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Taken from the Lips

Gender and Eros in Mesoamerican Religions

by

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With a foreword by Catherine Keller



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For Jean Robert

Thank you for a stimulating
and thought-provoking companionship

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FOREWORD

“The body, abode and axis of delights and pleasures, the dual body of women and men, fluid and permeable corporeality, the body as the principle of being on earth, fusion with the immediate surroundings and also with the origin of the cosmos . . .”—so writes Sylvia Marcos of the life of ancient Mesoamerica [112], a pangendered, cosmically entangled life. Does this body she excavates with tender precision offer also an abode for a displaced desire, the longing of regendered, transgendered or postgendered intellectuals for a bodily belonging that never really could have been? Or is it possible that the attractive force of Marcos’ account stirs a memory, a ghostly potentiality, that even the full brutality of the *conquista* could not eliminate? If this fluid sexuality with its permeable cosmos, or chaosmos, of relations, seems all too tempting, all too healing, for a postmodern ego, she has teased it out of a richly textured set of narratives. With her sifting of texts and practices, from the sexual lore of the ancient Aztecs to the therapeutic poetry of living *curanderas*, Marcos presents a persuasive archeology of Mesoamerican eros: as sex, as gender, and as episteme. Indeed she deftly deploys Foucault to excavate the subjugated knowledges of the Nahuatl tradition from the layers of Spanish translation, overlaid with missionary intentions. She works with great care in the gap between the defeated world of the Aztecs and certain remarkable but fractured and hybrid continuities among the living Maya of Chiapas. The women of Mesoamerica begin to reappear precisely at the points of their effacement, emerging from pictograms, oral transmissions, ethnographic data and textual residues.

The erotic episteme that Marcos vividly reconstructs is however too true to its sources to remain within an anthropocentric paradigm. Epistemology folds into cosmology—or more precisely “cosmivision”—as eros for the Nahua unfolds into universe, even as every dimension of the universe folds back into gender. It is the human body that is the fold between the intimate performance of gender and the cosmic extension of all materiality. Her analysis of the stories, metaphors and practices of Mesoamerica then and now yields a beautiful conceptual pictogram of its own, that “of a permeable and yet individual body, open to the cosmos and yet particular,

gendered and yet not fixed.” [10] I have been struck by the multiple resonances between Marcos’ reconstruction and certain sources crucial to my own work in the very different area of philosophical theology. For instance the resonance is especially intriguing between Marcos’ Mesoamerica and the cosmology of Alfred North Whitehead and the process theology that it supports. Derived in part from relativity and especially quantum theory, process cosmology depicts a universe in which everything is in flux, in becoming. The human body is just one complex society of events of becoming, organic and inorganic, mental and physical. And the content of each distinct process of becoming derives from its interfluency with its entire world of relations. I call this the process of ‘interbecoming.’ Whitehead sometimes names the “divine element in the universe”, which is the lure to becoming in relation, the “cosmic Eros.” He is revising Plato, however, for a monotheistic framework. Gradually process theology developed its own school of feminist theology, in which we celebrate the Eros as the non-omnipotent, fluidly gendered image of God, in whose image we are remaking ourselves.

One may go elsewhere for affinities to Marcos’ connection between gender and cosmology: for instance to Luce Irigaray’s rethinking of gender difference in terms of the ‘sensible transcendental,’ in which a fluid sense of the body, as enveloped by delicate, indeed permeable boundaries, invites a new kind of touching between the genders—and at the same time a new doctrine of the incarnation. The frequent charge of “essentialism” laid at Irigaray’s feet may say less about her actual thinking—in which she never attributes particular traits or roles to masculinity or femininity—than to the difficulty of articulating gender difference today. The difficulty seems to lie in its binary structure, which seems (essentially) welded to a dominological hierarchy of superiority and subjection. Yet while reading Marcos one meditates on an approach to duality that remains irreducible to the familiar western (and Asian) hierarchy. She recognizes that the Aztec warrior empire had its own forms of hierarchy and patriarchy, and that femininity in symbols does not entail female equality in practice. However, she insists that we read the vocabulary of Mesoamerican gender difference without the same old lens—of the same difference, the difference of the same masculine subject ordered over and against the same subjected femininity. If we let her get us in touch with these ancient bodies, bodies not tightly bounded against each other and the universe as ours in the forcefield of the Christian

west have become, we begin to perceive how “what was feminine and masculine oscillated, continuously reconstituting and redefining itself.” In this cosmic condition of “permanent movement and continuous readjustment between the poles, neither pole could dominate or prevail over the other except for an instant.” [45] This feminine or masculine charge runs through all beings, rocks, plants, animals, people or deities. Goddesses here—like the wise women who channel them—are to be approached rigorously and respectfully.” [ch. 4] A different incarnation indeed! “Finding even vestiges of it can begin to reveal incarnate universes that escape the master narrative of the disdainful superiority of spirit over flesh.” [113]

If so, then we of a north whose modernity was financed by the conquest and legitimated by the disdain will read this book with a double risk. On the one hand we may monitor our own inclination to appropriate, yet again, a native paradise of earthly delight and cosmic harmony; we may worry about the illusions of those (ourselves) seeking forgiveness and redemption at the hands of the long-conquered other. On the other we may note that our very resistance to such appropriation can sound like sophisticated repulsion at the traditional cultures themselves. How readily the attempt to check our own greedy projections turns into a new suppression of the “vestigial alternative”! For the insignia of gender complementarity and cosmic balance, indeed the hint of an erotic ecology whose memory can only haunt our ruined biosphere—can hardly be conveyed with respect, before someone needs to decry the romanticism or the essentialism of the binary episteme. It is because Marcos requires the language of “complementarity” to account for the Mesoamerican worldview, that I am trying to dispel in advance the echoes of this modernism that always knows best, even in its feminist form. I know well how a once helpful critique of the language of gender complementarity works, as it shaped my own thinking. But what if this critique, become habitual, makes us tone deaf to the stories and wisdoms of cultures defeated by our own ancestors? What if even our feminist sensibilities can partake of that “disdainful superiority”? In other words, what if the more truly dominative dualism lies more in the disdain of these dualities?

Marcos’ method, however, does not trade judgment for disdain. This book does not scold but invites. At any rate Marcos is herself a conceptual *curandera*. Her mediating contextuality—as a cosmopolitan Mexican intellectual, a feminist long connected to the struggles of

Mexican women, particularly in Chiapas—will tempt us to slide right into her perspective, her skilled empathy with this ancestral people. We might be tempted to abstract or extract this “cosmovision” of masculinity and femininity from its own earth. But then we would have been misreading the project. It moves with brilliant balance between her native informants, read for their subjugated knowledges ancient and present—and her sense, always delicate, never coercive, that there is wisdom here, a cosmovision for all who will respectfully engage. This wisdom recognizes the struggle that pervades life, the precarious path of a life “between abysses,” along the ridged back of Earth, likened to a great iguana. Yet it also exults in the pleasure of life—with particularly salty examples of the pleasures of older women! Between a skillfully decoded memory and a still tantalizing hope, Marcos’ “permeable corporeality,” embedded in a complex, shifting, ever lively ecology, opens up new spaces for our thinking. And our loving. It is an archeology that digs deep into self and other, into culture and spirituality, into ethnography and ecology.

The Aztecs, Marcos tells us, referred to their ritual words as “a scattering of jades.” The reader will find both in her sources and in her interpretations many gems indeed.

Catherine Keller
NYC November 2005

INTRODUCTION

The essays in this book move around in time, much like a spiral that ever comes back to several versions of the past, ever seen in new perspectives, slightly different here but always recognizable, evidently modernized there but never losing their reference to the cyclical motion proper to Mesoamerican cultures.

At every new loop of the spiral new texts are scrutinized: the first chronicles back in the sixteenth century that first cast oral traditions into an alphabetic mold, the “past” constructed by the baroque intelligentsia of New Spain (colonial Mexico) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the twentieth-century ethnographies of still mostly oral traditions that reinterpret these pasts in order to bring them to present-day usage.

Certain super-positions between the spirals suggest a resilience which the neo-Zapatista movement has turned into a politically coherent historic project: the adaptive and creative resistance of the indigenous peoples and their defense and reappropriation of a spirituality rooted in their soil. The method followed is, by necessity, a blending of ethnohistorical research with ethnographic field work.

This book is also the story of a long intellectual journey whose trigger was a young Mexican woman’s stubborn questioning of the historically subservient and often servile position of women in her society. In Ivan Illich’s wondrous library, I spent years of research. On a hill dominating the valley of Cuernavaca, Illich had established the Centro Intercultural de Documentacion (CIDOC). At that time, the two protecting volcanos Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl were still visible landmarks in “*la region mas transparente*,” as Carlos Fuentes would define the valley of Mexico. There I spent years delving in successive layers of primary sources, colonial documents, and ethnographies, jumping from one spiral to the other, from archeology to history, ethnography, sociology. I learned to decipher old Spanish. I spent hours in mute contemplation of pictographic codices from different regions and pre-Hispanic pasts, trying to disentangle their symbolic meanings. I filled notebooks with quotes from ancestral ritual discourses, admonitions of the elders, orations and canticles registered from the lips of the people who were already born when

Europe flooded their world under waves of misunderstandings, cruelties, good intentions, ecological destructions, and decimating epidemics.

I can still see myself sitting in a room of Rancho Tetela, piles of treasures on my table. In fact the initial puzzlement and fascination have not receded and I am ever more under the grip of the original passion for discovering those peoples who are part of my ancestral past. I strive to understand them on their own terms, with their world views, their sense of gender and of gendered spaces and times. I try to attune my ear to their voices buried in the lines of chronicles written in alphabetic script by Spaniards and hispanized natives.

CIDOC's library kept a complete collection of the early chroniclers, missionaries, and soldiers who wrote about their early, merciless, and often bloody subjection of the Americas. With the thrill of discovery, I devoured every bit of Fray Toribio de Benavente, "Motolinia," Fray Diego Duran, Fray Diego de Landa, and of course Fray Bernardino de Sahagun and Fray Bartolome de las Casas, among others. They were mostly missionaries, some were conquerors. With his nonorthodox view on Catholicism and its history of implantation in Mexico, Ivan Illich had enthusiastically collected an immense wealth of original documents hardly accessible in other nonspecialized libraries. His alternative concept of "education" consisted mainly of providing students with direct access to all kinds of sources and often to their authors.

Faced with the challenge of leading the first seminar on "Women in Mexico" ever taught, I dedicated my time to rigorously reviewing the primary sources. The seminar was very well attended and popular. In those early years of feminism, there was hardly anything being taught in a similar vein. The learning alternative that CIDOC promoted was a two-way learning-teaching interrupted by convivial gatherings and feasts. These gatherings were enriched by the intense interactions with other Latin American and international intellectuals, activists as well as political figures. Significant leaders of the Latin American struggles made themselves available in an environment of horizontal interactions. Camilo Torres's and "Che" Guevara's presence was noted at different periods. Attendants could include Boaventura de Souza Santos, Don Sergio Mendez Arceo, Roberto Rosselini, Danilo Dolci, Franco Basaglia, and also Chanta, from whom I learned so much. This indigenous *amate* (traditional bark paper) painter from the state of Guerrero introduced me to the shamanistic rituals of

healing so common in the Mesoamerican area, including Ameyaltepec, her village. I recorded and transcribed intensive interviews with her, in which she described a recent ceremony where she had expelled “evil” and “illness” incarnated in several material beings. To her I owe my initiation into the ethnology of healing, with its multiple referents and polymorphic signifiers. Somehow, what she said made sense within epistemic references that were not very distant from what I read in the pre-Hispanic documents. However, they were incompatible with the philosophical veneer I had been given at the university. Her world view was my first living guide to the cosmovision implicit in the ancestral references.

More than an educational center, CIDOC was a “thinkery” equipped with its own printing shop. In spite of very modest technical means, the outpour of monographs, works in progress, and articles outmatched, in number of titles published yearly, that of Mexico’s largest publishing house.

Roger Bastide, the well-known French sociologist of religions, reviewing these publications, placed them in the avant-garde of Catholic thought. This path is still to be walked fully by contemporary Catholics. In CIDOC’s series, writes Bastide, “certain excellent research works have been produced, whose value lies in the fact that they are descriptive, devoid of ready-made theoretical claims and conceptualization. The reason we express preference for this kind of descriptive study is because the problems posed are not bookish, trite and extrinsic to the inquiry, but are specific and posed by the facts themselves” (1976, pp. 6–7).

FOCUS ON MESOMERICA

As to my first reading of such descriptive materials, it was inevitably literal—places, times, what really happened, to whom, and how—and so were my initial publications. Years of careful re-readings followed, of checking the same myth or situation as recorded in different documents; that is, checking and comparing the sources against each other. I have been careful to contextualize every document within the colonial and evangelizing enterprise, taking into consideration the variants and nuances of different documentary transcriptions, versions, and/or translations. I was especially attentive to the cultural load that Catholic evangelizers left on their renderings of the natives’

life. I scrutinized skeptically their evaluations of beliefs and rituals. It has been a sustained effort, without ever losing the thrill of discovery that continues until today—for instance, when I find a new depth or a fresh nuance in Angel M. Garibay's, Alfredo Lopez Austin's, Lousie Burckhart's, Willard Gingerich's, or Miguel Leon-Portilla's retranslations from Nahuatl.

In the ethnographic area, my experience in in-depth interviewing with Chanta was followed by rigorous field research with *Espiritualistas Trinitarios Marianos*, and with *curanderas*, *graniceras*, shamans, and midwives in several communities in the state of Morelos and Chiapas. Chapters 4 and 5 as well as several references scattered in this book are the result of those experiences with ethnological participative field research.

EPISTEMIC FRAMES

My aim was always to go beyond descriptive and monographic work. I focused my research on the epistemological issues that gave apparently disparate empirical data their profound sense and internal logic. Inspired by Michel Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*, I developed an instrument to unravel the intricacies of causal links, and discover the cognitive processes proper to the peoples native to Mesoamerica. The heart of my work rests there. In the first chapter I elucidate the cognitive frame underlying healing practices. How do Mesoamerican people heal with apparently disparate procedures? Why are these procedures effective? What does being ill and well mean? I try to systematically avoid the concept of "magic." I think that it too often stands for ethnocentric and chronocentric perspectives unable to go beyond their own explanation of reality.

In every area of research touched upon, I stand at the threshold between two worlds. I patiently collect data and try to uncover the other thread of "subjugated knowledges" that binds and weaves everything together. The still incomplete results of my efforts are here. Besides healing, which is the center of the chapters 1, 4, and 5, I move to other issues which gradually emerged from the same field of research. First and foremost: How is gender conceptualized in a world with such a divide between what is deemed male and female?

The searching of primary sources for women's voices and ritual practices relies heavily on Spanish sources and translations. Being

mainly the work of male chroniclers and Catholic clerics and conquerors, these sources are of limited bearing, to say the least, to the presence and contributions of women in myth and ritual. Even Sahagún often translates pictograms unambiguously representing women acting as doctors, midwives, and ritual practitioners into the Spanish generic masculine, thus erasing them from agency and pre-eminence. Only the occasional subversions of the original intentions of the chroniclers are an open window to comprehend Mesoamerican gender configurations. Critical re-interpretations of pictographic or pictoglyphic codices, as well as recent Spanish retranslations from the original Nahuatl documents, enlightened the recovery of ancestral meanings. Giving visibility to feminine presences that were made invisible or lost in texts and documents has been one of my guiding objectives. In the Mesoamerican “episteme,” gender is the root of duality. Its pervasive presence is simply occulted by the concealing of women.

In chapter 2, I review the philosophical tenets implied in the Mesoamerican concept of duality. Eroticism is a puzzling presence scattered among the priestly clerical writings of Sahagun and other colonial missionaries. Its paradoxical link to vitality and gender is elaborated in chapter 7. What is the Mesoamerican concept of god and goddess? It does not necessarily fit with our transcendent interpretations, nor is it endowed with exclusively beneficial qualities, nor is it in total insularity with respect to human actions. In chapter 3, I reconcile texts reporting on the ancient pantheon with contemporary interpretations of “more than human” agents. The primary sources concerning gods and goddesses are not only repetitious and redundant but also contradictory and sometimes confusing. Frequently, the search of an order based in mutually exclusive categories has failed to pay honor to this other world. Its “logic” lies in deeper epistemological tenets elaborated in chapter 3 and implicit in other chapters. For gender theory, it is vital to unravel the significance of the body as the preferred locus of our identity as women. What is the body for Mesoamericans? In chapter 8, I try to interpret body metaphors. The analysis of diverse narratives, metaphors, and practices leads to the notion of an individual body that is gendered, yet permeable not fixed, and open to the cosmos.

The last chapter explores the ways of orality. An understanding of the oral mode of permanence has been implicit in every chapter. Oral religious traditions are forged by oratory devices in very distinctive

manners. They are both fluid and permanent, in a constant process of change and yet resilient. They are permanently re-created but remain based on their own distinctive generative roots.

The amblings of oral thought, its circular and unpredictably innovative flow, reminds us of the river of the ancient Greek philosophers, ever the same and ever changing. Its waters flow incessantly, murmuring over stones, disappearing down a ravine or flowing freely toward the sea that embraces them. The thought behind oral narrative resembles water that flows swiftly at times and quietly at others, changing course unpredictably but always remaining the same river.

A large part of the material of the *Historia General de las Cosas de la Nueva España* is epic and poetic songs, chronicles and stories, hymns and ritual discourses, all destined to be declaimed in public. These gems of knowledge and oral tradition were called *chalchihuitl*: precious jade stone.

MESOAMERICAN COMMONALITIES

Combining records of the contact period with archaeological findings of previous periods, it is possible to conceive a commonality of certain Mesoamerican generative roots. Most scholars assume a common cultural core, manifest in similarities of symbolic meanings, rituals and social practices, medical knowledge, architectural elements, and iconographies, writing systems (pictograms, hieroglyphs, pictographs), and measurement of time (calendars) among the diverse peoples of Mesoamerica. Some even affirm the existence of one broad Mesoamerican religious armature.

The geographical term Mesoamerica, which is the universe of reference of my research, has historical and cultural connotations. It refers to the cultures of an area extending from mid-Mexico south to include most of Central America. In this region, complex and sophisticated civilizations attained a peak in religion, art, architecture, agriculture, medicine, and calendaric knowledge. The communities in the area are not identical, but they share a common core and generative roots that allow us to make some generalizations.

Data about the earliest periods of Mesoamerican religions are basically archaeological. Iconographic studies, hieroglyph decoding, and the examination of mural paintings and sculpture have revealed the importance of feminine presences in myth and ritual.

The first written records properly speaking about Mesoamerican peoples and religion are from the so-called contact period. It was indeed a time of contact or encounter, as some scholars like to call it, in the sense that both sides contributed to the creation of a new configuration. Yet this encounter was decidedly disadvantageous for the natives: in order to survive they had to become subservient and silently suffer cruel impositions. The records of that period consist mostly of transcriptions of poetry, chants, and mythic narratives preserved by oral custom from the time immediately previous to the European invasion of the territory that had been ruled by the Aztecs or Mexica. In the course of this book we use alternatively the term Aztec, Nahuatl (which refers to one of the native or language groups of the area), and Mesoamerican for the regional overview.

The primary sources are generally called codices. They are composed either in pictograms, in alphabetical Nahuatl, or in the old usage Spanish. Spanish chroniclers seldom displayed the sensitivity of Sahagún and Las Casas, which is the main reason why I, like most Mesoamerican scholars, again and again return to one of the versions of the *Historia de las Cosas de la Nueva España*.

SAHAGÚN'S ETHNOGRAPHIC ENCYCLOPEDIA

Sahagún, in an attempt to gather information about the civilizations that his own people had conquered and almost eradicated, drew up a questionnaire in Nahuatl and sent indigenous assistants to interview the elders of three towns and villages. With the help of these *colegiales*, he interviewed selected elders from Tenochtitlan (the Aztec capital), Tepepulco, and Tlaltelolco. With these collected materials he composed the *Historia*, which is known in several versions.

His *Primeros Memoriales* have been translated into English by Thelma Sullivan. They consist mainly of canticles and songs or long poems, as we might call them today. They were the very first transcriptions from a previous oral tradition that had thus far preserved its myths and history through oratory devices. The *Codice Matritense del Real Placio* (or *Segundos Memoriales*) is another version of Sahagún's compilation. It is from a recent translation into Spanish, by Leon-Portilla, that I elaborated my analysis of the *Curiosa Historia del Tohuenyo*. This epic chant is a perfect example of the eroticism pervading pre-Hispanic Mexico. The *Historia de las Cosas de la Nueva España* is the

Spanish translation by Sahagún of materials in Nahuatl collected by him twenty years earlier. In 1577, Sahagún elaborated a bilingual Nahuatl-Spanish and pictographic version which has been called *Florentine Codex*. The *Florentine Codex's* original edition was given as a present to an Italian noble of the time. It has been translated directly from Nahuatl into English by Arthur J. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble. Most English-language Mesoamericanists use this version as their base of reference. The *Florentine Codex* is also the base of Lopez Austin's and Josefina Garcia Quintana's *Historia General de las Cosas de la Nueva España, Codice Florentino* (1989), a volume with extensive introduction, paleography, and notes.

Sahagún himself details all the manipulations to which he had to subject the original transcriptions of the elders' accounts. He cut, synthesized, and arranged the materials to adapt them to the guidelines of his time concerning the writing of books. He had to organize the material by books, chapters, and paragraphs. He also elaborated appendices, which are generally the most interesting part. Here he relegated data which he could not force into his pre-organized scheme. The combination of oral transcription and literary manipulation typical of Sahagún gives us in a nutshell a view of the confrontation between two worlds. In this sense, these texts are of immense importance for exemplifying a dialogic or "dia-logues."

When speaking about the so-called Dialogues of Sahagún, Thomas Bremer says, "A careful reading of the *Historia General* reveals the voices of native informants and hybrid *colegiales*, and what they say, in some ways, subverts the intentions of Sahagún. Although their exchanges may be occluded by the European form of alphabetized writing and Sahagún's missionary intentions, something of the conversation still remains" (2003, p. 29).

I have been particularly attentive to the subversions of Sahagún's intentions, which are the basis of almost all this book's chapters. They reveal universes of the flesh and eroticism, the fluid dimensions of gender, and the healing capacities of gods and goddesses.

The *Florentine Codex* has been recognized as the most reliable source on the ancient Mexicans, the way they worshipped their gods and goddess, their myths, rituals, and curing practices. But Sahagún's is important for still another reason: he already writes with a Mesoamerican perspective. He gives us clues and descriptions of beliefs and practices belonging to groups as different as Guastec, Otomi, Chichimec, Mixtec, Olmec, etc. He seems to have in mind a comparative frame

of reference that focused on commonalities and/or diversities among those several native groups he encountered in relation to his own Hispanic Christian background.

The primary sources or “texts” on which this book is based are hybrid, in the sense that they belong to both oral and written narrative forms and styles. Walter Ong might call them “residually oral.” I feel that it is their characteristic of “oral texts” that gives unity to the universe of study presented in this book. They were *taken from the lips*: from the lips of the wise elders of the communities Fray Bernardino de Sahagún researched in 1542 or from the lips of Maria Sabina whose chants, in 1981, are close morphologically and symbolically to the “Cantares Mexicanos” that Angel Garibay and Leon-Portilla have translated from the collections in Nahuatl.

I do not use modern ethnographic data with the assumption that Mesoamericans are living today in a pristine state unaffected by change. Neither do I see every community in the area as identical. I have insisted on presenting this region inserted in a permanent process of change. Consistent with Mesoamerican epistemology, I affirm that the Mesoamerican epistemic frame has changed profoundly and remained much the same. Change and continuity do not exclude each other.

CHAPTER ONE

CURING AND COSMOLOGY

Bodies are permeable, the soul lives in the object, even smells can heal.

Dona Macaria moves her arm around me with sweeping motions. In her hand, she has a bunch of herbs that fill the air with a pungent smell. Standing in front of her, I feel a freshness as she blows on my back, my face, my entire body.

Finally she stops. "You're well now, Señorita. The bad spirits that were clinging to you have left. Tonight, when you go to bed, place a white flower on your night table and drink a tea of white zapote leaves boiled with three lemons cut in the form of a cross . . ."

Cognitive frameworks pervade our thinking, influence our conceptions of causality, and guide our sensory perceptions. At all times, we are immersed in a knowledge system that organizes the way we conceptualize the material world around us. When we confront popular and traditional medicines, we can discern—if we are perceptive enough—that underlying them is a knowledge system intimately bound to a cosmology. In the overall pattern of medical practices in Mexico and Mesoamerica today, there is a contrasting interplay between the institutional medical paradigm and the popular one. Traditional medicine has its own classification system, its special categories, its medical tools, its particular connections between illness and health. In this chapter, we shall review the conceptual frame underlying the therapeutic practices of today's popular medicines in Mesoamerica.

The area encompassed by the term Mesoamerica stretches, at its northern limits, from about halfway between the Central Mexican highlands and the United States border, south through Mexico and Guatemala, to parts of El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Mesoamerica evokes the confluence of great regional cultures—Mayan, Toltec, Aztec, Zapotec, Mixtec—and the cultural cataclysm wrought by the conquest. Despite enormous linguistic differences, the ancient Mesoamericans formed a world for themselves, as different from the indigenous tribes of the north as from the Andean empires to the south. Mesoamericans were united by their cosmology, their mythic and ritual legacy, and their concepts of time, as manifested in their

calendar. Their great cultural centers, like Teotihuacan, reinforced that sense of unity. Because of this commonality in indigenous roots, Mesoamericans must be differentiated from other Latin American and Amerindian nations.¹

The Spanish word *mestizaje* and the English expression *syncretism* are the terms generally applied to the fusion or synthesis of indigenous and European cultural legacies. Few scholars have understood that beneath the supposed blending or syncretism hides something much more complex than a homogenous “mingling.” One who has is Roger Bastide (1978, p. 12). Instead of syncretism, he speaks of the *interpenetration* of civilizations, a dynamic process that continues today.

One of the fields where this phenomenon is most clearly observed is *curanderismo* or popular medicine. *Curanderismo* is a Spanish term covering a variety of shamanistic and healing practices. It represents one of those privileged realms where ethnicity entrenched itself and managed to survive the conquest. According to Mario Margulis (1984), “Popular medicine is one of those refuges of cultural resistance” (p. 61). As stressed by other investigators, however, this resistance is not passive but can be a focal point for autonomous re-creation” (Bonfil 1984, p. 80). It is there that elements from different historical periods are autonomously fused, reorganized, and resignified. The agents of this process belong to the large disadvantaged majorities who live in Mexico’s urban centers and peasant communities.

The popular healer frequently manages better than the modern medical doctor to reestablish the multidimensional equilibrium disrupted by “illness.” *Curandera* and *curandero* are the terms used to designate the female and male healer. Since the majority are women, the suffix *-a*, proper to the feminine gender, will generally be used. The *curandera* is, literally, a *med-dica* in the classic sense of one who knows how to manifest the measure (med) suitable to restore a multi-dimensional equilibrium. “Health,” we will recall, is related to “whole,” through an Indo-European antecedent of the Greek *holon*. Understanding acts of restoration of health requires from the researcher to immerse herself in the cosmology in which these acts are meaningful. Still shared by most contemporary Mesoamericans, this cosmological vision is largely a Mesoamerican legacy.

¹ All citations from references in French or Spanish are the author’s translations.

However, attempting to isolate purely indigenous elements would be absurd. All our cultural heritage bears the mark of the interpenetration of civilizations of which Bastide spoke (*idem*, pp. 12–13). We can visualize this interpenetration as the many currents of a deep river whose flow is made up of fast and slow currents, undercurrents, and crosscurrents. The surface movements rarely reveal the depths. In some instances, the origin of large currents can be clearly established. For this, primary sources are a help. For Mesoamerican scholars, primary sources are accounts of the indigenous cultures by the first Spanish observers, as for instance Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. As to the origin of many important intermediate currents, it will remain forever subject to debate.

Though the cognitive and symbolic frame of contemporary Mesoamerican popular medicines can almost always be traced back to pre-Hispanic cosmology, it is often related as well to early Spanish medicine in its “scientific” and popular forms. In this interpenetration of civilizations, contemporary popular medicine is one of many expressions of a permanent process of synthesis and appropriation of cultural elements. Yet, in spite of the multiplicity of the elements involved, this process shows a surprising coherence. It is this coherent whole that must be brought into focus in this review of popular and traditional medicines in Mesoamerica.

DOMAIN OF INQUIRY

Various authors, such as Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán (1980, p. 37), Alfredo Lopez Austin (1971, p. 20), and Carlos Viesca (1984, p. 202), have already identified the pitfalls on the path to the recovery of the symbolic universe and cosmology implicit in contemporary popular diagnostic and therapeutic practices. For those of us who haven’t lost all our ties to popular culture, these medical practices seem both familiar and strange. They are familiar because we have grown up in a world where people pray, conjure, and invoke the saints. In this world, there is a concept of “cold” and “hot” that is unrelated to temperature, and one takes precautions against “bad airs” that have nothing to do with atmospheric conditions. At the same time, professionals, scientists, or doctors were thought to conceptualize their cultural legacy as contrary to modern dominant knowledge systems and to alienate themselves from it. After this confrontation of two

world views, it requires a painstaking effort to (re)discover the cognitive structures and epistemological frameworks behind the practices, prayers, invocations, and use of medicinal, aromatic, and hallucinogenic plants that are part of our culture.

Conceptually, traditional medicine is like a woven fabric of which we have intriguing fragments, but not the overall pattern. Recovering it requires a kind of anamnesis which systematizes (Viesca, 1986, p. 7) a conceptual weave. A way of achieving this is by interviewing *curanderas* who are deeply rooted in their traditions or who have received a spiritual and mystical initiation, and then compare these interviews with the oldest available testimonies.

The study of the *curanderas*' many recipes for teas and poultices, their prayers, imprecations, invocations, precepts for behaviour, and instructions to the sick for taking potions and avoiding "bad airs," envy, and the evil eye can seem like the "Chinese taxonomy" of Jorge Luis Borges that made Michel Foucault laugh (Foucault, 1966, p. 7). It is only gradually that, for the patient researcher, some patterns begin to emerge from elements that, at first glance, seem diffuse, disconnected, bereft of interrelationship. This is precisely when we must fend off the temptation to discard as magical those practices or superstitions that we still cannot interpret.

The comparison of our studies with primary sources can then reveal the tenacious persistence of certain formations down through the centuries. Noemi Quezada refers to them as *pervivencias* (comunicación personal). Austin (2001, pp. 59–62) alludes to a *nucleo duro*, a surviving hard core, endowed, according to Guillermo Bonfil (1984, p. 80), with a great capacity for autonomous appropriation. The coherence that thus begins to appear is neither superficial nor obvious. It lies in the deep currents of the "interpenetration of civilizations," in the interaction of pre-Hispanic formations with elements of sixteenth-century Western medicine with its Galenic remnants, as well as with modern cultural formations and medical contributions.

CURING PRACTICES

Some healing practices characteristic of popular medicines will be mentioned briefly. Let's start with the example of Doña María, an *espiritualista* healer of the Temple of the Sixth Seal. A patient consults her because he "feels bad" and thinks he has caught a "bad air."

Doña Maria first rubs a raw egg over the patient's body in order to absorb the bad airs. If the patient wishes, Doña Maria then "takes a look at" the egg, breaking it into a glass of water. Air bubbles, long filaments, and spirals appear in the egg white. Eventually solid particles will also appear. If these impurities penetrate the egg yolk, Doña Maria will diagnose that the illness is "taking root" because it has entered the body.

An analysis of this and similar curative practices reveals no strict frontier between the diagnosis and the healing: the egg first enables the disease to be diagnosed, and then it cures it. First, the diagnosis provides the healer with a vision of hidden connections: the similarity of the bubbles with "eyes," the materialization of pathological entities in material bodies, the analogy of the divide between egg white and yolk, and the chiasm between the body and its immediate environment. Then, after grasping the connections of which the illness is an expression, the healer sees in them the means for undoing the evil knots. Frequently, the session ends with the patient being given some medicine or a special object as a protection.

Another procedure equally common in popular medicine is a *limpia*, "cleansing." In the cleansing, the *curandera* "sweeps" the patient's entire body with a bundle of aromatic plants made into a brush for absorbing the disease. This brush is destroyed after the cleansing, usually by burning. This technique is an example of the principle of proximity, which we will discuss later.

On other occasions, the healer will breathe on the patient's head, hands, or wherever there is pain. Other times, she will chew an herb with which she will then rub the affected body part. Also very common is the practice of curing with the hands, by touching the patient or, in other instances, forcefully shaking him or her. Finally, there are a number of *curanderas* who prescribe medicinal teas, set bones, or help to move the fetus to the correct position to facilitate labor.

Fluidity, duality, symbolic representation, proximity, and similarity are pieces of the epistemic frame implicit in these curing practices. We will only review them briefly here.

The body as the focus of fluid animic entities

According to traditional medicine, the body is porous, permeable, and open to the great cosmic currents. It is not a package of blood, viscera, and bones enclosed in a sack of skin like the one which the

modern individual “has.” Nor can the body be the inert terrain of modern anatomical charts. What must be read in the body are signs of relationship with the universe. Inversely, the external world is rich in signals which bespeak the small universe which is the body. Diagnoses are frequently based on the observation of entities penetrating the body or, inversely, leaving it. In this last respect, one of the most frequent diagnoses is loss of the soul. Viewed through the lenses of the medical profession, science, and even theology, this pathological category can only be discarded as absurd. How can one suffer “soul loss” and continue to live? Yet, today, “soul loss” is one of the principal pathological categories in Mexican healing practices. Numerous field studies describe and analyze its multiple variations. The diagnosis of “soul loss” means that the soul is a prisoner of another being or is wandering.

However, the soul here is the Nahua *tonalli*, and not the unitary occidental soul. It includes a multiplicity of invisible and psychic entities that inhabit the body. In his studies of the influence of black medicine in Mexico, Aguirre Beltrán (1980) notes the existence of four psychic and material components of the self: the dream soul, the breath soul, the shadow soul, and the mortal body. Evon Vogt (1970, p. 10), in his studies on Zinacantan in the Maya region, points out that *c’hulel*, the Maya soul corresponding to the *tonalli* of the Nahuatl-speaking regions of Mesoamerica, has up to thirteen components. Some of them can become independent from the body and interact with the supernatural world.

In ancient Mesoamerica, the entities that animated the body (Lopez Austin, 1988, p. 182) were invisible and some could leave it at various moments in life. For example, *ihiyotl*, whose principal dwelling was the liver, could at times produce emanations harmful to people. Some strong individuals could produce them at will, others involuntarily. This concept of harmful emanations is the origin of the notion of “bad airs” and occasionally of envy as pathogenic factors.

The *tonalli*, whose principal dwelling was considered to be the head, traveled at night during dreams. In these journeys, it ventured on the path of supernatural beings. It was said to leave the body during coitus and, sometimes, during an unexpected experience. Until today, “soul loss” has frequently been seen as a response to an unexpected situation, not necessarily negative. When it is negative, such a condition is now called *susto*, “fright,” an event reputed to cause *pérdida de la sombra*, loss of the shadow. Due to the inaccurate

identification of the *tonalli* with the Christian concept of soul in the primary sources (Sahagún, 1577; Ruiz de Alarcón, 1629), its original meaning has been subject to many distortions that render its pre-Hispanic polysemy difficult to fully recover.

The third psychic entity was the *teyolia*, which was concentrated principally in the heart, considered the seat of reason, intelligence, knowledge, and memory. This was the only entity which, when it abandoned the body, produced death. It is interesting to point out that in divine possession among the Aztecs (Lopez Austin, 1984b, p. 110) the god possessed or *mounted* the *teyolia* (heart) and not the head as in African, Afro-Brazilian, and Afro-Caribbean traditions.

Recently, a medical doctor doing service in a town bordering the Maya Lacandon jungle in southeast Mexico reported how his patients expressed symptoms: “Doctor, I have a pain here (touches his heart) but it is moving here (touches his neck) and also moves around here (points to his legs) . . .” This contemporary report evokes the fluidity of animic entities which have a preferential location in the body but not a fixed center.

Fluid dualities

In the Mesoamerican tradition, the body’s characteristics are very different from the ones that define the anatomical body of modern medicine. For instance, interior and exterior are not separated by the hermetic barrier of the skin. Between interior and exterior, there is an exchange of a sort that modern, professional doctors do not understand. Moreover, the material and the immaterial are not conceived as exclusive opposites but rather as complementary sides or poles on a spectrum of continuously interacting and mutually redefining fluid shades. We will review in depth in the next chapters how this fluidity was conceived. It is in this interaction that pathologic entities and the corresponding healing practices take shape. This “polarity of complementary opposites” is a recurrent feature of the Mesoamerican *epistémè* that gives Mesoamerican cosmology its coherence. The complementary poles of the broader spectrum constitute the dualities that—like up and down, exterior and interior, masculine and feminine, day and night, life and death—structure the whole cosmos in such a way that every primary duality is reproduced into an infinity of shades that blend without negating their dual character.

Symbolic action

In such a cognitive framework or *epistemè*, it is not surprising to discover that disease, a categorical and immaterial entity, takes material forms. One of the therapeutic practices that more clearly shows the materiality of disease is curing by sucking, which consists of extracting the illness from the body by sucking it out. Healers who work this way say that they extract insects, worms, and even frogs and snakes, but the terms that they use reveal the symbolic aspect of what they do: “things like worms came out, like little frogs.” The word “like” links symbolically the immaterial illness with material objects that can be sucked out. Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán refers to these procedures as symbolic actions (1980, p. 245). The single objects of what we call objective reality are not as important as the chains of symbolic meanings that link them all. The materialization of the disease in an object—an insect, or pieces of bone, glass, or hair, for example—means that it may be destroyed, burned, or thrown out. It indicates also that the immaterial illness flows towards the material pole, transforms itself into matter. Well-being, wholeness, “health” depends thus on the balance of the material and immaterial flow between the body and its environment. In this flow, the beings that move between the interior and the exterior act not only on a material basis but also on a symbolic basis. This is more significant than the often-emphasized chemical similarities between modern medical remedies and the potions prescribed by *curanderas*.

For all these concepts of illness and curing practices, the primary sources confirm that we are in the presence of persistent, hard-core formations of Mesoamerican medicine. The conquest was barely over when Sahagún, in his *Historia General de Las Cosas de Nueva España*, described the different practices of the *titici* or Aztec doctors:

Those who extract something from someone: First she chews absinth (estafiate) [sic] and then sprinkles and rubs the patient with this. Then she massages with her hand. From the places that she massages, she takes out things such as pieces of flint or obsidian, paper, splinters of pine or other things. When something has been extracted, the patient recovers . . . (Sahagun, 1982 [1582], Appendix III, p. 908)

Proximity and similarity: therapeutic tools

The principle of proximity rules the diagnosis of the causes of illness and the structuring of the therapeutic measures. For example, Doña Rita, a healer from Michoacan, relates that both her mother

and father died when she was a child. "I sighed a lot and felt very sad," she says. As a cure she put "a red cloth soaked in alcohol here, next to my heart." The understanding and therapeutic use of a proximity between illness (or the body part affected by it) and the remedy is reputed to provide relief. It is what is sought by the healers who spread herbs on the chest in order to "clear up the lungs." Proximity, in this cognitive framework, is not an external relationship but rather one more expression of the intimate connection between all things. Curative and pathological properties usually interact in proximity, hence the notion that, when nature has placed two things together, their properties can be transferred from one to the other.

"Like produces like" (Viesca, 1984b, p. 205) is another principle that operates in a number of cures. For instance, burned hair is frequently prescribed to combat insomnia, because it is thought that the insensibility of burned hair will be transmitted to the person who drinks it in a potion, and will make her sleep better. In this case, similarity is reinforced by the proximity between the hair and *tonalli*. The principle of "like produces like" is based on a similarity of morphological aspects. For example, *tzotzoca ihuitl* (wart herb or *Euphorbia helioscopia*), whose leaves are full of growths, is used to cure warts. The blood-colored *extel* stone stops hemorrhages. The *yolloxochitl* (*Talauma mexicana*) or *flor del corazón* (heart flower), which has the form of a heart, is frequently prescribed for those suffering from cardiac problems. The heart-shaped flower is also used to treat mental retardation, according to the Badiano Codex (this illustrates the Mesoamerican cosmological theory that the *teyolia*, whose dwelling is the heart, was considered the center of the mental functions).

Similarity can also include the qualities of the therapeutic element. For example, the *cuauhalahuac* (*Grewia terebinthimacea*), or slippery tree, is used for difficult births to help expel the child and the placenta. Even today in the Tuxtlas region, *doradilla*—a herb flower that opens when placed in water—is put under the bed of a woman in labor (Olavarrieta, 1977, p. 145). As the flower opens, so does the uterus and the birth is accomplished faster. Other examples of this principle include the recommendation to eat fox or weasel brains in order to acquire the characteristics of these animals. Also, hairs from the dead are sometimes administered so that the illness will, in its turn, die. Many of these prescriptions can seem to stem from superstition, but we ought to always keep in mind that the whole of a cosmology is significant and coherent for the people who operate within it.

Mirroring in popular medicines

We will turn now to yet another type of connection proper to the cognitive framework of Mexican traditional medicine: the relationship of things that are similar to each other but are not in physical proximity. We will understand this concept better if we keep in mind the idea of mirror reflection. Things are connected or linked through a relationship of reflection, and by mirroring they imitate each other throughout the universe.

An example of reflection is the belief, in popular medicines, that the congenital deformation of harelip is due to the evil influence of lunar eclipses. It is thought that, just as the moon is “devoured” during an eclipse, the lip of a child could be eaten into. Angela, the mother of a girl with a harelip, laments that she did not follow the advice not to go out in the night during a lunar eclipse when she was pregnant. Now, by a process of mirroring between the two phenomena that are linked in this particular cognitive system, her daughter turned out to be “bitten in the mouth” as the moon is “bitten” during an eclipse.

The universe reproduces itself through space and gives rise to a recoupling between the macrocosm and microcosm. It is a game of eternal reflections through which healing resources are found and employed.

Healing by odors

Agreeable and disagreeable smells and odors belong to these therapeutic components of popular medicines that have deep pre-Hispanic roots. Here attraction-repulsion comes into play. Frequently, a pleasant fragrance is used to lure the evil entity out of the sick body. While perfume attracts, stench repels: many current prescriptions recommend nauseous odors to expel “bad airs” or “bad spirits” and protect the patient against them. In the presence of disagreeable smells, the intrusive and malevolent entities are unable to introduce themselves into the fluid and permeable yet permanent core that is a human being.

These cognitive principles are not mutually exclusive. Frequently, they become associated in the curative process or in diagnosis. Studied in their totality, they are a way of understanding oneself, one’s social group, the forces of nature, the relation between sacred and profane, and the relationship to society as a whole. This continues to be so

even when society confines popular medicines to its fringes, to survival underground, and to secret practice out of fear of ridicule. As subordinated cosmologies in the ideological complexity of present-day Mexican society (Lopez Austin, 1988) they challenge all attempts to homogenize concepts of health, illness, and healing.

We will recall that certain authors (Baytelman, 1986, and Zolla, 1987) consider that almost one third of the Mexican population makes use of such traditional therapies.

THE PREDOMINANCE OF WOMEN HEALERS

In his survey of healers in his *Atlas of Traditional Medicine*, Carlos Zolla (1987) gives 65 percent as the proportion of healers in Mexico who are women. This current figure fits in with ancient data. Sahagún already tended to ascribe this function primarily to women. Subsequent chroniclers confirmed this predominance: for instance, Hernando Ruíz de Alarcón, a Catholic priest who traveled the country searching out the “superstitions” of the Indians, noted the large numbers of women carrying out medical functions in the part of the Mexican territory that he covered.

Ethnological studies and monographs on cultural regions in Mesoamerica include many interviews with women who are healers and shamans, midwives and herbalists. And finally, a series of studies on the *Marian Trinitary Espiritualistas* confirm the absolute majority of women at the highest levels as guides, healers and founders of this popular religion (Finkler, 1981b, p. 483, 1985, p. 1; Lagarriga, 1991, p. 31). This numerical predominance is also qualitative. Recent data given by Carlos Viesca (1992, personal communication) points out that the highest authority for the *graniceros* (a type of shaman who deals with rain and lightening) in the region of the volcanoes near Mexico City is a woman and that the office is handed down through female lineage.

In summary, such examples pinpoint one more fundamental difference between Mesoamerican popular and traditional healing and institutional medicine: authority in healing is not found predominantly in the hands of men. On the contrary, it is usually in the hands of women.

If to the above we add data from what is being called domestic medicine and is presently taken into account by an increasing number

of researchers (Kleinman, 1980, p. 51; Zolla, 1987, p. 3), we have more confirmations of the predominance of women. Domestic medicine means the attention, generally performed by women, to the early phases of ailments within the circle of the extended family. According to these observers, most of the actually occurring ailments never reach the professionals, since the care given by these vernacular doctors generally cures them in their incipient stage. Frequently, it is her proven effectiveness within the family circle that first designates a woman as a healer. Eventually, requests will come from her immediate neighbors, other members of her community, and townspeople. The reputation of her abilities can sometimes reach beyond the boundaries of her region and even of her country. Such was the case, for example, of Maria Sabina, from the Sierra Mazateca in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, whom Gordon Wasson, the Rolling Stones, and other personalities and celebrities came to visit (see chapter 5).

It is evident (Marcos, 1983) that the selection of a popular doctor has nothing to do with the way in which someone chooses to be a doctor in institutional medicine. In traditional medicine, the call comes principally from the community itself, from the beneficiaries who deposit their trust in the healer.

CHAPTER TWO

DUALITY, FLUIDITY, AND EQUILIBRIUM

The law of this world is the fluctuation of distinct, sharply cut qualities that eternally dominate, withdraw and appear again.

(Jacques Soustelle, 1955, p. 85)

Years of participative field research have enticed me to delve beyond what is apparent and verbalized. The underlying cosmology emerged little by little in the course of my immersion in healing rituals and other gender-focused research.

Some recurring epistemic components constitute the background for the meaning of Mesoamerican actions and thoughts about gender. From the daily religious rituals, to cooking, weaving, healing, and giving birth, gender is always a key to any profound understanding. I took note and found that, then, my intersecting presence gave another depth to my views of the Mesoamerican people. Trying to understand them on their own terms, I started to grope for appropriate words. In this chapter, I will especially focus on concepts that permeate and structure the ancient data as well as contemporary ethnographic studies, and I will propose English approximations of them. These concepts are part of what has been recognized by scholars as *nucelo duro* (“hard core,” Lopez Austin, 2001), *pervivencias* (Quezada, 1997), or “historically deep generative roots” (G. Gossen, 1986, p. 4). What this chapter’s reflections have in common is the sense of a duality of fluid polarities kept in balance through a homeorrheic equilibrium.

“*Todo esta en par*” (all comes in pairs) is according to anthropologist Lourdes Baez the typical response to her inquiries in the Sierra Norte de Puebla (2005, personal communication). “*Todo es dualidad*,” confirms Griselda de la Cruz, a Chontal Indian woman from the southern state of Tabasco, with whom I drank coffee. These women take it for granted. Duality is not some elusive concept that sits somewhere in the cosmos. It is reality as they perceive it when they are cured, when they eat and when they pray. “God is a pair, a double, God both mother and father, female and male,” says Rosa Alba

Tepole, a Nahuatl woman from the Sierra de Zongolica, in the state of Veracruz (author's notes).

Doña Lety Popoca, from the state of Morelos, insists that she can not have dessert: "We have eaten much *frio* [cold] and dessert is again *frio*." She then looks at me and says: "Señora, you should understand what hot and cold mean. It has nothing to do with temperature. We have had too much *frio*, we should now eat something *caliente*." She looks at me with the despair of a teacher in front of a badly behaved and hard-headed student. She finds it strange that I, a Mexican, do not grasp this distinction instinctively. She looks at me as if she feels it almost impossible to make me understand deeply what she really means.

The hot-cold duality has been an ingrained classificatory principle. This ordering device is applied to the fruits of the earth like plants, roots, and other edibles. It is also an organizing principle for time and for periods of the calendar like days and months and years. It contributes to guide the Mesoamericans as to when and how to maintain the required equilibrium to guard them from extremes that bring illness and misfortune. This basic Mesoamerican dual classificatory principle is based on and reflects the gender duality.

GENDER AND DUALITY

The idea of a divine pair was deeply rooted in Mesoamerican thought. This dual male and female unit was held to have generative and protective powers. It was the ultimate expression of the pervasive concept of duality permeating all reality from daily practices to cosmology. Man and woman, death and life, evil and good, above and below, far and close, light and dark, cold and hot were some of the dual aspects of one same reality. Not mutually exclusive, not static, not hierarchically organized (at least not in the modern pyramidal way), all elements and natural phenomena were construed as a balance of dual valences. If the divine pair was the ultimate duality in the cosmic realm, its most pervasive expression in the intermediary human domain was gender.

As an analytical tool in theory, gender has often been defined in contrast to sex, as culture to nature (Ortner and Wittehead, 1989). However, to be relevant to the Mesoamerican universe, gender must be freed from assumptions of fixed dichotomous characteristics

grounded on anatomical distinctions, “a commonplace of the modern European intellectual tradition,” according to Rosemary Joyce (2000, p. 7). Gender relations in Mesoamerica are much more than that. They are embedded in cultural settings and shaped by local contexts. Accordingly, gender constructions are closely related to concepts of duality. Gender was nothing less than a root metaphor for everything existing in the cosmos and in society. The following definition of gender brings us closer to an understanding of what it means in Mesoamerica: “Gender categorizations are often based . . . on what women and men do, rather than on anatomy The North American *berdache* is now a rather well-known example of a third gender categorization which counters the one-to-one equivalence of binary categories of sex and gender . . .” (Moore, 1994, p. 24).

The sex-gender distinction is an analytical tool that has been useful in forging feminist theory. However, concerning gender relations and ideas of the feminine and masculine in Mesoamerican primary sources, this tool can lead to distortions. Its roots in the mind-body (or spirit-matter) split inherited from the all pervasive classic traditions of thought proves to be more of a hindrance than help in elucidating gender in Mesoamerica (Marcos, 1996, p. 3). Joyce (2000), referring to Judith Butler’s *Bodies that Matter* (1993), writes: “Butler has argued strongly for the decoupling of gender from the ‘natural’ body.” In her archaeological Mesoamerican studies, Joyce confirms that gender is defined by what people do, and is thus a performance. She insists that, “as performance, gender is a way of being in the world” (p. 7).

If we now turn to the primary sources and to the archaeological evidences in search of an “epochal” concept of gender, we find that it is inseparable from the following characteristics of the ancestral Mesoamerican duality:

- mutual openness of categories
- fluidity between poles
- absence of hierarchical stratification between these poles

Hence a gender theory true to Mesoamerican sources must be open, fluid, and nonstratified if it is to embrace the distinctive fluidity and mobility of Mesoamerican pairs of opposites. Contrary to the mutually exclusive categories inherited from the classical tradition, the sense of feminine-masculine that emerges from the sources has the same quality as does the cosmic balance, a quality that I call “homeorrheic”

rather than “homeostatic.” Binary, mutually exclusive categories, such as the dichotomies of culture vs. nature or public vs. private, are in themselves products of an epistemology constrained by the conventional philosophical training (Lloyd, 1993, pp. 107–109).

If we ascribe the term “Mesoamerican gender categories” to the concepts of feminine and masculine emerging from Mesoamerican sources, we will have to define them as indeed opposite, but also fluid, open, in an unceasingly shifting balance, making and remaking themselves without ever reaching any fixed hierarchical stratification.

Gender, neither immutable nor completely unstable, permeated every aspect of Mesoamerican life. It was the primordial dynamic polar ordering that blended feminine and masculine valences in ever-changing degrees and manifested itself in religion as well as in everyday life (Gossen 1986, p. 6). As the original feminine-masculine dual unity, it was fundamental to the creation of the cosmos, its (re)generation, and its sustenance. The combination of feminine and masculine in one bipolar principle is a recurring feature in Mesoamerican thinking. It is this principle, both singular and dual, that is manifested by representations of gods in pairs.

Most Mesoamerican deities were pairs of gods and goddesses, beginning with Ometeotl, the supreme creator whose name means “double god” or dual divinity. Dwelling in Omeyocan, beyond the thirteen heavens, Ometeotl was thought of as a pair whose feminine and masculine poles were, respectively, Omecihuatl and Ometecutli, the Lady and the Lord of Duality. Born of this supreme pair, other dual deities, in their turn, incarnated natural phenomena (Andrews and Hassig, 1984, p. 14).

With other specialists on Mesoamerica (Kirchoff, 1968), Alfredo Lopez Austin explains that the various cultures of Mesoamerica see the world ordered as by the same divine laws and worship the same gods under different names. Thus, the concept of “dual oneness” is found in the entire Mesoamerican region. Mayanists, for their part, speak in the same terms of Itzam Na and his partner Ix Chebel Yax (Thompson, 1975). Fray Bartholome de Las Casas (1967 [1552]) mentions the pair Izona and his wife; and Diego de Landa (1986 [1574]) refers to Itzam Na and Ixchel as the god and goddess of medicine. For the inhabitants of the Michoacan area, the creating pair was constituted by the union of Curicuauert and Cuerauahperi. Cipactli, the mythic monster that was lord of the earth, was male and female.

Divine (primordial) gender

A brief, unelaborated manuscript from the sixteenth century attributed by Angel Garibay (1973) to Fray Andres de Olmos [1533] already records this concept of duality. It is precisely its unelaborated quality that marks this work by one of the first Christian chroniclers as one of the least altered primary sources. This early manuscript, the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas*, depicts a mythical universe in which the pervading divine dual unity unfolded in almost endless dual multiplicities.

For gods as for humans, there was no masculine without a feminine. Cecilia Klein, citing John Bierhorst's English translation (Bierhorst, 1992, p. 603, n. 18), comments:

A Nahua myth in the *Leyenda de los soles* relates that the god Quetzalcoatl found the bones of the previous inhabitants of the earth neatly laid out in two piles in the underworld; one pile contained the bones of women, the other of men. He wrapped them up to take them back to earth but, on the way, fell into a pit and spilled them. Quails nibbled the bones before the god gathered them up, rewrapped them, and took them to the goddess Cihuacoatl/Quilaztli, with whose help he then produced from them the first humans . . ." (C. Klein, 2001, p. 237)¹

This myth accounts for the observable reality of the fluidity and fusion of masculine and feminine in the human realm as well as in the cosmos at large.

Both genders fused, for example, in Coatlicue, the serpent-skirted Aztec goddess (Fernandez, 1959). In contrast, Tlaloc, the rain deity, as it is pictured in the Tepantitla mural of Teotihuacan, has no specifically female or male traits (Nash and Leacock, 1982). Feminine and masculine attributes merged in Tlazolteotl, the deity associated with birth and "that which is cast off" (Karttunen, 1988; Heyden, 1977). Among the explicitly dual divinities we find Mictlantecuhtli-Mictecacihuatl, lord and lady of Mictlan (land of the dead); Tlaloc-Chalchiuhtlicue, lord and lady of the waters; Quetzalcoatl-Cihuacoatl, feathered serpent and female serpent; and Tezcatlipoca-Tezcatlanextia,

¹ Bones symbolized for the Nahuas not only death but life and fertility. Life and death are in a dialectical (dual) relationship. Earth was both a tomb and an uterus. Lopez Austin reports the belief that semen originated in bone marrow (Lopez Austin, 1988).

mirror that obscures things and mirror that makes them brilliant. With slight variances, all other Mesoamerican peoples constructed their pantheon around dual gods-goddesses. Among the Zapotecs, the supreme dual god was Pitao Cozaana–Pitao Cochaana. He-she was also called Pije-Tao, and was the deity of time.²

The gods-goddesses possessed few attributes that were exclusively and unambiguously theirs. Although scholars have attempted to structure the various gods-goddesses of the Mesoamerican pantheon into clear orderings (Caso, 1968; Nicholson, 1971) with evolutionary or theogonic approaches, it is virtually impossible to portray them as discrete, nonoverlapping categories. The gods did not have fixed unitary meaning (Hunt, 1977, p. 55).

According to an ancient myth, the creators had a fight during which they broke dishes, and from every shard that hit the ground a new dual divinity sprang up. While some Mexicanists have inferred that this legend was used to explain the multiplicity of gods, it mainly illustrates how the prime duality in its turn engenders dualities (Garibay, 1973, p. 25).

Life/death is another example of the duality that pervades the Mesoamerican cosmos. That life and death are but two aspects of the same reality is dramatically expressed by a type of figurine from Tlatilco with a human head that is half living face and half skull. Or, to turn to the cosmos, the sun and moon are regarded as constituting a dynamic masculine-feminine complementarity (Baez-Jorge, 1988). Likewise, during the ritual bathing of newborns, feminine and masculine waters were invoked (Sahagún, 1989). Cosmic duality is also reflected in everyday life: corn, for example, was in turn feminine (Xilonen-Chicomecoatl) and masculine (Cinteotl-Itztlacolihqui).

Division and measure of space and time

The earth was conceived as divided in four great quadrants of space whose common point is the center or navel of the earth. From this point, the four quadrants extend out to the horizon, the meeting place of the heavens and the surrounding celestial water (*ilhuica-atl*). Above and below the horizontal world (*cem-a-nahuac*) are thirteen heavens and nine underworlds. Just as space was structured in quad-

² In this book, I respected the Nahuatl orthography of the sources. Alphabetization of Nahuatl terms has led to many variations in the spelling of one same word.

rant and polar pairs, so was time itself. That duality, the essential ordering force of the cosmos, is interestingly illustrated by the fact that time was kept by two calendars. One was a ritual calendar of 260 days (13×20) which some regard as linked to the human gestation cycle (Furst, 1986, p. 69), while the other was an agricultural calendar of 360 days (18×20) (Olmos, 1973 [1544], pp. 29–31). Five days were added at the end of the year to adjust it to the astronomical calendar.

Mexican cosmological thinking does not radically distinguish space and time; it particularly avoids to conceive space as a neutral and homogeneous medium, independent of the employing of duration. On the contrary, it moves within heterogeneous and singular *milieus*, whose peculiar characteristics follow one another in a cyclical way, according to a given rhythm. For this way of thinking, there is not one space and one time, but *spimes* encompassing all natural phenomena as well as human actions pregnant with the qualities proper to every place and instant . . . (Soustelle, 1955, p. 85)

Oratory and literary devices

Even the arts of poetry and oratory had to reflect the dual makeup of the universe. Verses were repeated twice with minimal but significant changes.

Among the most frequent stylistic procedures in Aztec poetry is parallelism. It is a repetition of two ideas and/or two expressions of sentiment. *Difrasismo* is the juxtaposition of two metaphors or two parallel phrases in Aztec oratory and poetic traditions. Sometimes a thought will be complemented or emphasized through the use of different dual metaphors which arouse the same intuitive feeling, or two phrases will present the same idea in opposite form (M. Leon Portilla, 1969, p. 76). This rhetorical device has been also studied by Garibay in his extensive review of Nahuatl literature and poetry (2000 [1954]), as well as by Thelma Sullivan (1983). In the metaphoric realm “a skirt and a shirt,” for instance, meant a woman in her carnal aspect.

We will see, in the narratives quoted in chapter 5, with extensive references to the chants of the healer Maria Sabina, in chapter 7 on erotic poetry, and in chapter 8 citing the ancient moral discourses, how these stylistic procedures became incarnated in language by means of oratory devices embedded in a cosmological frame. Such poetic devices still permeate the contemporary discourses of politically active indigenous women (Marcos, 1997).

Another dual device, says Miguel León-Portilla, “consists of uniting two words which also complement each other . . .” Some examples are “flower and song” which metaphorically means poetry and “seat and mat” which suggests the idea of authority (p. 77). Epic singers also alternated pairs of verses whose order varied but were always sung in sets of two. These couplets cannot be separated from each other without loss of meaning.

Among others, Alfredo Lopez Austin stands out for his perception that Mesoamerican thought was totally permeated by dualities (Lopez Austin, 1988).³ Sullivan echoes this understanding when she speaks of “redundant pairs” as an oratorical and narrative device (T. Sullivan, 1986).

The specificity of Mesoamerican duality

Several authors have attempted to define the ever present and elusive concept of Mesoamerican duality. For example, both Frances Karttunen and Gary Gossen define it as dynamic. To the polar ordering of opposites, other scholars add complementarity that gives duality a certain reversibility of terms and gives movement to the concept (Lopez Austin, 1988).

Dennis Tedlock for his part defines Mesoamerican duality as “complementary rather than oppositional, contemporaneous rather than sequential” (1983). On another register, Klein affirms that “[g]ender duality refers to entities who simultaneously incorporate within themselves both a wholly male and wholly female aspect” (2001, p. 186). Duality is thus a paradoxical and elusive interpenetration of masculine and feminine. Still debatable, and to a certain point, in the words of Marjorie Garber, “nonapprehensible,” [this concept] introduces an epistemological crisis by destabilizing and thus challenging the *inevitability of bipolar gender categories*” (cited by C. Klein, 2001, p. 190; emphasis mine). This is one of the most characteristic and

³ This expression by Lopez Austin, 1984, seems to be echoed by Lauretis, Teresa de, “Introduction: The Practice of Sexual Difference and Feminist Thought in Italy” in Milan Woman’s Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social Symbolic Practice*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 4: “The question then, for the feminist philosopher is how to rethink sexual difference within a dual conceptualization of being ‘an absolute dual’ in which both being woman and being man would be primary—as ‘being there from the beginning’ in both woman and man.” Introduction, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.

distinctive Mesoamerican philosophical tenets that sets Mesoamerican thought decisively apart from philosophical European traditions in which most scholars have been trained. “[Nahuas] . . . did not see sex and gender as inherently bipolar and necessarily biologically determined. Rather both sex and gender could be determined socially and supernaturally” (Klein, 2001, p. 184).

Reading *La Pensée Cosmologique des Anciens Mexicains*, the pioneering work of French anthropologist Jacques Soustelle (1955), I find someone who was able to express the essence of Mesoamerican cosmological thought:

Thus [in] Mexican cosmological thought . . . what characterizes [it] is precisely the connecting of traditionally associated images. The world is a system of symbols that mutually reflect each other . . . Colors, times, oriented spaces, celestial bodies, gods, historical phenomena, [genders] are in correspondence. Rather than “long chains of reason” [what we have] is an implicit and reciprocal imbrication of all in all, in every instant. (p. 9)

Duality and the idea of equilibrium

Duality in the Mesoamerican cosmovision was not fixed or static, but fluid and continuously changing. This fluidity is another core characteristic of Nahua thought. Deities, people, plants, and other elements in nature as well as space and time all had a gendered identity that shifted constantly along a continuum. Fluidity is thus a further characteristic that affects the meanings of gender and other dualities by allowing a continuous shifting from one pole to the other. Thus, femininity is always in transit to masculinity and vice-versa. No duality of the Mesoamerican cosmovision was fixed and static; all were fluid and ever changing.

Yet, the idea of duality was enhanced by still another concept, no less pervasive, that of equilibrium or balance. Rather than the static repose of two equal weights or masses, it can be conceived as a force that constantly modifies the relation between dual and/or polar pairs. Like duality itself, equilibrium or balance permeated not only relations between men and women, but also relations among deities, deities and humans, and elements of nature. Of equilibrium, more is known by its effects than by its nature: it determined and modified the concept of duality. Besides, it was the condition for the preservation of the cosmos (Lopez Austin, 1984, p. 105; Burckhart, 1989, p. 79). The existence of the Mesoamericans was thus the constant

pursuit of an ever-to-be-regained balance that called not for a pragmatic compromise between static opposites, but rather for a dynamic equilibrium, always in the making, between shifting poles. For example, the image for the path to walk in life was conceived as a “ridge between abysses” (Gingerich, 1988, p. 521). This implied keeping a balance not only between right and left but also between up and down. This search for a never definitely fixed point of balance was an absolute cosmic necessity if a human world was to be maintained at the edge of threatening chaos.

Thus, Mesoamerican duality cannot be a binary ordering of “static” poles such as appears implicit in some gender theory. The idea of “balance” can best be understood as an ‘agent’ that constantly modifies the terms of dualities and thereby bestows a singular quality on the opposite and complementary pairs. It endows duality with flexibility or plasticity and makes it flow, impeding stratification. This fluidity of Mesoamerican equilibrium—reflected by the narrative style in which it is expressed—is only understandable as a reflection of oral thought, filtered through the hybrid oral-transcribed character of the texts through which it is accessible to us. We will revisit in more depth the characteristics of oral thought and traditions in the last chapter of this book.

In the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas* (Garibay, 1973), we find the following account of the separation of heaven and earth: “When the four deities saw the sky falling on the earth, they ordered four paths be made from the center of the earth so they could enter . . .” (p. 32). Lopez Austin decodes the myth and adds:

[T]he four pillars which support the heavens, separating them from the earth’s surface . . . [are] described as four trees through which flow currents of influences from the gods of heaven and the underworld toward the center. (1984a, p. 104)

Gender Fluidity

Essential to the symbolic construction of this universe, fluidity was the characteristic that fostered the constant contact among the thirteen heavens, the four intermediate earthly levels, and the nine levels of the underworld.

Fundamental to the maintenance of the cosmos, fluid equilibrium is incompatible with closed, immutable, unitary categories. An equilibrium that is always reestablishing itself within a universe in move-

ment also keeps all other possible points of balance in motion. In a similar way, the categories of feminine and masculine were open and changing, as Lopez Austin seems to suggest when he affirms that there was not a being exclusively feminine or exclusively masculine but rather exhibiting different nuances of combinations (1988).

Shifting continuously, gender categories in Mesoamerican thought were thus in fluid equilibrium. The “critical point” of balance had to be found in continual movement: it redefined itself moment to moment, and was subject to the change and flux of the entire cosmos. Likewise, what was feminine and masculine oscillated, continuously reconstituting and redefining itself. In a state of permanent movement and continuous readjustment between the poles, neither pole could dominate or prevail over the other except for an instant. A sometimes overwhelming, sometimes imperceptible gendered “charge” or “load” affected all beings (Lopez Austin, 1984a), whether rocks, plants, animals, or people. Everything was feminine or masculine, and frequently both simultaneously in different gradations that perpetually changed and shifted (Klein).⁴

DYNAMIC EQUILIBRIUM

To understand how equilibrium affects duality, we can begin by acknowledging how this concept differs from and is foreign to most European intellectual traditions of thought. I will start with a consideration of Greek classical thinking, in order to see what Mesoamerican thought is not; then I will move to an examination of oral traditions, because the sources examined here are essentially the reflections of an oral culture; and finally, I will discuss metaphor, one of the characteristics of oral traditions and a key element in Nahua thought.

⁴ Cecilia Klein (ed.), *Gender in pre-Hispanic America*, Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 2001 gives rich and detailed references to what she defines as “gender ambiguity.” These references, which include primary sources as well as monographs on contemporary Mesoamerican practices, beautifully exemplify the characteristics of what I call here “gender fluidity.” See especially her pp. 183–254. However, her interpretations are not always coincident with mine. If the motility and fluidity of Mesoamerican gender are foregrounded, an ex-post characterization of gender as ambiguous “uncertain, unpredictable or incomplete” seems superfluous.

Some contrast between Mesoamerican and classical Greek concepts of balance

The Nahua and more generally Mesoamerican concept of equilibrium is of a different order than the “golden mean” said to be inherited from Greek thought. In the discussion of the Mesoamerican concept of equilibrium by some Mesoamericanists, we repeatedly find comments on precepts for living based on this notion of dynamic balance that contrast it with the Greek notion of the golden mean. Gingerich, for example, writes, in relation to the Nahuatl metaphor used to express a proper life that appears in the *ilamattatolli* (discourses of the wise old women):

[t]he doctrine of the middle way, therefore, was a central principle in the formulation and interpretation of this ethic . . . this middle way definitively is not the Aristotelian golden mean. This concept [is] profoundly indigenous.” (Gingerich 1988, p. 522)

The *meden agan*, the Apollonian “nothing in excess,” was, like the Delphic “know thyself,” part of the philosophical baggage of personal virtue, as much public as private (Martin, 1989). The “golden mean” of antiquity is an inherent part of the western cultural heritage. In its successive reinterpretations by European societies, the “golden mean” became a stasis or fixed point of balance—that is, an intermediary hub between two opposing fixed positions. Accordingly, equilibrium was defined as homeostasis.

Departure from the “golden mean” in classical thought meant a lack of personal virtue on the part of the transgressor and went against proper behavior within the limits set by *Nemesis*. To stray from the golden mean did not necessarily pose a danger to the structure and survival of the entire cosmos as it did in Mesoamerica. Among those who have noted this sense of radical urgency that characterizes the Nahua collective responsibility for achieving a vital, fluid, and mobile equilibrium is Louise Burckhart: “The Nahuas had a sense of collective responsibility . . . and they believed that human actions could provoke a final cataclysm” (1989, p. 79). This Nahua “middle road,” even though it was also an expression of personal virtue, was above all the fulfillment of a requirement for cosmic survival and, thereby necessarily, for participation in the sustenance of the universe.

In reference again to the classical conceptual world, we could say that more than a kind of homeostasis, Nahuatl equilibrium could be

called a homeorrhesis (from *rheoo*, to flow) or balance of conjunctions in flux. Being situated between opposite poles implied, for the Nahuas, the necessity of working or “negotiating” constantly with the movement and plasticity of opposites as these transformed themselves continuously within an endless flow.

To amend the classical stasis by the dialectics of the Hegelian tradition would likewise be inappropriate. The Nahuatl homeorrhic equilibrium is not a balance achieved by a “synthesis” between a “thesis” and an “antithesis,” nor is it a pragmatic compromise between irreducible opposites. More exactly, it is a state of extreme dynamic tension, such as when two forces meet without resolution and veer precariously toward the edge of chaos. Barbara Myerhoff comes close to the concept of Nahuatl homeorrhesis when she defines the notion of balance as a nonstatic condition gained by the resolution of opposites (1976, p. 102).⁵

From birth, the Nahua individual was defined in terms of balance: “the Nahuatl concept defines the individual as a product of a particular alchemy of good and bad characteristics” (W. Gingerich, 1988, p. 532). The condition of a child born among the Aztecs is described as neither totally deficient nor totally beneficent, not totally free and independent, nor totally determined; “the new-born was endowed with its deserts and merits—in *ülhuil in imahceual*” (Ibid., p. 526). The child was born with his/her own unique combination of moral qualities determining the boundaries within which s/he may influence her/his identity.

Since the equilibrium was fluid, not fixed, it could be modified. If the child was born under an inauspicious sign, there was hope that when the ritual for newborns was performed on a propitious

⁵ I had just written this article when I discovered that Louis Dumont describes the categories of Hindu thought in terms of fluid “segmentation” and “openness” of concepts. See Dumont, Louis, *Essais sur l'individualisme. Une perspective anthropologique sur l'idéologie moderne*. Paris: Seuil, 1983, p. 245: “[As] I was saying to you concerning India, the distinctions are many, fluid and flexible, they run by themselves independently in a web of reduced density; likewise, they are variously accented according to situations, appearing at times in the forefront, at other times almost vanishing in the background. For us, we generally think in black and white, projecting ourselves on a vast field of clear disjunctions (either good or bad) and employing a small number of rigid, thick frontiers that define solid entities.” (Author’s translations)

day, his/her *tonalli* (the body's principal animating force or entity, see chapter 6) would acquire positive tendencies and inclinations.

If a harmonic balance was achieved, the individual could obtain great advantages from the inclinations and tendencies defined by the *tonalli*; if not, the tendencies could take the individual toward less beneficial directions and reduce vitality. (Lopez Austin, 1984, p. 206)

Because balance—as equilibrium in motion—is one of the most important keys to Mesoamerican thought along with the concept of duality, it is important to illustrate here its specific nature by further describing what it isn't. In sharp contrast to the practices associated with what Foucault calls “the care of the self” of late antiquity, Mesoamerican balance carried a very particular call. The responsibility of keeping equilibrium required that every individual in every circumstance had to constantly seek the central hub of the cosmos and coordinate him or herself in relation to it. To sustain this balance is to combine and recombine opposites. This implies never negating the opposite but rather advancing toward it, embracing it in the attempt to find the fluctuating balance.

The principle of the excluded third—the *tertium non datur* of formal classical logic—definitively has no place in the Nahuatl universe. In this realm of thought, opposites are integrated: cold and hot, night and day, sun and moon, sacred and profane, feminine and masculine. “The extremes, although they did not have to be completely avoided, did have to be offset one with the other” (Burckhart, 1989, 130–131). In contrast, the Mesoamerican fluid position summed up the equilibrium of the cosmos. The fusion/tension of contraries proper to the Mesoamerican cosmos was the measure and means to achieving the fundamental, primordial equilibrium or any particular local balance.

Cosmic and moral equilibrium

The collective responsibility of not only sustaining balance but also participating in its achievement produced a very particular set of moral codes. The best expression of these moral codes is found in the *huehuetlatolli* and *ilamatlatoll* (see chapter 8). Many Mexicanists regard Book VI of Sahagún's *Florentine Codex*, *Historia General de las Cosas de la Nueva España* as a sort of *summa* of Nahuatl thought. Like none other, this text probes deeply into the beliefs and norms of Aztec society. The rhetorical admonitions of the *Florentine Codex* are

explicitly about the type of equilibrium required in the conduct of women and men:

(D)o not walk hurriedly nor slowly . . . because walking slowly is a sign of pompousness and walking quickly shows restlessness and little sense. Walk moderately . . . Do not walk with your head lowered or your body slouched, but also do not carry your head overly high and upright because this is a sign of bad upbringing. . . . (Sahagún, 1989, p. 371)

(Y)our garments (should) be modest, suitable. Do not dress strangely, nor extravagantly, nor eccentrically. . . . Nor is it appropriate that your garments be ugly, dirty or torn . . . (Ibid.)

When you speak, do not speak rapidly . . . do not raise your voice nor speak too softly . . . Don't use a thin, high voice in speaking and greeting others, do not speak through your nose, but let your voice be normal. (Ibid., p. 383)

In these recommendations, we can appreciate the Nahua requirement of equilibrium incarnated in daily life, relations between genders, and bodily attitudes.

NONHIERARCHICAL ORGANIZATION

In a cosmos so constructed, there would be little space for the pyramidlike 'hierarchical' ordering and stratification that characterizes classical philosophical traditions. In the various Nahua narratives, whether we look at the *ilamatlatolli* (discourses of the wise old women) or the *huehuetlatolli* (speeches of the wise old men) or review primary sources that speak of pairs of deities, we can never infer any categorizing of one pole as 'superior' to the other. The unfolding of dualities manifests itself on all levels of heaven, earth, and below the earth as well as the four corners of the universe. This fluid duality permeates the entire cosmos, leaving its imprint on every object, situation, deity, and body.

Within all this flux of metaphorical dualities, divine and corporeal, the only essential configuration was the mutual necessity to interconnect and interrelate. It was the missionaries who, in their need to find familiar elements in the very "other" world that they encountered, called the upper and lower levels of the Nahuatl universe "heaven" and "hell" respectively. Yet Tlalocan, a place filled with birds and streams where those who died by drowning were privileged to go, was located in the eastern part of the Nahuatl

underworld. Here was a place of election and privilege not located up in heaven (Lopez Austin, 1994).⁶

Not even between good and evil, divine and earthly, death and life did hierarchical values exist. Life, for example, is born from death:

Life and death: interplayed on Great Mother Earth, forming a cycle of complementary opposites: life carried within it the seed of death; but without death rebirth was impossible because death was the pregnancy from which life emerged. (Lopez Austin, 1984, p. 103)

Similarly, Lopez Austin mentions that the decaying semen in the womb gave place to new life. Divine forces dwelt in the underworlds (“hell”), and the Flower Wars—a form of destruction—kept alive not only their divinities but the entire universe. “Dynamic” as some authors call it (Gossen, 1986), or “complementary” according to others (Lopez Austin, 1988), this dual ordering is specific to Mesoamerican thought and is characterized by the absence of mutually exclusive, closed categories. Not only do the deities participate in the duality that flows between opposite poles such as good and evil, but all entities play a dual function, shifting between aggressor and benefactor. As Lopez Austin states, from the four pillars of the cosmos at the four corners came the heavenly waters and the beneficial and destructive winds (1984, p. 59).

Mesoamerican cosmology implied a concept of duality that was not fixed nor static but constantly transforming itself. Hierarchies between poles do not seem to exist either. An essential ingredient of Nahua thought, this motility gave its impulse to everything. Divinities, objects, time and space with its five directions, all had gender ascription: they were feminine or masculine in proportions which continually modified themselves.

Gender permeating all areas of life was itself the movement that engendered and transformed all identity. In the universe, feminine and masculine attributes wove together in the generation of fluid,

⁶ Lopez Austin, Alfredo, *Tamoanchan y Tlalocan*, Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1994, does a very careful re-translation and re-interpretation of the several original primary sources in Nahuatl. He traces the origins of the misconceptions of these two sacred places to the evangelization enterprise. These were the two sacred places that early missionaries associated respectively with the catholic concepts of heaven and the original paradise. The early missionaries, in their efforts to find equivalents in the Nahua imagery, distorted the information collected in their chronicles.

nonfixed identities. The shifting balance of opposing forces that made up the universe, from society to the body itself—as its reflection and image—should be understood as a manifestation of this interpenetration of genders. From the cosmos to the individual body, dual gender is revealed as the fundamental metaphor of Mesoamerican thought.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SACRED EARTH OF THE NAHUAS

My daughter . . . Here in this world we walk along a very high, narrow and dangerous path like a very high hill with a narrow path along the top of it, and on both sides it is endlessly deep.

(Florentine Codex, 1577)

In Mesoamerican cultures the earth is respected as soil. The soil is where we stand. Today the idea that we have of the earth is informed by satellite photography: the astronomer's blue planet, lost in the dark immensity of space. It is hardly the soil, which our feet no longer touch. On the contrary, like all pedestrian peoples, Mesoamericans drew their world view from their embeddedness in the soil of their particular place. The layer of soil that supports all life on earth was regarded by them as living. This view is in sharp contrast to the contemporary view of the earth in which that top life-supporting layer is subject to exploitation and destruction.

One day a gardener from a Nahuatl-speaking region was working in my garden. I told him to throw the dirt from a planter into the garbage bin. He answered with a shocked but polite "No, no, Señora, soil shouldn't be treated like garbage." Another time, an indigenous woman helping me at home heard me complaining about the dirt and dust blowing into the house. She chastised me, saying, "Señora, you shouldn't speak like that of dust, because it is soil and soil is our mother, *la madre tierra*, who nurtures us."

The implicit ecological dimensions associated with Mesoamerican views of the earth and soil were brought home to me by these comments. What my interlocutors were reacting to was my acquired contemporary concept of soil as inert matter that can be discarded like refuse or complained about like an intrusive pollutant.

In nearly all agrarian civilizations the earth is sacred. Exactly how this sacredness is expressed and what forms it takes vary from one particular location to another. The unique features of the sacrificial sacredness of the Nahuas or Aztecs arise from their cosmivision. Many elements of the Mesoamerican concept of the cosmos were

often expressed in metaphor, a dominant mode of expression in Aztec culture.

AZTEC COSMOVISION

Mesoamerican concepts and understandings of the earth differ radically from standard modern perceptions. Primary sources speak of the earth as a disk floating on water, a rabbit, an iguana, or Cipactli, an alligator with a ridged back.

Leon-Portilla writes:

The surface of the earth is a great disk situated in the center of the universe and extending horizontally and vertically. Encircling the earth like a ring is an immense body of water (*teo-atl*, divine water), which makes the world *cem-a-nahuac*, “that-which-is-entirely-surrounded-by-water.” (1990, p. 48)

In anthropomorphic representations, the earth was a body with eyes, mouth, hair, and a navel. Earth itself is simultaneously womb, mouth, and bowels. Body imagery was transferred to the multiple levels of the cosmos. The center of the earth was its navel, the trees and flowers its hair. Grass was its skin. Wells, springs, and caves were its eyes. Rivers were its mouth and its nose was the origin of mountains and valleys.

The earth was also a devouring monster. According to Nahuatl cosmology, Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca brought Tlaltecuhltli (lord of the earth, another name for Cipactli, the alligator) down from the heavens. Tlaltecuhltli was a mythic male-female monster that snapped and bit like a savage beast. The two gods divided Tlaltecuhltli, thus separating sky from earth (Gonzalez Torres, 1991, pp. 169, 170).

In ancient Mexico, the horizontal directions of space were emphasized much more than the vertical, contrary to the vision of the sixteenth-century missionaries with heaven above and hell below. *Tlalocan* was the “paradise” of *Tlaloc*, the God of Rain, and was located to the east, rather than in the heavens. In contemporary christianized Nahuatl versions, “hell” is a cave in the forest. These examples indicate the strength of the horizontal metaphor in relation to the vertical, Christian one. Louise Burckhart speaks of “periphery and center” (1989, p. 67). As we have seen in the previous chapter, above and below the horizontal world (*cem-a-nahuac*) are thirteen upperworlds and nine underworlds. This multilayered symbolism is implicit in the concept of the four directions of the world:

The universe is divided into four well-defined directions which, although coinciding with the cardinal points, encompass much more than mere direction; each includes a whole quadrant of universal space. The directions are: the East, land of the color red and region of light, symbolized by the reed, representing fertility and life; the North, black, region of the dead—a cold and desert area symbolized by flint; the West, region of the color white, the land of woman whose symbol is the house of the sun; and the South, the blue region to the left of the sun, a direction of uncertain character represented by the rabbit, whose next leap, according to the Nahuas, no one can anticipate. (León-Portilla, 1990, pp. 46–47)

Above the upper worlds is the metaphysical beyond, the region of the gods. Ultimately above all is Omeyocan (the place of *omeyotl*, duality), dwelling place of the dual supreme deity, the originator of the universe. The god and goddess of the underworld were Miclantecuhtli and Mictecacihuatl.

Rivers, lakes, water holes, mountain tops, caves, forests, and deserts all had gods and goddesses who ruled over them and required rituals. Mountains had a particularly complex role in mythology. Rituals for mountain gods were celebrated throughout the yearly cycle, as were those associated with the *cenotes* (underground lakes). Contemporary Mesoamerican Indians have preserved some of the complexities of these rituals. Among the Cuicatec, for example, cave rituals, mountain ceremonies, and water-hole rituals are quite important. This has also been observed among Nahua communities of the state of Morelos near Mexico City (Hunt, 1977, p. 135; Salazar, 2001, p. 3).

All deities which symbolized aspects of reproduction, birth, and death had earthly aspects. Symbols of vegetable or animal deities were earthly too, because the earth was conceptualized as the primordial generating and regenerating principle. Death was an integral part of these vital forces. The earth had both human and animal characteristics, and it was both male and female, living and dead.

Centuries of observing the world and its workings from the macrocosm to the microcosm of the body itself had engendered the Nahua world view, with its distinctive characteristics of duality, fluidity, and balance. Yet bipolar duality is ubiquitous in all Mesoamerican concepts of the cosmos. For instance, Cipactli, the mythic monster that was lord of the earth, was male and female. It was both dual and singular, for opposites tended to form a complementary unit. Movement characterized the Mesoamerican universe, but fluidity was always in balance.

The urge for balance gave duality plasticity: since the critical point of balance had to be found in continuous movement, it redefined itself from moment to moment. Change and flux in the entire cosmos had an impact on the way things here on the earth were conceptualized. This bipolar fluid, shifting, and yet balanced universe framed the perception of beneficial as well as harmful events and actions, of good as well as evil forces, giving their relations a nonstatic, non-rigid quality. The duality implicit in all Mesoamerican cosmologies gave its impulse to everything: divinities, people, objects, time, and space with its five directions (Marcos, 1993):

(F)rom the four trees [pillars of the cosmos] the influences of the gods of the upper and lower worlds radiated toward a central point, the fire of destiny and time, transforming everything in existence . . . (Lopez Austin, 1988, p. 59)

METAPHORS

In the Nahuatl universe, everything was endowed with material, spiritual, temporal, and spatial qualities. Consequently, it was a metaphorically complex and allusorily sophisticated construction (Andrews and Hassig, 1984, pp. 13–14). León-Portilla has called the Nahua culture a philosophy and culture of metaphors (1990, pp. 177–183). Metaphorical language is found largely in prayers, rhetorical orations, admonitions (*huehuetlatolli*), songs (*cantares*), and incantations (*conjuros*). As the main means of transmission and preservation of an eminently oral tradition, they were often memorized. The visual metaphors in the codices of all Mesoamerican cultures are pictorial representations of their cosmos. Metaphors were cultivated as the highest and most valued means of expression of their vision of the earth and the divine forces that affected it.

Immaterial, nonphysical entities were not set off from the material world but were continuous with it, integrated into a single conception of reality. Only in first approximation can a tentative distinction be made between “physical” and “ethical” metaphors: while there were special metaphors for the physical conception of the earth and for its position within the cosmos, other metaphors reveal the relationships that the Nahuas maintained with the earth and life on its surface. As we shall see, the terms *tlalticpac* and *tlalticpacayotl* (“on the earth’s surface” and “of the quality of the things on the earth’s surface”) are closely related to the moral perspective that guided them.

Moral dimensions of the Nahua earth and metaphors for it

The Nahua perspective on the earth is indeed a moral one. The earth is a “slippery” place (Burkhart, 1989, p. 130) and the moral prescription is that one must act very carefully in all circumstances. One must live according to the guidelines established by the ancestors. The earth is not a place of happiness but of effort and strain. However:

so that we would not die of sadness, our lord gave us laughter, sleep and sustenance, our becoming strong, our growing up; and moreover, earthliness (sexuality), in order that people go on being planted. (Sahagún, Book VI, p. 00)

The earth was above all a perilous place. The word *tlalticpac* synthesized many of the physical and moral meanings of earth and soil. It is formed by the substantive *tlalli* (earth) and the postpositional suffix *icpac* (on, above). However, its meaning is not just “on earth,” but rather “on the point or summit of the earth,” referring to a point of equilibrium on its crest and suggesting a narrow path between abysses. One linked oneself with the earth by acts of *tlalticpacayotl*, “earthliness,” which included but was not restricted to sexual activity and its moral dimension (Burkhart, 1989, p. 58).

Ancient chronicles are full of references to the relation between soil and sexuality, as well as between soil and moral matters. For instance, the grandmothers in the discourses recorded by Sahagún say, “our bodies are like a deep abyss.” The *huehuetlatolli*, moral precepts that parents ought to transmit to their children, refer to the danger of earthly existence in these words:

On the earth we walk, we live, on the ridge of a mountain peak sharp as a harpoon blade *chichiquilli*. To one side is an abyss, to the other side is another abyss. If you go here or if you go there, you will fall, only through the middle can one go or live. (Sahagún, transl. W. Gingerich, 1988, p. 522)

An elder giving advice to his son would refer to the wisdom of the ancestors, whose bones are in the soil:

They used to say, the elders, that on the earth we walk, we live on the ridge of a mountain peak. Here is an abyss, there is an abyss. Wherever you deviate, wherever you go astray, there you will fall, you will plunge into the depths. (Ibid.)

“Tripping and stumbling, falling off precipices and into caves or torrents appear over and over again in the sources as metaphors for

moral aberration and its result” (Burkhart, 1989, p. 61). Opposing poles should not be avoided completely, but must rather be balanced against each other. Walking on the ridged back of Cipactli implied the moral duty of carefully balancing the extremes to achieve a harmony of tensions. This shifting moral balance was expressed in people’s careful and cautious pace on the narrow path everyone had to trace on the corrugated skin of earth’s surface. Undoubtedly, the mountainous geography of Mexico provided the ancient Nahuas with the metaphor of the earth as a giant iguana or alligator.

Aztec concepts of the divine

In Nahua religious thinking, gods depended as much on humans as humans depended on gods. All had a shared interest in the maintenance of the universe. Yet the Aztec world was an animated place that had little room for the concept of an inert physical world ruled by a *deus ex machina*. Nahua deities were neither Aztec society writ large nor ethereal beings touching only tangentially on individual’s lives (Andrews and Hassig, 1984, p. 14). A permanent interaction characterized the relations between the Nahuas and their divinities. The sacred domain was not distant; it was a presence that suffused every element of nature, every daily activity, every ceremonial action, and every physical being: flora and fauna, the sun and moon and stars, mountains, earth, water, fire were all divine presences. The Aztecs were so enmeshed in the “supernatural” and the “sacred” that the distinction between sacred and profane hardly holds for them.

Sharing divine attributes with the god of duality were other forces, forces of nature, that have been designated in popular thought as “innumerable gods.” However, all these gods only embodied the powers that Omoteotl (two-god) had produced, among them the four elements earth, wind, fire, and water (León-Portilla, 1990, p. 46). Each one of them was conceptualized as a dual female-male couple.

The gods were not “unique solutions” in that they did not have fixed unitary meanings. One god could be conceived of as an aspect of another (Andrews and Hassig, 1984, p. 10):

The religious representation of earth in the symbolism of ancient Mesoamericans embodies some of the most complicated and diversified ideas. (Hunt, 1977, p. 129)

... earth as a symbol complex was coded and transformed into practically all other mythic and ritual codes, it is impossible to produce a complete list. (Ibid., p. 133)

Earth, like the images of the gods, manifested a fundamental ambivalence. This ambivalence can be understood as the expression of the duality which pervaded all Mesoamerican constructs. "The earth was both loving and destructive, both nurturing mother and carnivorous monster. Reflecting ideas both complicated and disquieting, the earth was often represented as a demonic figure (Hunt, 1977, p. 131). As we have seen, the mythic earth deity, Cipactli or Tlaltecuhctli, was a monster with a ridged back like an iguana, a giant frog, or an alligator, a fitting the metaphor for the mountains and the creviced valleys of the earth's surface (Gonzalez Torres, 1991, p. 40).

Tlazolli—dirt, mud, foul matter, soil

The concept of dirt cannot be separated from soil. To the soil we bequeath our excrement, our bodies go back to the soil, and to the soil we let fall what is no longer useful.

In the Nahuatl language spoken by the Aztecs, there is a term that covers a whole range of impurities used in moral discourse to connote negativity. It is the word *tlazolli*, formed from the roots *tlalli* (earth, soil) and *zoli* (used, discarded). In its most literal meaning, it refers to something useless, used up, something that has lost its original order or structure and has been rendered "loose and undifferentiated matter." It broadly denotes any sort of dirt, chaff, straw, twigs, bits of hair or fiber, excrement, muck. What one sweeps up with a broom is *tlazolli* (Burkhart, 1989, p. 89).

The *tlazolli* complex drew materials principally from the realms of excretions and decay and associated them, through the processes of moral rhetoric, with the less desirable activities. Yet, since most concepts were ambivalent, this word denoting "filth" also had multiple favorable connotations, for maize grows from mud, from the body of the earth deity, and one linked oneself with the earth by eating cultivated foods like maize. Besides, all acts of *tlalticpacayotl* (earthliness, often understood as we have seen, as sexual activity) put people metaphorically into contact with *tlazolli*. Manure used to fertilize crops is *tlazolli* (Burkhart, 1989). Therefore, most of the substances of the *tlazolli* semantic field have a fertilizing, creative role.

Tlazolli was the realm of Tlazolteotl, the goddess that ruled sex and sanctioned sexual transgressions. Associated with the sensuous, she was the patroness of dust and filth, as well as of adulterers and promiscuous women. She had the power to induce immoral activity as well as to punish people for it. But she could also remove impurities. In that function, she was called Tlaelcuani (or Ixcuina) “eater of foul things,” because she cleansed those who submitted to the indigenous confession rite by absorbing their impurities. This rite, as described in the *Florentine Codex*, was conducted by her diviners. Tlazolteotl-Tlaelcuani was closely related to the earth-deity complex (Sahagún, 1989). According to Thelma Sullivan:

[Tlazolteotl-Ixcuina], in her quadruple aspect as the four sisters, is a metaphor for the generative and regenerative cycle of life. Her four-fold character represents the growth and decline of things. . . . She represents the Mother Goddess concept in its totality. This includes its negative as well as positive aspects. (Sullivan, 1977, p. 30)

Earth's womb

Caves were metaphorically referred to as the earth's womb. Accordingly, the *temazcal*, or Mexican “sweat bath,” shaped like a cave, is still symbolic of the womb of Mother Earth. Earthquakes were thought of in the same terms as uterine contractions: disorderly movements that could create, but could also kill. The duality in the conception of a life-giving, life-destroying deity is evident here.

Tonantzin and Monantzin, “Our Mother” and “Your Mother” respectively, are titles of the Mother Goddess. They refer to the earth as the Great Womb. One incantation says, “Come here, you, my mother, Princess Earth” (Ruiz de Alarcón, in Andrews and Hassig, 1984, p. 207). Symbolism of the earth's interior, the mythical cave house/uterus still persists among contemporary Mayas in Zinacantan, Chiapas (Hunt, 1977, p. 134).¹

Through this overview of the ancient Nahuatl concepts of the earth and divinity, especially as expressed in metaphors and attitudes concerning morality, we have come in contact with a distinct cosmovision. What bearing might it have on our contemporary ecological

¹ These observations, that come from my own field data, are corroborated by Eva Hunt (1977, pp. 134–35). Ana María Salazar reports similar contemporary rituals in the area of Tepoztlán, Morelos (2001).

concerns? Natural phenomena elicited awe in the Aztec mind. Physical beings were regarded as infused with the divine. Reciprocity and understanding for other life forms are evident. This precludes abuse and exploitation of nature and natural resources. The entire belief system fostered and sustained a measured, nonexploitative use of the earth's resources. Aztec creation myths and stories did not give the people the role of dominating nature; nor were they created as the species that ruled over all life forms. Rather, they were interconnected not only with "nature" in the form of flora and fauna and with natural phenomena like wind and rain, but with the divinities that represented the entire natural domain.

This connectedness, however, could also prove fearful. The duality that pervades the Mesoamerican concept of the universe included both the positive and negative aspects of nature, the creative as well as the destructive, the nurturing and the annihilating forces. The metaphors for earth and nature were never romantic. We cannot conceive of the Nahuas—and this holds true also for contemporary Indians—as "taking a stroll in nature." When they visit mountains and caves, it is to influence or placate the deities that live there. Because they have not lost their roots in nature, they still regard themselves as an integral part of earth. There is no sentimentality in their perception of the earth. Earth is a great nourishing deity and an unpredictable, fearsome monster: in all cases, it is necessary to move about on the earth with care.

In the moral domain, the *huehuetlatolli* speak often of the extreme care to be used walking on Cipactli's slippery back with an abyss on each side. Behavior had to be such that balance was preserved—and this was a collective obligation. For Mesoamericans, appropriate behavior while living one's life and enjoying the pleasures of earth was necessary to maintain the cosmic order.

CHAPTER FOUR

GENDER AND HEALING RITUALS

After Mariana, age 60, completed these activities (preparing the temple), which were routine on healing days, she put on her long spotless white robe. The other three women, ranging in age from 30 to 60, removed their white robes from the shopping bags and followed Mariana's example. As they were putting them on, I saw ordinary looking women being transformed into repositories of power, capable of summoning the spirits, and into experts for whose ministrations many people waited to entrust themselves. (K. Finkler, Spiritualist Healers in Mexico, 1985)

Traditional curing practices in Mexico are inseparable from the cosmology in which they are rooted. The predominance of women in traditional Mexican healing makes gender analysis pertinent as a dimension of therapeutic, spiritual, and community powers, and of the implicit knowledge system pervading the healing practices in Mexico. As we have seen, the cosmology underlying healing practices was and is pervaded by the concept of duality. Most deities had a feminine and a masculine aspect, and every cosmic force identified with the feminine was complemented by a masculine counterpart. Women and men were profoundly influenced to view themselves, and their interactions and functions in society, as different but complementary on all levels and in all areas of life. Women healers expressed a world view in which they and the female aspect of life were integral into society. Furthermore, accounts from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries show that women outnumbered men as practitioners of the healing arts. It is still the case. Today, in popular medicine, we still see women healers acting in ways that take them beyond the roles imposed by their social position in contemporary cultural contexts.

The historical and ethnographic material reviewed below will outline the range of healing activities performed by women and confirm the importance of their participation. Methodologically, the study explores the possibility of systematic confrontations of relevant primary and secondary sources from the time immediately preceding and

following the conquest with contemporary field studies on popular curative practices in Mexico. We proceed from the hypothesis of certain common features underlying both ancient Mesoamerican cosmology and contemporary healing practices. Alfredo Lopez Austin (1994, 2001) speaks of the *nucleo duro*, the hard core of Mesoamerican perceptual modes—a cosmology in which, as the many goddesses testify, the feminine plays a relevant role and must be approached rigorously and respectfully. In such a civilization, the feminine presence permeates all levels: sacred and profane, daily and ritual, domestic and macrosocial.

COSMOLOGY

Popular medicine as practiced in Mesoamerica must be understood as the interpenetration of the deep, powerful streams of ancient cosmology and concepts of European origin introduced by successive Spanish colonizers. The indigenous elements retain an underground yet impressively vital existence, nourishing, especially, healing practices and religious forms. However, without blending into a homogeneous “syncretism,” the perceptions, images, and ideas that make up the conceptual framework in which the people of Mesoamerica face life and death are never purely Mesoamerican nor purely Spanish.

Besides, the merging or overlapping of divine images—which sometimes discourages linear-thinking researchers from making sense out of the primary sources and materials on Mesoamerican cosmology—does not reflect an unfinished pantheon. Rather, it was its very nature to be based on fluidity and movement, the permanent transit toward one pole or the other (see chapter 2).

The Aztec and other Mesoamerican societies were neither monotheistic nor polytheistic:

In their view . . . reality, nature and experience were nothing but multiple manifestations of a single unity of being. God was *both* the one and the many. Thus the deities were but his multiple personifications, his partial unfoldings into perceptible experiences. (Hunt, 1977, p. 55)

It was within this cosmology, with its duality, fluidity, and divinized feminine presences, that the *curanderas* and other Mesoamerican healers of the past moved and worked. The following accounts, one undertaken to record and the other to eradicate traditional beliefs, reveal the significance of the *curanderas* in their social settings.

CURANDERAS OF THE PAST

Born in Spain around 1500, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, a Franciscan, came to Mexico in 1529. Some ten years later, he began traveling to gather material for his *General History of Things in New Spain*. Sahagún, rightly called the father of modern ethnology, drew up a questionnaire that enabled him to systematically inventory some key aspects of the culture less than a quarter century after the catastrophe of the conquest. Despite his critical comments and his bias about native religious beliefs, his extremely comprehensive accounts are regarded as one of the most reliable sources on pre-Hispanic Mexico.

Female images in the Mesoamerican pantheon offer a vision of women's social position revealed through their medical functions. Sahagún speaks of Temazcaltoci, as of the goddess of medicine. According to her name, patroness of the *temezcal*, the healing vapor bath, she was also the "heart of the earth and our grandmother; . . . doctors, surgeons and bleeders venerate her as well as the diviners who foretell the good and bad fortune that children will have according to their birth" (*Florentine Codex*, Book 1, Ch. VIII, 1989, pp. 40–41). In his first encounter with this female healing power, Sahagún recorded the activities of what he called female doctors or *titi* (*ticitl* in the singular):

The female doctor knows well the properties of herbs, roots, trees and rocks. She has a great deal of experience with them and likewise knows many medical secrets. She who is a good doctor knows how to cure the sick and, for the good she does them, practically brings the dead back to life, making them get better or recover with the cures she uses. She knows, how to bleed, to give purges, administer medicine and apply ointments to the body, to soften lumps in the body by massage, to set bones, lance and cure wounds and the gout, cut away bad flesh and cure the evil eye. (*Florentine Codex*, Book 10, Ch. XIV, 1989 [1577], p. 606)

[By] blowing on the sick, subtly tying and untying cords, looking into water, throwing the large grains of corn customarily used in divination . . . she learns about and understands illnesses . . . (*Historia General de las Cosas de la Nueva España*, 1982 [1582], Appendix III, p. 908)

Midwifery has traditionally been women's specialty, but additionally, in the Aztec world, midwives presided as priestesses at the rituals surrounding delivery. They encouraged women on the battlefield of birth. Midwives directed the process, gave messages, prayed,

administered herbs, and took the women to the *temazcal* bath. Their duties included preparing pregnant women to become Cihuateteo, the goddesses that accompanied the sun from its height to its setting. If the mother were to die in childbirth, she would then become one of these goddesses. She would be regarded with the deference due to a warrior who died on the battlefield.

And when the baby arrived on earth, the midwife shouted; she gave war cries, which meant that the woman had fought a good battle, had become a brave warrior, had taken a captive, had captured a baby. (Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, Book VI, Ch. XXX, 1989 [1577], p. 413)

Even Hernan Cortez, the conqueror of Mexico, in a letter to the Emperor Carlos V, admits, “Do not send doctors because those here are much better” (1962)[1524].

“Heathen superstitions”

After nearly one century of catechization, church authorities in colonial Mexico saw that native religious practices still persisted and even flourished. The church’s official position, when confronted with the complex and highly evolved religious beliefs of the New World’s inhabitants, was to attribute them to the devil. For Christians, there was only one God, so the native deities—perceived by the catechizers as real and effective—must be the evil spirits. Accordingly, the religious customs and acts, which included ritual bathing and naming four days after birth, confessing to the goddess Tlzolteotl, eating figures of the gods fashioned from amaranth, as well as other rituals that superficially recalled church practices, were regarded as attempts by the devil to lead souls astray by imitating Christian practices.

The effort to eliminate native religious customs focused on bringing their practitioners—the healers—to judgment, especially those who used incantations, since these were regarded as prayers to the devil. For his zeal in persecuting those presumed guilty of practicing native beliefs, Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón, a local priest born in Taxco, Guerrero (and brother of the famous playwright Juan Ruiz de Alarcón), was appointed an ecclesiastical judge and assigned the task of surveying the persistence of these old customs and beliefs. The result was the *Treatise on the Heathen Superstitions That Today Live Among the Indians Native to This New Spain*, published in 1629.

The *Treatise* is one of the most important sources dealing with native religions, beliefs, and medicine for early colonial Mexico and has attracted several scholars (Lopez Austin, 1971; Gruzinski, 1988;

Andrews and Hassing, 1984). Although Ruiz de Alarcón is regarded as a flawed ethnographer because of his too obvious biases against native traditions, the accounts and invocations recorded in the document provide information about cosmology, concepts of deities and their interactions with humans, and ideas about health and illness. Between Sahagún's *Florentine Codex* and the *Treatise* we can note certain shifts in the indigenous rituals because of the adoption of Christian images and symbols. However, the underlying structure revealed in the *Treatise* continues to be that of the indigenous religion (Gruzinski, 1988, p. 190; Andrews and Hassig, 1984, p. 7).

I have arrested and punished many Indian men and women for this crime [healing with invocations to Mesoamerican deities and fortune telling] although, having made a calculation, there have been more women than men . . . [they] are found in many provinces, because, on account of the name of the seers, they are highly respected and regarded and very well provided with necessities . . . (Andrews and Hassig, 1984, p. 47)

Of the thirty or so healers mentioned by Ruiz de Alarcón, around two thirds were women. The portrait that emerges is of women with authority who were staunch, resolute, and wise. It suggests that, with the persistence of the old religious beliefs, the presence of powerful women healers may have likewise been a reflection of women's healing functions before the conquest. Serge Gruzinski comments: "One would hardly exaggerate these women's importance, who participate on equal footing with men, in the transmission of ancient cultures. Besides, it is not the first time that we see them intervene so manifestly in the process of acculturation and counteracculturation." After analyzing the social context of those women healers, he adds: "It seems that their function has little to do with social origin, age (some are old but not all) or condition (widows, married women) and only one knows how to read and write . . . (1988, pp. 202–203). Some healers achieved great prestige and notoriety and even outwitted the clergy's efforts to find them. Ruiz de Alarcón reports the case of the

old woman Isabel Maria, an inhabitant of Temimilzinco who uses spells and incantations, I took measures to get my hands on her. And she was so careful that for more than one year I was not able to discover her . . . this old woman was so pleased with the strength of this false incantation, that she said she had unburdened her conscience with having made it known and not hiding any of the things that God had communicated to her for the benefit of man. (Andrews and Hassig, 1984, pp. 51–52)

Ruiz de Alarcón also speaks of a woman with a considerable reputation among the indigenous populations of Guerrero and Morelos:

. . . In the village of Iguala (in Guerrero) . . . I arrested an Indian woman called Mariana, a seer, a liar, a healer, of the type called *ticil*. This Mariana declared that what she knew and used in her sorcery and frauds she had learned from another Indian woman, Mariana's sister, and that the sister had not learned it from another person, but that it had been revealed to her, because when the sister was consulting the *ololuhqui* about the cure of an old wound, having become intoxicated with the strength of the drink, she summoned the sick person and blew upon the wound some embers, whereupon the wound healed immediately . . . a youth whom she judged to be an angel [appeared to her and] consoled her, [telling her that] God gives you a favor and a gift . . . You will cure wounds . . . and the rash and the smallpox [and thereby support herself even though she lived in] poverty and much misery . . . And after this the youth spent all night giving her a cross and crucifying her on it and driving nails into her hands, and while the Indian woman was on the cross, the youth taught her the ways she knew for curing which were seven or more exorcisms and invocations . . . (Ibid., pp. 66–67)

Ruiz de Alarcón sums up: “With these diabolical chimeras, fictions and representations which the Devil puts into their imagination, they make themselves esteemed as almost divine . . .” (Ibid., p. 67).

Rituals of healing

It should be clear from the accounts in the *Treatise* that religious ritual was essential to healing. Today it remains true that more than administering a plant for a disease, almost all the women herbalists, bone-setters, and other healers carry out rituals. These may be simple prayers or invocations, or they may be long and complex, but they involve the *curandera* in an encounter with divine power. For them, illness cannot be reduced to a simple imbalance to be restored by taking the correct chemical substance. It is in this “hidden” dimension that the power of women healers is most evident. The ability to drive out bad airs (spirits), neutralize the evil eye, go in search of a lost *tonalli* (life force), free patients from mischievous or evil entities depends on their capacity to act in the realm of the spirit. Doña Marcela, a *curandera* from Chiapas, points out:

Traditional doctors, those which we call *iloletik*, have as the center of their healing action the spirit, the soul, and not the plants or other

kind of material medicine. This is why they read pulses and use other methods to diagnose social causes of sickness rather than physical or physiological causes . . . Certain medicinal plants are used as a support but these are not the core of their actions. (author's notes)

Elena Islas speaks of the method used by her mother, Doña Rufina, healer in San Miguel Tzinacapan, in the sierra of Puebla:

My mother cured everything: fright, bad airs, evil eye . . . She cured everything but she never did any evil, even though she knew how to do it. She had to pray all day. Only if she went out or if people came to visit her did she stop . . . she prayed until midnight. (Almeida, 1986, Ms. p. 6)

This chapter focuses on some of the most current curing resources, techniques, and styles of healing practiced in the Mesoamerican territory. (In contrast, in the next chapter, the emphasis will be placed on the self-perceptions of healers about their mission in life.) There are multiple styles of ritual healing, most still practiced by contemporary *curanderas* in Mexico. Below are descriptions from various studies as well as from my own field research as a participant-observer in healing ceremonies.

Doña Lucía, a peasant healer

It is just after dawn in the simple house of a peasant woman, Doña Lucía, who stands before an urban lady from Mexico City. On the floor, a black pottery incense burner of pre-Columbian design sends up a steady stream of smoke. Both patient and healer are fasting. The healer has previously diagnosed her patient as suffering from an illness brought on by the jealousy and harmful thoughts of her office colleagues. Doña Lucía looks towards her altar with its many holy pictures and statues of Jesus, Virgin Mary, and the saints. She invokes the divine presences, asking God to take away the perturbations that afflict the woman. Picking up the burner, she fans the incense to every part of the woman's body. Then she gives her a packet of chopped plant root and tells her how to take it. It will purge her, Doña Lucía explains, but after that she will begin to get better. She will have expelled the evil from her. Before setting out for home, the woman leaves a donation on the altar.

Similar healing acts have been carried out by women for centuries in Mexico and are an extension of their abilities and position in the rural communities. At the same time, they reflect the position of the feminine in their cosmology.

Espiritualismo

Marian Trinitary *Espiritualismo* is a popular—urban, poor, and rural—religion which is expanding rapidly throughout Mexico and into Central and South America. According to some researchers, the movement began in 1866 with Roque Rojas, an ex-seminarist of the town of Contreras outside Mexico City (Ortiz, 1990, p. 31). “Spiritualist” beliefs and rituals display evident traces of pre-Hispanic elements interwoven with Christian, Hindu, and Judaic borrowings. Followers refer to themselves as the Lost Tribes of Israel; they believe in reincarnation; in their chants, they address a divinity present in oceans, rivers, stones, light, insects, earth, and the four corners of the world. The image of the Trinity (A simple abstract triangle) is the central piece of the altar.

In *Espiritualismo*, curing is accomplished through spiritual techniques. Some herbs are administered (with notable variations from one local temple to the next) and massage is often used, but healing takes place by the action of the spirit protectors working through the healer while s/he is in a state of trance. *Espiritualismo* encourages direct relationship with the world of spirit protectors. In its temples, the same hierarchical positions are open to men and women, but women most often rank the highest (Finkler, 1979; Lagarriga, 1991; Ortiz, 1989).

Doña Lola was a founder and *guía* (guide) of an *espiritualista* temple in Cuernavaca, Morelos. She selected and trained members who had *facultades* (capacities)—that is, people deemed to be mediums. Through trances and spirit possession, a woman becomes a bearer of knowledge and acquires special dignity. Transformed into the receptacle of the divine, she guides, cures, and teaches.

Currently the “spiritualists” have seven *sellos* (seals) or chapters, each with its own characteristics. The Sixth Seal was founded by Damiana Oviedo, whose biography was converted into a founding myth.

Using Enteogens for healing

Another style of healing involves establishing an altered state of consciousness in order to diagnose and cure. The term *enteogens* was coined by Gordon Wasson (1983 [1966], p. 113) and used by other scholars as a means for conveying the cultural mandate ascribed to the ingestion of hallucinogens. It is a way of communicating with the deity, as well as achieving enlightenment about the causes (diagnosis) and cure (therapy) of an illness and the expulsion of evil. In San

Bartolo Yautepec, a Zapotec village in the state of Oaxaca, a study (see Ruiz de Alarcón, 1619, above) recounts the use of the *ololiuhqui* seed (*Rivea colymbosa* or morning glory) by the healer Paula Jimenez. A beverage is prepared during a ritual that requires precise handling of the seeds, chanting, invocations, and awareness of proper time and place. The potion, in different quantities, is drunk by the *curandera* and the patient. The healer, now with access to divine knowledge and power, can facilitate the cure (Wasson, 1966, p. 344).

La hermana (sister) Julia

In yet another style of ritual healing, we find *hermana* Julia, as she is called by the residents of her poor urban neighborhood in Cuernavaca. During a ceremony to cure a small girl of a potentially fatal scorpion bite, she talks to an image of Jesus, whom she begs to heal through her. She then simulates the gestures of giving an injection to the girl. Meanwhile, she addresses the image casually, at times harshly, as when the girl's state at first does not improve. The divinity she calls on is not a transcendent being but an immanent one. The image she addresses is of the crucified Christ. The cure is accomplished through her power to call on divine aid (Baytelman, 1986, p. 95).

As healers, women transcend the limitations of their social and cultural gender roles, and not only among the "spiritualists," where women clearly predominate in the temple hierarchy. In this as in other styles of healing, this quantitative predominance is also qualitative. For example, the highest authority among the *graniceras* (a type of *curanderas* who control rain, hail, and lightening) in the volcano region near Mexico City is a woman and the position is handed down through female lineage (Viesca, 1984, personal communication).

In the ancient Mesoamerican cosmology, as well as in popular healing practices where its influence still pervades, medicine is the art of exchange with the divine. It is the capacity for immersion in divinity and mastery over revealed information. It is the skill to illuminate hidden mysteries and the power to intervene in uncertain destinies and order them in to harmony. By participating in healing rituals, women healers in Mexico manage their skills in answer to the needs of those around them.

CHAPTER FIVE

FUSION WITH THE SACRED: PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN HEALERS

*"I am a woman who swims in the sacred." (Maria Sabina,
wise woman of the sacred mushrooms)*

Supranatural realities and experiences are key components of the day-to-day existence of *curanderas*. Their understanding of the ways they heal and their self-perceptions rest in the realm of the supernatural. They perceive themselves alternatively as vehicles for divinity, as vessels (receptacles) that incorporate the deity, as messengers of divine wisdom, as companions of the spirit sharing a task with him, and as servants working under the orders of powerful spirits. Participatory involvement has allowed me glimpses into their ways of relating with the sacred domain. Not mutually exclusive, the mentioned categories seem to express fittingly the depth and power of the religious specialists who immerse themselves in the divinity and emerge to alleviate the pains and ills of the human condition.

VEHICLES OF THE SACRED

The healer as vehicle receives the spirit, but not as inert matter. She vibrates, she is alive. Although she is possessed by God, she retains hearing, speech, sight, and motion. Her human boundaries are flexible, pliable, redundant and permeable, allowing a certain flow between the heavenly domain and her own earthly being. Vehicle healers participate actively in conveying the divine to the human.

Night has come. Flickering candlelight hides and reveals in turn the Mazatec *curanderas* who meet to chant. One of them sings in a voice that encompasses the earthly horizon of the mountain chains with their deep river ravines and sweeping highlands. Her chant is as dramatic and charged as her physical environment. The ritual chant starts with "I am the woman who sees the inside of things . . . I am the woman who sees the inside of things . . . I am the woman who sees the inside of things . . . says." (Estrada, 1981, p. 144).

The gathered *curanderas* wait for the “flesh of God,” *teonanacatl*, the hallucinogenic mushroom (*Psilocybe mexicana*) to alter their ordinary and everyday perceptions, to open new horizons for them, and to begin speaking through them. After almost every line of the rhythmic and poetic stanzas, the particle *tzo* is uttered. *Tzo* in Mazatec (an indigenous language spoken by peoples of the mountains in the states of Puebla and Oaxaca) means “says.” It is the divinity who speaks, not they. Irene, Maria Sabina, Apolonia, and other *curanderas* of the region always stress the *tzo* when they chant.

I am the woman torn up out of the ground . . . (idem, p. 112)

I am the woman who investigates, says (p. 131)

She is the woman of good words, says (p. 133)

Woman of important origin . . . (p. 135)

I am the woman wise in Language, says . . .” (p. 109)

It is not they who deliver the healing messages, or administer the herbal medicine; it is the sacred acting through them. The way they express themselves shows clearly this subtle but significant fact: “I am a woman wise in Medicine, says” (Estrada, 1981, p. 109).

The wise Mazatec women do not travel to the heavens or the underworld. They accept the sacred into their bodies. They are flooded by the divine. Their boundaries expand to make room for the essence, to contain the infinite and, as vehicles, they bring healing powers to the human community.

CURANDERAS AS RECEPTACLES

Curanderas belonging to the tradition of the *Espiritualista* temples use the term *vaso* (vessel, receptacle) for the women who receive the spirit. As *vaso*, they are both an instrument and a receptacle for the spirit’s curative powers. A “humble woman,” in their own words, becomes identified with the all-powerful.

In *Espiritualismo*, women are the receptacles of the creator and of supernatural entities (Ortiz, 1990, p. 51). Since, as we have seen in the previous chapter, women generally rank the highest within the temples’ hierarchy (Finkler, 1979, p. 103), the rapid expansion of “spiritualist” religions is offering new positions of authority to women, together with considerable status in the community.

Doña Agustina sits silently at one side of the temple’s altar waiting for the patients. A middle-aged man, modestly dressed, explains

his ailment. The spirit protector speaks through her. An assistant writes down the prescription and recommendations. After the possession ritual is over, Doña Agustina will not remember what she has said, heard, or done under possession.

The *vaso* healer is selected as a receptacle by the divinity. Her training and preparation are focused on letting the spirit work through her. She also learns how to deal with and protect herself from other mischievous spirits that could impede her healing functions. Her main collaboration consists in removing all obstacles to the full exercise of the divinity in and through her body.

COSMIC TRAVELER: THE MESSENGER

Imagine the messenger as a fast runner, trained to run great distances, capable of crossing mountains, valleys, deserts, forests, marshes, of running miles and miles endlessly with a sustained effort seemingly beyond human endurance. Such runners existed in the Aztec empire. They were the messengers who brought news of the warriors on the front, rumors about allies and enemies, and fresh fish for the emperor from distant Veracruz to the highlands of Tenochtitlan. These runners were tireless, struggling against the forces of nature and the limits of human resistance. Women messengers of the divinity do the same, except that they cross the dangerous paths of consciousness and perception. They enter the mysteries, perplexities, and obscurities of existence, returning with news from the divinity, with cures, with comfort and revelations.

As we have already mentioned, Damina Oviedo was the founder of a lineage of the *Espiritualista* heritage. The introduction of the guide to the Templo de Belén in the city of Jalapa in the state of Veracruz begins by referring to this primordial messenger woman: “The first woman who descended to the planet earth in order to make the light of the Lord known was Damiana Oviedo” (Lagarriaga, 1991, p. 31). “Since her birth,” the guide goes on:

[s]he predicted many things . . . She lived three days and later died, and was revived twenty four hours later and led a normal life . . . At thirteen years of age, she went to Manzanillo and there founded the first temple and the Lord spoke with her and told her that she should plant the light in Mexico and she went there and founded a temple and many followed her.” (Lagarriaga, 1991, p. 31)

The activity described as “message giving”—in so far as messages from the spirit relate to pain and sickness—fulfills a diagnostic and therapeutic function. By listening to and letting themselves be marked and influenced by the spirit, the messenger *curanderas* receive the communication. This mainly concerns spiritual and health worries and only secondarily material matters.

Paula Jimenez, of San Bartolo Yautepec, when she takes an infusion of *ololiuhqui*, prepares herself to become a messenger between the gods and earth (Wasson, 1966, p. 000). More actively than the vessel, the messenger collaborates with the healing spirit and with the patient by taking a concern into her hands and transporting it to another level of reality. From God, from the divinity, from the forces of good, she strives to bring beneficial information, blessings, and knowledge to the human realm. She has to leap back and forth with humble prayers and petitions so that anguish and suffering will be resolved (Wasson, 1966, pp. 336–37).

Their rituals confirm messenger women as intermediaries. Rosa, a *curandera* from Guerrero, requests protection, insists on going there again, to tell the deity that it is urgent. She tells her patient to wait in silence and pray. Not one sound while she goes to ask, while she speaks with the “Almighty.” She feels happy when she can come back with an answer for the patient’s suffering, with an understanding of his predicament, with peaceful and soothing words that are not hers, but are those of the “message” from the spirit beyond. Being a messenger is a way of communicating with God and a way to resolve human suffering and ailment.

THE COMPANION

She and God are colleagues, companions, and partners. They have a common task, to alleviate pain and suffering. It could be a matter of bringing back a lost shadow (*tonalli* or soul), healing a convulsive illness, or reestablishing peace in a person who suffers from *susto* (fright). When she begs the divinity for help, she does it in an intimate tone, sharing the weight of the responsibility with her divine partner. “Little Jesus, don’t fail me. Tell me what I have to give her,” says *hermana* Julia from Cuernavaca, while standing in front of an image of Christ who shall help her to cure the girl stung by a scorpion (Baytelman, 1993, p. 66). “A shot in the arm?” she asks. The woman’s tone is quick, happy, sometimes excited, but in no way solemn or pious.

Shortly, she turns to us and tells us that the girl must get a shot. She then involves herself in a series of surprising procedures. From an imaginary table she takes some instruments and carries out actions mimicking the medical ritual of giving a shot. After waiting for half an hour, she faces us again. The little girl's arm still looks bad. Julia turns urgently to the image of Jesus. "Shame on you. You told me to give her a shot and it hasn't worked. What do you have against me? You failed me. The girl is still sick. I'm not going to let you do this to me. Tell me what to do." Silence. She listens carefully and then, "Another shot? All right, but this time you do your part of the work!" She repeats the ritual. After some minutes have gone by, the arm is less inflamed and the girl seems to suffer less pain. Julia takes us to the door. She doesn't charge for her services and when she receives three ten-peso bills, she looks them over and then returns one.

The way in which Julia approaches the divine, Jesus Christ, expresses the tone of a culture in which the religious domain is accepted as naturally as any other. The girl got better and returned home. Sister Julia returned to her television, wrapped in the darkness of her dirt-floor shack. There was not the drama, nor the trances, nor the intensity with which other *curanderas* operate. Her collaborator, Jesus, simply carried out a common task with her. She did not think very much about it herself. She knew that without divine help, she would never have been able to cure the child. She is just another woman of her neighborhood: poor, simple, with no formal education. Her contact with eternity has not made her proud. She does not ask for compensation for her services. She serves the community and shares her work with the divinity. Her needs are few. Her life is organized to make her able to respond to petitions for help, to call on the divinity whenever someone is in pain or distress. The companion healer doesn't take the supernatural spirit into her body, nor does she have the obligation to transmit a divine message. She is not alone, not possessed, not in a trance; she is not a vehicle; she is simply the playful companion that has to carry out a healing task.

SERVANTS OF THE DIVINE

Many of the *curanderas* are herbalists, bone-setters, and midwives and speak of themselves as servants of the divine. Along with administering a plant for an ailment, almost every woman herbalist or bone-setter also performs a ritual. Sharing symbolic content is no less

relevant than the dramatic immersion in the divinity or the comfortable collaboration with the divine as a means of curing. This is particularly true when the treatment for the disease implies a *limpia* (cleansing), or a search for a lost shadow, or the healing of fright or the “evil eye.” These categories of illness cannot be reduced to simple physical imbalances. It is in this dimension that the power of the women herbalists is most evident. They also have the capacity to expel the bad “airs” or spirits from the afflicted bodies of their patients. They neutralize the evil eye and perform elaborate rites to recapture a lost shadow. They likewise free patients from those mischievous, at times evil, spirit entities that populate the complex Mesoamerican cosmos.

Besides home remedies, almost every woman in the popular sector of Mexican society has the capacity to do a cleansing or *limpia*. The *limpia* implies a perception of the universe, a world of implicit meanings, which is inaccessible to many individuals.

Midwives were the great priestesses of the Aztec world. They encouraged women on their first battlefield, the birth ceremony. They were the ones who directed the process: they gave massages, prayed, administered herbs, and took the women to the *temazcal* (sweat bath), and prepared them for their decisive “battle” (Sahagún, 1982, Book VI, Ch. 10). Midwives are still widely appreciated and sought out for helping with childbirth. The techniques they use vary from one village to another (Marcos, 1996, p. 124). Today, they are called *parteras empíricas* (midwives who have been trained within their oral, “empirical” traditions), meaning that their knowledge comes from practical and traditional learning; they have a broad knowledge of herbs and rituals. These *parteras* chant songs that endow the woman’s body with cosmic significance and encourage her to attune herself to the natural life-giving forces.

The women who carry out these healing functions are serving the divinity. As they do so, they minister to the community and become powerful mediators for its well-being.

Maria Sabina, the wise woman of the sacred mushrooms

Like an empty vase that contains the unthinkable, the unimaginable, the unapprehensible, she, a form of nature, receives the spirit and enters into a relationship with the divinity appropriate to her work. The intensity of this relationship together with a deep commitment to the well-being of the community guides her healing art. Transformed

by the divinity, she is, at times, a vehicle, a receptacle, a messenger, a companion and a servant of the gods. Maria Sabina is one of the wise women of *Teonanacatl*, as the Sacred Mushrooms have been called. They are the flesh of the gods.

This tradition persists among the Mazatec, an indigenous group of the Mexican states of Puebla and Oaxaca. Protected by the inaccessibility of high mountainous peaks, the tradition of performing nightlong healing rituals (*veladas*) has remained alive. An important element of these *veladas* or vigils is the ingestion of psychotropic mushrooms—or *santos niños*, saint children, as the healer/shaman calls them. Maria Sabina is the best known among this kind of ritual specialists. During the healing ritual, she chants a litany whose rhythmic repetitions and semantic redundancies have a hypnotic effect. In that state, she conceives of herself as a vehicle of the gods' voices and of their universe.

Among the world regions, the Americas are the most plentiful in what Gordon Wasson has called *enteogens*—seeds, leaves, flowers, weeds, roots, and cactuses whose ingestion “connects with the gods”—and by far the richest in the expert knowledge of how to use them. (Schultes and Hofmann, 1982, p. 62). In all the other continents taken together, the number of vegetal elements known, and used for inducing altered states of consciousness is considerably smaller. In Mesoamerica, enteogens are known as sacred plants that allow communication with the supernatural; as such, they are a privileged means for healing. It has been estimated that their use and the traditions associated with it date back approximately 10,000 years (Furst, 1976, p. 8). Embedded in religious rituals, these traditions are still today a heritage and a wealth of resources in the lives of the Mesoamerican peoples.

Wasson tape-recorded one of Maria Sabina's sacred *veladas* (vigils) and studied it in detail in 1956. He recounts the several different steps that lead the shaman healer and the other participants to gradual immersion in the supernatural. It is a communal affair. The close family congregates beside the sick person while the whole extended family fasts, chants, and accompanies their sick kin all night long, until the expelling of the evil or illness is achieved.¹

¹ In Ameyaltepec, Guerrero, there are similar ceremonies. Chanta, an indigenous *amatl* paper painter from that city, gave to me long interviews where she described

One striking characteristic of this ceremony is that the shaman sings all night long. Maria Sabina's chants were translated from the Mazatec into Spanish by her nephew Alvaro Estrada (1981) and then into English by H. Munn (1981). These chants attest to the persistence or *pervivencia* (Quezada, 1997) of a hidden, hermetic universe of beliefs. Through them we get a glimpse into the cosmology that still pervades the perception of the peoples of Mesoamerica. Reading the early colonial manuscript of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Psalmodia Christiana*, translated by Arthur J. O. Anderson, we stumble on these words by Sahagún in the prologue:

Among the things of which the Indians of New Spain were very careful, one was the worship of their gods . . . and to whom in various ways they paid honor and also [sang] praises extolling them in the temples and oratories day and night, singing hymns and forming choruses and dances in their presence. . . . Since the time they were baptized, efforts have been made to force them to abandon those old canticles of praise to their false gods and to sing only in praise of God and His saints . . . for in the old canticles mostly idolatrous things are sung in a style so obscure that none can understand them well except themselves . . . in this volume called *Christian Psalmody*, these canticles have been printed in the Nahuatl language so that they will completely abandon the old canticles . . . a penalty being imposed . . . to any who go back to singing old canticles . . . but to sing only those of God and His saints. (Anderson, 1993 [1583], pp. 7, 8)

And Angel Garibay (1964) adds, "they (the Franciscans) gave their support to [the traditional] religious songs and dances but took pains to see that they were Christianized" (cited in Anderson, 1993, p. ix).

In Maria Sabina's healing rituals, as well as in the ones performed during almost every contemporary indigenous ceremony in the Mesoamerican area, the Catholic saints, and especially the Virgin

minutely all the phases of the ceremony. They can last as long as a week, during which the ill person and his extended community of friends and relatives keep fasting together in silence and prayer while the healer/shaman performs the ceremony. The place where the ceremony is performed has to be secluded and distant from the troubling noises of the town. The dramatic experience of the healed person and his kin could include seeing the sick expelling all sorts of odds and ends, insects and worms, of all types and sizes and otherwise unrecognizable in the outer world. The visionary experience of seeing, hearing, and talking to powerful spirits and the expelling of the evil follows a similar pattern as Maria Sabina's *veladas*. The potion that increases and extends perceptions is here a seed called *ololihqui*, the morning glory seed (see chapter 4 above; S. Marcos, research ms., 1979).

Mary, are frequently invoked in the litanies, chants, canticles, and prayers. Sahagún's translation of the Christian Psalmody to Nahuatl gives us clues into this apparent syncretism: since for the friars, catechization was mainly an effort to change local devotions, they substituted invocations of the saints, the Virgin, and Christ for the indigenous people's calls to their traditional supernatural spirits and deities. What happened since early colonial times was certainly not an "autonomous appropriation" (G. Bonfil, 1984), and hardly a spontaneous "interpenetration of civilizations" (R. Bastide, 1978), but rather a switching in images and invocations aimed at eluding punishment by the agents of the conquering faith. As scholars have noted (Gruzinski, 1988, p. 232), the fundamental armature of indigenous beliefs could survive mostly untouched under this veneer (Hunt, 1977, p. 230). Thus Maria Sabina's chants—clad in a Catholic imagery but as "obscure" as the ancestral canticles registered by Sahagún in the years prior to 1590—provide glimpses into the innermost meanings and the poetry that underlie them, and into their literary value and moral importance (Anderson, p. ix). It would be useful to approach these chants with the understanding of Nahuatl poetry and literature that Miguel León-Portilla has proposed (1969, 1984). For his part, John Bierhosrt, in his English translation of the *Cantares Mexicanos*, has this phrase that seems to complement and relate well with Maria Sabina's experiences: "From heaven, ah, come good flowers, good songs" (1985, p. 4). And the Aztec poet sings, "we have drunk fungus wine. . . ." And so does Maria Sabina sing. Here are her chants, quoted extensively. Getting a taste for their rhythmic, redundant, poetic, and spiritual quality, we might be able to approach respectfully a religious universe so alien to the modern mind:

I am a sap woman, a dew woman, says
 I am a fresh woman, a woman of clarity, says
 I am a woman of light, a woman of the day, says
 I am a woman who looks into the inside of things, says
 I am a woman who investigates, says
 Holy Father, says
 Holy Father, says
 I am a Saint Peter woman, says
 I am a Saint Paul woman, says
 I am a saint woman, says
 I am a spirit woman, says
 A woman of good words, of good words, good breath and good saliva,

says
 It's certain, says
 It's true, says . . .
 That is your communion wafer, says (p. 145) . . .
 Woman of the day, says
 Woman who goes through water
 Woman who travels on the heights
 Woman who sounds forth with grandiloquence
 Woman who sounds forth with divinity
 Woman of superior reason, says
 That is your paper
 That is your book
 There is only one true God
 We are going to see whether it's true, says
 Whirling woman of colors, says
 Woman on the sea, says
 Good is her voice, her breath, her words, says
 Holy Father
 I am the Cross Star woman, says
 The constellation of the sandal woman, says . . .

God knows me, says
 Benito Juarez, says
 Mother Guadalupe, says
 Mother Magdalene, says
 I am a saint woman, says
 Woman of the day, says
 Ah, Jesus
 It's true what I say (p. 140) . . .

I am a woman of letters, says
 I am a book woman, says
 Nobody can close my Book, says
 Nobody can take my Book away from me, says
 My Book encountered beneath the waters, says
 My Book of prayers
 Big star woman, says . . .

I am a woman born
 I am a woman fallen into the world
 I am a law woman
 I am a woman of thought
 I am a woman who gives life
 I am a woman who reanimates
 I have the heart of Christ, says
 I have the heart of the Virgin

I have the heart of Christ
I have the heart of the Father
I have the heart of the old Old One (p. 107)

Maria Sabina mutters, “the little things are the ones that speak. If I say . . . I am a woman who was born alone, the children mushrooms [are the ones who speak” (Maria Sabina, quoted in Estrada, 1981, p. 66)]. She continues, “The God that lives in them enters my body. I cede my body and my voice to the Saint children. They are the ones who speak in the vigils. . . .” (Ibid., p. 93).

CHAPTER SIX

CORPOREALITY, RELIGIOUS METAPHOR, AND NARRATIVE

Soon Huemac found out: his daughter was sick. He then asked the women who were taking care of her:

“What did she do? . . . How did this heat enter my daughter?” . . . And the women who took care of her answered, “It’s the Tohuenyo, he who’s selling chili: he has put fire in her, he’s made her restless . . .”

(Codice Matritense, 1964 [1547])

Body perceptions are culturally embedded in gender. Mesoamerican sources are particularly revealing of that relationship. Concepts of equilibrium and fluidity (see chapter 2) are fundamental to grasp the perception or construction of bodies in ancient Mesoamerica and, in particular, Mexico. A review of primary sources for the history of ancient Mexico manifests a conception of corporeality that could be called “embodied thought.” The concepts of equilibrium, fluidity, and gender define the way the body is conceptualized and perceived (Lopez Austin, 1988). The body is a powerful symbolic form. As Mary Douglas has affirmed, the body is a surface on which are written the rules, the hierarchies, and even the metaphysical obligations of a culture (1982). Gender is circumscribed by it.

In Mesoamerica, a strict distinction between (biological) sex and (cultural) gender would lead to distortions. Reminiscent of old European metaphors of the submission of matter to form or female to male, such a distinction is not supported by a careful review of the several primary sources (Joyce, 2000, p. 7). Nor is anything reminiscent of the “master narrative,” which affirms the superiority of the spirit over the flesh—and which seems to characterize the Christian tradition of the second millennium—to be found here. Let’s recall that, for Mesoamericans, the skin is not a hermetic barrier between the inside and the outside of the body. The multiple “animic” (non-material) entities usually reside in certain body parts but are not permanently fixed in them (Lopez Austin, 1988, p. 182). They rather oscillate among different body parts and travel between the inside and the outside of bodily frontiers.

The boundary between nature and culture (as between sex and gender) is also porous and fluid. Ambiguous, polar, and shifting gender identifications cannot be disentangled from bodily appearances, as no being can be dis-gendered in this universe. This holds for natural, physical phenomena as well as for the manifestations of supernatural entities and beings (Lopez Austin, 1988, p. 57). Mesoamerican thought is framed by metaphors. An exploration of religious metaphors and narrative styles yields fleshy insights into the gender-sex continuum.

Corporeality was not only acknowledged but conceived of as intertwined with the circumscribing universe. The body could not be extracted from the fabric of the cosmos within which all human activities acquired meaning. It was a body that echoed the cosmic forces and fused with them physically as well as nonphysically. There was no ontological disjunction between mind and body. It can be said that the person was indissolubly body and animic entities (Lopez Austin, 1988, p. 236). Besides, no binary oppositions strictly dividing reason from passion, or culture from nature, or even self from other, appear in this religious thought.

THE MESOAMERICAN BODY

In dominant Western traditions, the very concept of body has been formed in opposition to mind. Body is defined as the place of biological data, of the material, of the immanent. It has also been conceptualized as that which marks the boundaries between the interior self and the external world (Bordo, 1989, p. 4; Duden, 1991, p. 11).

In the Mesoamerican tradition, on the other hand, the body has characteristics that are very different from those of the anatomical or biological body. Between the outside and the inside, a continuous exchange occurs. Material and immaterial, external and internal are in permanent interaction, while the skin is constantly crossed by all kinds of entities. Everything leads toward a concept of corporeality in which the body is open to all dimensions of the cosmos: a body, both singular and dual, that incorporates solids and fluids or "juices" in flux, as well as volatile emanations and immaterial "airs." The Mesoamerican body can be imagined as a vortex generated by the dynamic confluence of multiple entities, both material and immaterial and often contradictory, that combine and recombine in endless interplay.

Feminine and masculine bodies echoed each other and, united, mirrored the universe since their duality reflected the cosmic duality. In turn, this cosmic duality reflected the duality of the masculine and feminine imbricated in each other and both incorporated in the universe. Body and cosmos, “microcosmos” and “macrocosmos,” reflected one another and were complementary: the head corresponded to the heavens, the heart as the vital center to the earth, and the liver to the underworld. These correspondences were themselves immersed in a permanent reciprocal movement. The ebb and flow between the universe and the body, between the cosmic duality and the bodies of women and men poured back again as a current from the feminine to the masculine body and from this duality to the cosmos.

The Permeable and multiple body

Chapter 1 introduced the characteristics of the body implicit in Mesoamerican traditional medicine. We will briefly review them now, relating them to body concepts. The “physical body” could not be dissociated from animic entities organized around three main centers. The mobile *tonalli*, identified with the hair and head, was located at the customary place of respect. Thelma Sullivan translates several Nahuatl metaphors that express the importance of the head, which according to Carlos Viesca (1984b, p. 205) is synonymous with the *tonalli*: “Where have I gone over the hair, over the head of our lord?” means: “Have I offended God in any way for him to send me such misfortune?” Expressions such as to “go over the hair, over the head” are synonymous with giving offense. Likewise “Cover your hair, cover your head” means “Protect your honor and your good name” (Sahagun, 1989, Book VI, Ch. 42, p. 454). The *teyolia* resided in the heart and was the center of memory, knowledge, and intelligence. Let’s recall that, when the *teyolia* left the body, death occurred. “Wisdom,” says Miguel Leon-Portilla, “also implied purity of heart” (1990, p. 183), and “a face and a heart” meant personality (L. Portilla, 1969, p. 77). The *ihiyotl* (breath, or *soplo* according to Rémy Siméon’s *Diccionario de la Lengua Nahuatl o Mexicana*, was associated with the liver and could produce emanations capable of harming others (1988, p. 183). Divisible, it could leave the body both voluntarily and involuntarily. Individuals with supernatural knowledge and abilities could send out their *ihiyotl* at will. The *ihiyotl* was the vital center of passion and feeling. But Alfredo Lopez Austin says that the most elevated thoughts and the passions most related to the preservation of

human life originated in the heart and not in the liver or head (1988, pp. 229–232).

The animic centers and their flow of vital forces hardly exhaust the totality of what made up an individual. The body, teeming with activity in the greater and lesser centers that emanate and receive forces and entities, reflects the multiplicity of the cosmos with which it was connected (Lopez Austin, 1988, p. 236). There were many forces that could move from the outside in, merge with internal forces, and then leave the body as emanations. The joints were regarded as centers of dense life force. It was at the joints that supernatural beings (of a cold nature) could attack and thus impede bodily movement (Lopez Austin, 1984b, p. 104). All these entities were discernible to the Mesoamericans and were as evident to them as their own faces, hands, arms, legs, and genitals.

The Nahuatl mode of being in the world

The world, for the Nahuas, was not “out there,” established outside of and apart from them. It was within them and even “through” them. Actions and their circumstances were much more imbricated than is the case in Western thought, where the “I” can be analytically abstracted from its surroundings. Using a grammatical comparison, it could be said that the circumstantial complement of place and that which defines the mode of action are inseparable: all spatial location implies modalities of action and vice versa.

Further, the body’s porosity reflects an essential porosity of the cosmos, a permeability of the entire “material” world that defines an order of existence characterized by continuous transit between the material and the immaterial. The cosmos emerges literally, in this conceptualization, as the complement of a permeable corporeality. Jorge Klor de Alva writes: “the Nahuas imagined their multi-dimensional being as an integral part of their body and of the physical and spiritual world around them (1988, p. 66)”.

He adds that the “conceptual being” of the Nahuas was much less limited than that of Christians at the time of the conquest and more inclined toward forming “a physical and conceptual continuum with others, with the body and with the world beyond it . . .” (Ibid., p. 67).

METAPHORS AND THE FLESH

Metaphors not only abound in Mesoamerican thought, they make up its very fabric. Almost since the first contact between Spain and Technochtitlan, Fray Bernardino Sahagún (1989, Book VI, Ch. 43, p. 454) and Fray Andres de Olmos commented on the rich metaphoric language of the indigenous inhabitants. At times, they complained, as did Fray Diego Duran, of the natives' "excessive use" of it, as when the ubiquitous metaphors frustrated the Spaniards' attempts to understand the native culture. At other times, though, they marveled at the metaphorical complexity of speech (Duran, 1977 [1590], pp. 299–300). Sahagún praised the "metaphors delicate in their declarations," and he was the first to record a glossary of Nahuatl metaphors and their equivalents in the Spanish language of the time (Sahagún, 1989, Book VI, Ch. 43, p. 454). León-Portilla, in *Nahuatl Philosophy*, defines Nahua thought as the "culture and philosophy of metaphors" (1956, p. 322). The metaphor, according to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, is not only a rhetorical embellishment but part of everyday language that affects how we perceive, think, and act. Metaphors impregnate our language, and "the most fundamental values of a culture will be consistent with the metaphorical structure of its fundamental concepts" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1986, p. 39).¹ Metaphors such as the bodies of men described as juicy, tender ears of corn convey not only the culture's fundamental values but also a distinctive attitude toward carnal pleasure. This metaphor as well as the others analyzed below are found in discourses and narratives from books III and VI of Sahagún's *General History of the Things of New Spain*. Studying them offers the possibility of understanding Mesoamerican corporeality more closely.

The metaphors of the body discussed here appear mainly in certain teaching discourses which were learned by memory at the *calmecac*, the schools where Nahua children (mainly boys, but also girls) were sent.

¹ See also Lakoff, George, and Johnson, Mark, *Metáforas de la Vida Cotidiana*, Madrid: Catedra, 1986 [1980], chapter 4, p. 50 ff. In Western cultures, the metaphors derived from spatial orientations have a moral or emotional value: high is associated with good and with happiness, down with bad—note the English expression "I'm low" or the Spanish, "*me levantas el ánimo*" ("ou raise my spirits"). To transpose these values to the Mesoamerican universe would be a serious error; as we will see, the underworld could be a place of delight.

In the *Calmecac* and the *Telpuchcalli* . . . the students had to systematically memorize long chronicles, hymns to the gods, poems, myths and legends. . . . Thus, through this double process of transmission and systematic memorization of the chronicles, the hymns, poems and traditions . . . the religious leaders and elders preserved and propagated their religious and literary heritage. (León-Portilla, 1984, p. 15).

It is important to emphasize that the discourses were didactic and used for instruction. What the students in the *calmecac* memorized also served as models for their own conduct. Many metaphors are also found in the *ilamatlatolli* and *huehuetlatolli*, the discourses of the elders, which were central to the rite of initiation into adult life among the Nahuas. These rhetorical and ritual admonitions played a very important role throughout the lives of the Mesoamericans and ritualized many kinds of social events.

My aim here, however, is to present some of the metaphors for the feminine and masculine body that are found in the *ilamatlatolli* and *huehuetlatolli* in Book VI of the *Florentine Codex*. Full of metaphors, they are a rich source also for the analysis of gender relations because they define the conduct considered appropriate for women and men as well as for relations between them (see chapter 8). As several researchers have pointed out, the discourses, recited publicly when children became adolescents, contain metaphors fundamental to Mesoamerican thought and morals. Yet the *calmecac*'s repertory also included narrations like the "strange story of the *tohuēnyō*" (foreigner) with which this chapter concludes.

The following excerpts are part of the elders admonitions:

[F]rom the time of the lord of Tetzcuco, named Netzahualcoyotzin, . . . who asked them [two older women], saying: "Grandmothers, tell me, is it true that you have desire for fleshly pleasure . . . old as you are?"

The old women replied with a long explanation ending in a metaphor:

[Y]ou men when you become old no longer desire carnal delights . . . but we women never tire of these doings nor do we get enough of them because our bodies are like a deep abyss, a chasm that never fills up; it receives everything . . . desiring more and asking for more . . . (Sahagún, 1989, Book VI, p. 382).

In Book XVIII, there is the following advice for daughters:

Look now, don't choose from among the men the one that seems the best to you like those who shop for mantas in the market . . . and don't carry on like people do when the new corn is just fresh, looking for the best and tastiest cobs . . . (Ibid., p. 369)

These metaphors about the bodies of women and men reveal aspects of the culture that were selectively eliminated by the first chroniclers because they clashed with their own moral values. However, the many metaphors surviving in everyday expressions registered by Sahagún must have passed in his eyes for mere poetic adornment of language. He would qualify them as “very delicate and exact and adequate.” Most likely, he preserved them due to their apparent innocence. Metaphors carry the imprint of the cognitive system. For example, the socially accepted desire for the body of another is evident in the use of the metaphor “the best and tastiest cobs.” It is evident likewise in the image of women’s bodies as “a deep abyss, a chasm that never fills up.”

These metaphors, along with the foreigner or *tohueryo* narrative analysed below, give us an idea of the sorts of pleasures accepted in the Mesoamerican world. *Tlalticpacayotl*, translated as carnality or sex, literally means “that which pertains to the surface of the earth” (Siméon, 1988, p. 605). As with all that pertains to the earth’s surface, erotic pleasure belongs to an earthly identity. Not only is it accepted, but it defines the inhabitants of Mesoamerica as dwellers of the four intermediate levels of earth’s surface. This abode of women and men is the place of the flesh, its joys and concerns. The earth would be inconceivable without the corporeal dimension. Perhaps this was the reason why Mesoamericans regarded the negation of carnal activities as abnormal, since without them one didn’t belong to the surface of the earth. To speak cosmically of eroticism is to speak of the dimensions belonging to the surface of the earth and its central position in the Nahua cosmos.

Corporeality in the Florentine Codex

The narrative of the *tohueryo* or foreigner is a choice example for understanding body and gender in Nahua thought. Found in Book III of the *Florentine Codex*, it forms part of the wealth of documentation in Nahuatl about sixteenth-century Mexican culture. The story was collected from indigenous informants by Sahagún either in Tepepulco (Tezcoco region) or Tlatelolco around 1547. It was probably part of the old Nahuatl oratory, with its rhythms and measure, that was learned by heart in the *calmecac* or other Nahua centers of superior education (León-Portilla, 1995, p. 375). Nahuatl youth in these centers received a polished training in bodily gestures and in intellectual activities, as they listened to the *tlamatinime* (the wise men

and women philosophers) display and express verbally the highest values of their culture. It was also a place of formation for the priesthood. There is no doubt that the teachings directed at the most select of the Nahuatl youth included the highest thinking, often contained in the songs and discourses learned by memory (Leon-Portilla, 1990, p. 138).

The “normative discourses” of the elders’ admonitions or *huehuetlatolli* cannot be understood without narratives such as this in which the cosmic meaning of pleasure manifests itself. The story, part of epic narratives concerning divinities, is surprising for its images and metaphors, as well as for the prominent place given to desire and carnality as expressed by a young girl. León-Portilla comments:

It has been said at times concerning our indigenous culture that there is a lack of erotic themes . . . But, contrary to those who think this way, there are some old texts in Nahuatl, collected from native lips at the time of the conquest. (1995, p. 373)

To find a text with explicitly carnal content in such a context leads us to another level of understanding about the role of desire, the body, and pleasure in Nahuatl thought and culture. These expressions are very far from the clerical fear of the power of feminine desire, or from the fear of inexhaustible female sexuality as expressed about the same time in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, for example.²

Frequently historians emphasize the disciplined, and to a certain degree (as we would say) repressive, character of Aztec culture. Without doubt, norms and disciplinary demands with respect to sex existed. At the same time though, we cannot simplistically declare that no space existed for eroticism. In a culture and thought produced by duality, by the alternating presence of opposites in motion, the demands of discipline were enriched by the possibility of and esteem for carnality. The one-sided chronicled emphasis on rigor

² The *Malleus Maleficarum* (Hammer of Witches), by the Dominicans Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, was published 1484 (or 1486 according to one author). From this sadly renowned document, written to help hunt “witches” and later to condemn them to the Inquisition’s stakes, comes the idea of women envious of masculine genitals, insatiable, and thus dangerous for men. The work almost seems to imply that all men are near saints and that only the evil influence of women keeps them from dedicating their lives to the service of God or to the elevated (bodiless) activities of the mind. The document is a fevered, unrestrained harangue against the body and its activities.

and discipline is more a product of the values of the missionaries and historians than a true reflection of the realities of that ancient world. What Sahagún recorded in Book VI of the *General History of the Things of New Spain* completes the picture.

They worshipped Tlzulteotl, the deity of lust, the Mexicas did, especially the Mixtecs and Olmecs . . . and the Cueztecs worshipped and honored Tlzulteotl, and didn't accuse themselves of lust before him, because for them lust was not a sin. (Book VI, Ch. 7)

The story of the *tohueryo* concerns the erotic ardor that, without hyperbole, overcame a Toltec princess. (León Portilla, 1995, p. 373). Here at length is the story. For reasons I will explain below, I am using León-Portilla's translation from Nahuatl into Spanish (1995 [1980]) in order to compare it further on with Sahagún's translation from 1577 (translation to English by SM):

The Story of Tohueryo

And here is something else
That Titltlacahuan achieved,
He did something extraordinary:
He transformed himself, he took the face and figure of a *Tohueryo*
He went about naked, his thing just hanging, [*tlapilotinemi*]
he began selling chilies,
setting up his stand in the market, in front of the palace.

So then, the daughter of Huemac,
very appealing, [*cenca qualli*],
was desired and sought after
by many of the Toltecan men
who wanted her as a wife.
But Huemac ignored them all.
He wouldn't give his daughter to any of them.

So then that daughter of Huemac
looked toward the market
and saw the *Tohueryo*: there with his thing hanging.
As soon as she saw him,
she went into the palace.
Then, because of this, the daughter of Huemac fell sick.
She became filled with tension, she entered into great heat,
feeling herself deprived of the *Tohueryo*'s bird [*itotouhi*—his manly part—

Soon Huemac found out:
his daughter was sick.
He then asked the women who were taking care of her
“What did she do? What's she doing?”

How did this heat begin to enter my daughter?"
 And the women who took care of her answered,
 "It's the *Tohuenyo*, he who's selling chili:
 he has put fire in her, he's made her restless.
 That's how it began, that's how it is that she fell sick."

And the lord Huemac, seeing this, gave orders and said,
 "Toltecs, look for the chili vendor,
 we will find this *Tohuenyo*."
 And immediately they went about looking for him every where.

And since nobody showed up
 For this reason the herald started to announce
 on top a hill. He said:
 "Toltecs, did you in some place see the chili vendor
 the *Tohuenyo*? Bring him here.
 The Lord is looking for him.
 They turned all Tula upside down
 and even though they made every effort,
 they didn't see him anywhere.
 So they came to tell the lord
 that they hadn't seen *Tohuenyo* anywhere.

But a little later *Tohuenyo* appeared on his own,
 he just came to set up
 where he had been seen the first time.
 And when the Toltecs saw him,
 They ran to let Huemac know,
 They told him:
 "the *Tohuenyo* has turned up."

To this Huemac said:
 "Come here speedily."
 And the Toltecs went hurriedly and brought the *Tohuenyo*
 They had him come before the Lord.

And when they brought him before him,
 Huemac immediately questioned him:
 "Where is your home?"
 The other answered:
 I am a *tohuenyo*, (foreigner).

I go around selling chilies.
 And Lord Huemac told him:
 "What kind of life is yours, *Tohuenyo*?
 Put on a loincloth, [*maxtlatl*] cover yourself."
 To which the *Tohuenyo* responded,
 "So do we live."

Then the Lord said to him:
 “You have awakened that yearning in my daughter,
 You will cure her.”

The *Tohuenyo* answered:
 “I am a foreigner, my lord,
 this can not be.
 Kill me, put me down,
 That I die!
 What are you telling me?
 I am only a poor chili vendor.”
 Then the Lord told him:
 “But now, you will cure her,
 do not be afraid.”

And right away they cut his hair,
 they bathed him and after this
 they anointed him,
 put a loincloth [*maxtlatl*] on him and tied on a cloak.
 And after they had thus groomed him,
 The Lord told him:
 “Look for my daughter,
 she is guarded.”

And when *Tohuenyo* went to see her,
 he immediately mated with her
 and with this, the woman got well that moment.
 Soon after, *Tohuenyo* married the lord’s daughter,
 So, the *Tohuenyo* became the Lord’s son. . . .

In commenting on the *tohuenyo* story, the emphasis has been to view metaphors of pleasure and eroticism in their relation to gender. In the declarations of the Texcoco Grandmothers as in this story, women are not presented as valuable only because their field of battle is giving birth. Neither are they respected solely because they represent fertility and the possibility of bringing a new life, even though this is the case in the great majority of agrarian societies and civilizations. It is appropriate to emphasize that according to Mesoamerican concepts, women’s bodies are not only recognized and venerated for their reproductive capacity but as “subjects of desire” (Lacqueur, 1990, p. 113). In the case of Lord Huemac’s young daughter, her desire provoked concern and action that affected the mythic and political history of her time. What must surprise us is that some of these erotic narratives could survive despite the disapproval and expurgation that the vestiges of erotic Nahua art suffered at the hands of clerical chroniclers.

Modalities of text alterations

Sahagún, after carefully collecting these narratives from the lips of the elders, introduced changes or variations when he organized and translated the material into Spanish. These variations appear in the translation to Spanish by Sahagún in 1577, in Book III of his *General History of the Things of New Spain*. Rather than a translation, his Spanish version is a summary in which the adjectives and metaphors are toned down. Differences between the original Nahuatl version and Sahagún's translation illustrate the type of alteration often applied to texts with carnal or erotic implications. While other clerics expurgated their transcriptions of Nahuatl oratory of all that shocked their "chaste ears," Sahagún subtly modified and toned down what he had truthfully registered in the original language—allowing thus for retranslations. Such material was either directly expurgated as in the example from Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón below, or subtly modified and toned down, as in Sahagún's rendering of the narrative. The changes made by him and other chroniclers were quite understandable given the evangelizing purposes of their writings (E. Garibay, 2000, p. 363), the pressure exerted by the Inquisition, and the shame or reserve the friars and missionaries could have experienced when faced with certain Mesoamerican expressions of desire and pleasure.

Let's now look at the main changes in Sahagún's 1577 translation. First, the verse form, characteristic of hymns memorized in the *calmecac*, was turned into prose and highly condensed. Yet Sahagún's translation is true to the central narrative, though the meanings and metaphors have been significantly softened. The first notable alteration is that Huemac's daughter is no longer described as *cenca qualli* as the Nahuatl text has it ("very sexually appealing," as in the Mexican-Spanish expression "*está muy buena*"). Sahagún writes, "Huemac . . . had a very beautiful daughter, and because of her beauty the Toltec men coveted and desired her" (Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, Book III, 1989, p. 210). Further on, changes appear in the description of Tohuenyo's body. Sahagún no longer says "he went about naked, his thing just hanging." This expression clearly comes from a world where "sex is that which belongs to the surface of the earth," to *talticpacayotl* (Lopez Austin, 1984). (In Sahagún's world, it could be said that sex is that which should disappear from the surface of the earth). Nevertheless, Sahagún continues:

And the said daughter of lord Huemac gazed toward the marketplace and saw the said *Tohuenyo* naked, and the genital part . . .

The more graphic description of what unleashed her desire (“his thing just hanging”) is transformed into a mere anatomical reference. Sahagún adds:

“And after having seen it, the said daughter went into the palace and longed for *Tohuenyo*’s member, and soon began to be very sick for love of what she saw. Her body became swollen . . . she is sick from love.” (Idem, Book III, p. 210)

In the original narrative, the valid physical desire is expressed as:

[The *Tohuenyo*] has put fire in her, he’s made her restless . . . she entered into great heat, feeling herself deprived of *Tohuenyo*’s bird—his manly part . . .

But for Sahagún, Huemac’s daughter fell ill, her body swelled. It seems that he is describing an actual illness rather than expressing the bodily effects of intense sexual desire. It would seem that he feels obliged to soften the expression of pure desire with a symptom from medical pathology. And when he finally states the cause, he says “she is sick from love” because love is more acceptable than sexual heat and desire.

Noting the changes this poetic story underwent at the hands of Sahagún leads us to suppose that other texts, chants, and admonitions with erotic implications in the *General History of the Things of New Spain* and the *Florentine Codex* should be reinterpreted or would even deserve a retranslation from the Nahuatl. Even so, we must admit that Sahagún was much more respectful than others in conserving, albeit modified, the teachings and discourses that did not agree with his moral values.

The other strategy of dealing with material that was contrary to the beliefs of the missionaries was expurgation or suppression. Unfortunately, it was the strategy most commonly recommended and followed.

THE STRATEGY OF SUPPRESSION

An example is the *Treatise on the Heathen Superstitions That Today Live Among the Indians Native to This New Spain, 1629*, by Ruiz de Alarcón,

a priest in charge of a region that is now part of the states of Guerrero, and Morelos. In a transcription of a spell “to attract or inspire affection,” he says that “the rest of the words are such that, although somewhat disguised, they are not put down out of concern for modesty and for chaste ears (*castos oydos*)” (Andrews and Hassing, 1984, p. 133). It is important to mention that all the other spells used in every aspect and activity of life were extensively and fully transcribed. The *Treatise* is valuable precisely because it records words, phrases, and metaphors whose flowing and poetic rhythm provides valuable insights about this symbolic universe. However, the “chaste ears” have not permitted us access to more than mere fragments of it. Nonetheless, these fragments, weighed against each other and studied systematically, allow us to confirm the power of the images and myths concerning body, gender, and pleasure in Mesoamerica.

This brings to mind, once again, the paradoxical role that the first chroniclers of the New World frequently played. The Inquisition imposed limits and restrictions on the autonomy of chroniclers. According to Alfredo Lopez Austin, given these pressures, the sources referring to the recent centuries of Mesoamerican life are extremely limited in some aspects, among them most notably the area of sexuality (1982, p. 162). Hence the importance of the fragments that here and there escaped the inquisitional filter, for the study of metaphors and narratives. What they contain can reveal is just these aspects of the culture—such as corporeality and carnality—that were most severely censored in the majority of sources.

The body, abode and axis of delights and pleasures, the dual body of women and men, fluid and permeable corporeality, the body as the principle of being on earth, fusion with the immediate surroundings and also with the origin of the cosmos, this feminine and masculine body manifests itself in remnants of epic erotic poetry, songs, narratives, and metaphors. Finding even vestiges of it can begin to reveal incarnate universes that escape the “master narrative” of the disdainful superiority of spirit over flesh.

CHAPTER SEVEN

INDIGENOUS EROTICISM AND COLONIAL MORALITY: THE CONFESSION MANUALS OF NEW SPAIN

*Get ready, my little sisters:
let us go and gather flowers . . .
with my garland of flowers adorn yourself,
my flowers they are, and I a woman of Chalco . . .
Among joyful pleasures we will laugh.
(Song of the Women of Chalco, Garibay, 1964 [1479])*

After the conquest, eroticism and the place of the feminine in sixteenth and seventeenth-century indigenous society in Mexico became the battleground of a war that amounted in part to a cultural annihilation. Iberian Catholicism confronted and ultimately dominated the region's rich civilizations with their complex cosmology, thereby dooming to extinction many cultural attitudes and expressions. This chapter analyses one aspect of the missionaries' well-intentioned "battle to save people's souls."

As in previous, internal forms of violent subjugation of one Mesoamerican culture by another, the Spaniards destroyed local gods and temples. However, unlike previous conquerors who superimposed their beliefs upon local customs, the newcomers demanded a complete eradication of those customs, as if they only could save the Indians by destroying their identity, their cultural relation to reality, and their very concept of time, space, and the self. By condemning indigenous erotic practices and imposing unprecedented restraints on them, the missionaries altered the roots of ancient Mesoamerican perceptions of the body and the cosmos.

Particular attention will be paid here to the confession manuals, written as an answer to the Spaniards' "discovery" that lust was the Indian's most frequent sin. These manuals can rightly be considered instruments of the alteration of indigenous perceptions. (F. Guerra, 1971, p. 175). In these manuals, the repetition of the same excruciating questions tended to graft guilt onto the Mesoamerican conscience and thus eradicate the Indians' perception of eroticism in its sacred and vitalizing dimension (S. Gruzinski, 1987; S. Marcos, 1993).

Commentaries on the preconquest "Song of the Women of Chalco"

(León-Portilla, ed. and transl., 1976 [1479]) attempt to recapture, through the playful voices of women speaking openly, some of the flavor of a very different symbolic erotic universe. They only confirm how different Mesoamerican cultures were from the imported models in terms of sexuality, eroticism, and the place and function of the feminine. While it is impossible to fully reconstruct the preconquest environment in order to ascertain the values and attitudes surrounding sexuality and eroticism, we do have the recourse of poetic remains, objects, codices, as well as several texts and testimonies from the contact period. Similarly, there is a wealth of material from colonial times that reveal the course of this “battle for souls,” as the missionaries viewed their work, or cultural annihilation, as the indigenous inhabitants experienced it.

FORCED CATECHIZATION

In the New World, Catholicism was frequently established through force and sometimes through violence and bloodshed. Although charitable work was carried out by many missionaries, their efforts could not counteract the destruction wrought by others, nor the overwhelming impact of a new religion and culture on the indigenous one. The abuses that characterize the history of the Spanish colonization in the New World were often sanctioned by Church authorities. When outright abuses, injustice, and excess were not the case, the lesser evil that the conquered Indians endured was profound disapproval of their way of living and total repudiation of their world view.¹

Spain's exploitation of the Americas was justified by the objective of christianizing the Indians. Almost any means was allowed to achieve this end. The colonizers even learned to make use of various legal mechanisms based on pre-Hispanic institutions to extract labor from converted Indians. Among these were the *mita* in South America and the *tequio* in Mexico, which were systems of voluntary communal labor. They also introduced Iberian institutions such as the *encomienda*, which put entire Indian villages under the control of one Spanish colonizer. In them, Indians were obliged to work without pay, while in exchange the grant holder or *encomendero* promised the

¹ Not until 1537 in the Papal Bull *Sublime Deus* did Pope Paul II decree that the inhabitants of the new world were human beings.

Church to christianize them. Frequently, the fulfillment of this requirement was reduced to providing a half-hour of catechism per week, a condition met sporadically when not entirely ignored (de Las Casas [1552], cited in Molina Martínez, 1991, p. 157; Bonfil, 1987, pp. 121–134).

The Franciscans (arrival in Mexico: 1524), Dominicans (1536), Augustinians (1553), and Jesuits (1572) who converted and catechized the indigenous populations were, for the most part, dedicated and humble friars, concerned about the well-being of the Indians. Some who participated in the colonization, especially before 1570 during the so-called “spiritual conquest” period (Ricard, 1933, pp. 1–7), vigorously opposed the abuses of the secular colonizers.² However, even they were paternalistic, authoritarian and, above all, intolerant of the beliefs of a religious symbolic system foreign to them (Bonfil, 1987, p. 126). Some friars fathomed the refinement and richness of Mesoamerican civilization, but the Church hierarchy viewed their accounts with suspicion and disapproval. The famous defender of the Indians, Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, for example, wrote his controversial *Brief Relation of the Destruction of the Indies* in 1552. Its publication provoked discord and animosity on the part of the friars, his brothers in catechization. Las Casas was rabidly persecuted because he denounced abuses of the Indians by his co-religionaries. His second work, *Apologética Historia de las Indias*, was not published until 1909 (Keen, 1991, pp. 151–52).

The majority of the clerics who came to New Spain to catechize were much less understanding than Las Casas. At times, the intolerant behavior of some clerics became so extreme that church authorities removed them from their posts, as was the case with the Franciscan bishop of Yucatán, Fray Diego de Landa. He punished the Mayan Indians he found celebrating the rites of their religion in a hidden temple in the jungle by hanging them by their hands and feet. Among the legal briefs of allegations of the time is one written in 1562 by the same Landa, defending himself in a court proceeding where he was accused of having burned Indians alive. Although he was removed from his post by the Spanish clerical authorities, he was reinstated

² Immediately after the conquest and Christianization, the indigenous peoples openly followed their long-established pattern of assimilation and integration of the new religious figures and beliefs into existing structures. The friars interpreted this acceptance of Christianity within their own cultural and theological context.

as bishop some years later (Landa, 1986, [1574] A. Garibay, pp. viii–x). However, shortly before his death, he apparently repented of all the damage that his excess of “holy” rage had caused, and attempted to rescue some of what his violence had destroyed. Thus he compiled, with the help of knowledgeable local elders, the meanings of some twenty Mayan glyphs. He also wrote a *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán*. Two of the most essential documents for the study of Mayan culture happened thus to be the work of the man who, besides his crimes, had caused the most tremendous cultural losses in the Maya region: he had smashed and burned mounds of sculptures, codices, terra cotta objects, jewels, and other precious artifacts.

In their chronicles of life in the New World, clerics were required to emphasize the “cruel” and “demonic” character of indigenous Americans. In order to be published, their writings had to be overstocked with phrases such as “these Indians have the devil as their idol,” or “these natives live degrading lives,” or “it is astonishing to see how bestial they are, how they lack understanding.” These formulas legitimized the abuse of the Indians under the pretext of catechizing them. Even Sahagún, considered one of the most reliable sources for pre-Columbian times, conformed to this requirement. An attitude that showed too much understanding might have provoked charges by ecclesiastics that he had become an “idolater.” So, after several pages of praise of the achievements of indigenous culture, we catch him launching a diatribe about their ancestral customs, calling them “idolatries,” dubbing their divinities “devils”, and exaggerating the quantitative importance of their sacrifices (Pagden, 1985; Garibay, intro. Landa, 1986, p. ix).

The Indians of the Americas often chose to take refuge with the missionaries who, even when catechizing them, defended them from the voracious Spanish colonizers and their greed for quick fortune. As Guillermo Bonfil (1987, pp. 130–135) points out, the option offered by the missionaries was the desperate choice of the lesser evil. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that, although evangelizers during the era of the spiritual conquest did not, for the most part, torture the Indians, nor subject them to forced labor, nor let them die of hunger, nor rape the women, their colonization took place at deeper levels. In order to “save” them, they considered, it necessary to destroy their identity. This negation of the indigenous self altered the way the Indians conceptualized themselves, their world, the earth, the sun, space and time, and the divinized cosmic

forces. After that first epoch, genocide and ethnocide were arrayed against them: genocide despoiled them and even deprived them of life, and ethnocide devastated them spiritually and negated their culture's ways of perceiving the cosmos.

Concerning this, George Gruzinski comments:

[H]owever brutal the aggressions and impositions of the Indian victors might have been—the Triple Alliance, for example—they respected the equilibrium local cultures had in relation to reality, time, space, the person . . . At most, they imposed practices and customs that came from the same Mesoamerican cultural context. With Christianity, things were different. Christians, the same as the former invaders, burned temples and imposed their gods. But sharing or imposing theirs on what already existed was unacceptable to the Christians; instead, they demanded the annihilation of local cults. Not satisfied with eliminating the priests and part of the nobility, the Spaniards laid claim to a monopoly on the priesthood and the sacred, and thereby the definition of reality (1988, pp. 195–196, trans. from French by SM).

NORMS AND SEXUALITY

Sexual norms in Mesoamerica and the entire American continent differed radically from those imported by Catholic missionaries. This is not to say that total liberty existed; that would be impossible in any cultural and religious system. But the prevalent norms revolved around a significantly different valuing of gender, sexuality, and eroticism.

Some norms governing indigenous societies before colonization can be discerned in the records of their rituals. The transition to young adulthood required a family rite. Fray Bernardino de Sahagún records speeches that Aztec parents addressed to their daughters and sons at that moment in their lives (see chapter 8). The discourses reveal what the Aztecs considered appropriate and dignified behavior in their society. It should be noted that continence, respect, humility toward elders, and fulfillment of religious obligations were expected of both sexes. Even though identical behavior was not expected from men and women, expectations for conduct in these areas were similar (Sahagún, 1989, see Book VI). Likewise, both genders received comparable punishments for comparable sexual transgressions (Torquemada, 1615, pp. 31–33; Las Casas, 1552, pp. 21–22, cited in Guerra, 1971).

Landa expressed his surprise at the ease with which marriages were dissolved. According to his Mayan chronicles, women could

leave their husbands and change partners or return home without reproach (Landa, 1986 [1574]). In indigenous Mesoamerica, marriage was not indissoluble (Gruzinski, 1988, 1987, p. 175). Investigators mention provisional marriages in preconquest Mexico (Lopez Austin, 1982b), and in Mayan culture a wife or husband could temporarily or permanently interrupt the marriage. But this was not so for the Spaniards, whose influence on the Indians is described by the bishop Landa:

[w]ith the same ease, men left their spouses and children with no fear that others would take them as wives . . . and now, since the Spaniards in this matter (when women leave their husbands for other men) kill theirs, they (the Mayans) begin to mistreat and even kill their wives . . . (1986, pp. 42–43)

CONFESSION MANUALS

Lust, the priests complained, was the most frequent sin, not stealing, murder, lying or drunkenness (Guerra, 1971, p. 264). In the sources on Aztec and Mayan morals, it is difficult to identify the Catholic evangelizers' value judgments. The divergencies between indigenous norms and Catholic morality were rather obvious. They were so ample that the missionaries used minutely detailed questionnaires to conduct confessions. The inquisitorial questions were aimed at exposing the sexual conduct of the new converts to the disapproval of the confessors. Other areas of deviance were also probed, but the questions relating to sexual behavior were so recurrent that they can only have been thought of as a privileged instrument for the inculcation of Christian morality.

In his analysis of the confession manuals of the first two centuries of colonization, Gruzinski discovered an exaggerated concern with sexuality as revealed by the manuals' specific questions (1987, p. 187). For example, in the confession manual of Father Joan Baptista 69 percent of the questions refer to sex, while 63 percent of those of Martín de León and Juan de la Anunciación concern this topic (Idem, pp. 193–94). Such preoccupation with the sixth commandment, only one of ten, suggests a rather uncommon, obsessive interest on the part of the confessors and/or the institution whose beliefs they represented.

The *Great Confession Manual in the Mexican Language and in Spanish*

by Fray Alonso de Molina (1565) is the earliest bilingual confessionary in Nahuatl and Spanish. It was later used as a model for other confession manuals. In it we find:

Tell me, my son,
 Did you lie with a woman who was not yours?
 How many times?
 Did you lie with your wife making use of the proper entry?
 Or did you take her by the back way thus committing the nefarious
 sin (of sodomy)?
 How many times?
 Did you lie with your wife while she had her month?
 How many times?
 Did you lie with your wife avoiding the procreation of children?
 Because you are poor and needy or because you had a fight with her?
 How many times?
 Have you committed the sin against nature carrying out this act with
 an animal?
 How many times?
 When you were drunk, out of your senses, did you fall into the abomin-
 able sin of sodomy with another man?
 How many times?
 Have you done anything improper or dirty with yourself or with another
 man?
 How many times? (folios 32–35, trans. by SM)

There were also questions specifically for women. In the *Manual for Administering the Holy Sacraments* by Fray Angel Serra (1731 edition), we read:

Are you a married woman, widow, virgin or have you lost your
 virginity? Did you have sexual relations with another woman like
 yourself and she with you?
 How many times?
 Did you want anybody?
 Have you touched the lower parts of a man with pleasure, desiring in
 this way to commit sin? How many times? (folios 111–136, cited in
 F. Guerra, 1971, p. 239)

In *Manual for Administering the Holy Sacraments* (1697), also for women's confessions, we find these other questions:

Have you sinned with a woman?
 Have you kissed a woman?
 Was she your mother, the one who gave you birth?
 Did you commit sin with some woman using both parts?
 Have you sinned with your sister?

Have you committed sin with a woman while she was lying down like an animal on four feet, or did you put her like that, wanting to be with her? And have you sinned with another woman as if you were man and woman? How many times? (1731 edition, folios 111–136, cited in Guerra, 1971, p. 239)

Even though these texts speak for themselves, it is important to stress that for the inhabitants of Mesoamerica, their bodies, their pleasures, the experience of sexuality must have been a very different matter. It was necessary to repeat these detailed questions hundreds of times in confession in order to instill the Catholic concept of sex as sinful. Even married life, legalized and blessed by the Church, was subject to inquisitorial suspicion: “remember the times that . . . you provoked your wife in order to have access to her” (Molina, 1569, *Mandamientos IV*, f.33).

In these manuals, we also find an immoderate zeal for quantifying, something alien to Indian thought (Gruzinski, 1987, p. 208). In the *Confessionario de Indios* (1761 edition, pp. 9–12), Carlos C. Velazquez reports these answers:

. . . I changed from my correct position, because I reached my wife from behind; seventy-two times . . .

I wished to sin with my mother and had bad thoughts about many women, they cannot be counted, I cannot tell how many times: sixty-six times . . . (cited in Guerra, p. 240)

The friar Martín de León gives us a clue:

They finally say twice, and then for the rest of the confession, it is the same . . . these natives give the number used for the first sin they confess for all the rest. (Gruzinski, 1986, p. 35)

Francisco Guerra (1971) confirms that these quantities had no meaning since the same numbers were repeated for all sins. According to Perez de Velasco in 1766:

The Indian at the feet of the confessor is supremely inadequate . . . the rules (of confession) are for the Indian in most cases, impractical, due to his ignorance, his crudeness, his lack of breadth, his inconstancy, his great unfaithfulness . . . an understanding that we cannot give them. (cited in Gruzinski, 1986, p. 36)

Studying the underlying reason for this exaggerated and repetitive quantification of sins, Gruzinski contends that “without understanding and interiorizing the conceptual framework of Christianity, any

attempt to total up sinful acts is as useless as it is senseless." The Indians chose numbers arbitrarily and repeated them. The use of numerical exaggeration and repetition, moreover, can be seen as a way of rejecting what was for the Indians a meaningless exercise. It served as a strategy to escape total control over their actions and pleasures.

In view of the sexual morality that the missionaries aimed at imposing on the Indians, the sexual abuses perpetrated by the Spaniards appear even more startling. The Spanish male conquerors regarded, as part of their booty, the "right" to sexually "use" all the female Indians in their territory. On the basis of this "right," landowners claimed the privilege of raping all virgin women on their plantations. Remnants of this "usage" persist in contemporary Mexico in the still practiced *pernada* or "right of first night." This abuse, allowing a landowner to have relations with a virgin bride before her husband does, was studied by Mercedes Olivera on the coffee plantations of Chiapas in southern Mexico (1977).

SEXUAL SPIRITUALITY

While Western Christianity considered sex shameful and troublesome and dedicated great energy to the ascetic repression of sexual impulses, the ancient cultures of America placed it at the center of religious rituals.

It is true that the Spaniards must have been hard pressed to understand the tacit joyful eroticism, openly practiced, of religious fertility festivals . . . (Lopez Austin, 1982, pp. 162, 182)

For instance, the Aztecs celebrated symbolically the union with cosmic forces by means of sexual rituals in the temples (Quezada, 1975, p. 30). Priestesses were important celebrants in such rites. In ancient America, sexuality, as a vital part of daily life, had an essential place in religious ceremonies. The orgasmic experience united humans with the gods. Texts recounting these ritual practices are complemented by examples in terra cotta figures. Funerary figurines of the Mochica and Chimú cultures of Peru as well as of the Nahua region of the Valley of Mexico illustrate the ceremonial and ordinary sexual practices of the inhabitants of ancient America. Despite the fact that objects with sexual content such as these were selectively destroyed

by Catholic missionaries, some examples have survived. The variety of sexual positions displayed in these archaeological pieces (terra cotta figures, paintings, bas-reliefs) testify to a rich eroticism.

The confession manuals of Molina, Baptista, Serra, and others seem to exhibit the missionaries' uneasiness over the diversity of sexual pleasures enjoyed by the souls in their charge. The priests had to repeatedly expose their impoverished ideas of sexuality so that the vital Indians could understand that what for them was often a link with the gods was, in their new religion, most of the time a sin, a fault, an offense, or an aberration. Through evangelization, guilt was grafted onto the Mesoamerican conscience. The morality of negation and abstinence propagated by the missionaries became one more weapon in the process of violent acculturation (Bonfil, 1987, p. 126).

EROTICISM AND WOMEN

Concepts of the sacred, images of the divine, and ceremonial ritualization of the interaction between the divinities and humans give us an insight into social structure as well. The gods of a culture are frequently reflections of its human members: divinities created in the "image and likeness" of women and men (Baez-Jorge, 1988, p. 52).

In Mesoamerican civilizations, priestesses and goddesses as well as simple women all embody a particular form of being female. Here we are not speaking of matriarchy, but of a certain complementarity of both genders. We are not matching female powers in the same areas as men's, nor do we refer to socially productive work carried out by women in the same spheres as men. We mean duality, the duality of complementary opposites, as one of the basic elements of the coherence of ancient Mesoamerican civilization (see chapter 2).

Coatlicue, Teteoinan, Toci, Tonantzin, and Ixcuiname are some of the goddesses in the Aztec pantheon (Baez-Jorge, 1988; Marcos, 1975, 1989). The goddesses Xochiquetzal and Tlazolteotl are central to this essay because of their connection with sexual morality and what we refer to as sexual spirituality.

Eroticism and the goddesses of love

Ancient Nahuas had two divinities that represented what we call sexuality: Xochiquetzal and Tlazolteotl. Mesoamerican spiritual sexual-

ity is revealed especially in the cult of these two goddesses. Xochiquetzal, the goddess of lovers, was the patroness of ritual sexual relations (Quezada, 1975, p. 21). With this goddess, the emphasis is on amorous activity rather than on fertility. She protected illicit sexual relationships and was the patroness of the priestesses chosen to perform ritual sexual relations. Tlazolteotl, on the other hand, was the goddess of sexual pleasure and sensuality associated with fertility. She is represented as a woman at the moment of birth and is the protector of pregnant women and midwives. Tlazolteotl is also the goddess of medicine and medicinal herbs, and also of the healers "who provide herbs for abortion" (Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 1989). Xochiquetzal and Tlazolteotl were the Mesoamerican divinities to whom the Indians confessed. Both goddesses represented the female principle before which penitents implored pardon for their transgressions. The power of these goddesses was invoked to counteract the harmful effects of their devotees' erring conduct.

The cult of these goddesses was a challenge to Christian categories. On the one hand, Xochiquetzal is the goddess and patron of illicit sexual relations (Quezada, 1975, p. 28) and, on the other, Tlazolteotl is the protector of fertility but also of abortion. Both goddesses offer forgiveness through a confession ritual. Of course, in the Christian tradition, there could never be divine protection for what is illicit, nor sacred wisdom for abortion, nor confession to incarnations of the feminine. Here again are elements of the Mesoamerican religious universe that did not fit the evangelizers' categories.

The panorama of divine feminine powers and deified presences included women, as we have seen, who died in childbirth and were transformed into goddesses: the Cihuateteo who supported the sun from its zenith to its setting. The mother of god was Coatlicue. The mother of the people was Tonantzin, and the Ixuiname held up the sky as pillars of the Nahua universe (Marcos, 1989). These sacred images gave the feminine pole importance. It was a very different symbolic universe from that of Christianity with its masculine trinity of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

"Song of the Women of Chalco"

The ancient Nahuas developed the art of poetry to a remarkable level. Angel Garibay gave us translations of the poetry in which the inhabitants of Mesoamerica excelled. Among the selected poems

translated by this author, the “Song of the Women of Chalco” is one that for its erotic and metaphorical character and its sexual symbolism is important to include at length.

Beyond its historical, political and ritual interpretations, the song provides a glimpse into an eroticism that takes delight in sexual relations as the playful voices of women speak openly of sexual desire and express a voluptuous sensuality at odds with 16th century Iberian Catholic sexual morality. (Garibay, 1964, pp. 55–60)

While probably not an isolated poetic phenomenon, this explicitly sexual poem stands almost alone among the literary collections of Aztec songs and testimonies. “This Canto de Mujeres de Chalco, extremely erotic, could not have emerged as an isolated poetic phenomena, and its exceptionality should be attributed to the censure of similar poetic work done by the religious chroniclers” (Lopez Austin, 1982, p. 162).

The “Song of the Women of Chalco,” *Chalca Cihuacuicatl*, belongs, together with only two other songs with erotic contents, to the full collection of the *Cantares Mexicanos*. Two of these songs refer to love between women and are available in English in John Bierhorst’s 1985 translation and commentaries. The first song is *Cococuicatl* (“Song of the Dove”, p. 395). The second song is called *Tohcococuicatl* (“Song of the Wanton Dove,” p. 403).

Full of metaphors, the “Song of the Women of Chalco” is a dialogue between various women and the warrior king Axayacatl:

Get ready, my little sisters:
 let us go and gather flowers . . .
 with my garland of flowers adorn yourself,
 my flowers they are, and I a woman of Chalco. . . .
 and now, raise a song to dear King Axayacatito: . . .
 By myself I raise my snake and make it stand up straight:
 with it I will give pleasure to my little darling Axayacatito.
 Ay, my beautiful and dear king Axayacatito,
 if you are truly a man, here you will have much to keep you busy. . . .
 Take my poor ashes, then go on and work me.
 Come and take it, take it, my joy:
 Oh, my little boy, give yourself to me, my darling boy.
 Among joyful pleasures we will laugh.
 We will enter happiness, and I will learn. . . .
 Now you move, now you move your hands,
 already you want to catch hold of my nipples.
 Almost ready, my love! . . .

I give you my womb . . . there it is . . .
 I give it to your gimlet, I offer it as a gift . . .
 Here I have my husband: I can no longer dance with the bone;
 I can't make room for the spindle:
 How you enjoy me, my little child!
 What can I do? . . . I accept!
 Is this how the plumed shield becomes pregnant
 in the middle of the plain? I will give myself . . .
 fit yourself to me, show your virility. . . .
 Perhaps my women's self will do crazy things,
 my heart is ashamed.
 What remedy is there? What will I do? Who will I have for a man?
 Even though I wear a skirt and a blouse . . .
 Come, take my tortilla dough, you king Axayacatito,
 let me touch you . . .
 Give it pleasure and raise up our snake,
 again and once again! . . .
 After, my little child, to give you pleasure!
 Now I have no skirt, no blouse,
 I am a little woman and here I am . . .
 Slowly undo your skirts,
 slowly open your legs, women of Tlatelolco,
 those who are not going to war, Huhu!
 keep your eyes on Chalco!
 (Garibay, 1964, vol. III, pp. 55–60, trans. to English by SM)

The chant continues and ends with these stanzas quoted from the English translation from the Nahuatl by León-Portilla (1976, p. 255):

I have come to please my blooming vulva,
 my little mouth.
 I desire the lord,
 The little man, Axayacatl.
 Look on my flowering painting,
 look on my flowering painting: my breasts
 Will it fall in vain,
 your heart,
 little man Axayacatl?

 Here are your small hands,
 now take me with your hands.
 Let us take pleasure.

 On your mat of flowers
 In the place were you live, little friend,
 slowly, slowly surrender to sleep,
 rest, my little son, you, lord Axayacatl.

The “Song of the Women of Chalco” might evoke the biblical *Song of Songs*; however, this erotic Nahuatl song is exclusively uttered from the side of female experience and sensuality. It is the woman who is presented as inciting and directing this erotic and vital sexual force of the cosmos. Miguel León-Portilla dates the composition of this chant-poem to the Year 13 Reed, or 1479 (1976, p. 237). Its explicit sexual imagery and metaphors are fitting expressions of the erotic *tlaticpacayotl*—that which belongs to the surface of the earth—that prevailed before the catastrophic imposition of Catholic sexual mores on the Mesoamerican world. This song, together with the dove songs, encapsulated meanings of erotic pleasure fitting a particular divine order. According to Bierhorst, the dove songs were sung at marriage festivals. When the Aztec poet sings, “From heaven, ah, come good flowers, good songs” (Bierhorst, 1985, p. 4), he expresses a longing for the Giver of Life, and a desire to bring him joy, invoking him from his place of flowers and song. In the Aztec universe reviewed here, things that exist can be understood only through metaphor, symbol, and eroticism as it flowered in Mexico before the conquest.

EROTICISM AND OLD AGE

As we have seen in chapter 6, texts containing accounts of pre-conquest customs and mores indicate that for the Mesoamericans, old age, the last stage of life, was not bereft of eroticism and power. According to Nohemi Quezada:

The old person is not censured if he or she still has erotic desires even though they are regarded socially as impotent and sterile. To the contrary, the older woman is thought of as insatiable sexually. Certain texts develop the theme of the “older woman crazy for love.” (1975, p. 53)

Even today, among Mayan groups of the sierra of Chiapas, old people can accumulate *k'al*—the vital essence that animates all living beings, is indestructible, and gives special powers to those who possess it. “The older the person, the greater quantity of *k'al* he or she possesses” (Favre, 1984, p. 262). Old people, infused with *k'al*, can be as influential and even dangerous because of their power as are shamans and healers.

Above all, it is through the elders that the treasure of an eminently oral tradition is transmitted. Thelma Sullivan has claimed that the oral cultural heritage of ancient Nahua was provided by “Those

who sowed the seeds of ancestral grandfathers, of ancestral grandmothers” (Sahagún, cited by Sullivan, 1986, p. 9).

Sahagún compiled his great work on the Nahuatl culture thanks to extensive interviews with old women and men—privileged sources of ancestral culture—who provided him with invaluable data about the ancient Nahuas.

In Mesoamerica, it was the old person who was the most complete and powerful in the social fabric. He or she enjoyed moral privileges as ethical demands were relaxed. There was also greater freedom concerning drink and physical labor. The transformation that the old person experienced as his physical strength declined was balanced by gains in spiritual, religious, and political dimensions. Old people formed the essential nucleus of a community. They even had their own god in the Mesoamerican pantheon: Huehuetēotl, the old god, and *Ilamatecutli*, goddess of old women. (Siméon, 1988, p. 186).

The sexuality that entered into conflict with the conquering ideology in Mesoamerica cannot be precisely defined in contemporary terms. The only certainty is that its sense of eroticism, of the sexual in its sacred and vitalizing dimension, contrasted sharply with the dark and shameful view of sexuality of in sixteenth-century Catholicism. It also contrasts sharply with contemporary ideas of sexuality and sexual liberation.

More than half a millennium ago the process of subjecting the part of the world known today as Latin America to Iberian Catholic missionaries, soldiers, and colonizers began. In no other region was the arrival of Catholicism as abrupt or its imposition so violent. In Mexico, but also in Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Colombia, the appetites of the conquerors and the zeal of the missionaries combined to destroy indigenous cultures. While the first group exploited and abused the native inhabitants, the latter condemned their very way of being in the universe.

The Indian peoples, steadily decimated by disease and the effects of exploitation, witnessed the repudiation of the norms that maintained their society in balance, the prohibition of their life-renewing rituals, the negation of their way of perceiving the cosmos and their place in it. Even the sense of their own physical bodies was tampered with and turned into a source of guilt. The detailed and inquisitorial confession manuals were weapons in the war of acculturation.

The inhabitants of Mesoamerica were told by the colonizers that their goddesses and gods and the forces of the universe on which

they relied were the work of the evil one. What for the Indians was their way of participation in the power and harmony of the cosmos was declared base and vile. The sexual, as a life-giving force, had sustained both the cosmos and the individual within a greater order. Its practice was surrounded by rules and norms whose observance was essential for the proper functioning of the universe. As the sustenance of the universe, it had a central role in collective religious ritual. To have it torn out of the temple and thrust as it were, into the dark disrupted the indigenous culture at its core. Through the repression of indigenous eroticism, Catholic morality shook the foundation of indigenous cosmology.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SCATTERING OF JADES: GENDERED MORAL DISCOURSES OF THE WISE OLD WOMEN AND MEN

*Daughter, my beloved, my dear little dove . . .
these words are . . . precious like fine well-cut
gems. Take them and keep in your heart, write
them deep within you . . . (Florentine Codex,
1577)*

The wisdom from the “female ancestors, the noble ladies, old and grey-haired, the grandmothers,” transmitted by the “elders, wise and prudent men and women” (Sahagún, 1989 [1577], Book VI, Ch. 18, p. 372), is embodied in the highly polished formulations of the ancient Aztec *huehuetlatolli* and *ilamatlatolli*. Part of a long, rich oral tradition, they include precepts and sayings that describe expected behavior and adult responsibilities. They are specially concentrated and preserved in Book VI of the *Florentine Codex* (Gingerich, 1988, p. 517) collected by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, the Franciscan missionary who arrived to Mexico shortly after the conquest. These moral precepts are a key to the interplay between gender, culture, and daily practices. They are considered the “essentials of a coherent axiological system” (Ibid.).

A certain scholarship in Mexico has long taken these texts as a confirmation of the passive and submissive feminine role in Aztec society. That reading may appear justified if only the precepts for girls are considered (Hierro, 1989, p. 30; Rodriguez Shadow, 1991). However, a gender analysis, taking into account all the precepts, those directed to boys as well as those for girls, uncovers an underlying *epistémè* of gender equilibrium.

The reader has already encountered several references to these admonitions of the elders. Their importance for an adequate and comprehensive approach of the indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica cannot be sufficiently stressed (Garibay, 2000; M. León Portilla, 1991). Thelma Sullivan calls them “an inexhaustible mine of information on Nahua beliefs and customs” (1965, p. 28). According to Willard Gingerich, “[t]he axiological vision which informs and orders the

orations of Book VI is refined, whole, mythically coherent” (1988, p. 521). Already back in the sixteenth century, Sahagún gave his Book VI the subtitle: *De la Retórica y filosofía moral y teología de la gente mexicana, donde hay cosas muy curiosas tocantes a los primores de su lengua y cosas muy delicadas tocantes a las virtudes morales* [1577]. The “rhetoric,” “moral philosophy,” “theology,” as well as “exquisiteness of their languages” and “moral virtues” that elicited Sahagún’s admiration particularly characterize the moral discourses collected in Book VI.

As many other scholars, I come back again and again to Book VI. In this chapter the focus of the analysis of these rhetorical discourses is the peculiarity of gender construction in Mesoamerica. The concept of equilibrium is exemplified in certain excerpts from them and thus I cited them in chapter 2. In chapter 3, I cited excerpts of them as a treasure in the study of metaphors/concepts for Sacred Earth. In chapter 6, I considered them as a source for concepts of the body. The fleshy metaphors betray a pervasive eroticism. The portrayal of men’s bodies as fresh and tasty corn cobs is one of my favorite Nahua metaphors, along with the portrayal of the grandmothers’ lively eroticism in spite of their “wiry and white hair.” In the second chapter of this book, these discourses gave me philosophical grounding for the systematization of duality, fluidity, and equilibrium as the main tenets of the Mesoamerican world view. In chapter 9, I will come back to them in order to substantiate my methodological proposal for a “hermeneutics of orality.”

In this chapter I shall principally review Sahagún’s transcriptions of the moral precepts dictated by the elders. Referring to these precepts as “a scattering of jades,” the Aztecs meant that their words—like other ritual words—were as permanent, solid, and precious as jade stones.

A contemporary *nahuatlato* and translator from the Nahuatl, Gingerich (1988) rescues from centuries of oblivion the term *ilamatlatolli*: orations of the wise old women. He proves that these revered verbal traditions were voiced by women as much as by men. Yet both terms, *huehuetlatolli* and *ilamatlatolli*, are mentioned with the same frequency in the original Nahuatl orations of Book VI (Gingerich, p. 518). However, previous historical scholarship generally mentioned only the *huehuetlatolli*, implying that only the old wise men were the repositories of moral traditions (León-Portilla, 1988; Sullivan, 1986). Paraphrasing Gingerich, we could say that the term *huehuetlatolli* is a “seemingly

appropriate but relatively unattested generic label” (1988, p. 520).¹

Both the *ilamatlatolli* and the *huehuetlatolli* are sacred orations procuring, in a dense metaphoric language, the transmission of gendered norms of conduct. Didactic, rhetorical, or “enculturistic,” as Thelma Sullivan prefers to call them, they were ritually uttered by the elders in the religious ceremonies marking the coming of age of boys and girls. Seldom do the primary sources give such a clear, detailed, and homely presentation of the ancestors’ ethical ideas.

There are indications that Mesoamerican women participated in political life in significant ways. In previous works (S. Marcos, 1976, 1989), I discuss these instances and their references. For example, in the *Anales de Cuauhtlán*, it is recorded that six women and six men were elected to rule collectively. In areas under Aztec rule, the custom of calling one of two governing elders Cihuacoatl, or Snake Woman, indicates the dignity given the feminine complement (Sahagún, 1989). Women could also own properties and at times led warriors in battle. In the *Selden Codex*, there is a reference to a warrior princess who defended her domain. Hernan Cortes in his *Five Letters to the Emperor* tells of a local woman ruler who blocked the advance of the Spaniards on their march to Tenochtitlan (Marcos, 1975, pp. 33–35).

¹ The majority of Mesoamerican scholars refer to the rhetorical orations with the term *huehuetlatolli*, literally meaning the sayings of the old wise men. Following Willard Gingerich, in Book VI of the *Florentine Codex*, both the terms *ilamatlatolli*, or admonitions of the “old women, the white haired and wise grandmothers” and *huehuetlatolli* or admonitions of the old men appear with the same frequency. “The phrase in *huehuetlatolli*, in *ilamatlatolli*, ‘discourses of the old men,’ ‘discourses of the old women’ occurs in a passage of Book VI. The word *huehuetlatolli* occurs only once in a key position in Book VI in the opening paragraph . . . In *tlatol huehuetque* ‘the world of the old men,’ in *tlatol ilamatque*, ‘the words of the old women’ each are found once in the climatic final discourse . . .” These terms appear in the last discourse in Chapter 40 of Book VI of the *Florentine Codex* (W. Gingerich, 1988, p. 512). These discourses were those spoken by the mothers and fathers to their sons and daughters before they entered the *calmecac* or school for religious training (p. 518). In an effort to recover the voices of women from previous erasures, I insist on using both *ilamatlatolli* and *huehuetlatolli*. The arbitrary choice of the term *huehuetlatolli* to the exclusion of *ilamatlatolli* could be an example of unconscious selectivity based on the scholar’s patriarchal values. The historical tradition written in Spanish in which the generic masculine encompasses and in a certain sense annuls the feminine, has led to the disuse of the term *ilamatlatolli*. Thus today the discourses of both wise old women and men are called *huehuetlatolli*. This favors an interpretation which sees only old men as the givers of these discourses.

Gender theorists have affirmed the inseparability of gender from other social relations. As a result, we can no longer assume a universal determinant of the social construction of gender (Malson et al., 1989). Focusing on the intersection between gender and moral precepts will provide insight into a cultural arrangement that does not seem to foster or validate rigid and mutually exclusive gender categories. A review of the highly polished formulations of the *ilamatlatolli* and *huetlatolli* concerning proper conduct in ancient Mexico could enlighten the ongoing debate on socially constructed gender behavior.²

CONTEXT OF THE RHETORICAL ORATIONS

Religious and social aspects of pre-Hispanic society were tightly interwoven: religion, philosophy, the arts, war, agriculture, and social relations formed a whole which reflected the Mesoamerican world view or cosmovision. Aztecs regarded their deities as the supernatural unity that made the collective more important than the sum of its members. Of the Aztec god of war, Huitzilopochtli, Sahagún's native informants said, "he is but subject and prince," meaning he is no more than the people as a whole, from the highest to the lowest. Sahagún's comments on Nahua goddesses and gods reveal a complex concept of divinity. The Aztecs generally used the word *teotl* (literally "stony" but figuratively "permanent" or "powerful") for their deities.

Balance was important as a sustaining principle of the universe and of society, as will be seen in the following exploration of gender and its relation to cosmology. Opposing forces or apparently opposite extremes of a polarity must be kept in balance in the universe, in society, and in the individual. Awareness of balance and the need to restore it was (and is) the basis for Mesoamerican healing practices (Lopez Austin, 1971; Viesca, 1984; Marcos, 1988). Within the

² These recommendations, we will recall, are normative and do not necessarily permit direct inferences to be drawn concerning everyday behavior. Both Susan Kellogg and Francis Karttunen find evidence of nonhierarchical gender relations in the analysis of legal documents dealing with property and inheritance; both indicate that women could own, administer and inherit property. These practices and attitudes cannot be linked to Spanish usage in Mexico in the sixteenth century (Kellogg, 1984; Karttunen, 1986). Further, the importance of textile (*manta*) production is already attested in the *Historia de los Mexica os por sus Pinturas* attributed to Fray Andrés de Olmos by A. Garibay. The production of textiles, used as an economic form of exchange in ancient Mexico, was the preferential domain of women.

four levels of earth where the Nahuas lived (let's remember that their universe had nine underworlds and thirteen upper worlds) there was nothing that was exclusively female or male. Within this realm, all beings combined gender characteristics in varying degrees (Lopez Austin, 1984a, pp. 64–65). Feminine and masculine attributes merged into fluid entities. These expressed the shifting equilibrium of opposite forces which in their turn reflected the fundamental balance of the cosmos and society.³ From the individual to the cosmic, gender appeared as the root metaphor of balance. It was this highly regarded ideal of equilibrium that was recommended as a pattern of conduct for the young adults of the community.

Innumerable examples of dualities were found in nature and in the social structure. Not only the elements have an implicit gender load. Even the Mesoamerican calendar was dual, and articulated two different temporalities. Speech and poetry likewise reflected doubleness: important statements were repeated in pairs with minor changes. Much Nahuatl poetry is made up of pairs of verses of which the order may vary, but the two members of the pair must not be separated. Mesoamerican deities, like everything in the cosmos, had two complementary parts: female and male, light and dark, creative and destructive, dry and humid, etc. What we might perceive as a contradiction, the Mesoamericans from their point of view see as wholeness and harmony. In the *ilamatlatolli and huehuetlatolli*, we can see these basic principles of Nahua thought expressed in the context of daily life and social relations.

Sahagún's dilemma

The first transcriptions in alphabetic script of the elders' orations on appropriate conduct date from the period immediately following the conquest. Although for the most part the military battles were over, the era was marked by Spain's attempt to consolidate its control over the original inhabitants of Mesoamerica and was filled with the tension of conflicts between two sharply divergent world views and social organizations. Bloody battles had left a relatively small group

³ We can contrast this moral ethos with that of the third-century Romans discussed by Foucault in *The Care of the Self* in *History of Sexuality*, vol. III. For the Romans, "balance" and "harmony" refer to inner virtues cultivated for *individual* self-discipline. This is in sharp contrast to the Nahua idea of collective responsibility which was the basis of both the concept of sacrifice and the celebration of erotic pleasure.

of colonizers in political control. The unspeakably beautiful Aztec city of Tenochtitlan had been destroyed, the imposing temples torn down and burned, and the awesome statues of the goddesses and gods smashed. Native peoples, now subdued, came under the influence of missionaries such as “The Twelve”—a dozen Franciscan friars who arrived in 1525 with great enthusiasm to convert the Indians to Christianity (Ricard, 1982 [1933]). In 1529 another group of missionaries arrived, and among them was Sahagún. The apparent compliance of the Indians had first led the evangelizers to believe that conversion was being accomplished easily and quickly. However, after the first years, the friars of New Spain noted that, far from truly converting the Indians, their work had laid the basis for the emergence of a new configuration of religious elements. “Nahuatized Christianity” is the term chosen by Klor de Alva (1993, p. 173) to describe this phenomenon. Despite the efforts of the missionaries, in most cases they simply provided the natives with another set of sacred entities and rituals that were worked into the existing structure in an original way. Now the missionaries were no longer so sure of their effectiveness. They realized that much of the supposedly vanquished culture had escaped their control and that christianization was inadvertently fostering practices and ceremonies in the churches that kept alive what ecclesiastical authorities termed idolatries.

Sahagún, who had already demonstrated his zeal for catechization and had translated the Bible into Nahuatl to this purpose, was ordered to write an extensive manual about native beliefs and practices. He understood that converting the Indians successfully required a profound knowledge of their customs, morals, beliefs, and language. Beginning in 1547 and using his ample knowledge of the main indigenous language of the highlands, Nahuatl or Aztec, he compiled prayers, songs, admonitory discourses, and other examples of highly polished metaphorical and literary expression from the codified oral traditions. Thus, when he was asked in 1558 to record in Nahuatl what would be useful for catechizers to know about the people they were teaching, he seized the opportunity to describe extensively the old culture and its ways. He spent years interviewing the elders. From long conversations and questionnaires and with the aid of Indian assistants, he gathered material for his “ethnographic encyclopedia,” as Louise Burkhart (1989) calls it. But Sahagún’s systematic presentation of the important elements of Nahua belief and ritual, medical practices, religious festivities, hymns to deities, and other forms of expression raised the suspicion that he was spreading “idolatries.”

The Franciscan friar had to face persecution by church authorities and his Nahuatl transcriptions were not allowed to be translated into Spanish until 1575.

Sahagún's keen perception and rigorous investigation made of his *General History of the Things of New Spain* or *Florentine Codex* an anthropological *summa*. According to Alfredo Lopez Austin: "The bilingual work which records to the letter the responses of the elder informants constitutes the greatest source for the study of the ancient Nahuas" (Sahagún, 1989, intro. Lopez Austin, p. 9). According to Klor de Alva, the text is "the fullest record available of the natives' own reconstruction of their culture" (1989, p. 18). "Written" in part pictographically, whole portions of the document were provided by *tlamatinime*, indigenous philosophers-recorders. Their drawings accompanied the Nahuatl and Spanish versions and were the basis for parts of the alphabetically written texts.

Although Sahagún's main purpose was to foster the conversion of the Indians, he was also sincerely interested in them and paradoxically fascinated by their culture. He even aligned himself with those who fought to protect them. Accordingly, he was inclined to stress the similarities between native religious and moral practices and his Spanish Catholic values. This explains why, although his text contains numerous references to women, he underplays their position in Aztec society. The pictographic material that accompanies the Nahuatl rendition in the *Florentine Codex* offers ample examples of this crucial presence of women (Hellbom, 1967). Other researchers who have reflected on this discrepancy include Betty A. Brown (1983). As June Nash has noted, the accompanying pictographs indicate greater participation by women than explicitly stated in the text (1978, p. 356). The *Florentine Codex* has of course been analyzed from many different viewpoints. Gender is one of them: several recent studies have started to unravel the ubiquitous presence of women, whilst, until not very long ago, there was, with few notable exceptions, very little interest for the implications of a gendered reading of the sources for the study of women in Mesoamerica. My interest for such reading and my first publications date back to early 1970.⁴

⁴ Marcos, 1974, 1975, 1988, 1991, 1993, 1995, 1996, 2004, 2000. A wealth of research on issues of women's roles in pre-Hispanic societies can be found in F. Karttunen (1986), Karttunen/Lockhart (1987), Susan Schroeder (1997) Susan Kellogg (1984, 1988), and Robert Haskett (1997). The work of June Nash (1978) and J. Nash and

ANCIENT MORAL PRECEPTS

The older women and men of Mesoamerican communities were repositories of wisdom and knowledge; they could acquire prestige and were often regarded as having a significant vital force. They commanded respect and were considered very powerful.

The *ilamatlatolli* and *huehuetlatolli* that survived the conquest were transcribed by both native speakers and missionaries in a modified Latin alphabet worked out for Nahuatl. *Huehuetlatolli* and *ilamatlatolli* include parental orations as well as discourses for other religious and civil occasions. Merchants, artisans, healers, midwives, and other specialists in several crafts had their specific orations. Still other orations related to life-cycle events. The midwife's words to a mother on the birth of her child are a striking and well-known example of a life-cycle discourse.

In the orations before birth, the midwife urged the woman to fight her battle bravely. When the child was born, the midwife would utter a war cry meaning that "the woman had fought her battle well . . . she had taken a captive . . . she had captured a child" (Sahagún, cited in Sullivan, 1986, p. 15). The importance of the *ilamatlatolli* and *huehuetlatolli* for the Nahuas is summed up by Sullivan:

Every important event in the life of an Aztec . . . was punctuated by long, eloquent orations appropriate to the occasion. It was in the rhythmic phrases of these orations with their exquisite metaphors, complementary phrases, and carefully selected synonyms, that the religious, moral, social, and political concepts of the Aztec were transmitted from generation to generation. The *ilamatlatolli* and *huehuetlatolli* were the great repositories of Aztec traditions and wisdom, and in the corpus of Aztec literature they stand out as the most revealing of the Aztec mind and thought. (T. Sullivan, 1986, p. 10)

Among those who have contributed to the literature on the *ilamatlatolli* and *huehuetlatolli* are George Baudot (1979), who analyzes their literary structure, and Frances Karttunen and James Lockhart (1987), who look at them from an ethnolinguistic point of view. The orations

E. Leacock (1982) advanced important hypotheses and contributions to our knowledge of women in the Aztec "state." With a specific focus on sexuality and eroticism, the work of Nohemi Quezada has enriched what we know about pre-Hispanic women (1975, 1997). It is only of late that a specific focus on gender has started to present significant contributions (see, for example, Rosemary Joyce, 2000, and Cecilia Klein, 2001).

have been studied for the wealth of cultural information that they convey (León-Portilla, 1988). Alfredo Lopez Austin (1984c) refers to them as “Mexica education” (Aztec education).⁵

The *ilamatlatolli* and *huehuetlatolli* commented on below were addressed to daughters and sons at the appropriate moment when they began to show signs of physical maturity. As we have seen, they have often been quoted in a piecemeal fashion, citing only the advice for young girls because they appear to reinforce the rigidly subservient gender roles familiar to Western researchers. However, the interpretation of these precepts should be balanced with references to the advice given to young men. Such comparisons reveal cultural norms of the Aztecs concerning gender. They do not only show gender-bound behavior expected of both young women and men, but also provide clues to many other key elements of Aztec thought.⁶

VOICES OF THE ELDERS

My beloved daughter, my little dove . . . precious as a gold bead and a rare feather . . . listen attentively to what I have to say . . . (Sahagun, 1989, p. 365)

My dearly cherished one, you are my son . . . precious gem . . . beautiful feather . . . I have decided to tell you some things owing to my duty as your father . . . (Ibid., p. 373)

Expressions of affection, flowery speech, and use of metaphor often appeared in the first part of the discourses for both young women and men. Aztecs were concerned about the proper way to enjoy the pleasures of life. Some of the orations include phrases like:

Daughter . . . our Lord gave us laughter and sleep, eating and drinking with which we sustain ourselves. God also gave us the craft of begetting (*el oficio de la generación*) by which we multiply in the world. All these things provide some contentment in our lives for a little while . . . (p. 366)

⁵ The Mexican anthropologist Alberto Zarate has found contemporary versions of the admonitions of the elders that Sahagún called *ilamatlatolli* in Zihuatlan, a Nahuatl-speaking community of the state of Puebla Sierra Norte. Even the name has changed little: today, these admonitions are called *nanatlatolli*, discourses of advice of the old and wise grandmothers (personal communication, November 2004).

⁶ All the notes, and introduction by A. Lopez Austin and J. García Quintana, 1989. Translations to English by SM.

Life is pleasurable by the Lord's command; pleasure was regarded as a gift to be enjoyed and savoured.

My son . . . the world has this way of generating and increasing, and for this begetting, God ordered that a woman require a man, and a man a woman . . . (p. 381)

As Lopez Austin notes (1988), sexuality was considered a pleasure given by God to alleviate pain on earth. But Sahagún, struggling to present the natives in a way acceptable to the Church, muted this divine command. It was transformed into *el oficio de la generación* (literally, the craft of generation). As long as pleasures in life were regarded as a gift from God, nothing could exempt the Nahua from a concern with balance:

Daughter . . . Do not throw yourself into the fetid dung of lust . . . (p. 369)

Son . . . Do not throw yourself at a woman like a dog throws itself on its food (p. 381)

[Daughters were advised not to look men over as if they were] fresh cobs of corn, to find the best and tastiest. (p. 381)

In order to truly penetrate these moral recommendations, we must situate them in the specific context of Aztec beliefs formed by cosmology and experience. For the Nahua peoples, conduct was not a matter of individual expression. Human conduct was a matter of life and death. The fear of bringing upon themselves chaos and destruction through their personal behavior operated within the larger framework of collective responsibility (see chapter 3). Thus, an individual who erred was a threat to the survival of the collective, and elimination of the disturbance had to be rigorous, radical, and immediate. Instead of a concept of personal moral goodness that could foment a self-righteous behavior, the Nahuas believed that a connection existed between individual failings and the effects of this failure, not only for the individual but for the entire community and for the cosmos (see chapter 3).

Even these limited selections from the *ilamatlatolli* and *huehuetlatolli* demonstrate that although the precepts were directed separately to both genders, there is no implication that one is superior to the other. Fulfillment of duties is presented as essential to proper living, and correct conduct is insisted upon for sons as well as daughters. For example, both young women and young men were expected to fulfill their religious obligations:

Daughter . . . Do not be overly fond of sleep. You should rise up in the night, sweep, wash the mouths of the gods and offer them incense . . . (p. 367)

My son . . . the first thing is that you be very mindful to waken and maintain vigil without sleeping all the night . . . You must rise at night . . . And take care to sweep the place where the images stand and offer them incense (p. 383)

Hard work was expected from both genders, but each had its own domain of production. Weaving, a primordial productive activity, was carried out by women. Not only did it supply clothing, but it also produced wealth. Lengths of woven cloth or *mantas* were used as exchange for the purchase of many products and for the payment of tribute (Galarza, 1998). Young girls were encouraged to strive for mastery and excellence as weavers. Boys were told to plant corn, fruit, and agave. The productive activities of women and men complemented each other: one gender's activity was not regarded as more valuable than that of the other:

Daughter . . . learn well how to make food and drink . . . learn soon how to make chocolate . . . or grind corn or how to weave and embroider . . . (p. 367)

Son, be watchful that you sow the cornfields, that you plant magueys (agaves) and tunas (cactus fruit) and fruit trees . . . (p. 364)

Aztec society, after its first great victories in the central plateau, evolved into a militaristic society that valued, above all, war-related activities from which women were generally excluded. However, women had a domain in which by performing their tasks well they attained the same esteem accorded the courageous warrior:

And if you are adept at your tasks . . . you will be praised and honored . . . and you will value yourself as if you were in the ranks of those who merit honor for their feats in war. You will merit the eagle standard like good soldiers. And if by chance you are adroit in your crafts like a soldier in battle . . . (p. 368)

On this Cecilia Klein comments, "Nahua gender ideology . . . stressed the military virtues of bravery and endurance for both men and women; daughters of noble families, for example, were urged to metaphorically 'assume the shield like a good soldier' (i.e., conduct themselves well) and to 'suffer manfully' while giving birth" (Klein, 2001, p. 223, footnote 75).

These examples are of equivalent advice for each gender. Other prescriptions for such mundane activities as dressing, eating, and walking are similar for girls and boys:

Daughter, . . . do not walk hurriedly nor slowly . . . because walking slowly is a sign of pompousness and walking quickly reveals restlessness, and little sense. Walk moderately . . . Do not walk with your head lowered or your body slouched, but also do not carry your head overly high and upright because this is a sign of bad upbringing (p. 371)

Son . . . take care when you go about the streets or roadways that you walk calmly, neither in a great hurry nor too slowly, but with forthrightness and measure . . . Do not go about head down, nor stooped over, head to one side, nor looking every which way, so that they say you are . . . badly brought up and undisciplined . . . (p. 383)

Balance in dress was recommended; the expectations for both genders were alike:

Daughter . . . Do not dress yourself with curious and elaborate things because this signifies extravagance . . . Nor is it appropriate that your garments be ugly, or dirty or torn . . . (pp. 370–371)

Son . . . your garments (should) be modest and unadorned. Do not dress strangely, or extravagantly, or eccentrically. (p. 384)

The counsels for carnal relations were complementary for young women and men. Women were counseled to have only one sexual partner:

When God wills you to take a husband . . . look, do not give license to your heart to be drawn somewhere else . . . at no time and nowhere should you commit the betrayal called adultery . . . look, do not give your body to another (p. 372)

Boys did not have this restriction, but they were warned about the danger of becoming useless to their women:

You will be like the maguey whose sap is dried up . . . and whoever tries to get nectar from you gets nothing . . . (p. 381)

Your wife, because you are dried up and no good any more and have nothing to give her, will reject you because you do not satisfy her desire, and she will look for another because you are worn out. And even though she has not the intention to do it, because of your lack she will commit adultery. (p. 382)⁷

⁷ These texts could indicate that adultery on the part of women was expected and fairly common.

In the previous chapter, we analyzed eroticism in old age. It is important to emphasize where, in the ample body of collected sayings of the ancient Nahuas, these recommendations were found. It is also important to include for the reader all the nuances of such recommendations.

In one of the discourses for young men, we find a story that illustrates a difference in perception of the genders. Two older women, grandmothers with “white hair, wiry like sisal fiber” were discovered having sexual relations with two young temple attendants and were brought before lord Netzahualcoyotzin.⁸ This excerpt has been cited often (Quezada, 1975, p. 53; Baudot, 1979, pp. 132–133). Its implication for gender issues has been further elaborated (Marcos, 1993). The old women evidently did not feel any regret or guilt about their conduct. They fully accepted their apparent misdeeds but explained them with a poetic metaphor about the configuration of their bodies. This metaphor of women’s bodies (see chapter 6) being “like a deep chasm” runs parallel to the metaphors for earth reviewed in chapter 3: earth is ridge between abysses. Thus, being earthy, fashioned much the way earth is, old women did not seem to get enough and desired more and more pleasures of the flesh. These women invoked quite a different reason for being sexually driven, in spite of old age, than the explanations currently known in our worlds. In a certain way, their explanation entailed a belief in being entitled to continue enjoying *tlalticpacayotl*: that which pertains to the surface of the earth.

Besides complementary recommendations for sexual conduct, both young men and women were told that, eroticism being a gift from the Lord, they were expected to manage it wisely. Both were enjoined to avoid the excess of passion and to wait for the ritual moments in the Aztec calendar of festivities when it could be indulged. Again the ideal of balance appears. Eroticism had evident religious connotations. There were times for ritual sexuality in the temples as well as times of ritual abstinence (Sahagún, 1989, Book VI). What was absolutely rejected was the fixation of behavior at one of the extremes. For example, absolute repression of sexuality was considered abnormal.

⁸ Is Sahagún projecting his European Catholic formation into this incident and shifting from a Nahuatl concept to a concept of his own concerning the sexual natures of women? Cf. the idea of women’s sexual insatiability found in *Malleus Malificarum*.

L. Burckhart affirms: “The *huehuetlatolli* teach diligence and chastity. Young men and women are exhorted to submit to the authority of their parents and ancestors. But do the orations teach women to be submissive to their husbands? . . . The orations to the marrying couple in Sahagún’s collection emphasize hard work and responsibility for both partners; marriage is depicted primarily as an economic partnership and union between families . . . Here, the essence of marriage appears to be the formation of a household based on complementary productive activities” (2001, p. 101). In a previous work my analysis and conclusions have been similar to hers (Marcos, 1991).

After examining erotic poetry and other manifestations of the erotic components of Nahua culture in chapters 6 and 7, it must also be stressed that discipline was important. The opposites were always balanced: two seemingly distinct poles fused. Lust and restraint, like other opposites, were complementary (Garibay, 2000, p. 377).

The *huehuetlatolli* and *ilamatlatolli* reveal a social construction of gender within Aztec morality where similarity and/or equivalence appear as the norm for the community rather than gender hierarchy or superiority. The equilibrium that was so valued in the society served as both the measure and expression of individual and collective well-being; lack of balance was a major threat of disturbance in the cosmos.

Gender was the abiding metaphor that sustained, constructed, and explained the cosmos. Gender oppositions, as well as other oppositions in the Mesoamerican universe, shared the common characteristic of all dualities: the imperative to transcend the extremes. Nahua women and men sought to reproduce in themselves a reflection of the equilibrium essential to Mesoamerican cosmology.

CHAPTER NINE

BEYOND MESOAMERICA: THE HERMENEUTICS OF ORALITY

The effects of oral states of consciousness are bizarre to the literal mind and they can invite elaborate explanations which may turn out to be needless.

(Walter Ong)

The field of indigenous religions is commanding increased attention from scholars in a variety of cultural contexts. It is of great significance that increasingly serious efforts are being made to understand indigenous religions as valid expressions of belief. In fact, such a turning point has become an ethical imperative. For centuries, indigenous religions have been reduced to the “primitive,” “primal,” “native,” and “animistic” (not to mention the terms “heathen,” “superstitious,” and “irrational”). An initial step toward recognizing other world views in their own terms and acknowledging the epistemic specificities of indigenous religious beliefs was reached in the work of scholars such as Ninian Smart (1983, pp. 2–3). According to Jonathan Z. Smith (1988, pp. 270, 271), such categories as “primitive,” “native,” or “animistic” are part of the “history” of the study of religions. Indeed the first methodological problem in the study of indigenous religions is the construction of the category of religion itself by historians of religion.

A conference organized by Jacob Olupona on “Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity” dealt explicitly with these issues. Olupona concluded that indigenous religions are indeed quite complex, vary from society to society, and have been affected considerably by change. Since naming, defining, and conceptualizing these traditions is and will remain problematic, it is better to regard any definition as a working definition (1996a, p. 16). Graham Harvey, in *Indigenous Religions*, a volume of which he was the editor, makes the same point: “[Even if] it is possible to find considerable common ground that justifies the label [indigenous religions] . . . we will not forget that it remains an imprecise tool, a broad category and a wide generic term” (2000, p. 7).

It is an interesting fact that the first use of the term “religion” to describe indigenous forms of worship is to be found in the writings of the Spanish friars who came to Mesoamerica. Jonathon Z. Smith (*idem*, pp. 269–270) cites nobody less than the conquistador Hernan Cortez and the letters he wrote to the Emperor in 1520, as well as the learned Jesuit Joseph de Acosta, who, between 1590 and 1604, wrote a *Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias*. Although the conquerors and the friars denounced the natives’ practices as “pagan,” they were nonetheless able to recognize a religion, or religions, in the complex social organizations and highly elaborated rituals that they encountered in the New World. It remains true that, in most contacts with the inhabitants of Asia, Africa or America, the European colonizers first refused to grant the status of religion to the natives’ practices and beliefs (*ibid.*, p. 269).

The relevance of studying indigenous religions is heightened by the exciting challenge they offer to prevalent Western academic concepts of and approaches to religion. It is important to advance some analyses and propose insights on methodological approaches to multicultural religious categories. Ethnographers and anthropologists can contribute further with what has been called an “engaged and embattled dialogical anthropology” (Mannheim and Tedlock, 1995, cited in Morrison, 2000, p. 24).

Indigenous religious traditions are mainly oral traditions. Texts, even if they exist, are not at the core of their belief structure. If we try to systematize the religions that are transmitted through oral traditions with the methods used for systematizing religions rooted in textual traditions, we will distort and misinterpret them. Historical and textual methods presuppose a fixed narrative as a basis for analysis. Oral traditions are fluid, flexible, and malleable. The subtle shifting and changing of words, metaphors, and meanings easily slip through the “text” cast by historical and textual analysis. Different, in part new, methods are needed to capture a tradition that is in continuous change. As an unwritten code of regulations, tradition is the transmission of beliefs, rules, customs, and rituals by word of mouth, and has nonetheless a regulating power that is often more persuasive than written law and texts.

Another methodological issue raised by the study of indigenous religion, which I will not engage now, is the question of the “hybridization” of indigenous and colonizing religions in new oral traditions. Most indigenous religions show a great capacity to take on influences from the colonizing religions and to incorporate them into their own

oral structures, thereby appropriating and transforming meanings that had been stabilized by texts.

GENDER, WOMEN, AND ORALITY

A central focus in the study of Mesoamerican indigenous religions is the way a gender configuration based on duality plays out in the performance and preservation of oral religious traditions. Gender, as I have argued, needs to be conceptualized in terms of a fluid continuum of identities rather than polarized in a fixed and dichotomous way (see chapter 2). Meticulously memorized, religious narratives are at the heart of indigenous religious traditions whose primary mode of expression is oral. And it is especially in these oral traditions that women play a prominent role, presiding over rituals, preserving and transmitting tradition. Women shape narratives, lead rituals of rhythmic oral invocations, and elaborate and transmit myths using traditional formulae. They are often very visible within these religious contexts.

Women are central to the processes not only of sustaining but also of creating and recreating indigenous religious traditions. Their contributions are so crucial that without them we could only have a partial and thus distorted access to these traditions. Diane Bell states that a “woman-centered ethnography reveals that certain conducts of women, which appear anomalous if mapped with male as ego, are in fact a consistent set of religious practices” (1991, p. 37). In her *Daughters of the Dreaming*, she reminds us that when male researchers interview male practitioners, the religious world presided over by women disappears. The gender divide is often so pervasive that it renders the “other half” invisible (Bell, 1983, pp. 18–33). In the hands of the women, myths, symbols, and rituals are especially malleable. Women shape and reshape oral traditions according to the needs of their communities. Any effort to reframe the meaning of religion for indigenous world views must include a reassessment of women’s contributions. The gender relations that shape such religious universes have not yet been fully explored.

The vital link between the preservation of religious traditions and the assertion of women’s authority is particularly well illustrated by the myth of “changing woman,” a multivocal symbol for Mother Earth common to several native nations of North America. As M. A. Jaimes Guerrero explains, “[t]his *creatrix* is not only about

present day change in the fluctuating and transitional times for indigenous peoples and others, she is also about the restoration and renewal of Native women's rightful authority and leadership" (Jaimes Guerrero, 2000, pp. 38–39). Studies focused on indigenous women provide a distinctive perspective on the way the oral and symbolic world of religious beliefs organizes the social and has an impact on the political world.

INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS AND ORALITY

Because the transmission as well as the practices of indigenous religions operate in an oral mode, it must now seem obvious that they cannot be approached with the same methods as text-based religions. "Oral traditions [are] profound and beautiful and as deep as any written traditions," Ines Talamantez reminds us (1996, p. 3). Oral thought, according to Serge Gruzinski, is prone to juxtapositions, unlikely combinations, and unexpected associations. It is invested in an ordering always marked by movement and change, and ready to cast experience into narrative (Gruzinski, 1988, pp. 215, 228, 232, trans. from French by SM).

Not only must our methodologies be scrutinized carefully before applying them to indigenous religions, but we must also question basic categories such as concepts of God or the deity, the sacred/profane dualism, and our views and perceptions of nature. A careful analysis of the dynamics of indigenous beliefs provides grounds for a re-elaboration of several of the basic categories in the study of religion. Further, we must elaborate a "hermeneutics of orality" to be used as an interpretive method. Such a hermeneutics would include a re-examination of certain rhetorical devices proper to oral religious traditions, particularly a revisiting of words and formulae, redundancies, parallelisms, songs, stories, and mythical narratives. The profusion in the use of symbols and metaphors should be seen as genuine expressions of cogent modes of grasping the divine.

APPROACHES TO ORALITY: A METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

Because they are traditions of the winged words (Peabody, 1975), most indigenous oral religions must be approached through direct and listening contact; careful ethnographic methods are essential. A

current trend in religious studies is turning increasingly from the study of texts to the study of social issues. Yet, as David Chidister warned in his keynote address at the XVIIIth International Congress on the History of Religions in Durban, South Africa, in 2000, we must beware of “methods of denial, based on reluctance to enter a contested frontier.” This is what happens when scholars refuse to grant indigenous rituals and practices the status of religions. Rosalind Hackett (1993, p. 1) for her part criticizes a preoccupation with the field of religious studies that would privilege desk-bound theorizing and historicizing focused on religious texts at the expense of fieldwork and data collection.

Ethnographers, in their turn, recognize their own methodological limitations: they increasingly engage in participant observation, participatory research, and the examination of self-other relations. The distortions originating in the process of “othering” the subjects of research are poignantly discussed by several philosophers and anthropologists. Barbara Tedlock, who did a formal apprenticeship to a Mayan diviner in Guatemala, proposes a “human intersubjectivity” as the basis for ethnography (1982). Karen Brown resorts to incorporating her own experiences, those of the Haitian voodoo priestess Mama Lola, her family and community, the voices of the spirits, and ethnographic reports, as well as theoretical concerns (Brown, 2001).

Diane Bell reflects that we anthropologists, too, have been part of the problem. Too often our power to define ‘the other’ has displaced and silenced indigenous voices. Here I am not speaking for indigenous peoples, rather I am turning the anthropological gaze on Western cultures so that we may understand why so many individuals seek healing, meaning and spiritual answers in the lives of peoples whose lands and lives have been so devastated by western colonialism” (Bell, 1997, p. 53).

Nevertheless, the option for a direct contact with the field, limited as it might be, can, beyond the study of texts, be a catalyst for self-reflection and participatory research on the techniques of “collective remembering.” In this respect, Eric Havelock recalls that, more than eighty years ago, Milman Parry introduced the concept of the specificity of “storing materials in the oral memory” as the display of a state of mind diametrically different from the alphabetic subjectivity (Havelock, 1991 Spanish trans., p. 39).

The researcher must learn to come to terms with her/his own alphabetized subjectivity and to develop a stance of self-interrogation.

Such a posture allows for a closer and more respectful approach toward traditions which are not encoded texts, in which the “technologies of re-remembering” are very distinct from what they are in the alphabetic writing/scripture-based traditions. And Walter Ong confirms that “many contrasts often made between ‘western’ and other views seem reducible to contrasts between deeply interiorized literacy and more or less residually oral states of consciousness” (Ong, 1982, p. 29).

Some guidelines for interpreting indigenous oral traditions might prove helpful. Because oral religious traditions operate within epistemic frames alien to the alphabetic mind set (see chapters 1 and 2), they often cause perplexity to the scholar of text-based religions. A rigorous and respectful approach to traditions that do not rely on texts for their transmission and resilience must pay attention to formulae, redundancies, rhythms, imprint of utterances, ambiguities and polysemy of symbolization, metaphors, and encoded meanings of customary songs and tales.

The weight of words alone

Maria Sabina, the wise woman of the mushrooms, speaks very concretely of her experiences of healing with language: “. . . and I also see the words fall, they come from up above, as if they were little luminous objects falling from the sky . . . then with my hands I catch word after word” (Estrada, 1983, p. 94, trans. Munn; see chapter 5). Words in the oral tradition are meaningful in a particular way. For example, “Native American languages encoded the insight that speech is power all persons share . . . the Navajo think of language as generative rather than . . . representative. Navajo speech does not encode realities which might exist independently, objectively apart from itself” (Morrison, 2000, p. 34). Oral traditions have absolute faith in the efficacy and power of the spoken word. We have seen that the Nahuas (Aztecs) used a beautiful metaphor for their *huehuetlatolli* and *ilamatlatolli*, the elders’ admonitions and instructions: they called them a “scattering of jades” (see chapter 8). Words had weight, permanence, and were precious like gems. Oral languages tend to “actively call the world into being” by the power of words themselves. This is why ethnographers often report uses of spoken language that appear magical to the alphabetized mind. In some, the rhythmic repetition of incantations and invocations liter-

ally brings phenomena into being. In others, the articulation of rhythmic stanzas has the power to summon distant or past realities into the here and now.

Empirical facts are indistinguishable from the words that conjure them up. The spoken words are not meant to convey knowledge and still less "information." They are as substantial as the facts. Reflecting on her field data, Favret Saada says, "if the ritual is upheld it is only through words and through the persona who says them . . . for many months the only empirical facts I was able to record were words" (1980, p. 30).

Formulization: songs and stories

Songs or sung tales are highly formalized in structure; they bear the mark of metaphorical and other remembering techniques that elicit a creative interpretation by the listener. The vitality and permanence, through encoded meanings, of oral formulae proper to indigenous religious traditions, as well as their pervasive influence, need to be reassessed. Some of these formulae should be studied as vital expressions of beliefs and practices and even as recurrent characteristics of "orality-based texts"—that is, of what Parry defined as texts obtained from the first transcription of an oral declamation (Parry, 1971 [1928]).

The various versions of Fray Bernardino de Sahugún's *Codice Florentino* consist of transcribed oral narratives, including epic stories such as that of *Tohuencyo* analyzed in chapter 6, as well as speeches giving moral and practical advice. As first transcriptions of traditional oral discourses, they probably correspond to Parry's definition of "authentic text."

An oral narrative is neither the recitation of a text learned by memory, nor a completely original creation of the narrator. It is in oral narratives that religious myths and symbols rest encapsulated. Remembering them, every time in a slightly different way, is a collective enactment. According to Parry, every such re-enactment is a *rhapsodia*, meaning a patchwork in Greek, a woven sort of composition based on ever-new combinations of traditional formulae. It is in every such re-enactment that the religious myths and symbols are re-remembered. The reciter of a fixed, memorized text unrolls a pre-fabricated tapestry, as it were, in front of the listeners. The oral narrator, in contrast, weaves the tapestry as he goes along, using elements familiar to his audience. Punctuated by breathing, the narration is

given the pauses required by both the speaker and the audience (Tedlock, 1983, pp. 124–129). In oral narrations, the epic actions of heroes are glorified, divine interventions are celebrated, rules of proper conduct are enhanced, and repetitions and redundancies are used for emphasis throughout (Garibay, 2000, p. 409).

The repetition of the same episode with comparable yet different formulae and enhanced by numerous metaphors is also one of the most notable characteristics of the Nahuatl “texts” and other recombinations of the ancient oral world by the first chroniclers. This is particularly the case of the *huehuetlatolli*. There are several versions of them—by Andres de Olmos, Sahagún, and Baptista—and none compares exactly to the other. Presumably, the original oral versions collected by both Olmos and Sahagún were themselves not exactly alike (see Garibay, 2000, pp. 403–420). Both were oral narratives subjected to the fluidity of a *rhapsodia*.

Frequently, women held the patronage of these collective re-enactments. Songs like *El Canto de las Mujeres de Chalco* (chapter 7) defy classification (Garibay, 1964; León Portilla, 1976). They combine religious and political narratives in which the deeds of the ancestral beings interact with the living governing elite. Performed in front of audiences for their amusement, they thus connected the performers with their audiences. Led by women, they sometimes also evoked the domain of erotic practices and pleasures.

In my meetings with the indigenous women from the CNMI (*Coordinadora Nacional de Mujeres Indígenas*), I often hear resonances of this *Cántico de las Mujeres de Chalco*. Without any trace of false prudery, some comments—for example, that in order “not to offend chaste ears” I refrain from quoting here—come close to this excerpt from the canticle: “I have come to please my blooming vulva . . .” (León-Portilla, 1976, p. 255).

Inserted in a religious ceremony, the singing of songs was and still is a vital element of indigenous rituals. For the Warao living in the Orinoco River delta of Venezuela, wisdom is embedded in stories, for human knowledge is generated in the telling of tales (Sullivan, 1997, p. 4). Ancestral knowledge is transmitted to the present generation through specialists of remembering techniques. Warao storytellers begin and end the day narrating dramatic episodes of life-bearing myths of dawn and dusk.

Redundancy

Repetition is a key characteristic of oral conservation techniques (Sullivan, 1997, p. 4; Garibay, 2000, p. 421). Religious, moral, or ethical precepts are ingrained in the participants by repetition. Redundancy—that is, the repetition of a given semantic content, using different formulae—is another means of conservation. A form of this stylistic device has been called parallelism by analysts of the prose and poetry of the ancient Aztecs (León-Portilla, 1969, p. 76; Garibay, 2000, p. 418). It is also a mnemonic device that articulates musically the discursive practices. Redundancy along with parallelism foster the remembering of the formulae, since in orality the unit of discourse is a formula, an utterance, not a word.

In a manuscript of 1629, approximately one century after the conquest of Mexico, Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón registered some of the formulae used by the mostly female healers of his dioceses. The whole manuscript is made out of transcribed *conjuros*, invocations or incantations (Andrews and Hassig, 1984). Today, morphologically similar stanzas continue to be prayed aloud by a *rezandera* in every significant ceremony of contemporary indigenous groups in Mexico (see the chants of Maria Sabina in chapter 5). In her transcription and translation of the Prayers on the Wajxakib Batz in her book, *Time and the Highland*, Barbara Tedlock records extensive use of these parallelisms:

Pardon my sin God. Pardon my sin Earth (p. 231)
 At the east. At the rising of the sun (p. 231)
 For our life
 For our very own life (p. 233)
 Now on this day, this hour (p. 237)
 It is handed over their work, their service (p. 237)

Parallelism is a formulaic, rhythmic, repetitive expression consisting of two parallel phrases, meanings, and/or metaphors whose redundancy facilitates memorization. Such complex formulae are the basis of the ritual discourses. Each ritual specialist grabs onto these formulae and, according to his or her own improvisations, weaves them together. His or her songs will never be twice word for word the same, but they will always be alike. There is seldom reference to an abstract concept of truth like the one linked to a written text that can be reproduced to the letter.

Metaphoric orality

In oral traditions, metaphors disclose the deep qualities of nature, people, and events. In Mesoamerica, the innermost meanings of eminently metaphoric religious narratives still require further decoding. Epic chants and invocations are performed in arcane metaphoric language. Even Sahagún, after his first confrontation with Nahua cultures, complained about his difficulty understanding his informants due to their predilection for metaphoric sayings (Sahagún, 1989 [1547], Book VI, p. 454). The Sacred Books of the Maya are composed in metaphoric language. "The *Chilam Balam*, for instance, is made out of synthetic formulae, archaic language, metaphors and multi-vocal symbolism that makes it esoteric or secret" (Garza, 1988, p. 15). Willard Gingerich suggests that the paradoxical juxtapositions exemplified in the ritual discourses reveal a seamless unity which can only be discovered in the mythopoetic, metaphoric context of ancient Mesoamerican world views, not through the application of purely Western standards of syllogism (1988, p. 530).

Jacques Soustelle (1970) reports that sweeping the temple early in the morning was a priestly activity preparing the way for the deity to arrive. In the *Codex Mendoza*, an early pictographic manuscript of the Aztecs, a broom at the side of the loom is one of the objects belonging to a girl's birth site. It binds a woman's future life on earth. In several excerpts of the *huehuetlollí* referred to in this book, there are recommendations for both boys and girls to be prompt and dutiful in waking early and sweeping the temple. The broom as a metaphor for a girl, together with the metaphoric priestly sweeping, have often been misinterpreted and reduced to mean the typical menial domestic lot of women (Hierro, 1989, p. 36). During one of my recent researches among indigenous women, Ernestina, an Otomi Indian, commented to me that she had to prepare a great ceremony in which she would be the leader. It was a ritual for a little girl who was going to be given a broom as symbol of her duties. But, she hastened to clarify, it is not a broom to sweep the floor; rather, the meaning in our tradition is that it represents the powers of women to lead ceremonies of our religion.

Uses of symbols

In oral religious traditions, symbols are polysemic and multivocal (Turner, 1978, p. 573). Again and again, diverse symbols overlap and intertwine. No linear interpretation can grasp these complex layers

upon layers of meaning. These fluid characteristics shape the way we should approach symbolic indigenous universes. Gananath Obeyeskere (1981, p. 51) states:

When a symbol is conventionalized it loses its inherent ambiguity. Myths and symbols are part of the public culture, their syntactic looseness and ambiguity facilitates manipulation and choice. When a symbol is conventionalized it is deprived of its ambiguity and ipso facto of its capacity for leverage and maneuverability. One of the commonest occasions for conventionalization is when a popular myth or symbol is taken over by learned virtuosos and narrowed down and given limited and rigid meaning. Hence . . . one must be wary of myths and symbols as they appear in treatises of learned theologians. Their analytical status is quite different from that of symbol systems on the ground . . . The “rational” explanation of symbols by academic anthropologists are of the same order. They also narrow the field of meaning and produce a conventionalization of symbols.

Difficult for alphabetized minds to grasp, this nonconventionalized process of symbolization should remain fluid in a frame of reference allowing scholars to study it without immobilizing it. A static interpretation of symbols would impede an authentic approach to oral religious traditions where meaning does not inhere only in symbols, but must be invested in and interpreted by acting social beings.

Oral ways of appropriating and expressing (defining) religious themes can be further comprehended if we review certain underlying religious concepts.

NATURE AS DIVINE

“The natural world is our bible,” says Mohawk. “We do not have chapters and verses: we have trees and fish and animals. The creation is the manifestation of energy through matter . . .” (1996, p. 11).

J. Richard Andrews and Ross Hassig (1984, p. 14) observe that the Aztecs were enmeshed in the supernatural. For them, “the gods represented (*were?*) . . . the physical world (sun, moon, stars . . . earth, water, and mountains) . . . the elements (rain, lightning, clouds, wind), flora and fauna (maize, tobacco, maguey, peyote, deer, eagles, snakes, jaguars, pumas) and major cultural functions (fishing, hunting, war, sex) . . .”

In indigenous Mesoamerica., the gods and goddesses do not seem to be conceptualized as they are in the institutional (historical) religions. The now classic monograph by June Nash, “In the Eyes of

the Ancestors,” seems to encapsulate this point of view in its title (Nash, 1970). Ancestors and other spiritual (super- and supranatural) beings seem to be as influential on earth as are the gods. The deities’ well-being is as dependent upon human offerings as vice versa, expressing the importance of a bidirectional flow of spiritual forces between the realm of the deities and the realm of human existence. A. Geertz (1994, p. 324) speaks of similar concepts among the Hopi: “[the] end of the world rests solely on the immorality of humanity . . .”

A deity outside the universe and acting upon it is a completely alien idea. On the contrary, in Mesoamerica, the deity appears immersed in the cosmos. Yet we are not speaking here of immanence versus transcendence. Neither one nor the other concept fits the way oral Mesoamericans relate to and conceive of their deities. The thought of a perfect superior being, all good and always beneficial, is also absent. Deities had to be sustained as well as placated. They could destroy as well as nurture.

Reading through an early pictographic manuscript, the *Codex Mendoza* mentioned earlier, Joaquin Galarza assures his readers that no gods or goddesses are represented in it (1998). There are only “personifications” of them—that is, humans that take on the attributes of the deities and thus impersonate them. The unity of the deity contrasts with the multiplicity of iconographic forms that it takes (Hunt, 1977, p. 55).

The polarity between sacred profane has also been much questioned. God is not distant but near. *El dios del junto y del cerca* was the meaning of *Tloquenauaque*, divine reference of the Aztecs (León-Portilla, 1990, p. 91). If god is near and by our side, then the classical disjunction between sacred and profane is inadequate for the comprehension of indigenous religions. Everything is interconnected in a web of sacredness.

We should speak of transcendence and immanence in the same vein. Using the expression that god is immanent in indigenous religious traditions, we are immediately projecting our gaze from the outside, judging from a philosophical background that constructs meaning and order through mutually exclusive polarities. Immanence and transcendence are not separate realms of reality. For instance, there are deep meanings involved in the feminine activity of patting tortillas and putting them to cook on the *comal*. Among contemporary Nahua groups in the town of Cuetzalan, Sierra de Puebla, the

woman making tortillas sees herself reconfiguring the sun-earth relationship, with planets represented in each flat tortilla she places on the fire. This is why A. Lupu speaks of a “domestic priesthood” referring to the sacralization of menial domestic tasks (1991, p. 191).

In Maria Apolonia, a wise healer of the highlands of Oaxaca, we have an example of the powerful and central role played by women in oral Mesoamerican indigenous religious traditions. Some excerpts from one of her rituals will close this chapter. These rhythmic formulae reveal words as solid and permanent as jade; rhythmic, redundant phrases pregnant with meanings of the divine in nature; metaphoric stanzas and polysemic symbols that can provide some glimpses, like firestone sparks, of an Indian woman’s perception of her participation in a religious ceremony. She is in resonance with the word still orally shaped and heard and shared communally. She expresses, in a nutshell, the elusive universes of indigenous religious traditions:

Woman of the principal medicinal berries
 Woman of the sacred medicinal berries
 Ah Jesus
 Woman who searches, says
 Woman who examines by touch, says
 Woman who thunders am I . . . woman who sounds am I
 Hummingbird woman am I . . .
 Woman of the sacred, enchanted place am I
 Woman of the earth and dusk
 Woman . . . primordial being
 . . . am I

EPILOGUE

With the last loop of the spiral, this book opens to a beginning: decades of research into the Mesoamerican way of perceiving the world leads naturally to a consideration of the new cultural configurations and political positions that have characterized the indigenous movements in the last ten or fifteen years. Paraphrasing Guillermo Bonfil's expression, *el México profundo*, we can speak of the existence of a "deep Mesoamerica" or perhaps of a coming into political visibility favored mainly by the emergence of the *Ejercito Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, of an indigenous resistance that had been leavening underground for centuries. Its voice had been systematically silenced. Even with the good will of those who supported them, there was not until today "a register for audibility" (J. Butler, 2004). This book strives to be a small contribution toward the widening of that register.

Today, indigenous—and particularly indigenous women's—movements openly claim the permanence and continuity of their orally transmitted traditions and the practice of, in their own words, "indigenous spirituality," and they start to be heard. Their claims get translated into the language of human rights and cultural rights. In their communities, they speak of dignity, respect, and justice instead. It is by keeping true to their own words and perceptions that the indigenous movement has the potential to transform a political landscape hostile not only to their cultures, but to their livelihood on earth. This is why the self-reflection of indigenous groups and the autonomous elaborations about who they are, how they know, and how this identity and knowledge have been shaped through the ages are bearers of hope. In what I called their techniques of collective re-membering, I see an antidote to the dis-membering of all communitarian life, indigenous as well as *meztizo*.

The "indigenous communities" or "originary nations"—to retake terms by which they refer to themselves—are now elaborating a political discourse based on respect for the particularities of orally transmitted cultural heritages, theirs and others'. Their political agenda includes many of this book's themes, as for instance *duality* as an innate mode of conceptualizing gender-equitable relations, *balance* or

equilibrium as an alternative concept of justice, and *body perceptions* that pervade their particular styles of healing practices, including the use of *enteogens* as a way of communicating with their deities. All of this is in close resonance with the results of years of research on the historical roots of the Mesoamerican mode of “being in the world.”

The indigenous women’s movement emerged as a particular configuration from the larger indigenous movements. In 1997, I was invited as a non-indigenous to the foundation of the *Coordinadora Nacional de Mujeres Indígenas*, a network of politically organized women.

In 2002, I was invited by Rigoberta Menchu to be a consultant for documents of the First Summit of Indigenous Women of the Americas. This summit, originally a United Nations Protocol, was completely revamped to suit the indigenous worlds. Every roundtable discussion started with a ritual headed by a Mayan priest and priestess. The opening and closing, attended by institutional and political elites, included ceremonies in which all participants were challenged to invoke the four corners of the world with the body language and ritual procedures, and under the guidance, of the male-female couple of ritual specialists.

At those meetings, I heard a consistent claim for respect of indigenous culture, beliefs, and rituals, always inserted into the particular perspective of women. They build their indigenous spirituality with the same core elements of Mesoamerican thought that I found to be key in my research through the patient unraveling of their then-muted voices.

Their symbolic and metaphoric expressions followed closely what I have been elaborating here. I hear them often express themselves with a Spanish colored by poetic literary devices of *paralelismo* and *difrasismo* and a profusion of metaphors. Their appropriation of ancestral references as well as of contemporary political demands exemplified the perfect fusion of an oral tradition’s process of both revival and change. The concept of *paridad* that emerges as a gender demand from their political discourses has now been retaken by the mainstream feminist movement.

The indigenous women’s movements have built on their surviving and fluid oral traditions, and these recoveries have brought an unexpected reconfirmation for my intellectual journey. So this epilogue is a beginning as much as an end. It is about Mesoamerica—and particularly about Mexico—yesterday and today.

This book has been made from notes of thirty years of teaching in North American, Latin American, and European universities, and from my work in direct contact with indigenous organizations, groups, and communities. I have never felt as challenged as when recently I had to present my studies on Sahagún to the Zapatista women who were *promotoras de salud*. To my surprise and delight, I found that the curing methods, the uses of plants and healing rituals, mentioned by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún in his *Historia* written around 1547, had strong resonances for them. Taken from the lips of their grandmothers and grandfathers, these healing practices had been transmitted orally and were still in contemporary in the mountains of Chiapas.

Emerging as of their own motion, these terms have made themselves present in my analysis and writing. *Sexual spirituality* is the erotic heritage of ancestral peoples in Mesoamerica. *Embodied thought* is the incarnated knowledge of a cosmos where there is no disjunction between matter and spirit. Homeorrheic equilibrium is the balance of conjunctions in flux. *Gender fluidity* is the gender category that remains in permanent flux and escapes the binarisms criticized by some gender theorists. They are all autochthonous to Mesoamerica but certainly not exclusive to it. They are intellectual elaborations that seem to express in a nutshell much of what I have been discovering.

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