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Citation

Jansen, M. E. R. G. N. (2004). Archaeology and Indigenous Peoples: Attitudes towards Power in Ancient Oaxaca, 235-252. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16348>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Archaeology and Indigenous Peoples: Attitudes Towards Power in Ancient Oaxaca

Maarten Jansen¹

More than a generation ago, Vine Deloria wrote a penetrating critique of “anthropologists and other friends”:

The fundamental thesis of the anthropologist is that people are objects for observation, people are then considered objects for experimentation, for manipulation, and for eventual extinction . . . The massive volume of useless knowledge produced by anthropologists attempting to capture real Indians in a network of theories has contributed substantially to the invisibility of Indian people today. (Deloria 1969: ch. 4)

With these words the Lakota author invites anthropologists, as well as archaeologists and other investigators of the world of indigenous peoples, to reflect seriously on their work and to become conscious of the way we are embedded in a conflict-ridden reality of historical trauma and social injustice. Far from having a frustrating effect, such soul-searching should lead to a new and more positive practice. The space of this chapter allows only for a summary and exemplary treatment of some aspects of this complex matter. Making several huge leaps, passing over many discussions about colonialism and the relations between past and

present, I mainly want to indicate how interpretive archaeology can benefit and be beneficial by situating itself in the very heart of this problem and from changing its perspective accordingly.

The Setting of International Standards

Comparable to the classic anti-colonial and anti-racist writings of Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi, Deloria’s manifesto marked the beginning of a new era in the struggle for emancipation by indigenous peoples of the Americas. It was followed by the occupation of Wounded Knee and a series of actions at a national and international level, which denounced the continued existence of *internal colonialism*, reinforced through new forms of economic and cultural domination by “Western” states. First ignored and not taken seriously, then despised and ridiculed by the very anthropologists and bureaucrats it attacked, Deloria’s radical protest against colonial substrates and Eurocentric perspectives was echoed and continued by other indigenous activists (e.g., Pérez Jiménez 1989; Mamani Condori 1996; Churchill 1998; Smith 1999). As many Native

American movements organized themselves in the 1970s and 1980s, political awareness also mounted among anthropologists, lawyers, priests, and other concerned citizens of “Western” countries. This created a context in which the issue could receive general and serious attention.

Pitching their tepees in front of the Palais des Nations in Geneva, North American Indians forced the international community to open its doors. By 1982 the UN (ECOSOC, the Commission of Human Rights) installed a Working Group on Indigenous Populations in order to review developments and to formulate standards. In a parallel process the International Labor Organization revised its convention 107 and drafted a new convention 169 (1989), shifting from paternalist strategies of integration and “assistentialism” towards indigenous peoples, to a framework of respect, collaboration, and partnership. After a series of annual consultations with representatives of indigenous movements and other experts, the UN working group produced a Draft Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (E/CN.4/1995/2 and E/CN.4/Sub.2/1994/56). This remarkable document establishes key principles and guidelines for cultural policies and research:

Article 12. Indigenous peoples have the right to practice and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artefacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature, as well as the right to the restitution of cultural, intellectual, religious and spiritual property taken without their free and informed consent or in violation of their laws, traditions and customs.

Article 13. Indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practice, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies; the right to maintain, protect and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites; the right to use and control of ceremonial

objects; and the right to the repatriation of human remains.

In the 1990s, postmodernism and postcolonialism advanced in the work of literary critics and social scientists (Loomba 1998). It is now widely recognized that anthropology, as a product of the nineteenth century, was formed to serve the interests of (neo)colonial powers. Operating from a positivist and evolutionist perspective, its discourse could be used to legitimize “Western” expansion scientifically as a civilizing effort. The distinction between the dominant Self and the dominated Other was conceived and presented in terms of “civilized, developed” versus “primitive, underdeveloped,” or simply – with an essentialist twist – of “normal, active, superior” versus “strange, passive, inferior.” This political and intellectual legacy haunts anthropology. It is implicit in terms such as “myth” (a story which is sacred or otherwise of special significance for the Other, but in which the researcher, Self, does not believe) or “informant” (the Other, expert in his/her own culture, reduced to a mere *object* of study by Self as the more rational *subject*). Many anthropologists, however, participating in postcolonial thought, are now aware of the dangers of Eurocentrism and asymmetrical relationships in their research. Critiques like those formulated by Vine Deloria are – at least intellectually – accepted as part of a necessary reflexivity and multivocality. Theoretical norms now seem well defined; putting them into practice, however, is quite a different matter:

Since the publication of *Custer* there has been no concerted effort by the academic community, or by anthros themselves, to open the ranks of the discipline to American Indians. (Deloria, in Biolsi and Zimmerman 1998: 211)

Archaeology in the Anglo- and Latin American nations is part of anthropology. The logic behind this connection is that

both disciplines from the perspective of the dominant groups in those societies deal with the Other, i.e., the colonized native peoples. A more idealistic motivation would be the direct continuity of ancient cultural traditions in the present. This circumstance creates special opportunities for archaeology, as indigenous knowledge, experience, and views offer a wealth of valuable data and crucial insights for understanding the archaeological record. One may actually experience the past in a living environment. Ethnoarchaeology, especially the “continuous model” or the “direct historical approach,” calls for collaboration between the interested outsiders and the indigenous experts. Structures and mentalities inherited from colonialism, however, still form concrete obstacles, the more so where archaeologists are accustomed to see themselves as the sole “owners” or “caretakers” of the past. The encounter with other voices and claims often provokes a shock.

The developments sketched briefly above have obliged archaeology to reconsider its position, especially in the US. The most commented upon event is without doubt the passing of the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) by the US Congress in 1990. Simultaneously, the World Archaeological Congress formulated some principles and rules, focusing on the acknowledgment and protection of the indigenous cultural heritage, as well as on the need to seek the informed consent and active involvement of indigenous peoples in research. Soon after, the Society of American Archaeology elaborated its ethical standards, focusing on concepts like stewardship, accountability, and the recognition of intellectual property.² The question remains how much of this really transforms research practice and its outcome.

Obviously it is quite a challenge to translate indigenous demands and international protocols into concrete archaeological projects. Political and ethical concerns are important ingredients of our actual situation, but often difficult to accommodate in a trad-

itional research design. In fact, the claims of “neutrality” and “objectivity” of scientific discourse tend to shut them out systematically. Going against this mainstream may even be detrimental to one’s career. Many authors in this field, therefore, avoid connecting the study of the culture and history of indigenous peoples to an active engagement with their problems in present-day reality. The consequence is often a scholarly monologue, which excludes the peoples concerned, silences their voices, and impedes their possible contributions. Paradoxically, many intellectuals are focusing so much on their specific interests that they only move further away from the culture and people they study.

Cultural Continuity in Mexico

In Middle and South American countries the social sciences have a tradition of sociopolitical criticism (Benavides 2001), but here too we see little repercussion of the international standards outlined above, and even less true partnership. This is more noticeable as the indigenous population in this part of the world is quite significant, both in quantity (in some regions an absolute majority) and in cultural influence. Mexico is a particularly interesting case. Archaeologically and anthropologically speaking, most of its territory belongs to the large culture area known as Mesoamerica, of which the Nahuas (Mexico or “Aztecs”) and the Mayas are the most emblematic peoples. Scores of Mesoamerican languages continue to be spoken throughout the country. On the one hand, the prehispanic civilizations are valued as the root and pride of the nation; on the other hand, their present-day descendants in practice are victims of all kinds of racist and other negative prejudices, so that they are treated as second rank citizens or strangers in their own land (cf. Bartolomé 1997; Bonfil Batalla 1989). Their living conditions are often characterized by economic exploitation, marginalization, alcoholism,

violence, and ethnocide, as well as by the lack of work, medical care, good schools, and other elementary facilities. Many people simply have to migrate and leave their region. The typical future of indigenous girls is to become a servant somewhere in the city, often in circumstances that resemble slavery.

The double attitude of admiring the monuments and artefacts of the indigenous past, while discriminating against indigenous people in the present, has a correlate in the reluctance to consider cultural continuity as a relevant framework for studying Mesoamerica. On the popular level there is even a widespread belief that the prehispanic civilizations cannot have been created by the ancestors of “those Indians,” but must have been the work of other peoples, coming from Egypt, Atlantis, or Outer Space! A more scholarly version of the same view is the opinion that the ancient culture was *decapitated*: it had been developed by an elite of wise priests, advanced astronomers, and refined princes, who were all killed during or shortly after the Spanish conquest (1521). Contemporaneous indigenous peoples would “merely” be the descendants of the peasants and slaves, not deemed capable of carrying on the achievements of their leaders. The Native American heritage is thus seen and treated as a dead culture, a view particularly promoted by archaeologists. This disjunction may be observed in many major exhibitions, which usually focus on the sensational presentation of ancient treasures, while limiting attention to “cultural survivals” to some isolated and secondary elements, such as motifs in folk art, or leaving them out altogether.³

Another, more sophisticated form of disjunction is produced by emphasizing and exaggerating the cultural diversity of ancient Mesoamerica, and so calling into question the very idea of a coherent cultural tradition. Indeed, there were many local differences and, likewise, there were dramatic changes during the colonial era, but in spite of all that, we find a profound constant or “core”

both in the archaeological cultures and in the cultural heritage of present-day indigenous peoples of Mexico. This “core” may be understood from a Braudelian perspective as a long duration process (*histoire structurale*). It is not limited to ecological conditions and other cyclical processes, but is especially manifest in daily life experience, cognition, and mentality.⁴ Archaeologists can only ignore it at their own cost.

Characteristic of internal colonial structures is the complete nationalization of archaeological remains. Most research, preservation, and management are concentrated in the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH). Although some of its investigators have indigenous roots, and many have good relations with indigenous communities, the institution as such is not pursuing indigenous aims nor practicing an indigenous cultural policy.⁵ Instead, we see ancient shrines and holy places become tourist attractions, where nearly everything is permitted except the continuation of the native spiritual tradition. Similarly, cult images, archaeological objects venerated until this very day, still may end up in a museum, alienated from their devotees.

Changes are imminent, however. Despite all the odds, more and more young Native American men and women follow professional education and start to take a keen interest in these questions. Furthermore the Zapatista uprising at the beginning of 1994 has pushed the plight of indigenous peoples to the foreground, raising consciousness of Mexico’s internal contradictions in all segments of society.

This is the context for research in Oaxaca, a mountainous state in southern Mexico, bordering on the Pacific Ocean, and a specific culture area, centrally located within the wider context of Mesoamerica. It is a state with a large indigenous population, the Nuu Savi (Mixtec) and Beni Zaa (Zapotec) being the most numerous peoples. A crucial role in its archaeology is played by the site of Monte Albán, an impressive acropolis near Oaxaca City, located in the heart of the so-called

Central Valleys.⁶ Founded in the late Formative or Preclassic period around 500 BC, it became a major capital and flourished throughout the Classic period (ca. AD 200 – ca. 800), at the end of which it was largely abandoned. During the Postclassic (ca. AD 900–1521) it held only a ceremonial function, mainly as a site for elite burials and related cults. Throughout the state of Oaxaca there are many archaeological sites, the majority of which have not yet been explored. After significant excavation projects in the past decades, both on Monte Albán and other locations (such as Huamelulpan and Yucu Ita in the Ñuu Savi region), at present the research coordinated by the Regional Center of INAH in Oaxaca City focuses on non-destructive archaeology: identification and delimitation of zones, surveys, documentation, maintenance, conservation, and protection. The Center functions as a broker or gatekeeper for projects of foreign institutions or individuals, which also tend to engage in surveys or, at the most, small-scale excavations. Generally, the collaboration of local communities and their authorities is sought explicitly, as without their permission any work would be impossible.⁷ An interesting project is the foundation of community museums.

All of this results in a complex interaction of different interests and perspectives, not without tensions. In some cases local communities, following a legitimate tradition of distrust, may be opposed to the idea of outsiders walking through their lands or excavating special places, acts which arouse the suspicion of perpetrating some robbery or damaging the cultural heritage. The natural impression is that at the end of the day the archaeologists, and foreign intellectuals in general, are much better off than the poor villagers. Other communities precisely welcome such interventions, however, and want their monuments to be excavated and exposed in full splendor, as a boost to pride in local identity, to the level of education, and/or to the promotion of tourism. In all cases archaeology is clearly expected to be inter-

active and to tell a story with a meaning for the descendants and stewards of this patrimony.

Which Story?

Narrative plays a prominent role in all interpretive archaeology, both in conceptualization and in method. Drawing attention to the subjective and mythic nature of scientific discourses and to the circumstances under which knowledge is constructed, the post-modern perspective qualifies many disciplines as forms of storytelling. Far from dismissing archaeological work as cheap fiction, such a definition points towards the profound social responsibilities, tasks, and problems of research. Storytelling is a very serious activity. It has been said, “If the stories disappear, our people ceases to exist.”⁸ Subjective experience and creativity are not brought in as a justification for flights of fantasy, but as a call for personal engagement. The Past and the Other are not objects of free speculation, but have an independent existence, which demands recognition and *respect*. The archaeology of living cultures especially has to open up to intercultural communication and active intersubjectivity, the more so where the process of colonial domination profoundly determines the relationships between the peoples concerned. This sets the stage for a story about sovereignty, in the telling of which we all participate. Linda Tuhiwai Smith clarifies:

The research agenda is conceptualized here as constituting a program and set of approaches that are situated within the decolonization politics of the indigenous peoples’ movement. The agenda is focused strategically on the goal of self-determination of indigenous peoples. Self-determination in a research agenda becomes something more than a political goal. It becomes a goal of social justice which is expressed through and across a wide range of psychological, social, cultural and economic terrains. It

necessarily involves the processes of transformation, of decolonization, of healing and of mobilization as peoples. (Smith 1999: 115–16)

Self-determination, as a goal and a point for orientation in the studies of indigenous cultures, calls for a change in the attitudes, theories, and methods of archaeologists. If we reflect on the story that archaeology has been telling in Oaxaca, and for that matter in Mesoamerica as a whole and in many other regions, we notice that it has been to a large extent a “biography of the state,” giving a great deal of attention to the evolution of social complexity. Comparing the discourse of traditional archaeology with that of human rights, one cannot help but feel struck by the contrast in the evaluation of the state: in the former, it is hailed as the great hallmark of civilization and progress, creating law, social order, and efficiency; in the latter, it is denounced as one of the great dangers to fundamental human freedoms and as the main culprit in the violations of our common rights.

When Sanders and Price (1968) introduced the evolutionary scheme of Elman Service and others (Band-Tribe-Chiefdom-State) to the archaeology of Mesoamerica, the idea of being able to trace such a development using the hard data of material remains appealed to many and gave a new sense and direction to research and debates. Such a mission statement fitted the evolutionary perspective and conservative interests of archaeology as a product of the nineteenth century. Moreover, the discipline had developed in intimate connection with the state and its nationalist ideology. Concrete projects were often organized and/or financed by a direct executive branch of the state, generally through the mediation of a national institution which monitored all activity, granted permits, etc., and thereby was able to put forward a nearly exclusive claim on the past and its remains. In other words most archaeologists were and are directly or indirectly paid by the state.

The material bias of archaeology further programs a tendency towards (neo)positivism with a high appreciation for descriptive and quantitative analysis. The formulation and testing of hypotheses derived from general principles of social evolution and behavior (the nomothetic approach) was a hallmark of the New Archaeology, which has had its influence on projects in Oaxaca from the 1970s onwards. In such theories, economy and politics are intimately related. An admirable level of synthesis within this tradition, both of concrete fieldwork data and of theoretical reflection, was reached in *The Cloud People* (Flannery and Marcus 1983), which still influences archaeological thinking and practice today. Catchment areas, market systems, and long-distance trade routes to extract elite goods and commodities, became central concerns, as well as military endeavors to protect these interests and to establish law and order. The special attention to war-related aspects may in part be explained by the circumstance that archaeological practice from its origins had been rather militarily structured and conceived; traditionally, it was (and to a large extent still is) a world dominated by men, working in planned expeditions, with research strategies, maps, trenches, camps, and a clear hierarchy of site supervisors.

With a focus on the state, one tends to interpret the intellectual and aesthetic achievements of the indigenous cultures as manifestations of ideology. Precious objects were thus studied as markers of status and indicators of elite exchange systems. Iconography and writing were deemed to reflect propaganda, in order to legitimate the position of the ruling class, while religion itself was also seen as manipulated to serve the interests of power (Marcus 1992: 12–16). In connection with this framework, a regional perspective may be constructed using world systems theory (cf. Blanton et al. 1999). Its emphasis on asymmetrical core-periphery relationships and exploitation as one of the main dynamics in society was originally intended by Wallerstein as a

critical view on the modern economy. Curiously, its introduction in archaeology tends to have the opposite effect. The projection of exploitative imperialist structures and their legitimating ideologies onto the past, may lead to a feeling that this condition is somehow normal, and so may justify and reaffirm those structures in the present.

This body of theories certainly has made valuable contributions, making us aware of important processes in human society. On the other hand, it echoes the interests in the thinking and practices of present-day “Western” national elites and is quite far removed from the experiences and concerns of indigenous peoples, inheritors of the past onto which these theories are projected. In fact, one often gets the impression that the construction of abstract models and hypotheses gets in the way of communication and empathy with the people in question.

Present-day indigenous society may view the “biography of the state” as a rather hollow topic, of limited interest. In creating a communicative, multicultural discourse, new roads need to be explored. Established theories and methods do not automatically have to be discarded, but they must at least be complemented. Other perspectives have to be accommodated. The focus of research accordingly may shift from chronology and the use of resources to (for example) the cultural landscape experienced as a source of identity and power, a locale where the community connects with nature, where the ancestors live, and where one’s umbilical cord has been buried; from the evolution of status hierarchy to social drama and the experience of *communitas* (cf. Turner 1990); from the politics of exploitation and legitimation to the realm of the sacred and the moral. Where stratigraphic excavation is essential for the evolutionary perspective, it is conversation and interaction, the talking to and working with people (not as “informants” but in collaboration and *convivencia*), which is the main method for this approach.

Start with Learning the Language

Archaeology is not dealing with some “survival groups” of possible interest as a source of information, but with active and creative *peoples*, protagonists with a project for the future. A first step, therefore, is to recognize their proper names, instead of the names given to them by others: *Nuu Dzavui* (nowadays pronounced as *Nuu Savi*) instead of Mixtecs, *Beni Zaa* instead of Zapotecs, *Ngigua* instead of Chocho-Popoloca, etc. Most of the terms now widely used come from Nahuatl, the language of the Mexica empire, which was used as a broker language by the Spaniards during the early phases of colonization. Thus *Mixtec* means “inhabitant of the land of the clouds,” but *Nuu Dzavui* has a more profound sense as “People and Land of the Rain God,” referring to the unity of land and people (*ñuu*) and to the concept of a community formed by the devotion for and protection of a common patron deity. The same applies to the toponyms in the region, which in later times were combined with the names of Christian saints and historical heroes of the Mexican republic. An example of such a stratigraphy is the place-name Chalcatongo de Hidalgo. The latter part honors the initiator of Mexican independence. It took the place of the patron’s name Santa María de la Natividad that had been added in the viceroyal era. Chalcatongo itself is probably a corruption of the Nahuatl toponym Chalco Atenco, “Precious Place on the Lake Shore,” referring to the existence of a lake in the valley where the town is located. Its name in Dzaha Dzavui (the Mixtec language) is *Nuu Ndeya*, often translated today as “Town of Abundance.” In the sixteenth century it still was *Nuu Ndaya*, “Place of the Underworld,” probably named after the sacred cave where the pre-colonial rulers of the *Nuu Dzavui* city-states were centrally buried.

In order to be able to participate in the circuit of cultural communication and to develop an incipient understanding of another

meaningful universe, investigators have to study the native tongue. Names, concepts, convictions, sentiments – they are all formulated in a particular language. The same is true for material culture, the traditional focus of archaeology: forms, functions, production technologies – all are described and classified in that language. Surveys and excavations, as well as the study of the ancient chronicles, have to be combined with listening carefully to the oral tradition related to the landscape and with serious and committed participation in present-day indigenous society in order to promote awareness of its cultural dynamics, values, and challenges. Present-day traditions and concepts inform intents of a postprocessual, contextual, cognitive, and hermeneutic archaeology, which may surpass artefact fetishism by focusing on the immaterial aspects of the cultural heritage, particularly on the messages registered in iconography and writing. Metaphors and art are central to this line of research. Carved stones, figurative ceramic vessels, frescoes, incised bones, and particularly pictographic manuscripts (codices) may be read as statements and narratives. Here again the use of terms, phrases, and literary conventions in the native language may be extremely relevant and revealing. The character of the protagonists of the historical pictorial manuscripts, for example, was for a long time a matter of debate among scholars: were they deities, supernatural beings, or humans? Colonial glosses demonstrate that their titles were *iya*, “Lord,” and *iyadzehe*, “Lady.” Today, these terms are used for Christian saints and spirits of nature, in some villages also for priests and authorities. A contextual analysis clarifies that the protagonists of ancient dynastic history were considered human personages but with a special, divine status. Reading the codices in these terms (re)creates for present-day Nuu Dzavui people the experience of a “Sacred History,” similar to the holy scriptures of Christianity.⁹ And the political domain of those rulers – should we call it a chiefdom or a state? In Dzaha Dzavui

terms it was a *yuvui tayu*, “mat and throne,” a seat of rulership for the royal couple. Several events have a very special significance in the indigenous cosmovision. When we see a young warrior and a princess travel to a Death Temple, the scene is easily identified as a visit to the *Vehe Kihin*, a cave where daring people go to ask the fear-inspiring spirits of the Underworld for special favors, success, wealth, or power. But in exchange they have to hand over their soul. Such an act functions as a turning point in a dramatic narrative, announcing its tragic outcome, and thereby uncovers the literary composition of the historical source (cf. Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2000).

The focus on archaeological sites has to be extended to all features of the constructed and natural landscape that are significant in people’s worldview and experience.¹⁰ The village Santiago Apoala is a good example. Its original name in Dzaha Dzavui is Yuta Tnoho (now Yutsa Tohon), taken from the river that flows through the small plain in which the village is located. Tonal and nasalization differences account for different translations of the toponym as “River that Plucks or Pulls Out,” “River of the Lords,” or “River of the Stories.” All meanings refer to the root story of this place: it was on the bank of this river that the Sacred Mother Tree (a ceiba) stood, from which the first lords and ladies were “pulled out,” the founders of the dynasties that ruled the city-states of Nuu Dzavui. The village itself is clearly an archaeological area, but what the historical sources focus on is a series of points in the landscape: the cave with a subterranean lake and spring “at the head” of the valley, the waterfall where the river plunges over a cliff “at the foot” of the valley, a high mountaintop to the east, called the Mountain of Heaven, where the First Mother and Father are reported to have lived, “in the year and on the day of darkness and obscurity, before there were days or years.” A precolonial painting (Figure 13.1) represents this landscape as the body of a feathered serpent, a divine being, the emblem of the main culture

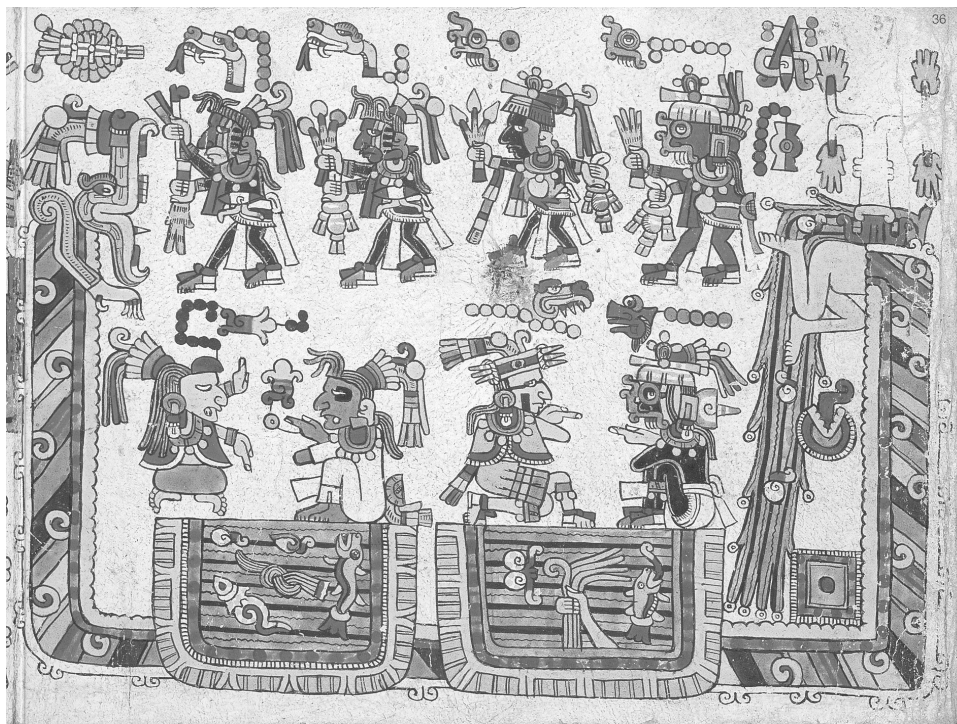


Figure 13.1 Codex Tonindeye (Nuttall), p. 36: the landscape of Yuta Tnoho (Apoala).

hero and a symbol of visionary experience in Mesoamerica (Anders et al. 1992). An archaeological study simply cannot hope to do justice to the ideological importance of this village if it does not take into account its awe-inspiring natural surroundings, central to a cosmovision and riddled with stories about the time of origins.

The same is true for a widely debated problem in Oaxacan archaeology: that of the rise of Monte Albán as the capital of a Classic Beni Zaa state. The location of this site, on a mountain in the center of the three-lobed valley of Oaxaca, clearly defies the suggestion that it was chosen for economic reasons: the acropolis is not particularly suited for farming or for establishing a market. Considering political motivations and taking into account some later carved stones that refer to conquests and captives, several scholars have proposed that Monte Albán was constructed as the “disembedded

capital” of a (military) alliance of valley towns. Militarism at Monte Albán indeed must have been an important ingredient in creating a state organization. In fact one of the most remarkable buildings in the central plaza has the form of an arrow and may represent an arrow temple, dedicated to the Divine Force of Arms.¹¹ Trying to understand the motivations for its foundation, however, we should be aware of the dominant role of religion in Mesoamerican culture, in particular the devotion towards mountaintops documented by historical sources and observable today. The mountain is alive, full of power. It holds the underground water streams that feed the lands and the community, as it contains the caves of origin and the caves where the Rain God lives. It is here that the first sunrays of morning hit and create a daily hierophany in the change from darkness to light – a central motif in Mesoamerican thinking. The rocky outcrops on

slopes and mountaintops are often considered the spiritual Owners (*Ñuhu* or *Ndodzo* in Dzaha Dzavui) of the lands around. They are invoked at harvesting rituals. Religious specialists seek their help in healing patients who suffer from “fright” or traumatic shock. Such a place rapidly becomes a focal point of pilgrimages from the surrounding valleys and adjacent areas. Taking into account this worldview, we understand immediately the religious importance of Monte Albán as a prime motivation for the construction of a ceremonial center there. The ubiquitous presence of the Beni Zaa rainstorm deity, Cocijo, molded on ceramic vessels (“urns”) of the Classic period, suggests that the site was considered to be his house, the source of all abundance.¹² The sacred place was honored and formalized through the building of different temples and altars. The large processions so popular in Mesoamerican cult determined the layout of courtyards and a huge central plaza.

Experiencing the Other World

From an outsider perspective, with a critical view to modern power-holders, one might focus on the manipulative pretensions of the elites, who may have used their success in war in combination with ideological claims, ritual prominence, and the accumulation of esoteric knowledge, to establish lasting control over the non-elites (Joyce and Winter 1996). An empathetic look at community life, or an insider’s perspective, problematizes the idea of a sharp elite–non-elite dichotomy, at least in the smaller city-states with their strong internal interdependence. The kings, queens, heads of leading lineages, priests, merchants, warlords, and artists formed quite a heterogeneous group, with varying degrees of education and intellectual capacity. Certainly they distinguished themselves from the tributaries, those who worked the fields, but at the same time all shared one frame of

reference, one sphere of communication, one “cognitive map,” one social and moral code. It would have been very difficult for an elite to locate itself outside this shared worldview for the purpose of cynical manipulation.

To understand ancient mentality, we should assimilate present-day Mesoamerican cosmovision. One of its most relevant aspects is *nahualism*, the dream sensation of transforming into a *nahual*, i.e., an alter ego (companion animal) in nature. This set of experiences explains the frequent representations of humans with animal traits in precolonial iconography. Shamans use this state of mind to speak with the ancestors and other spirits. The symbol of their ecstatic vision is the serpent. As visual expressions of liminality, sculptured serpents enclose the temples as homes of the gods. Already in the iconographic corpus of the earliest civilization of Mesoamerica, that of the Olmecs, these references are present: rulers represented in their nahual aspect with the traits of jaguars and other fierce animals, a priest encircled by a vision serpent. Especially powerful nahual animals are the plumed serpent, a metaphoric designation of the whirlwind, and the so-called fire serpent, which is a ball of lightning. The latter, with its characteristic upward curved snout, came to be used as the emblematic nahual, accompanying Mexica gods such as Huitzilopochtli, encircling the famous Sun Stone. The Dominican monks translated the ancient Dzaha Dzavui title *yaha yahui*, “Eagle, Fire Serpent,” as “necromancer,” i.e., shaman. Probably the heavily beaked or snouted flying animals in Classic Oaxaca art represent this same concept.

On Stela 1 of the South Platform of Monte Albán (Figure 13.2) we see a ruler in front of a large inscription and a series of carved slabs with the representation of captives (Marcus 1992: 325–8; Urcid 2001: 317). He is seated on a cushion of jaguar skin on top of a mountain with a mat design, i.e., on the “mat and throne” of the community. Outward looking heads of nahual animals, flanking the mountain – supposedly Monte Albán itself – stress its divine power. The



Figure 13.2 Monte Albán, South Platform, Stela 1: the ruler seated on the mat and the throne, with his staff and nahual attributes (Caso and Bernal 1952).

same value is given to the seated individual himself, as the same nahual animal forms part of his headdress. Evidently we are dealing with an important ruler of Monte Albán, portrayed with his regalia and symbols of charismatic power. His dress, a jaguar skin, is again a reference to this ruler's nahual. The staff in his hands is a common attribute of rulers. In Postclassic pictorial manuscripts the founders of dynasties carry similar staffs. Their configuration and context leave no doubt that we are dealing with the precolonial antecedent of the staffs of authority, so important in all communities today.

A related iconography is found on the carved slabs from the Mixteca Baja area, belonging to the so-called Ñuiñe style of the Late Classic Period (Rodríguez Cano et al. 1996/99). Some of them show jaguars seated on mountains. In view of the above these may be interpreted as representations of the names of rulers, connoting their nahual aspect. A confirmation is found in the feather crowns some of these animals are wearing. A particularly interesting example is the representation of a feathered jaguar emitting speech scrolls topped with flints, which have been interpreted as a "feather-crested tiger on place glyph utters twice the name of

1 Flint or declares war in words as cutting as flint knives” (Paddock 1970: 187). Looking at similar conventions in Postclassic codices we prefer a reading as a name: “Lord Jaguar saying ‘knife,’ i.e., Who Threatens to Kill,” “Feathered Jaguar Gnashing his Teeth,” or “Lord Growling or Roaring Jaguar.” The knife may also represent the quality of “sharp,” “brave,” or “much” (*dzaa*), a word which in combination with the verb “to speak” means “convincing,” “eloquent.” This would result in the reading: “Lord Jaguar, who is an eloquent speaker” (Figure 13.3). Other slabs portray a “Feathered Jaguar Holding a Mountain in its Paw,” i.e., “Lord Jaguar Ruler of the Mountain” and “Feathered Jaguar Holding a Man in its Paw,” i.e., “Lord Jaguar Ruler of the People” or maybe “Lord Man-Eating Jaguar.” The event commemorated on these slabs must have been an important one. Victories were eternalized this way, but not the simple declaration of war. Probably the fact that the feline is climbing a mountain or seated on top is the significant action. As the mountain (*yucu*) is usually the nucleus of a toponym, we may read it here as “our place.” Actually it may be short for our “mountain and water” (*yucu nduta*), a well-known Mesoamerican expression for our “community.” Sometimes a pyramid is added, probably as an explicit reference to the town’s ceremonial center. As the seating is a convention for rulership, for taking control of the polity,

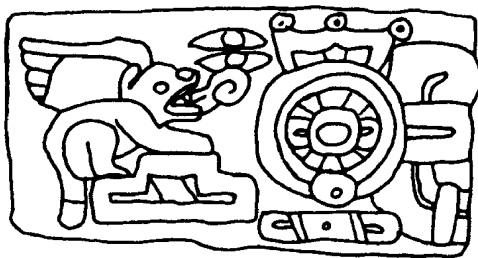


Figure 13.3 Yucu Ndaa Yee (Tequixtepec), Carved Stone 19: Lord “Roaring Jaguar” climbs the throne in the year 6 L (Rodríguez Cano et al. 1966/99).

probably all these cases show an enthronement statement.

The nahual transformation itself is depicted on a Nuiñe “urn,” found in Tomb 5 of Cerro de las Minas, Nuu Dzai (Huajuapán), now in the Museo Regional of Oaxaca (Winter 1994: 34). The vessel is modeled in the form of a man. The base on which he is seated contains a stepped fret motif which, as we know from Postclassic codices, is to be read *ñuu*, “town” (Figure 13.4). Being seated on this glyphic sign, the man can be identified as the ruler of the city-state. The gourd or small vessel he holds in his hands before his chest is decorated with a precious stone. The same object also occurs with priests in Postclassic codices, where it represents a gourd (*tecomate*) that contains the hallucinogenic *nicotiana rustica* (*piciete*). The animal snout in the face of the ruler and the wings on his arms, calling our attention



Figure 13.4 Ceramic urn from Tomb 5, Cerro de las Minas, Nuu Dzai (Huajuapán): the transformation of a ruler into a fire serpent.

because of their sensational colors, indicate that under the effects of an ecstatic ritual he is becoming a winged fire serpent (*yahui*) and entering the *nahual* world. The anthropomorphized vessel itself may be considered a “god pot,” which became alive during such a specific ritual.¹³

We may use this vessel as the key to interpret a whole series of Classic urns from Monte Albán and the valley of Oaxaca, which show very similar scenes of seated humans transforming into powerful *nahuales*, even taking the identity of divine ancestors or deities, the most important of whom is the ubiquitous *Cocijo*. Some of these figures also hold those small gourds in their hands. One actually is the typical old priest. In other cases a vessel from which vapors rise replaces the gourd.¹⁴ In one religious pictorial manuscript, known as the *Codex Borgia* (Figure 13.5), we see a comparable scene of autosacrifice and the preparation of the hallucinogenic priestly ointment: vapors rising from a vessel in the center of the pyramid take the form of vision serpents, consisting of night and wind, the mysterious essence of the gods, and bring those standing in the corners of the room into ecstasy (cf. Jansen 1998). If we are correct in our interpretation, the Classic “urns” are references to similar royal rituals involving vision quest and direct contact with the other world. Such activities were crucial moments in the lives of the rulers. Possibly these vessels accompanied them into their graves as a commemoration of their vision and as a point of recognition on their very last journey, which would bring them again face to face with the ancestors and the gods.

Conclusion

Modern Mestizo references to *nahualism* are often fanciful, and stress the element of suspense and strange magic, as in werewolf and vampire stories. Looking at the social function of those who have strong *nahuales* today, we should not see such representa-

tions as expressing cruel dominance. The evaluation of this phenomenon in traditional indigenous communities is quite different: it is the moral force of the *nahuales* which is important here, their responsibility to safeguard the village and to collaborate with the spirits of nature in order to bring water to the lands and make a good harvest possible. *Nahuales* usually are protectors of the community, just as shamans do their work for the benefit of the people, generally to heal. Sometimes a traditional healer will send his *nahual* animal to accompany and protect the *nahual* animal of another person who is in distress or suffering illness. In this way they are very similar to the *Benandanti* of sixteenth-century northern Italy, analyzed by Carlo Ginzburg (1966).

The *nahual* representations of rulers, therefore, seem to reiterate the religious and moral nature of rulership, stressing the devotion and ceremonial obligations of the lords and ladies as least as much – if not more – than the aspect of conquest, coercion, and surveillance. Having themselves portrayed as strong animals, the rulers emphasized that they dedicated all their strength and efforts to the well-being of the community. From a present-day standpoint one may interpret those statements as propaganda and ideological manipulation, but in their own iconographical vocabulary the rulers stressed their efforts to protect their people, their moral obligation to perform sacrifice, also self-sacrifice, and express devotion to the True Powers. That same moral discourse still characterizes the traditional passing on of power to newly elected authorities today. In the ceremony of handing over the staff of office, much emphasis is put on the sacred surroundings (invoking God and the patron saint) as well as on morality: the authority should guide the people as a father–mother, along a straight and correct road.

Connecting the past with the present deepens our understanding of both. Studying the ancient manifestations of an ongoing cultural tradition offers unique insights into

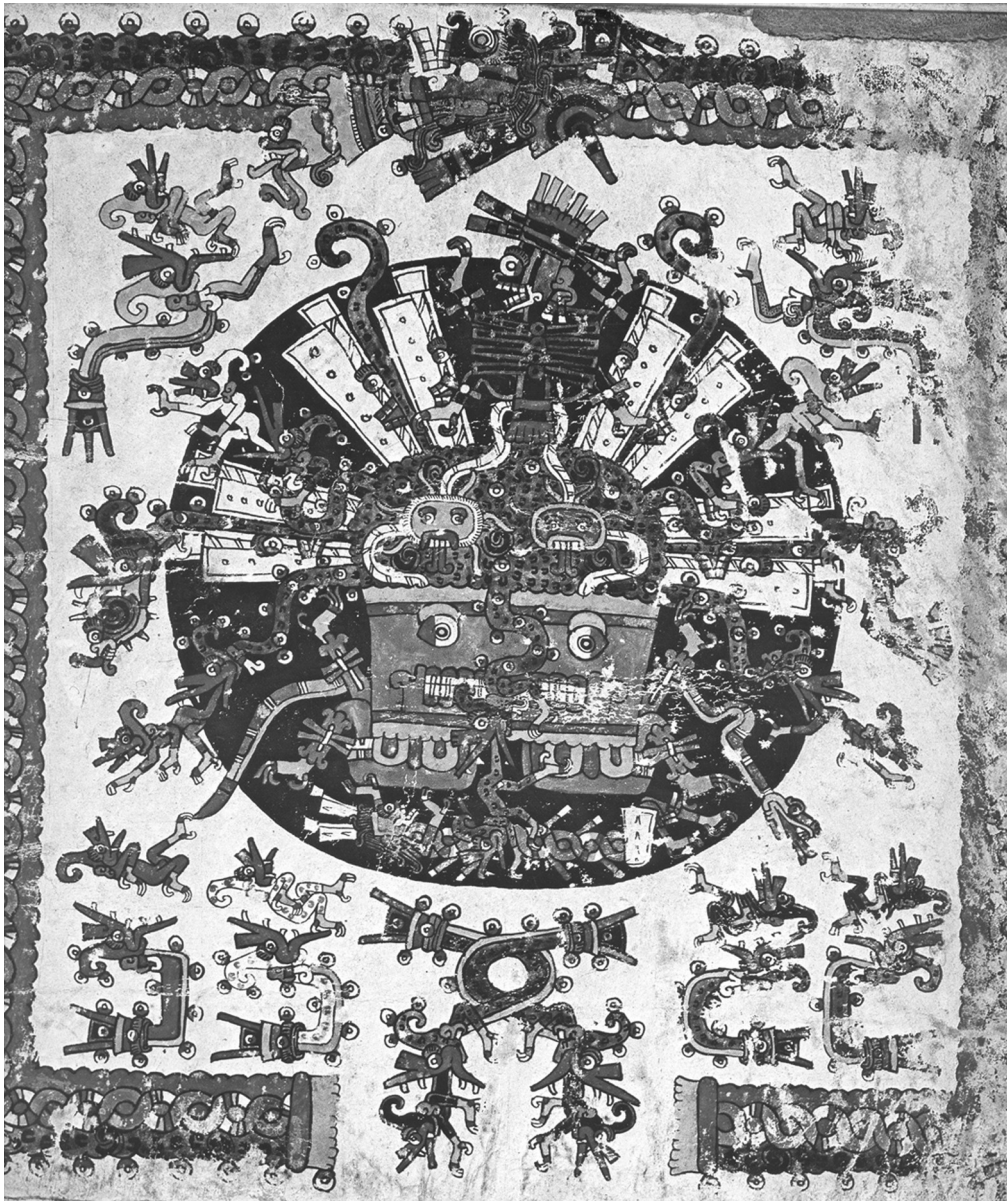


Figure 13.5 Codex Borgia, p. 29: the preparation of a hallucinogenic ointment in the Temple of the Death Goddess Cihuacoatl.

mentalities and values, but at the same time implies an encounter with the traumatic impact of colonialism and the persistent structure of social injustice. One of the consequences of colonization in the Amer-

icas, just as elsewhere, has been the denial and destruction of local historiography and historic memory, at least to a large extent, converting the native nations into “people without history” (cf. Wolf 1982). Here

lies an important social responsibility and challenge for archaeology. Developing a postcolonial perspective and emancipatory practice, archaeologists can and should contribute to the dignifying and so to the empowerment and continuity of the cultures they study and love. On this road their interests and those of the indigenous peoples go hand in hand:

If we were to talk of an Aymara philosophy of history, it would not be a vision of forward progress as a simple succession of stages which develop by the process of moving from one to the next. The past is not inert or dead, and it does not remain in some previous place. It is precisely by means

of the past that the hope of a free future can be nourished, in which the past can be re-generated. It is this idea which makes us believe that an Indian archaeology, under our control and systematized according to our concepts of time and space, could perhaps form part of our enterprise of winning back our own history and freeing it from the centuries of colonial subjugation. Archaeology has been up until now a means of domination and colonial dispossession of our identity. If it were to be taken back by the Indians themselves it could provide us with new tools to understand our historical development, and so strengthen our present demands and our projects for the future. (Mamani Condori 1996: 644)

Notes

- 1 The reflections expressed in this chapter have come up in the context of research carried out together with Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez. Our work at the Faculty of Archaeology, Leiden University, has received support from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). In recent years the collaboration of Laura van Broekhoven and Alex Geurds has been crucial. Thanks are due to the director and staff of the regional centre of INAH in Oaxaca, especially to Alicia Barabas, Miguel Bartolomé, and Raúl Matadamas, for their help, orientation, and positive input. Chatino archaeologist Ninfa Pacheco and Nuu Savi archaeologist Iván Rivera also contributed significantly to the development of these ideas.
- 2 Biolsi and Zimmerman (1998) demonstrate the influence of Deloria's work on anthropology and archaeology. For the ethical principles, see Lynott and Wylie (1995). From the indigenous side, efforts were also made to find some middle ground, or as White Deer put it, a mutually inclusive landscape (Swidler et al. 1997).
- 3 The absence of living people is quite common in museum contexts; but very different concepts are manifest in, for example, the exposition of the National Museum of the American Indian, New York (West et al. 1994) and in the museum of the Mashantucket Pequot reservation. In the first case the presence of many indigenous experts who give explanations on video and in the catalogue, emphasizes the living tradition. In the second the large-scale reconstruction of a sixteenth-century Pequot village, with native voices on the accompanying cassette guide, absorbs the visitor into indigenous life; the subsequent 3D movie of the historical violent destruction of that community creates empathy with its descendants.
- 4 Needless to say, the very concept of continuity also implies change. We should not think of it as an anachronistic fossilization of society but, on the contrary, as a dynamic diachronic relationship of the present with the past. Let us keep in mind that history, as remembered by the people, has an accumulating and evaluating effect: collective memory stores the experiences of the past, draws conclusions and installs behavioral norms (leading to what Bourdieu calls the *habitus*). In this way a cultural tradition can remain true to its "core,"

- its “profound identity,” in a subjective way, although over time its subsystems have suffered major transformations.
- 5 Typically, this issue is not even hinted at in the otherwise so-critical review of the development of Mexican archaeology by Vásquez León (1996).
 - 6 An overview of the archaeology of Oaxaca is beyond the scope of this chapter. Important reference works are Paddock (1970), Flannery and Marcus (1983), Dalton Palomo and Loera y Chávez (1997), Blanton et al. (1999), and Robles García (2001).
 - 7 A traumatic experience in the early 1960s was the excavation of tombs in Zaachila, executed against the will of the town’s inhabitants, under military protection, resulting in a lot of anger and a permanently disturbed relationship (see Jansen 1982).
 - 8 See Sambeek et al. (1989). Cf. Tilley (1993: 13–15) and Last in Hodder and Shanks et al. (1995: 141–57).
 - 9 The names of the manuscripts themselves are testimonies of the colonial process of alienation. For example, the book painted in the early viceroyal period on orders of Lord 10 Grass “Spirit of the Earth” (*iya Sicuañe* “Yoco Anuhu”), ruler of Añute, the “Place of Sand” (now known as Magdalena Jaltepec), is now preserved in the Bodleian Library in Oxford under the name “Codex Selden 3135 (A.2)” (cf. Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2000).
 - 10 The subjective experience of the ancient cultural landscape, as outlined by Shanks (1992) and Tilley (1994), may sound highly speculative in the context of European prehistory, but imposes itself as very real precisely in a situation of cultural continuity such as Mesoamerica.
 - 11 Such a cult is well demonstrated for the Postclassic in several pictorial manuscripts. The directionality provided by the pointing arrow has often been interpreted in archaeoastronomical terms, but without convincing results.
 - 12 Monte Albán seems to have had the quality of the Mesoamerican Cave of Origin and Mountain of Sustenance (known in Nahuatl as *Chicomoztoc* and *Tonacatepec* respectively). See also Anders and Jansen (1994) as well as Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2000).
 - 13 For the representation of vision quest and “god pots” in Maya art, see Freidel et al. (1993: 247–51 and throughout).
 - 14 Caso and Bernal (1952: figs. 16, 151, 159, 161, 241, 328, 363).

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