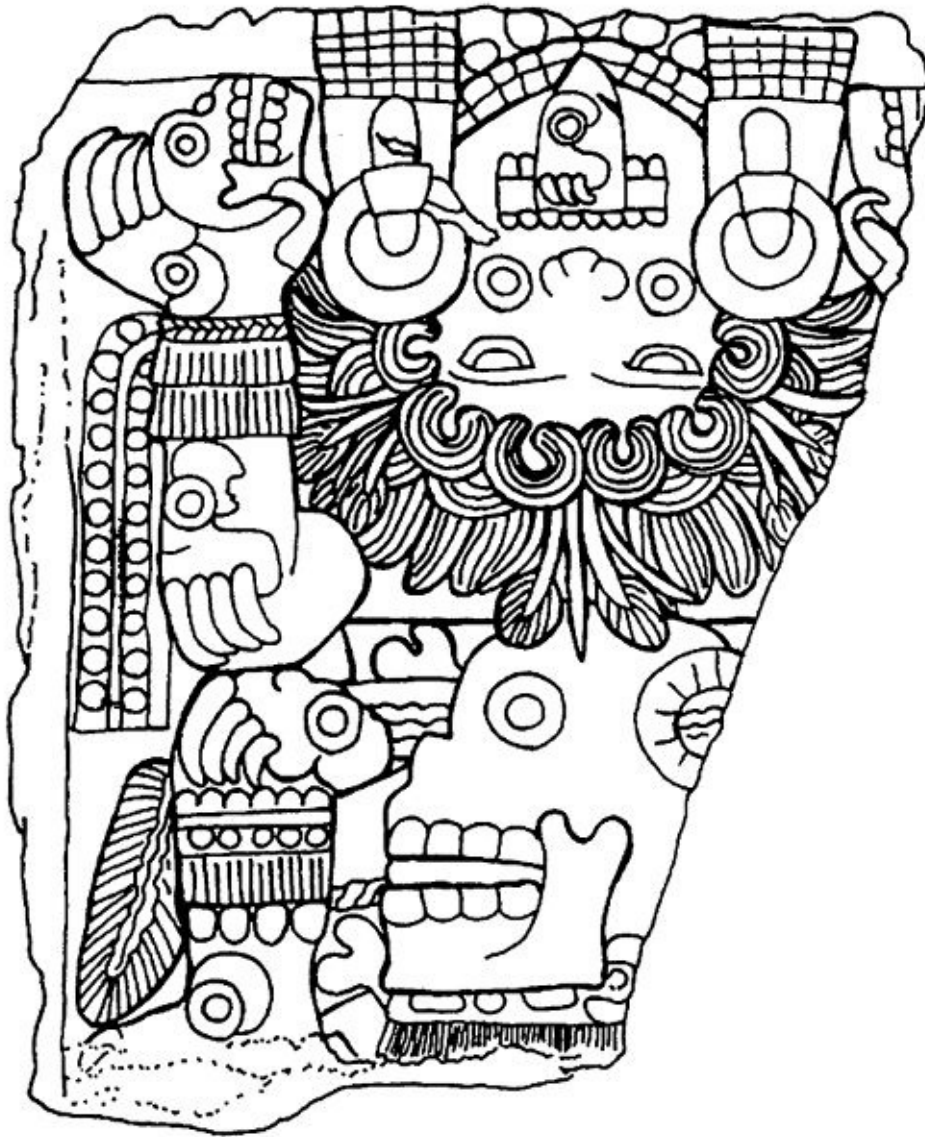


Figure 12.11. Tzitzimicihuatl, stone relief, probably reign of Moteuczoma II (1502–150). Courtesy Museo Templo Mayor. Drawing by Eulogio Guzman.

I therefore suggest that it is specifically Cihuacoatl in her persona of Tzitzimicihuatl, and not Tlaltecuhltli, that we see on the Ahuitzotl slab. There are several features of the smaller human-headed figures that allude to Cihuacoatl's darker side. In one relief, for example, the subject's mop of unruly hair is infested with poisonous nocturnal insects, among them a spider, a centipede, and a scorpion ([figure 12.12](#)). These are creatures that, in colonial sources, are associated with sorcery, and Tzitzimicihuatl, as we have seen, was a sorceress. Moreover, as I (Klein 1988: 245) pointed out long ago, evidence that these beings are either mortally wounded or—despite their open eyes—already dead is provided by their extended tongue. Like Tzitzimicihuatl's tongue on Codex Magliabechiano 76r, the tongue on these figures often takes the form of a sacrificial knife (see note 8). Moreover, one of the displayed human-headed figures has recessed vertical striations covering the lower part of the face that recall the stripes on the arms and legs of the figure on Ahuitzotl's slab. They likely indicate that the creature's jaw has been flayed. The lower jaw of another example incised on a small alabaster plaque may also be striated.⁵⁹ Like Tzitzimicihuatl on Ahuitzotl's slab, some of

these figures also have stripes on their arms and legs, and some have skulls attached with thongs to their arms and legs. Finally, as would later be the case for the early colonial figures of Tzitzimicihuatl on Codices Tudela 46r and Magliabechiano 76r, the face of one of these preconquest human-headed creatures—that seen on the underside of the so-called Stuttgart Statuette—is entirely skeletal ([figure 12.13](#)).



Figure 12.12. Tzitzimicihuatl, stone relief, probably reign of Moteuczoma II (1502–1520), Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City. Courtesy Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.



Figure 12.13. Tzitzimicihuatl, underside of greenstone statue, probably reign of Moteuczoma II (1502–1520), Landesmuseum Württemberg, Stuttgart. Drawing by Klementina Budnik.

I (Klein 1988) argued some years ago that all of these preconquest figures with a severed head and a flattened body had come to symbolize the Aztec Empire itself—that is, that they represented the territories militarily appropriated by the Aztec government. Images of the defeated goddess Cihuacoatl specifically recalled Tlacaelel's strategic victories over Xochimilco and Cuitlahuac. Matos Moctezuma's (1997) otherwise thorough study of images of Tlaltecuhltli does not mention my argument, however, and Henderson (2007) rejected it, giving as her chief reason the absence in the smaller, human-headed reliefs of the weaving batten, the shield, and the eagle-feathered headdress associated with Cihuacoatl in colonial manuscripts.⁶⁰ The captive women on the Stones of Moteuczoma I and Tizoc, who are widely agreed to represent Cihuacoatl, do carry weaving battens and wear eagle feathers in their hair, however, and their cheek circles reappear on Ahuitzotl's stone and the smaller human-headed reliefs. And although she does note that the human-headed figures have many of the same facial features as Tzitzimime seen in colonial manuscripts, Henderson does not take into consideration Cihuacoatl's ability to transform into a Tzitzimitl. More importantly, neither she nor the others who have tackled these two types of images ever offered an explanation

for the Aztec carvers' choice of one type of head over the other. Since Matos Moctezuma, Henderson, and I agree that the subjects of both types of figures—those that have bestial heads and those whose heads are human—are female, gender cannot explain the artists' choices.

My contention that the human-headed stone reliefs of Tzitzimicihuatl symbolized conquered territory fits with our earliest depictions of the goddess as a war captive on the Stones of Moteuczoma I and Tizoc. That her image had become increasingly terrifying over time is confirmed by the late date of the human-headed stone reliefs. The surface of most of those carvings, like that of the bestial-headed variety, is covered with very fine detail and reflects a higher level of technical skill than the Ahuitzotl slab.⁶¹ Umberger (1981: 231n1, 2007: 169) has observed an aesthetic shift toward smaller, more delicate, and more finely detailed surfaces during the last years of Ahuitzotl's reign and the initial years of the reign of his successor, Moteuczoma Xocoyotzin, or Moteuczoma II (1502–1521).⁶² She dates the initial appearance of the smaller, bestial-headed figures to the latter, pointing that two of the best-known examples of that type can be securely assigned to it. One appears on the upper platform of the Teocalli de la Guerra Sagrada (God House of the Sacred War), which bears a date tying it to the New Fire ceremony of 1502 (Caso 1927). The other is located on the underside of the much smaller Hamburg Box (formerly called the Hackmack Box), which Umberger (1981: 237) dates to 1506 ([figure 12.10](#)).⁶³ Because the majority of the human-headed variants mentioned above, like the objects on which they appear, are technically and stylistically highly similar to the bestial-headed examples, it follows that most, if not all, of them should be assigned to Moteuczoma II's reign as well.

That a much larger number of official images of Tzitzimicihuatl were produced at this time indicates that she had become increasingly important. Henderson illustrates ten examples of the human-headed variant, to which should be added a relief from Toluca, which brings the surviving corpus to eleven. The Toluca relief appears on the underside of a stone-carved feathered serpent, which, given its stylistic features and evidence of substantial technical skill, was either transported to Toluca from Tenochtitlan or made in Toluca by carvers trained in the Aztec capital. Elizabeth Baquedano and Clive Orton (1990: 18) have pointed out that all of the examples of both types of smaller figures whose provenience is known were found in Tenochtitlan or its immediate environs; none is documented as coming from a rural area. Moreover, many are made of a precious material, further indicating that most, if not all, of them were made for and used by Aztec elites in the capital—in all probability, elites in the Aztec government.

Over time Aztec artists therefore increasingly emphasized Cihuacoatl's darker side, casting her as a more and more macabre practitioner of black magic whose dangerous powers had been not only successfully thwarted but also harnessed by the government for its own ends. By 1521, as a sign of her subjugation, relief carvings of the dreaded sorceress were being kept out of sight on the undersides of objects, just as her statue was now secreted within a dark temple called Tlillan, "[Place of] Blackness." There the building's small, single door was kept closed so no one but her priests could see the goddess's statue (Durán 1971: 211, 217). At least temporarily crushed and hidden away by the Aztec state as a sign that it—and

only it—could control her, Tzitzimicihuatl’s frightening image could still reassure those aware of its presence that even greater imperial successes were surely yet to come.

Cihuacoatl before the Conquest: Beyond Tenochtitlan

But if all of the stone-carved preconquest objects and monuments bearing images of Cihuacoatl were made in or very near the Aztec capital, does this mean that she had no counterpart, no precedents, in towns and villages beyond the shores of Lake Texcoco? And if she did, what form or forms did they take, and what did they mean to the people who created and used them? There is, in fact, a genre of small clay figurines found over a broad area outside the capital that, as has been suggested by others before me, may well represent an earlier vision of Cihuacoatl.⁶⁴ None of these figurines has been found within the city limits of Tenochtitlan.⁶⁵ Although exceptionally popular during the Late Postclassic period (1350–1521), some of these figurines have been retrieved from Middle Postclassic (1150–1350) deposits as well. Michael Smith (2005: 53; pers. comm., 2007) found at least one at Yautepec in Morelos that he dated to 1100–1300. Similarly, Elizabeth Brumfiel (1996: 146–155) found female figurines, at least some of which apparently belong to this genre, in Middle Postclassic deposits at the Aztec mainland sites of Huexotla, Xico, and Xaltocan. All of these Middle Postclassic examples long predate Tlacaelel’s conquest of Xochimilco and Cuitlahuac and thus the earliest-known images of Cihuacoatl in the Aztec capital.

Commonly categorized and labeled by scholars as Group I, or Type I, figurines, these clay miniatures typically stand between 1.5 and 6 inches in height ([figure 12.14](#)).⁶⁶ Usually made with two molds, one for the front and one for the back, many are hollow and a few are jointed. Some functioned as rattles. Like the female captives on the Stones of Moteuczoma I and Tizoc, the majority takes the form of a standing woman wearing a skirt. Like those captives as well, these figurines are bare breasted and entirely human in form; none I have seen has any skeletal features. The figurines differ, however, from the female captives on the Stones of Moteuczoma I and Tizoc in lacking an eagle feather headdress, a bi-zoned face, a cheek circle, a skull buckle, and a weapon. Nor is there any cause to think they have been captured or defeated. Almost all Group I figurines appear completely unthreatening.



Figure 12.14. Group I figurine, clay, date unknown, Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City. Courtesy Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia. Photograph by Ian Mursell / Mexicolore.

The hairdos seen on the vast majority of these female figures consist of either a single “rope” of twisted hair wrapped around the head (*tlacoyal*) or a part in the middle, the two sides looped up on each side of the head to terminate in a vertical tuft. These hair arrangements identify the subject as a married woman.⁶⁷ It was married women and their midwives who would have been most concerned with matters of fertility, pregnancy, and childbirth.⁶⁸ That the Group I figurines were probably used in rituals pertaining to reproductive concerns is supported by the fact that they are found primarily in household contexts. Smith (1997: 78–79, 2002: 105–106) found small clay figurines associated with niches in house walls, recalling Sahagún’s (1950–1982, 4: 93) report that Aztec midwives made offerings to the Cihuapipiltin (or the Cihuateteo) in their homes. As we have seen, at the time of the conquest Quilaztli-Cihuacoatl was identified as the archetypal leader of the spirits of women who had died in childbirth and, as such, was honored and beseeched for aid by women in labor and their midwives. Assuming that their requests were directed toward a niche figure of the goddess, it is plausible that that it was a Group I figurine.

In addition to showing no signs of aggression or defeat, many of the Group I figurines hold one or, in some cases, two much smaller figures. A few of them even appear to be pregnant. When the woman holds two little figures, one of them usually appears to be an infant. If she holds only one, it is typically a miniature version of herself.⁶⁹ In some cases these smaller figures also have fully developed breasts. Whether these miniatures also represented a child is debatable, but the Aztec goddess of sexuality, Tlazolteotl (“Divine Filth”), is depicted giving birth to a smaller but identical version of herself on Codex Borbonicus 13.

Some scholars, including me, have suggested that the Group I figurines did not represent a specific, named deity per se but instead embodied a generalized notion of motherhood that only later, in urban elite settings, crystallized into the goddess known as Cihuacoatl (Millian 1981; Smith 2002; Klein and Victoria Lona 2009: 365–367). Exactly when this might have occurred is uncertain, but as we have seen, some Nahuas living on the mainland claimed that Cihuacoatl and her cult existed well before the Aztecs’ rise to power.⁷⁰ Among them, Cihuacoatl was remembered with pride and fondness. Why was this so? I propose here that in the beginning, and for many Nahuas on the mainland up to and after the conquest, Cihuacoatl represented the miraculous healing powers of certain plants. In particular, she was associated with certain vines and herbs commonly used by parturients and midwives in cases of difficult childbirth. That the sorceress Quilaztli’s name means “Plant Generator” has never before been satisfactorily explained, but it strongly suggests that Cihuacoatl-Quilaztli was in some way associated with vegetation.⁷¹

Although I have not found compelling iconographic evidence for this hypothesis among the Group I figurines, Cihuacoatl’s very name, “Woman Snake,” ties her to certain medicinal herbs used to do both harm and good, especially in cases of a difficult childbirth.⁷² These herbs are referred to in colonial texts by names that include the word “snake” or are described as looking serpent-like or both. One plant, the psychoactive vine Ololiuhqui (*Ipomoea violacea*, a species of morning glory), could cause a patient to have a vision of a snake as well.⁷³ Ololiuhqui, which was known in the colonial period as *coatl xoxouhqui*, “green snake,” or *coaxihuitl*, “serpent herb” (Sahagún 1950–1982, 11: 129; Hernandez 1651: 32), was the plant most commonly used by the Aztecs to kill pain.

In 1974 Peter Furst (p. 210) prophetically identified the morning glory with what he called the “Mother Goddess” and suggested that vines, to which I would add certain leaves, might have been associated with snakes because they creep and twine.⁷⁴ Indeed, Sahagún (1950–1982, 11: 129) described the leaves of *coatl xoxouhqui* as “slender, cord-like, small,” and added that the person who drank the brew made from them would see a poisonous serpent.⁷⁵ Serna (1987: 383) said that people venerated Ololiuhqui as if it were a god, and Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón (1984: 65–66), who like Serna wrote in the seventeenth century, was told that it appeared to people as a person. Although the gender of the vine reported to Ruiz de Alarcón was male, Serna (1987: 385) found people hiding Ololiuhqui among their *idolillos* (“little idols”), which represented their ancestors. It is plausible, even likely, that the *idolillos*, who were believed to protect the vine against outsiders, were clay figurines. Cihuacoatl, as we have seen, was remembered long after the conquest as a powerful founding ancestor.

Ololiuhqui was also closely associated with sorcerers, who fed it in beverages to people they wished to harm (Sahagún 1977, 3: 292). When mixed with tobacco, worms, soot, and noxious creatures like “spiders, scorpions, centipedes, lizards, vipers, and others” to form the magical pitch *teotlacualli*, it was used not only to protect priests from sorcery but also for medicinal purposes (Durán 1971: 114–118). Some of the pitch’s ingredients—the spider, the scorpion, and the centipede—also appear, as we have seen, in the tousled hair of one of the carved human-headed females in dorsal view that I have identified as Cihuacoatl in her persona of Tzitzimicihuatl. Torquemada (1975, 1: 80–81), as we have seen, described Quilaztli-Cihuacoatl, divine patroness of midwives, as a “great sorceress.” It is true, as I (Klein 1995: 252–253) have pointed out previously, that early colonial Spanish condemnations of native midwives as witches and sorcerers were influenced by the European belief that midwives were witches who consorted with the Devil. Nonetheless, it is unlikely that the notion would have been so readily accepted had it not meshed well with an already present concern that midwives had the occult power to do harm (Cervantes de Salazar 1985: 41; Quezada 1991: 37).⁷⁶

Cihuacoatl may also in some way have represented an herbaceous species of tobacco that the Aztecs called *picietl*. Both Mendieta (1971: 108) and Torquemada (1975, 2: 83), drawing upon the same unnamed and probably much earlier source, claim that *picietl* was thought to embody Cihuacoatl. Ruiz de Alarcón (1984: 227, 243), writing in the seventeenth century, said that it was also known as *xoxouhqui cihuatl* and *xoxohuic cihuatl*, both of which mean “Green Woman,” presumably because its crushed leaves make a “bright green powder” (Wasson 1964: 276). *Picietl*, according to Sahagún (1977, 3: 268) was used to capture snakes, which are often green. According to Serna (1987: 394), *picietl* was one of the herbs used in childbirth.⁷⁷

The serpent that appears between the legs of Tzitzimicihuatl on Codex Magliabechiano 76r therefore may have signified the goddess’s embodiment of the life-saving powers of certain plants used in childbirth. Seventeenth-century Nahua curers’ claims that they received their medicinal herbs from the Virgin Mary probably derives from a widespread preconquest belief that those same plants either embodied or were a gift from the archetypal first mother—or both (Serna 1987: 303; González M. 2006: 108). In that regard the Magliabechiano 76r image may allude to Cihuacoatl as the source of the medicines used by Aztec midwives and thus her capacity for life-saving benevolence. Nonetheless, as we have seen, Aztec supernaturals were never unilaterally helpful; instead their attitude was seen to be ambivalent. Thus, the Group I type of clay figurine that preceded the stone-carved images of Cihuacoatl in Tenochtitlan would have embodied the goddess’s darker side as well. Medicines do not always work, and Cihuacoatl’s ability to withhold or thwart their healing powers could cause a mother, and perhaps her child, to die.

Cihuacoatl’s dual capacity for both helping and harming people would have set the stage for the eventual separation of her darker side from her more benign aspect—and the former’s gradual transformation, first into an angry, archetypal Cihuateotl who been defeated in attempting to give birth and eventually into the dangerous and mortally wounded enemy of the Aztec state, the frightening sorceress Tzitzimicihuatl. Indeed, early signs of the separation

of the benevolent Cihuacoatl from her hostile alter ego can be seen in some of the Group I clay figurines. Although the vast majority of those figurines seem to represent a healthy and essentially neutral, if not benign, woman, there are a few that appear to be deformed or injured. Others show clear signs of anger or misery. The best examples of the latter come from Tlatelolco, the city that shared with Tenochtitlan the small island in Lake Texcoco. There, in the main ceremonial precinct, archaeologists found a group of female clay figurines averaging approximately 3.5 inches in height that belong, or closely relate, to Group I but, unlike the majority, show clear evidence of distress.

The figurines, many of which hold a child and at least one of which appears to be pregnant, were interred in a large burial jar (Offering 11) under a terrace fronting a Late Postclassic platform in front of the Temple of Ehecatl (Temple R). Ehecatl, best known today as the Aztec god of wind, was an aspect of the feathered serpent Quetzalcoatl, who we have seen was closely related to Cihuacoatl in Aztec memory. According to Francisco Cervantes de Salazar (1985: 40), it was Quetzalcoatl who presided over all of the shape-shifting “sorcerers” who used herbs to determine who should live and die. Perhaps it was precisely because Quetzalcoatl was a snake, purveyor of sexual excess and infidelity, that Ehecatl was frequently petitioned by women for help with conceiving a child. The Tlatelolco figurines were found along with the ritually interred remains of dozens of apparently sacrificed infants and women, the latter curled up in a fetal position (Graulich 1992b). The lead excavator of the find, Salvador Guilliem Arroyo (1997, 1999, 2008), argued that the context of the figurines links them and the burials to women’s concerns regarding conception, pregnancy, childbirth, and the health and longevity of their children.⁷⁸

Although all of the Tlatelolco figurines wear skirts and some are nude from the waist up, many of them differ from the Group I figurines discussed above in kneeling rather than standing and in having painted facial features and clothing details. One figurine with vertical cuts on its chest, which he interpreted as injuries, led Eduardo Corona S. (1972: 94, 100, fig. 9) to identify it as a Cihuapipilli. Guilliem Arroyo (1997: 114–116, 118, 133) later described all of the Tlatelolco female figurines as women dead in childbirth on the basis of the white paint applied to them. Sahagún (1993: 266r, 1950–1982, 1: 19), he pointed out, wrote that the faces of Aztec statues of the Cihuateteo were “whitened with chalk” (Sullivan 1997: 111). The figurines’ resemblance to the Cihuateteo, Guilliem Arroyo (1997: 118) added, is particularly strong in the type that he called *galleta*, which is characterized by rigid bodies, upturned eyes, snarling mouths with bared teeth, and arms crossed over the chest (figure 12.15). These features suggested to him that these angry women, despite their open eyes, were dead. As Guilliem Arroyo noted, the Temple of Ehecatl faced west, the direction of Cihuatlampa (“Land of the Women”), where the Cihuateteo were said to dwell.



Figure 12.15. Cihuateteo, galleta-style figurine, Tlatelolco, Late Postclassic period, INAH. Drawing by Klementina Budnik.

Whether the dead, deformed, and angry Group I figurines represent Cihuateteo rather than Cihuacoatl transformed into Tzitzimicihuatl—or something in between—may never be known. In the end, however, the question is probably moot. Tzitzimicihuatl, as we have seen, was a Cihuateotl, and the first Tzitzimime were probably Cihuateteo. Beyond Lake Texcoco's shores, the earliest-known images of Cihuateteo appear in cognate sections of the preconquest divinatory Codices Vaticanus 3773 (pp. 78–79) and Borgia (pp. 47–48). The exact provenience of Codex Vaticanus 3773, which contains many Mixtec features, is unknown, but the more skillfully executed Codex Borgia is generally agreed to have been painted by Nahuas in Tlaxcala or Puebla, possibly at Cholula and in a palace setting (Boone 2007: 227–229).⁷⁹ At the time of the conquest, and probably well before it, the diviners who used these manuscripts were seen to possess potentially dangerous magical powers; they were themselves, in other words, sorcerers. Pohl (1998, 2007) has shown that the Cihuateteo were patrons of these soothsayers.

In both of these manuscripts the Cihuateteo are naked from the waist up and have an angry

facial expression, their eyes dangling from their sockets and a toxic liquid or a noxious insect emerging from their mouths (figure 12.16).⁸⁰ One Cihuateotl on Codex Vaticanus 3773 79 wears a skull at the small of the back like the captive women on the Stones of Moteuczoma I and Tizoc and on Tzitzimicihuatl in the later stone reliefs.⁸¹ We do not see Cihuateteo with skeletal features, however, until we turn back to Tenochtitlan. There professional carvers, probably working for the state, created at least sixteen stone sculptures-in-the round averaging roughly three feet in height, each of which represents a frightening Cihuateotl. Sahagün (1950–1982, 1: 19) wrote of the Cihuapipiltin (more accurately, the Cihuateteo) that there were five in particular whose “images were made of stone.”⁸²



Figure 12.16. Cihuateotl, detail of Codex Borgia 47, Late Postclassic period. Drawing by Klementina Budnik.

Like many of the Tlatelolco figurines, these Cihuateteo take the form of a kneeling, bare-breasted woman. The faces of some of the statues have a fleshless mouth that, teeth bared, seems to growl or grimace, whereas the entire head of others takes the form of a disproportionately large human skull. H. B. Nicholson and Eloise Quiñones Keber (1983: 67–68) mention two others that take the form of a bust with gouged-out eyes that recall the

dangling eyeballs of the Cihuateteo in Codices Vaticanus 3773 and Borgia. Typically, like Tzitzimicihuatl, these stone figures also have a mop of long, disheveled hair, and one even wears a skirt tipped with shells as well as a fillet decorated with a row of smaller human skulls and a necklace with an attached skull flanked by human hands (figure 12.17).⁸³ Another statue, like Tzitzimicihuatl on Codices Tudela 46r and Magliabechiano 76r, has a heart or liver hanging from underneath its bony rib cage (figure 12.18).



Figure 12.17. Cihuateotl, Calixtlahuaca, stone, probably reign of Moteuczoma II (1502–1520), Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City. Courtesy Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia. Photograph by Jorge Pérez de Lara.

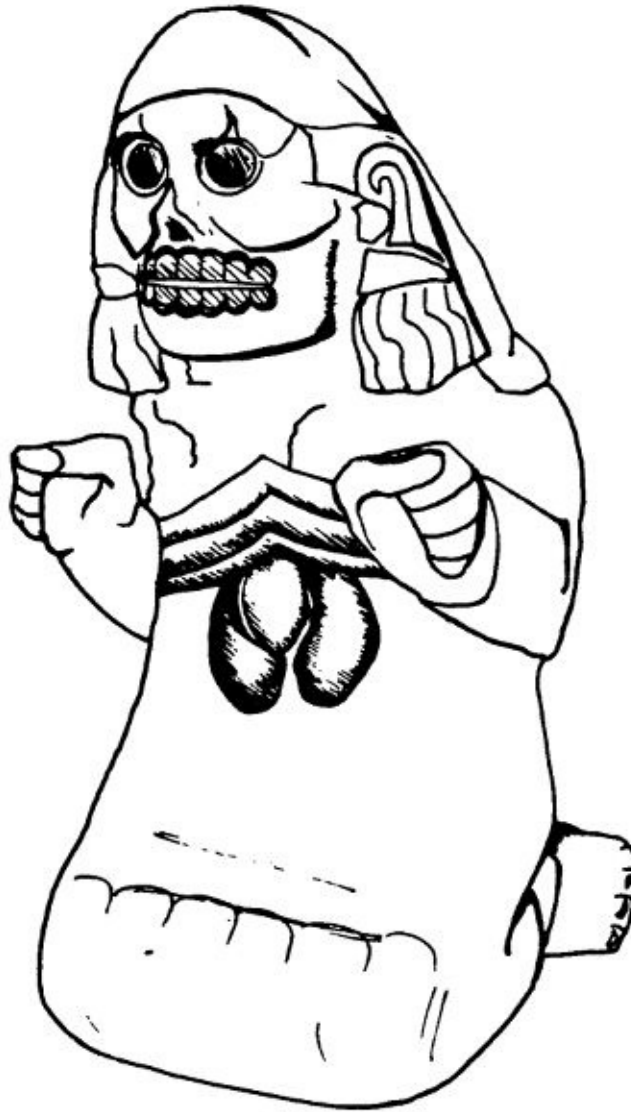


Figure 12.18. Cihuateotl, Tenochtitlan, stone, probably reign of Moteuczoma II (1502–1520), Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City. Drawing by the author.

According to Umberger (1981: 229, 231–232), these statues first began to appear during Ahuitzotl’s reign, in other words, at the same time as the displayed reliefs of Tzitzimicihuatl.⁸⁴ Thus at the same time that Aztec carvers in the capital were taking the final steps toward demonizing Cihuacoatl as Tzitzimicihuatl, others were introducing large, grimacing, often wholly or partly skeletal images of the unhappy female spirits over which she presided. Like the latest preconquest renderings of Tzitzimicihuatl, therefore, these urban images of the Cihuateteo were based on earlier forms made outside the capital. As was the case for Tzitzimicihuatl as well, it was at the hands of the government’s professional artists, working late in its history, that the images of women who had been defeated in childbirth both proliferated in number and assumed their most macabre form.

Conclusion

This historical approach to the known depictions of Cihuacoatl has made it clear that her image was progressively demonized over time. From a small, entirely human, seemingly benign and generic woman, a tiny figurine made of clay largely for use by private families within the confines of their homes, Cihuacoatl was transformed within the Aztec capital into the much larger, professionally rendered, angry and macabre skeletal goddess that in Tenochtitlan was still remembered with dread decades after the conquest. Cihuacoatl's defeat and capture at the hands of Tlacaelel's army was iconographically and conceptually grafted onto an older, underlying set of beliefs regarding the personal defeats of women who had died in childbirth, including the causes of and cures for their death, its unhappy aftermath, and the supernatural held responsible for them. This was accomplished at first by fusing those popular understandings and early images with the conventional symbol for military conquest, but in time it further entailed turning the goddess around to confront her viewer and adding signs that she had been not just captured but mortally wounded as well. Later artists, apparently not content with her frontal, upright image, proceeded to throw her onto her stomach and cut off her head. In the process the dark side of Cihuacoatl was transformed into Tzitzimicihuatl, the terrifying, inhuman, brazen, and highly dangerous practitioner of black magic who had dared to resist the advances of Tlacaelel's army—and paid the price. To keep Tzitzimicihuatl's destructive powers from resurfacing, the government used her frightening image with its open eyes and animated joints to demand ever greater sacrifices of peoples' life and labor. Without those sacrifices, without the people's cooperation with its grand imperial plan, the government would not be able to keep her occult powers under control.

Notes

1. This article represents an attempt to synthesize and render into a coherent whole a number of arguments that I have published previously. For that reason, it represents the assistance of many people, too numerous to thank individually by name. Special thanks go, however, to Eulogio Guzman, Michael Smith, and the late Elizabeth Brumfiel for their feedback on a paper on this subject that I presented at the University of Connecticut at Storrs in 2007. Prior to the conquest the Aztecs used their script primarily to record personal names, place-names, and dates. For more on Aztec writing, see Boone (2000: 28–63).
2. See, e.g., Boone (1983: 5) and Batalla Rosado (2002: 159–165) on the identification of early colonial manuscript painters as natives.
3. Because the only other pictorial cognate in the Magliabechiano Group, Codex Veytia, datable to 1755, appears to be considerably later than the others in the group, I will not discuss it here.
4. Robertson (1959: 125–133) was the first to make the case for an earlier date for Codex Tudela. Batalla Rosado (2010: 9) thinks that the glosses and comments on Tudela were added much later, between 1553 and 1554.
5. Bertold Riese (1986: 77) proposes a different genealogy, improbably placing the Codex Magliabechiano in the eighteenth century.
6. The circle on the sloppily rendered cognate figure in Codex Ixtlilxochitl seems originally to have been white, but a light red wash, which has bled in from the back of the sheet, covers part of it.
7. The anonymous *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas* (García Icazbalceta 1891: 229, 232) says that the Aztec patron god Huitzilopochtli was born “without flesh but with bones” at the time of the creation and that he remained so for another 600 years. Many scholars think that the *Historia* was authored by André de Olmos, about whom more will be said below.

8. Henry Nicholson (1993: 8–9) rebutted my contention that protruding tongues connote death, pointing out that long tongues also appear on a few other Aztec supernaturals that he presumed are healthy. The fact remains, however, that dead people and dead animals are often depicted with their tongues lolling (e.g., the outspread jaguar hide depicted on Codex Magliabechiano 68r). On Magliabechiano 45r and Ixtlilxochitl 102r, both later than the Tudela version, Cihuacoatl's skirt is decorated with flowers.
9. Batalla Rosado (1994, 2011) thinks that Codex Borbonicus was painted before the conquest because, in his view, it is thoroughly pre-Hispanic in style. He does not, however, fully engage some of the compositional and stylistic reasons that Robertson (1959: 88–94) gave for dating it to the early colonial period, including the empty spaces that were clearly left for Spanish glosses.
10. Nicholson (1988) offers reason to think that the Borbonicus figures represent a cihuacoatl in Culhuacan rather than Tenochtitlan, but there is no record of that city's cihuacoatl ever dressing as the goddess. Moreover, on Borbonicus 26 a figure facing the cihuacoatl is identified by a Spanish gloss as "Moctezoma" (Moteuczoma). Moteuczoma was the first name of two huei tlatoque who ruled from Tenochtitlan, Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina (Moteuczoma I) and Moteuczoma Xoxoyotzin (Moteuczoma II).
11. Profile figures with a similarly skeletal head and clawed extremities appear elsewhere in both Tudela (51r, 52r, 64r, 76r) and Magliabechiano (73r, 79r, 82r, 88r). Although they probably represent Cihuacoatl, they reflect such a high degree of misunderstanding of her appearance that I will not discuss them further here. In contrast to most recent sources, I do *not* think that they represent the Aztec death god Mictlantecuhtli (Mictlan Lord) (see Klein 2000 for more on these figures).
12. For more on jointmarks, see Klein (1995: 255–258).
13. Elderly women and nursing mothers living outside of Tenochtitlan may not have been required to cover their upper torsos, but in the capital, this does not seem to have been the case.
14. The exceptions are depictions of the death god Mictlantecuhtli on folio 15r of the Codex Telleriano-Remensis and folio 2v of the cognate Codex Vaticanus 3738 (also known as Codex Vaticanus A and Codex Ríos), which Quiñones Keber (1995: 150) thinks was completed slightly later, by 1563. The latter, according to her, reflects even more European influence than does the former (Quiñones Keber 1995: 128–132, 150).
15. The Nahuatl name for the so-called "posture of delivery" was *mamazouhticac*, "to have the arms extended."
16. On adultery as a cause of complications in childbirth, see Ruiz de Alarcón (1984: 163); Serna (1987: 408); Gómez de Orozco (1945: 55); and López Austin (1988, 1: 303–304).
17. Mendieta also says that this goddess might turn into a lovely young woman for the same purpose, but as I (Klein 1995: 247) have pointed out elsewhere, that notion probably owes much to European belief in the treacherous, seductive Wild Woman, which was introduced into New Spain shortly after the conquest. Mendieta's *Historia* survives only as a copy dated 1611 (Gibson and Glass 1975: 341). In book 8 of Bernardino de Sahagún's (1979, 2: 3r, 12r) *Códice florentino*, or Florentine Codex, which he based on native testimony collected between 1575 and 1577, Cihuacoatl, who is described in the text as a bad omen during the reign of Moteuczoma II, is depicted there in the form of a serpent with the head of a woman. A snake with a woman's human head on Codex Mendoza 2v tells us that Tenochtitlan's first huei tlatoani, Acamapichtli, had formerly served as the cihuacoatl of his home town, Culhuacan.
18. The translation is from Boone (1983: 214).
19. The *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas* (García Icazbalceta 1891: 256) states that "in the second (heaven) they [the Aztecs] say there are certain women who have no flesh whatever, but are all bones, named Tezauhzigua, and otherwise called Zizimime; and . . . these are placed there so that when the world comes to [an] end, their duty will be to eat up all the men" (translation mine).
20. Olivier cites Motolinía (1971: 307) and Las Casas (1967: 464), who state that the family of a warrior dead on the battlefield, whose body could not be returned, dressed one of his arrows in effigy and honored it as if it were their deceased loved one. Olivier also notes an adage in Sahagún (1950–1982, 6: 224) in which a captured enemy warrior is referred to as his captor's "arrow." Dakin (1996), in turn, ties *tizitzi* to words for bone.
21. We know that Torquemada had access to Olmos's later 1546 *Suma*, a summary of the *Libro's* contents (Baudot 1995: 172; see also Cline 1969; Gibson and Glass 1975: 342–343). Baudot does not, however, credit Olmos as the source of Torquemada's chapter containing the story of Quilaztli's transformative powers.
22. All of the translations of Torquemada's work are mine. Today the word *hechicera* means "witch," "enchanter," or "wizard." The most appropriate Nahuatl word would have been *nahualli* (*naualli*, *nahual*, pl. *nanahualtin*), which referred to a person with the ability, for good or bad purposes, to transform into another being, usually a bird or

- animal. For more on the Aztec nahualli, see Sahagún (1950–1982, 9: 31); López Austin (1967: 95–9); and Nutini and Roberts (1993: 85, 93–95). In his Spanish text Sahagún (1977, 3: 117) claims that the nahualli sucks the blood of babies (*chupa a los niños*), a notion imported into the New World in the sixteenth century.
23. Sahagún (1950–1982, 10: 53) describes the bad female physician as a sorceress who “has a vulva, a crushed vulva, a friction-loving vulva.” In the Spanish text he adds that she had a pact with the demon (devil) (Sahagún 1977, 3: 129). See Nutini and Roberts (1993: 113) for similar beliefs among present-day Nahuas in Tlaxcala.
 24. If Olivier’s suggestion that the word Tzitzimitl refers to an arrow is correct, the name Tzitzimicihuatl would translate as “Arrow Woman.” If Dakin is correct, it would mean “Bone Woman.” See note 20.
 25. Torquemada translates the name as “Infernal Woman,” implying that Quilaztli dwelt in the underworld, a notion probably derived from the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas*, where Cihuacoatl is wrongly described as “the wife of the god of the infernal regions” (García Icazbalceta 1891: 247). Spanish mendicants were eager to identify the most powerful Aztec deities with the Christian devil, his helpers, and hell (Boone 1983: 49; Klein 2000).
 26. The men ultimately declined to fight Quilaztli because she was female, a likely face-saving excuse for their cowardice. Sahagún’s (1993: fol. 278v) hymn to Cihuacoatl refers to her as “the eagle, the eagle Quilaztli” (Sullivan 1997: 143–144), which probably explains Tzitzimicihuatl’s bird talons on Codices Tudela 46r and Magliabechiano 76r.
 27. Elferink and colleagues (1994: 31) note that for the Aztecs “both benevolent and malevolent practices are specialized supplemental senses of the same relational universe in which good and evil practices were relative [to one another].”
 28. Sahagún’s references to the harm wrought by the Cihuateteo are too numerous to list here, but see Sahagún (1950–1982, 6: 107–109). Repentant adulterers had to strip naked and humble themselves at one of the goddesses’ shrines in order to obtain forgiveness; others were executed on one of the Cihuateteo’s feast days (Sahagún 1950–1982, 1: 26–7; 2: 45).
 29. Cihuacoatl’s association with failed motherhood is epitomized by Sahagún’s (1977, 1: 46–47) statement that she once left in the marketplace a cradle containing a knife used in human sacrifice. The story evolved into Mexico’s legendary La Llorona, the weeping woman who at night carries an empty cradle to a crossroads where an unwary traveler might have the misfortune to encounter her (Burkhart 1989: 78; Furst 1974: 212n6).
 30. Skeletal features are completely absent from the figure of Cihuacoatl on folio 6r of the Codex Telleriano-Remensis, painted, according to Quiñones Keber (1995: 111, 129), between 1553 and 1555, and in the cognate image on folio 50v of the Codex Vaticanus 3738. Nor are they mentioned in Sahagún’s description of “The Array of Cihuacoatl” (1993: fol. 264r; Sullivan 1997: 205).
 31. Sahagún’s (1993: fol. 278v; Sullivan 1997: 144) *Primeros Memoriales* hymn to Cihuacoatl identifies her as the “mother” and “bald cypress” of Chalma, a pilgrimage center south of Tenochtitlan. Since colonial times mothers of newborns have hung their umbilical cord or a lock of their hair on an enormous cypress tree near the pilgrimage church in gratitude for their infant’s safe delivery and to ensure its good health.
 32. As the mother of Quetzalcoatl, Cihuacoatl would have come from Tollan, legendary capital of the Aztecs’ famed Toltec predecessors in the region, whom they greatly admired (Bierhorst 1992: 29). A number of Nahua rulers, including the huei tlatoque of Tenochtitlan, legitimized their rule by claiming Toltec descent either directly or through marriage.
 33. With one possible exception we have no images of Cihuacoatl from any of these places. A stone statue from Cuzcatlan (Coxcatlan), which represents a standing female with bare upper torso and skeletal head, has been identified by Umberger (1996: 169–171, fig. 7.13, 2007: 176) as the town’s local patron goddess Cihuacoatl, but it wears a skirt of braided serpents and a serpent belt, two garments diagnostic of the Aztec goddess Coatlicue, “Snakes-Her-Skirt.”
 34. Tzitzimicihuatl is glossed on Codex Tudela 27r as Tona, “Our Mother,” a form of address that, like Tonantzin, “Our Dear Mother,” usually refers to Cihuacoatl in early colonial documents. The goddess’s role as an archetypal genetrix was so well entrenched in people’s memories that Serna (1987: 46), in his 1630 *Manual de los ministros de Indios*, could report a Nahuatl chant invoking Tonan as “Mother of the earth and of the gods” (Sahagún 1993: fol. 270v; Sullivan 1997: 123).
 35. On the nature of Aztec warfare, the frequency of revolts, and the state’s loose control of conquered communities, see Hassig (1988).
 36. Eventually the area, often referred to today as the *chinampaneca*, became famous for its extremely fertile *chinampa*

plots built out into the lake, which yielded several crops a year.

37. Sources disagree on the exact date of the Mexica's conquest of Culhuacan, but it was early in Tenochtitlan's history; on Codex Mendoza 2r, which depicts the founding of the capital, it is one of two cities, the other being Tenayucan (Tenayuca), that are shown as conquered (Barnes 2008: 167–171).
38. For some reason it was not until after Tlacaelel's army had reconquered Chalco, an important city south of Xochimilco and Cuitlahuac, that Moctezuma I bestowed these rewards on him. Chalco's patron deity was Tezcatlipoca, not Cihuacoatl, however.
39. Despite the evidence I (Klein 1986, 1987, and 1988) presented that Tlacaelel's public appearances in "drag" had a historical origin and clear political significance, Pete Sigal (2010) raises anew the question of Tlacaelel's reasons for dressing as a woman. He does not mention my argument, let alone attempt to refute it.
40. If I am correct in thinking that we see here the Cihuacoatl of Tenochtitlan, it is probably a descendent of Tlacaelel, for in Tenochtitlan the office stayed in Tlacaelel's line right up through the conquest (Klein 1988: 22; see also Acosta Saignes 1946: 184–185 and Rounds 1982).
41. The stone was formerly called the Archbishop's Stone because it was found buried beneath a colonial building that had once housed Mexico City's archbishopric.
42. For more on the identities of the captives on the Stone of Moctezuma I, see, in particular, Pérez-Castro Lira et al. (1989); Graulich (1992a); Umberger (1998); Barnes (2008); and Matos Moctezuma (2009). For those on the Stone of Tizoc, see Wicke (1976); Townsend (1979); Umberger (1998); Barnes (2008, 2: 150–302); and Matos Moctezuma (2009).
43. The Xochimilca also honored a goddess Chantico ("On the Hearth"). Aguilera (1997: 14) argued that the female captives next to the glyph for Xochimilco on the Stones of Moctezuma I and Tizoc represent Chantico. If so, the distinction is moot, as Chantico was a close relative, if not simply another aspect, of Quilaztli-Cihuacoatl.
44. The monolith was found in Offering 5, which dates to construction Stage IVb (López Luján 2005a: 258–259).
45. The stone probably symbolizes the earth from which the first maguey plant shoot emerged. It compares well with the single stone at the root of the famous *nopalli* (nopal) plant that served in Aztec imagery as a place sign for Tenochtitlan. Aztec migration myths state that Huitzilopochtli told the Mexica migrants they could settle down and found their capital when they sighted an eagle alight on a nopal cactus. The most well-known depiction of the stone and cactus is in the Codex Mendoza (Berdan and Anawalt 1992, 3: fol. 2r).
46. López Austin (1979: 141, 145) identified the disk on Axayacatl's slab as a mirror symbolic of the earth's surface on the basis of the nearby date 1 Rabbit (*ce tochtli*), which is the year the earth was created, according to the *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* (García Icazbalceta 1892: 234). Nonetheless, his interpretation of the little figure as being in the process of being born implies that he also saw the "mirror" as a symbol of the larger figure's womb.
47. In 2000 I (Klein 2000: 15–17) related the figure to the Aztec creator goddess, Citlalinicue, "Star(s)-Her-Skirt," who was virtually identical in appearance to Cihuacoatl and, like her, a Tzitzimitl. Citlalinicue appears repeatedly in the Codex Borbonicus (e.g., on page 5) wearing a red, shell-trimmed skirt and a row of paper banners in her tangled hair, her head in the form of a large skull with vertical red stripes on her lower jaw. See also Taube's (1993: 4–5) earlier discussion of the principal figure carved on the exterior of the so-called Bilimek Vessel in the Museum für Völkerkunde in Vienna, which I (Klein 1980: 162) identified as a Tzitzimitl.
48. Beneath the figure's right foot are twelve small roundels, two of which are divided from the other ten by a small rabbit head. They can be read collectively as the date 12 Rabbit (*matlactli ihuan ce tochtli*) or separately as 2 Rabbit (*ome tochtli*) and 10 Rabbit (*matlactli tochtli*). The date 10 Rabbit, Matos Moctezuma and López Luján point out, could refer to either the day that Ahuizotl was said to have taken the throne or the year of his death, 1502, or to both. The slab's exact function is unknown, although subsequent excavations have revealed that it covered a large number of rich offerings. Matos Moctezuma and López Luján (2007: 29) suspect that it may also have served as a lid to Ahuizotl's tomb, but to date no royal burial or ashes have been found.
49. For a more detailed description of the figure, see López Luján (2009: 418–430, 2010: 77–96).
50. Although López Luján (2009, 2010: 129n158) points out that other Aztec mother goddesses linked to sexuality and maternity—specifically Teteo innan, Toci, Tlazolteotl, and Itzpapalotl—occasionally appear in late colonial manuscripts with cheek circles, those circles are always black. In contrast, Cihuacoatl's cheek circles in those same sources are always white. Although the latter do not correspond to the red and blue cheek circles of the figure on Ahuizotl's slab, it is clear that not all cheek circles were the same. Color clearly mattered. López Luján includes Tlaltecuhli in his group as well, but as we will see, none of the images that I think represent Tlaltecuhli has circles on

its cheeks.

51. As López Luján (2009: 418, 2010: 77–78, 80) points out, Aztec artists frequently used these serrated edges to indicate a wound. There appears to have been a small profile figure walking with a staff inside this figure's opened womb (2009: 419–421, 2010: 80).
52. López Luján (2009: 419, 2010: 80) thinks the blood on the Ahuitzotl slab is flowing from the woman's womb to its mouth, but on Codex Tudela 46r the blood is clearly falling from Tzitzimicihuatl's mouth.
53. Red stripes, which are often seen in Aztec imagery on intended sacrificial victims, also commonly appear, as we shall see, on later preconquest stone reliefs of Cihuacoatl as well as on a Cihuateotl in the preconquest Codices Vaticanus 3773 (p. 77) and Borgia (p. 47) (López Luján 2009: 426, 2010: 87–88).
54. This passage appears in book 2, chapter 4, of Mendieta (1971); chapter 4 is one of the six chapters in book 2 that Mendieta based on Olmos's work.
55. Matos calls this type Group C, whereas Henderson calls it Type 1a.
56. I (Klein 1975, 1976) originally proposed that artists created Tlaltecuhli's distinctive head by joining the backs of two profile heads of the earth crocodile Cipactli, but they take the form of snakes and it is clear that the creature has been decapitated. Although the *Histoire du Mexique* (Jonche 1905: 25) states that the earth was torn in two during the creation, there is good reason to think that for many Mesoamericans it was decapitated instead.
57. On one relief of Tlaltecuhli seen from the front, a small, naked figure of the god Tezcatlipoca ("Mirror-That Smokes") emerges from a chalchihuitl in its abdomen as though being born. For important studies of this and other bestial-headed Tlaltecuhli figures, see Nicholson (1954, 1967, 1972).
58. Matos placed displayed figures with a human head in what he called Group B, while Henderson classified them as Type 1b.
59. The drawing of this plaque that was published by Matos Moctezuma and López Luján (2007: 25, fig. c) shows these striations, whereas the striations are not visible in the photograph of the plaque published in Matos Moctezuma (1997: foto 21).
60. For some reason, Henderson is persuaded as well by Carmen Aguilera's (1978) contention that Cihuacoatl was an "astral" deity and thus never associated with decapitation. I find no persuasive evidence that Cihuacoatl was an astral goddess, however, and in her table of "Astral Deities" in that same study, Aguilera (1978: 110a, b) lists her as decapitated. In a revised version of the table Aguilera (2001: 44–45; see also p. 51) does not list a reference to Cihuacoatl being decapitated but notes that a woman impersonating Ilamatecuhtli ("Old Lord/Lady"), who is generally acknowledged to be another aspect of Cihuacoatl, was ritually decapitated during the month of Tititl.
61. There is only one small, human-headed figure that may have been carved prior to Ahuitzotl's rule; largely effaced, it resembles Ahuitzotl's slab in being located on the upper surface, rather than the underside, of a large stone block. Known today as the Stone of the Warriors for the carved procession of armed men who wrap around its sides, the block has been dated by Umberger (pers. comm., 2007) to the reign of Axayacatl (1469–1481). Umberger does not provide her reasons for this early dating, however, and I (Klein 1987: 312–316) have presented several stylistic and iconographic reasons for assigning the monument to Ahuitzotl's rule. It is possible that the largely erased relief on the top of the Stone of the Warriors was initially carved on the underside of the block and that the block was later overturned and recarved.
62. Ahuitzotl's slab had not, of course, been discovered when Umberger was writing.
63. One of the five dates on the box, 1 Rabbit (*ce tochtli*), corresponds to the year 1506.
64. Seler ([1904] 1960–1967, 3: 305–308) seems to have been the first to suggest that the Group I figures represent Cihuacoatl, pointing out that, according to Sahagún (1977, 1: 46–47), she wore her hair up in tufts and carried a child. In an earlier study, while noting the absence of many of Cihuacoatl's later features, I and Naoli Victoria Lona (2009: 333–335) suggested that that they represent the way that people originally envisioned the goddess.
65. Of the tens of thousands of artifacts embedded in the dedicatory offerings at the Templo Mayor, not one is a clay figurine (López Luján, pers. comm., 2008; Klein and Victoria Lona 2009).
66. For in-depth studies of Group I figurines, see Kaplan (1958); Parsons (1972); Millian (1981), Otis Charlton (1991), Porcayo Michelini (1998), and Klein and Victoria Lona (2009). Although many archaeologists still refer to these figurines as Type I, I prefer to use the term Group I, initially proposed by Millian (1981), whose unpublished study of Aztec clay figurines is still the most thorough and critical.
67. The Spaniards called these tufts "horns."

68. There are no statistics on the maternal and infant mortality rate in the Aztec capital before the conquest, but a study of children's skeletons from San Gregorio Atlapulco in Xochilmilco, which date to the late Aztec III period (ca. 1325–1519), revealed that over 50 percent were under fifteen years of age, with many of those sufficiently young to suggest a high infant mortality rate (Hernández Espinosa et al. 2010: 90; Cruz Laina et al. 2010: 97).
69. The miniatures have the same hairdo and the same kind of clothing as is worn by the larger figures holding them.
70. According to Olmos, for example, long before Tenochtitlan was founded, Culhuacan had "a very fine temple" in which they celebrated a feast to "Çiguacoatl [Cihuacoatl]" (García Icazbalceta 1891: 247).
71. Read (2000: 407n1, 412) suggests that Quilaztli's name derives from the root words *quilitl* ("edible herbs") and *aztatl* ("heron") and that it refers to the rich chinampa farming region around Xochilmilco and Cuitlahuac. She translates the name as "Edible Heron Herb." All other authors I have read translate it as "Plant Generator," however (e.g., Sullivan 1997: 143n22). According to Serna (1987: 383), writing in 1630, Nahuas believed that all plants, including seeds and trees, had a soul and that trees, at least, had originally been a living person or ancestor.
72. Some scholars have suggested that the diamond pattern decorating the skirts of Group I figurines represent the scales of a snake, but as Millian (1981: 58–59) pointed out, skirts decorated with a diamond pattern appear on other supernaturals as well. The pattern also sometimes covers the body of the earth crocodile Cipactli and certain other earth forms, including mountains (Olivier 2004b: 105).
73. The close identification of healers and shapeshifters with snakes was first emphasized by Daniel Brinton (1894: 20, 27–28, 33, 57), who thought that there was an Aztec "semi-priestly order" of magicians called *naualteteuctin*, master *nahualli*, or "master magicians," which claimed as its founder and patron the god Quetzalcoatl, "Feathered Serpent." Brinton's best evidence for an association of healers with snakes comes from the Maya area, however.
74. Furst (1974: 199–202) thought the morning glory associated with the Mother Goddess was the *Rivea corymbosa*. This, he said, was the identity of the blossoming tree in the famous Tepantitla Patio murals at Teotihuacan.
75. Furst (1974: 203) also claimed (without citing his source) that in the colonial period Ololiuhqui was perceived as a deity that could manifest itself in human form.
76. For further discussion of European influences on native ideas about medicine and sorcery in the colonial period and the condemnation of native midwives as abortionists, see Klein (1995: 252–253).
77. Ruíz de Alarcon (1987: 163–165) records a chant that addresses "my sister the woman snake" and "my sister snake," in reference to the cords making up a lasso or net to be used for a deer hunt, which suggests that Cihuacoatl may have patronized certain male activities as well.
78. As Graulich (1992b: 37) notes, the inclusion of a clay figurine of an opossum carrying its baby on its back also points to a concern with reproduction. The Aztecs ground up the tail of an opossum and put it into a drink given to women enduring a difficult labor, which the potion was expected to alleviate (Sahagún 1950–1982, 6: 159; 11: 12).
79. I leave out here the preconquest Fonds Mexicaine 20, which, like Vaticanus 3773 and Borgia, pairs five Cihuateteo with five male Macuiltonaleque, because it is definitely a Mixtec manuscript (Jansen 1998). Cassidy (2004, 2010) argues against the likelihood of Codex Borgia having been made and used in a court setting, but due to the very high quality of its artistry, I am skeptical. Cassidy also allows for the possibility that Codex Borgia was made in Tenochtitlan.
80. In both manuscripts the Cihuateteo and the five male Macuiltonaleque who appear in the row above them are carrying a plant in one hand. The plant is identifiable as *malinalli*, "twisted," a distinctive grass used in making brooms that, in manuscript paintings, symbolize the owner's ability to sweep away—that is, purify—a person's "sins." In both manuscripts the piece of bone at the plant's roots consistently appears at its roots in the Aztec day sign Malinalli (e.g., in Codex Borgia 52, 73).
81. For more on the Cihuateteo and Macuiltonaleque, see, in particular, Lehmann (1905), Jansen (1998), and Pohl (2007 and this volume). Some of the Macuiltonaleque are identified as sorcerers in Codices Vaticanus 3773 and Borgia by the painted hand that surrounds their mouth.
82. A date of one the Cihuateteo's feast days is carved on all of these statues, thereby confirming their identity as Cihuateteo. The five feast days were 1 Deer (*ce mazatl*), 1 Rain (*ce quiauitl*), 1 Monkey (*ce ozomatli*), 1 House (*ce calli*), and 1 Eagle (*ce cuauhtli*). Because the angry, vengeful goddesses were expected to descend at midnight at those times, those days were seen as especially dangerous. At least some of the stone-carved Cihuateteo were probably placed at a crossroads shrine where offerings could be made to them, especially on their feast days (Sahagún 1950–1982, 2: 41).
83. See the lively exchange in print involving López Luján and Mercado (1996), who argued that the dangling organ is a

liver; Berger's (2004) refutation that it is a heart; López Luján's (2005b) defense of his original identification; Berger's (2006) unyielding reply to López Luján; and Teufel's (2016) compelling evidence that the first authors were correct: it is a liver. A similar pendant organ appears on the large, hollow clay figures of a skeletal male and almost identical female found in the Temple of the Eagles north of the Templo Mayor. Although López Luján and Vida Mercado (1996) identify them both as the Aztec death god Mictlanecuhtli ("Mictlan Lord"), I think they represent Tzitzimicuihuatl. Although this statue was reportedly found at Calixtlahuaca, Umberger (2007: 189, 192) says that it was made by sculptors trained in the Aztec imperial style.

84. Umberger (1981: 229) dates a single, "archaistic" greenstone Cihuateotl to the reign of Axayacatl. For a full discussion of the different types of Aztec sculptures representing Cihuateteo, see Umberger (1981: 78–81).

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Nahualli ihuan tlamacazqui

Witches, Sorcerers, and Priests in Ancient Mexico

Roberto Martínez González

Human learning is largely based on analogical thought. In other words, when we find ourselves confronting the new and unknown, we need to compare it with a whole body of concepts that we have already assimilated in addition to our memories of past experiences to understand them in terms of what we already know.¹ And so, when the Spaniards reached the Americas, they had to interpret the array of cultural elements that confronted them on the basis of their own vision of the world, a vision shaped by the legacy of medieval thought, based on biblical explanations and the contributions of the Greco-Roman tradition to Western culture.² Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the way colonial-period documents deal with indigenous ritual specialists is directly derived from coeval categories stemming from European systems.

A review of the literature on Mesoamerica reveals a clear trend since the sixteenth century to classify ritual specialists into two major groups. On the one hand, there are those referred to as “priests” or “ministers” and, on the other, a heterogeneous group of individuals whose main attribute seems to be precisely the difficulty in classifying them—and these include “witches,” “sorcerers,” “curers,” “spell-casters,” “prophets,” “hermits,” “monks,” and so forth (see Molina 2001 and Sahagún 1938 on the use of these terms). The same inclination can be seen in the work of many contemporary scholars (see, for example, Caso 1953: 106; Soustelle 1956: 69; and Porro Gutiérrez 1996: 139).

However, a cursory survey of sources on pre-Hispanic Mexico shows that indigenous informants designate those practitioners, whom we tend to group into two simple groups, with an extremely wide range of names. Examining the work of López Austin (1967) and León-Portilla (1958) yielded forty different sorts of “magicians” and thirty-eight different varieties of “priests.” Given the common practice in Nahuatl to use multiple terms for the same function, it is possible that the variety of designations does not necessarily imply they are different characters or individuals.

This preliminary approach to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century documents by Spaniards dealing with Mesoamerica also shows that not all of these appellations seem to be equally significant, because some of them are generic titles, while others are limited to designating specific actions. The thorough study of each one of these words would require much more space than the present forum permits, so for now a more general contrast will suffice. Quantitatively, the most significant terms are *nahualli* and *tlamacazqui*. These will form the

basis for an attempt to define the relations between what chroniclers called witches and priests.³ The idea is to dilute pure notions of priesthood and witchcraft to show that, beyond dealing with a difference in ritual performers, it is a matter of two different lines of logic concerning the supernatural level. Given the dearth of available information, for the moment comments will be limited to a functional analysis of the roles of these individuals.

The *Tlamacazqui* and the Priest

According to the *Diccionario de la lengua española* (Real Academia Española 2014), a *sacerdote* or priest is simply a “person dedicated or devoted to conducting, celebrating, or offering sacrifices” (“persona dedicada y consagrada a hacer, celebrar y ofrecer sacrificios”). In dictionaries of religion, two indicators appear to be constant for priestly functions; the first is sacrificial practice, and the second, performing rituals in representation of a collectivity (see *Diccionario Espasa de religiones y creencias* 1997: 679; Oxtoby 1987: 528; Royston 1960: 402.). The question arises when it comes to the ancient Nahuas because multiple individuals performed these functions, and their status ranged from commoners to the gods themselves, even including the *tlatoani*, or king. In the Bible in Spanish, the priestly *sacerdote*, from *sacerdos*, or “sacred gift” in Latin, is the person devoted to mediate relations between God and society and to perform sacrifices for the sins of humankind. His function is based on the fact that people are not naturally endowed with the deity’s goodwill; therefore, they need specialists who know the paths of the Lord and who can carry out the necessary reconciliation. In addition to administering rites, the priest is a religious teacher for the people (*Diccionario bíblico* n.d.). In this sense, one would expect the men identified by the chroniclers as indigenous “priests” to have been public figures responsible for administering rituals and for performing certain teaching functions for the general public.

Tlamacazqui is the title most frequently used to designate those who performed offerings and sacrifices.⁴ Their other activities included keeping the fire burning in temples, leading songs and dances, incensing images, collecting and presenting offerings, and organizing the principal celebrations and all matters related to human sacrifice. The *tlamacazque* (plural of *tlamacazqui*) received war captives, held them down on the sacrificial stone, extracted their hearts, wore the flayed skins of sacrificial victims, and offered the victims’ hearts to the gods and then placed them in the *cuauhxicalli*, “eagle vessel,” at the end of the ceremony. They were also known to perform fasts, vigils, partial sacrifices, and autosacrifice (Sahagún 1950–1981 [hereafter FC], 2: 3, 44, 47, 48, 53, 71, 74, 75, 76, 78, 79, 80, 81, 87; Durán 1995: 68, 203, 209, 286, 288, 432; Muñoz Camargo 1998: 168, 170; Chimalpahin 1998a, 1: fols. 1r–2v; Alvarado Tezozomoc 1998: 55–56). All of these actions were framed in the logic of the gift, and, what’s more, the very term they used to refer to the priestly *sacerdote*—translated as “the giver”—explains the central nature of his function.⁵

The purpose of these gifts is clear, at least in some cases. A song to the rain god Tlaloc shows that the goods granted by the gods were only to be lent to humankind: ¡*Ahuia! Mexico teutlaneuiloc!*—“Oh! in Mexico, they are asking for a loan from the god,” according to Garibay’s translation of the Nahuatl (Sahagún 1958: 47–51).⁶ Meanwhile, the fact that the

expression *tlaxtlahua*, “to pay a debt,” refers to human sacrifice shows that these actions were intended to repay the deities for what people had acquired (FC, 2: 42, 47, 57, 96, 111, 127, 131, 134, 141, 155).⁷ It is, however, striking that in this process the action of giving is emphasized, because this act tacitly implies that to give offerings to the gods, it is equally necessary to take from humankind.

Apparently these forms of offering also respond to a communicational logic. Based on the chroniclers’ words, the exchange of presents—ranging from foodstuffs to women—tended to precede the exchange of information (Fernández de Oviedo 1995: 8–9, 16, 18; Durán, 1995, 1: 94; Castillo 2001: 95). This perhaps explains why the *tlamacazqui* is repeatedly characterized as a sort of “messenger” or mediator; *tlamacazque* is the name for the envoys that Motecuhzoma sent to dialogue with the Spaniards, for those who kept an eye on the visiting lords, and those who were chosen by the conquerors to take messages to the indigenous people (FC, 12: 33–34, 122; Chimalpahin 1998a, 1: fols. 5r–5v). Also it is obviously in the same capacity that “priests” received messages from the gods, both in theophanies and in divination practices (Durán 1995, 1: 72, 73, 75, 272, 550, 569; Chimalpahin 1998b: fols. 59r–60r; Castillo 2001: 111, 121).

At the same time, at least some *tlamacazque* were linked to political power; not only were the “high priests” responsible for the investiture of new rulers, but they could also perform functions that, strictly speaking, could be regarded as apt for rulership (Mendieta 1997, 1: 282–283). Nauhyotl, the *tlatoani* of Culhuacan, is called a *teuctlamacazqui* (Alvarado Tezozomoc 1998: 82, 83; Chimalpahin 1998a, 2: fols. 155v–156r). Huemac, of Tula, was the Tezcatlipoca “priest” (Muñoz Camargo 1998: 63, note in right margin). Motenehuatzin Xicotencatl, of Tlaxcala, “was also known by the name of *Tlamacaztecuhtli*” (Muñoz Camargo 1998: 117). In Chalco, “the *tlamacazqui* Chalchiuhtlatonac ruled” (Chimalpahin 1998a, 2: fol. 151r–152r). For a particular sacrifice, the *tlatoani* Motecuhzoma and the *cihuacoatl*, or co-ruler, Tlacaelel blackened their bodies; this and other insignia “indicated that they were both kings and priests” (Durán 1995, 1: 246; 1994: 190). Instead of the *tlatoani*, those who took command in accounts of pilgrimages were “priests,” referred to as *teopixqui*, *tlamacazqui*, or *teopixcatlahtohuani* (Chimalpahin 1998b: fols. 19v–21r, 21r–22r, 22r–23r, 23r–28v, 30v–31v). In fact, it is believed that the ethnonym of the Mexica was derived from the name “in honor of the priest and lord who guided them on their migration, whose name was Meci” (Durán 1995, 1: 71, 1994: 21). Even in the colonial period it was said that “Don Gonzálo Tecpanecatl tecuhtli, lord of the *cabecera* [provincial capital] of Tepeticpac, had the ashes of Camaxtle . . . hidden in his house, having them concealed in his house in a shrine” (Muñoz Camargo 1998: 235).

It is widely known that rulers tended to serve before the people as representatives of the gods before the people, and, as a result, it was common on some occasions for them to receive messages from the gods (Pomar 1891: 8; López Austin 1973; Torquemada 1975–1983, 1: 201; Gillespie 1989; Graulich 1990, 1998a, 1998b; FC, 6: 52; Chimalpahin 1998a, 1: fols. 6r–7r, 9r–9v). Evidence points to the participation of the *tlatoani* and *cihuacoatl* in public sacrifices (Durán 1995, 1: 246, 506). In fact, some lords are said to have conducted propitiatory rites on mountaintops (Chimalpahin 1998a, 1: fols. 132v–133v); the most

relevant case in this regard is Cocotecuhtli, lord of Huexutla, who “led them to understand that he was the one who had the power to make it rain so that the land would bear fruit” (“Relación de Huexutla” 1986: 249). However, rather than serving as full-time ritual specialists, the lords could be regarded as *tlamacazque* as a result of their function as providers. Through war, one of their principal duties, they obtained both captives that were offered to the gods and the spoils to be divided among nobles and warriors (Durán 1995, 1: 262, 380, 406; Mendieta 1997, 1: 283). In fact, the chronicles indicate that from the moment of his accession, the ruler was obligated to distribute part of the goods that were collected in tribute among the people: “The following day the treasurers and factors from the different cities and provinces brought to the king the tribute that had been collected during the year. . . . The tribute, in fact, was so great in quantity, so rich, and so varied that it exceeds the imagination . . . He [Ahuitzotl] divided up among all those men much of the tribute just received” (Durán 1995, 1: 386; 1994: 358, 360; see also Muñoz Camargo 1998: 129).

However, we can also see that in some cases the term *tlamacazqui* is applied to objects and beings that could not be regarded as ritual specialists. For instance, the *cioatlamacazqui* raccoon is called “female *tlamacazqui*” (FC, 11: 9); a certain type of deer is referred to as *tlamacazcamaçatl*, which means “*tlamacazqui* deer” (FC, 11: 15); a type of dove was known as *uilotl tlamacazqui*; *tlamacazqui ipapa* was a plant used to treat genital ailments (FC, 11: 183); the penis is also designated *tlamacazqui* (FC, 10: 123); and in Tlaxcala there was a mountain range known as Tlamacazcatzinco Quauhtlipac (Muñoz Camargo 1998: 101). In addition to these examples are all of those plants and animals that are named *tlamacazqui* in the spells compiled by Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón ([1892] 1987: 139–140) in the seventeenth century.

It is widely known that earth and rain deities, including their zoomorphic form known as *ahuitzotl*, were given the same title (FC, 11: 68, 70, Sahagún 1938, 1: 38, 71, 484–485); nevertheless, we find that other deities, such as Huitzilopochtli, Quetzalcoatl, Mictlantecuhtli, the *centzonhuitznahua* (the “four hundred southerners” or stars), and the *tzitzimime* (feared, destructive female star-demons that descended from the night sky) could also be called *tlamacazqui* or *teotlamacazqui* (Alvarado Tezozomoc 1998: 29, 33, 43, 63, 65, 67, 74, 75, 83, 86; Serna 1987: 366; FC, 2: 1, “Códice Vaticano Latino 3738” 1964–1967: pl. 19). In fact, Ruiz de Alarcón ([1892] 1987: 56) extends the usage of this term to any “demon that is present in an idol or that appears in spells.”

The use of this appellation also appears tied to the logic of the gift. Sahagún (1938, 1: 38) explains that, in the case of Tlaloc, “*tlamacazqui* means that he is the god of the earthly paradise and that he gives men the sustenance necessary for bodily life.” Similarly, Quetzalcoatl gives life to humankind by offering his own blood (“Leyenda de los soles” 1945: 121; “Anales de Cuauhtitlan” 1945: 5; Torquemada 1975–1983, 2: 82), while Huitzilopochtli gives the kingdom to his followers at the end of his pilgrimage (Alvarado Tezozomoc 1998: 23–24). The *tzitzimime* also gave the people rain, water, thunder, flashes of lightning, and lightning bolts (Alvarado Tezozomoc 1878: 358, 451, 486).

Paradoxically, the same gods regarded as “givers” are the ones who are involved in bringing about the death and destruction of human beings. Mictlantecuhtli feeds on human

corpses (FC, 6: 21); the *tzitzimime* devour men at the end of each era (“Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas” 1891: 234; “Histoire du Mechique” 1965: 107; FC, 6: 161–165; 7: 7, 27; 8: 2); Huitzilopochtli instigates war (FC, 1: 1; 2: 175); the *tlaloque* kill people with lightning bolts, illness, or drowning (FC, 3: 47; 6: 115; Torquemada 1975–1983, 2: 365, 368; Mendieta 1997, 1: 96–97); and Quetzalcoatl sets in motion the ruin of Tollan (“Anales de Cuauhtitlan” 1945: 11), to mention only a few examples.

In synthesis and following Mikulska and Contel (2011), we can see that the use of the term *tlamacazqui* in designating deities underscores their character as “givers” of the resources needed by humankind; meanwhile, employing the same word to designate human participants in rituals indicates that they are the ones who “give” the gods offerings and sacrifices, which served as “payment” for what has been received on loan. The relationship described implies both giving and taking, in which the act of offering is emphasized in the process, while the dimension of predation remains present but unspoken.

The Witch and the *Nahualli*

Typically the word *brujo*, or “witch”—predominantly perceived as a female (*bruja*)—is used in the West to refer to human beings who, by virtue of an express pact with the Devil, are devoted to harming other people through supernatural means (Henningesen 1980: 73; *Proceso a la brujería* 1989: 58–60; Lisón Tolosana 1992: 113–116, 132). The variety of acts associated with this class of individuals shows that beyond a prototypical quality—such as transformation or magical flight—what characterizes them is the simple manifestation of a power beyond the sphere of Catholicism. And this power is what would have led to the identification of the *nahualli*—a sort of ritual specialist—with the *brujo*, given that its behavior was considered proof of the existence of an entire series of traits typical of the Devil’s adepts. Molina (2001) translates the term *nahualli* as *bruja*, or female witch. Sahagún (1938, 10: 33) defines it in the Spanish column of text as “a *brujo* [witch] that frightens men and sucks [the blood from] children at night.” Clavijero (1974: 107) claims it means *hechicero* (“sorcerer”). Meanwhile, Olmos, in his *Tratado de hechicerías y sortilegios* (1990: 40–41), states that *nahualli* is a term for a female and translates it as “she the *nahual* called *bruja* [female witch].”

The term *nahualli*, whose meaning is perhaps closest to “cover” or “disguise” (Martínez González 2011: 81–88), is generally employed for certain figures that are identified with the capacity to change shape at will (see Fernández de Oviedo 1944–1945, 11: 183; CF, 4: 43; Ruiz de Alarcón 1987: 132–133; Durán 1995, 1: 371–372; Mendieta 1997, 1: 94).⁸ The metamorphic capacity is equally present in other categories of beings, but what characterizes the *nahualli* here is that this transformation tends to occur during sleep while the human body is in repose and before it wakes in the form of the animal. The data about this metamorphosis are poor among the Mexicas, but evidence of it exists throughout Mesoamerica. For purposes of the present discussion, the description presented by Margil (1988: 259) with respect to a Guatemalan ritual practitioner suffices: “Art of becoming animals. This consisted of words and four turns . . . The Indian gave four turns and saw that the jaguar, lion, or animal that he

wished to become was coming from his mouth, and his body remained as if dreaming and senseless” (see also Archivo General de la Nación Inquisición [hereafter AGN], Inquisición 1621: 404; Fuentes y Guzmán 1882: 45; Zilberman 1964: 114, 119; Alcina Franch 1993: 85–86; López Austin 1996, 1: 425).

Diverse sources state that one of the main functions of the *nahualli* was to deploy evil against others. More specifically, they tend to emphasize its capacity to produce illness and death by supernatural means (FC, 10: 31; 4: 43, 101; Sahagún 1946–1947: 169–170, 1997: 17, 163; “Códice Vaticano Latino 3738” 1964–1967: 114, pl. 49; “Códice Telleriano-Remensis” 1964–1967: fol. 22r). The methods employed are said to be varied, although a number of colonial documents indicate that the *nanahualtin* (plural of *nahualli*) made use of their animal shapes to torment their human pairs, whether to devour their bodies or to kidnap their souls (AGN, Inquisición 1624: fol. 69r; Archivo Histórico Diocesano de Chiapas [hereafter AHDCH], Autos criminales contra Diego de Vera 1678: fol. 22).

However, this does not mean that they were essentially evil beings. In fact, beyond any reference to good or evil *nanahualtin* (FC, 10: 31), the documents suggest that these creatures could also act as protectors of their community. In most cases, what stands out is the participation of these figures in conflicts with outsiders. Sahagún’s Florentine Codex (FC, 12: 22; see also Muñoz Camargo 1998: 165) tells what happened when Cortés’s troops reached the Veracruz coast: “And it is said that for this reason did Moctezuma send the magicians [*nanahualtin*], the soothsayers [*tlaciuhque*]: that they might see of what sort [the Spaniards] were; that they might perhaps use their wizardry upon them, cast a spell over them; that they might perhaps blow upon them, enchant them.” Alva Ixtlilxochitl (II 1975: 186) offers an account in which Motecuhzoma and Nezahualpilli face off through their *hechiceros* (sorcerers). On the other hand, Pomar (1891: 34) declares that the lords “were friends of knowledge of the art of the necromancers or sorcerers, to be prepared to [defend themselves] from them.” Chimalpahin (1998a, 2: fols. 187r–187v) notes that “Quetzalmazatzin, *tlatocapilli* [‘the lord’] of Amaquemecan, went to Huexotzinco to fight and take captives for a second time in the shape of his fire serpent *nahualli*.” On another occasion, the same author (Chimalpahin 1998a, 2: fols. 8v–10r) mentions the presence of a *nahualli* called Mazatl (Deer) and of another during battle “that was an Otomi priest.”⁹

The practice of *nanahualtin* was similarly linked to divination and control over meteorological phenomena. Their actions were focused both on the propitiation of rain and on warding off storms and hailstorms (Pomar 1891: 52; *Procesos de indios* 1912: 56, 70; Sahagún 1946–1947: 167–168, FC, 4: 43; see also FC, 7: 20; Ponce [1892] 1987: 8; Torquemada 1975–1983, 2: 83). What is noteworthy is that according to available information, these powers could be used both in favor of the community and to its detriment (Sahagún 1946–1947: 168). The techniques employed are poorly known, but a late source explains that employing them implied “utter force and violence” (Serna 1987: 290).

Similarly, historical sources underscore that the *nahualli* was endowed with a therapeutic function. *Procesos de indios* (1912: 19) mentions that the *nahualli* Martín Ocelotl gave medicine to the sick, while Serna (1987: 292) and the trials of María Castro and Manuela Riberos (AGN, Inquisición 1675: fol. 9; Inquisición 1733: fols. 15v–16r) refer to the

existence of curers who could turn into dogs. What's more, in the case of most of the curing spells compiled by Ruiz de Alarcón (1987: 200, 201, 203), the celebrant is called Nahualtecuhli, "Lord *nahual* or Lord of the *nanahualtin*." What is interesting is that, at least on some occasions, the *nanahualtin*'s curing process could also assume the form of a combat between ritual participants battling for the patient's health. In a trial in Soconusco (AHDCH, Autos contra Antonio de Ovando 1685, fol. 22v), a ritual practitioner by the surname of Ovando was asked how he healed people, to which he responded that "the way is that his *nagual* (which was said to be a lion) warned him where the sick person's *nagual* was tied up, and this deponent went and released it and the patient got better." In the same trial document (fol. 31v), an indigenous woman named María Sánchez stated that the accused, Nicolás Santiago, had said to a sick man: "Oh Mr. Antonio, tonight I have fought to defend you from the four [enemies], so I have not been able to sleep all night, because they have wished to kill you."

In summary, the available data seem to indicate that, whatever his purpose may have been, the function of the *nahualli* was based on the logic of confrontation.

On the other hand, other colonial-period sources seem to link the *nahualli* to political power. According to Sahagún's informants (FC, 10: 194), in Teotihuacan "There law was established, there rulers were installed. The wise [*tlamatinime*], the sorcerers [*nanahualtin*], the *nenonotzaleque* [the holder of counsel] were installed as rulers [*tlahtoque*]." It apparently conferred the *nanahualtin* with an elevated rank in the hierarchy of power. In fact, we have been able to find a total of eleven lords who were attributed with *nahualli* traits in sources for central Mexico: Cuexcuex, Tzutzumatzin and Maxtlaton of Coyoacan, Olmecatl Uixtotli, the mythical leader of the Olmeca Uixtotin, Quetzalmazatzin of Amaquemecan, Copil of Malinalco, Ozomatzintecuhtli of Cuauhnahuac, Tzompanteuctli of Cuitlahuac, Nezahualcoyotl and Nezahualpilli of Texcoco, and Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin of Tenochtitlan (Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1975, 1: 537–538; "Anales de Cuauhtitlan" 1945: 61; Chimalpahin 1998a, 1: fols. 85r–87r; 8v–9r; 159r–159v, 184v; Torquemada 1975–1983, 1: 259; Durán 1995, 2: 385, 459, 466; Mendieta 1997, 1: 279–280; Muñoz Camargo 1981: fol. 77r; FC, 10: 192; Alvarado Tezozomoc 1998: 90–94). And *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (Kirchhoff et al. 1976: 152) cites a *nahualle tlamacazqui* among the *tlahtoque* of the Olmeca Xicallanca. At least in some of these cases, one can see that the *nahual* identity of rulers is equally tied to this combative attitude that characterizes the individuals who conduct rituals. Ozomatzintecuhtli "summoned all the spiders, as well as the centipedes, the serpent, the bat, and the scorpion, ordering them to watch over his daughter" (Alvarado Tezozomoc 1998: 90–94). Quetzalmazatzin transformed himself into a fire serpent to combat the Huexotzincas (Chimalpahin 1998a, 2: fols. 187r–187v). Then Tzutzumatzin performed a variety of transformations to defend himself from the emissaries that Ahuizotl sent to kill him (Chimalpahin 1998a, 2: fols. 184r–185r; Torquemada 1975, 1: 256).

Certain deities are presented as *nanahualtin*, such as Huitzilopochtli, Tezcatlipoca-Titlacahuan, Tlacahuapan, and Quetzalcoatl (FC, 1: 1; 3: 13, 17, 19, 23, 25, 27, 29, 31). It is possible that Quilaztli was also regarded as a *nahualli*, because she is described as a *hechicera* (sorceress) in reference to a transformation (Torquemada 1975, 1: 164–165). The

data are sparse, but it is clear that some of the metamorphoses of the gods are framed by confrontation and protection. For instance Quetzalcoatl and Mayahuel adopted the form of a tree with two branches to escape the goddess's grandmother ("Histoire du Mechique" 1965: 107). Tezcatlipoca turned into a jaguar to devour the giants that dwelled in the land and to defeat Quetzalcoatl to succeed him as the sun ("Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas" 1891: 213). The same god "assumed diverse forms and frightened the [people] of Tula" ("Histoire du Mechique" 1965: 114–115). Even more remarkable is the case of the phantasmagorical shapes that Tezcatlipoca adopted in the dark of the night to terrify cowardly men or to reward the courageous individuals who stood up to him (FC, 5: 77–78). A similar attitude may be seen toward Cihuacoatl when she transformed herself into a woman to seduce and kill men who wandered in marketplace (Torquemada 1977, 3: 99).

As Lamrani (2008: 49–51) has aptly noted, nahualism is based on the model of the food chain and the relations between *nanahualtin* are essentially predatory. The people of Mesoamerica chose to "animalize" themselves and their surroundings to take conflict to a symbolic plane in which only a select few were empowered to take action.

Witch and Priest, Rupture or Continuity

Although obviously there is no real consensus on the matter, a number of scholars regard the *nanahualtin* as alien to the Mexica priestly class. Therefore, for example, Caso (1953: 106) and Porro Gutiérrez (1996: 139) describe *nahuales* and sorcerers as rivals of the "regular clergy," Soustelle (1956: 69) situates them "at the pole opposing the sacred in regard to priests," and Miller and Taube (1993: 122, 136) only state that on occasions it is difficult to distinguish shamans from priests.¹⁰ In fact, a meticulous analysis of the information in ancient sources suggests that in reality the difference between one and the other is less clear than what one might imagine.

Quetzalcoatl, as the ruler of Tula, received both the title of *tlamacazqui* and that of *nahualli* (FC, 3: 13; Chimalpahin 1998b: fols. 66v–67v). Otontlamacazqui, "Otomí tlamacazqui," is referred to as a *nahualli* who fought against the Mexicas (Chimalpahin 1998a, 1: fols. 94r–94v, 9v–10r). The *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (Kirchhoff et al. 1976: 152) cites a *nahualle tlamacazqui* among the *tlahtoque* of the Olmeca Xicallanca. Meanwhile, in the Inquisition trial of Tlacatetl and Tanixtetl (*Procesos de indios* 1912: 3, 6–7) it is said that "Tacaxtecle is [a] sacrificer and idolater, and pope [priest] of sacrifices, who becomes a jaguar . . . He is a sorcerer and he turns into a jaguar and witch and all sorts of animals that he wishes [to become]."

In addition to appearing in connection with sacrifice—the priestly act par excellence—the *nahualli* also appears associated with the term *tlamacazqui*. Therefore, the Florentine Codex (FC, 2: 76) states that during the feast of Toxcatl, some "offering priests [*tlamacazque*] called *tlatlacanaualti* [*nahualli*-men] seized him, stretched him out [on the sacrificial stone], held him, cut open his breast. His heart they held up in dedication to the sun." On the other hand, occasionally the *tlamacazque* could perform actions as characteristic of the *nanahualtin* as divination and casting war spells (Ruiz de Alarcón 1987: 138–140; Muñoz Camargo 1998:

98–100). In many of the curing spells compiled by Ruiz de Alarcón ([1892] 1987: 139–140), the celebrant is presented simultaneously as a *tlamacazqui* and *nahualtecuhtli*. Among other points of coincidence, fasting and sexual abstinence were practiced especially by both the *nanahualtin* and the *tlamacazque* (FC, 9: 63; 1: 7; 2: 78; 3: 67; *Procesos de indios* 1912: 60). Both of the two individuals darkened their skin black on ritual occasions (Durán 1995, 1: 420) and lived in the temple (Sahagún 1946–1947: 168).

In synthesis, the present exercise shows that the translation of the terms *nahualli* and *tlamacazqui* as “witch” and “priest,” respectively, is not only imprecise but also classifies them as ritual practitioners, when in reality the two designations encompassed a multitude of different entities who happened to perform similar actions. Far from constituting opposites, some individuals could simultaneously act as *tlamacazqui* and *nahualli*. Furthermore, both categories seem to coincide in some of their attributions. It is not possible to conclude that every *nahualli* was a *tlamacazqui*, or vice versa, but at least it is clear that they were not exclusive entities. What can actually be observed is that, when it came to dealing with other human beings and with deities and spirits, it was possible to act under two different cannons: one anthropomorphic, which gave priority to exchange, alliance, and reciprocity—by means of gifts, offerings, and sacrifices—in contrast to a zoomorphic category, in which hunting, combat, and consumption emerged as recurrent mechanisms for mediation.¹¹ In other words, in Nahua thought, culture was not necessarily universal. On the contrary, formal qualities determined the type of relationship that could be established; the human level entailed exchange, while the nonhuman one implied predation. Thus, it is not surprising that some Mexica warriors dressed as jaguars, eagles, or *tzitzimime* to go to war, an activity that often ended in the ritual consumption of the enemies’ flesh and that, as Graulich (1997) and Olivier (2010) have pointed out, were acts comparable to hunting.

Notes

Translated from Spanish by Debra Nagao.

1. Obviously, there are other mechanisms, such as direct experience, that play an important role in the early years of childhood.
2. We see, for example, Durán (1995, 2: 26) states that Huitzilopochtli is Mars, and Muñoz Camargo (1998: 85) describes Camaxtle, Quetzalcoatl, and Tezcatlipoca as “men born from incubus.” Motolinia (1971: 13) sees the mythical hero Acol as “another Saul,” and Sahagún (1938, 1: 19) infers the presence of the term “serpent” in the name of the goddess Ciuhuacoatl and from the fact that she was also known as Tonantzin, “Our Mother,” “this goddess is our mother Eve.”
3. We can find at least twelve different terms associated with *nahualli* (see Ruiz de Alarcón [1892] 1987: 133; Sahagún 1946–1947: 167; FC, 10: 31, 101). Of the nine words that Molina (2001: 70) uses to translate *hechizero* (“sorcerer”) into Nahuatl, six are also used to designate the *nahualli*. However, we have been able to see that, among the words mentioned by Molina, *nahualli* is the one that appears most frequently in the sources, and in all cases, except for this one, they are based on the form “he who does something.” In contrast, *tlamacazqui* is the only term employed by Molina (2001: 83) to translate “ministers of Satan that served in the temples of the idols.”
4. Therefore, Muñoz Camargo (1998: 157) concluded that the *tlamacazque* “were the members that they had in that religion [that were] like the members of the church are now. They were called *tlamacazque* because they served the gods with sacrifices and perfuming [them] with incense.” Mikulska and Contel (2011: 32–33) convincingly

demonstrate that the title *tlamacazqui* was not exclusive to a specific priestly group; on the contrary, it could be applied to the priestly class as a whole.

5. See Mikulska and Contel (2011: 23–25) for a discussion of the etymology of the term *tlamacazqui*.
6. López Austin (1994: 185) explains that “from this storehouse men waited for the loan of sustenance that they requested from Tlaloc, as said in the hymn in his honor.”
7. According to Graulich (2003: 17), for the Mesoamerican people “at the root of it all is the notion of debt. A child owes life, and everything that makes it possible to live, to his creators. He must recognize it and pay his debt, *tlaxtlahua* in Nahuatl, through the offering of incense, tobacco, foodstuffs, or even his own blood.” See Köhler (2001) for a discussion of the concept of debt payment to the gods.
8. The form adopted by the transformer is given the same name; a number of ancient and modern texts indicate that this nonhuman dimension served as a sort of alter ego for the person (see Martínez González, 2011: 88–244).
9. Quiche and Cakchiquel chronicles also mention the presence of *nanahualtin* during war (see “Guerras Comunes de Quichés y Cakchiqueles” 1957: 137, 145, 149; Hernández and Díaz 1934: 240–241; “Testamento de los Xpantzay” 1957: 155).
10. A clear exception is Aguirre Beltrán (1955: 1); although he translates *nahualli* as “magician,” he presents this figure as a priest of Huastec origin, specifically linked to the control of weather phenomena.
11. Although clearly we cannot reduce the functions of the *nahualli* and the *tlamacazqui* to combat and reciprocity, it indeed seems clear that most of their actions are circumscribed within these two frames of logic.

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Contributors

LILIÁN GONZÁLEZ CHÉVEZ received her PhD in sociology from the Social Sciences and Health Program of the University of Barcelona and is a researcher at the Center for Social Research and Regional Studies of the Autonomous University of the State of Morelos, Mexico.

JOHN F. CHUCHIAK IV received his PhD from Tulane University in 2000. His general research focuses on the history of the colonial church in México with a special emphasis on the Franciscan missions, the Inquisition, and the Catholic Church in colonial Yucatan. His most recent publications have examined the contact and colonial transformation of the indigenous cultures of Mexico, most notably the Maya of Yucatan. He is especially interested in researching the realms of Christian mission history, religion, ethnic conflict, gender, and social change in the wider Atlantic world.

JEREMY D. COLTMAN has taught in the departments of anthropology at California State University, Los Angeles; Santa Monica College; and University of California, Riverside. He is fascinated with the ideological and artistic influence of the ancient Maya on the Late Postclassic Nahua and Aztec civilizations, a subject on which he has published with a number of journals including *Mexicon*, *Latin American Antiquity*, and *Ancient Mesoamerica*. His current research involves an investigation of the Maya solar cult at the site of Chichen Itza, Yucatan, Mexico.

ROBERTO MARTÍNEZ GONZÁLEZ is a Mexican researcher and professor at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. He has studied the notion of personhood in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican societies for many years and recently began to analyze conceptions of death among the same peoples.

OSWALDO CHINCHILLA MAZARIEGOS is an archaeologist specializing in the complex societies of ancient Mesoamerica. Currently an associate professor in the Anthropology Department at Yale University, he was formerly a professor at the Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala and curator at the Museo Popol Vuh in Guatemala City. His most recent book, *Art and Myth of the Ancient Maya*, was published by Yale University Press.

CECELIA F. KLEIN is professor emerita in art history at the University of California, Los Angeles, where she taught pre-Columbian and early colonial art history for thirty-five years. Her research has principally focused on the complex interrelationships among Aztec religion, politics, gender, and art before, during, and following the Spanish Conquest. In recent years, however, her attention has turned to the art of the tenth-century Maya living at Chichen Itza and its legacy in Aztec imagery.

TIMOTHY J. KNAB is presently a professor of anthropology at the Universidad de las Americas

in Cholula, Puebla. He has taught at the National University of Mexico, Mexico's National School of Anthropology and History as well as Tufts, Wellesley, and numerous other universities. He has written well over a hundred academic articles and published four books, including *A War of Witches* and *The Dialogue of Earth and Sky*, which focus on witchcraft in the Sierra Norte de Puebla. He is also a professional chef and from 1981 to 1990 was the *Chef-propriétaire* at the Auberge des 4 Saisons in Shandaken, New York, where he received numerous awards.

JOHN MONAGHAN is a professor of anthropology at the University of Illinois in Chicago. Most of his research has dealt with the history and ethnology of the Mixtec and Maya peoples in Mexico and Guatemala. He is currently working on a reconstruction of the Codex Colombino Becker with several collaborators and a study of indigenous land tenure in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Mexico.

JESPER NIELSEN is an associate professor at the University of Copenhagen, where he received his MA and PhD degrees from the Department of American Indian Languages and Cultures. His research, which can be characterized as cross-disciplinary, focuses on Mesoamerican iconography, epigraphy, history, and religion, particularly in Maya, Teotihuacan, and Epiclassic cultures. In 2014 Jesper received the Einar Hansen Research Foundations Prize for excellence in humanistic research.

JOHN M.D. POHL is an adjunct professor in art history at UCLA and a lecturer in anthropology at Cal State LA. He has received numerous fellowships and grants for his research on the Nahua, Mixtec, and Zapotec civilizations of southern Mexico and has had a prolific career as a writer, designer, and curator for major museums and exhibitions around the country, including "Sorcerers of the Fifth Heaven: Art and Ritual in Ancient Southern Mexico" for Princeton University; "The Aztec Pantheon and the Art of Empire" for the Getty Villa Museum; and "The Children of Plumed Serpent, the Legacy of Quetzalcoatl in Ancient Mexico" for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Dallas Museum of Art.

ALAN R. SANDSTROM has conducted long-term ethnographic field research in the pseudonymous Nahua community of Amatlán, located in the tropical forests of northern Veracruz, Mexico, since his first visit there in 1970. Professor emeritus of anthropology at Purdue University Fort Wayne, he is a sociocultural anthropologist whose research interests focus on cultural ecology, cultural materialism, economic anthropology, Native Americans, and religion and ritual.

PAMELA EFFREIN SANDSTROM is associate librarian emerita and former head of reference and information services at Helmke Library, Purdue University Fort Wayne. She has applied optimal foraging theory to the bibliometric study of citation patterns in human behavioral ecology and has written about ethnographic methods in library and information science. A participant since 1974 in the ongoing fieldwork with the Nahua, she is currently engaged with preserving access in archives and other repositories to the documentation generated by anthropological researchers.

DAVID STUART received his PhD in anthropology from Vanderbilt University and is the director of the Mesoamerica Center at the University of Texas at Austin, where he currently holds the Linda and David Schele Chair in the Art and Writing of Mesoamerica. His early work on the decipherment of Maya hieroglyphs led to a MacArthur Fellowship. More recently his research has focused on the art and epigraphy of the Maya sites of La Corona and San Bartolo. His recent books include *Palenque: Eternal City of the Maya* and *The Order of Days*.

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