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P.J.R. Modderman Stichting
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P.O. Box 9515
NL-2300 RA Leiden
The Netherlands

The Ancient Mexican Books of Time: interpretive developments and prospects

Maarten E.R.G.N. Jansen

Time was an important theme in the indigenous civilization of Mesoamerica (Mexico and Central America). A prime source for understanding the ancient symbolic associations and related practices is the small corpus of – still quite enigmatic – ancient screenfold manuscripts, nowadays dispersed over libraries and museums in different countries. The central structuring principle of these pictographic and hieroglyphic texts is the pre-colonial calendar, which was not only the dominant framework for historiography and astronomical observations, but was also used for divination, medical treatment, ritual performance, community organization and moral codes. Here we will examine the state of the art in the progress of interpretation and indicate prospects for future research.

1 INTRODUCTION

The perception and conceptualization of time is pre-understood in cultural and social codes, determining ideas about order, agency, memory, causality, progress, life and death (Nowotny 1994). Obviously, time is a major topic in physical theories and Western philosophy, playing a central role in works of such fundamental authors as St. Augustine and Heidegger, particularly with implications for identity (e.g. Ricoeur 1984-88; Campbell *et al.* 2010). Techniques of time-reckoning are a fundamental characteristic of cultures, and, as such, have all kinds of practical, symbolical, psychological and ideological implications (Aveni 2002). Chronological structures are present in narrative and ritual performances, which often include the manifestation of moral commitments with communitarian goals, and consequently have the potential to create and affirm individual and collective identities (Rappaport 1999; Orlove 2004). Both memory and ritual commemorations create “mnemonic communities” (Zerubavel 2003). Cultural historians and philosophers (such as Elias and Ricoeur), therefore, have stressed the social and narrative aspects of time. Archaeologists too have focused on the temporal dimension of the formation of the archaeological record, with forays into the Braudelian time-process or the relationship between landscape and time (e.g. Ingold 2000).

As a determinant of collective behaviour, time is an important topic in the study of intercultural communication, as

different time concepts in a group may affect many aspects of its interaction, planning, memory, social rhythms, and the expression of emotions and identity (Gudykunst 2005; Samovar *et al.* 2009). The complex (frequently even violent and traumatic) cultural and ethnic interactions of the past centuries have led to characterize the relationships between coexisting populations in terms of time: dominated people being considered as “stuck” in an earlier stage of development (Fabian 1983). Anthropologists have reflected on how temporality contributes to the construction of social systems; interest in conceptualizations of time itself in different cultures, has, indeed, increased in the past decades (e.g. Gell 1992; Munn 1992; James and Mills 2005).

2 MESOAMERICAN WRITING AND CALENDAR

Stretching between the deserts of Northern Mexico and the tropical forests of Central America, the culture area Middle America (‘Mesoamerica’) is a complex mosaic of cultures and peoples (such as the Aztecs, Mixtecs and Mayas). By the time of the Spanish conquest (AD 1521), a multifaceted development of several thousand years had created an impressive cultural heritage (Evans 2008). Within the modern Spanish-speaking republics, scores of Native American peoples preserve their languages and many ancient traditions, blending them with elements from the ‘Western’ world. Despite their numerical paucity (some 15-20 million) these indigenous peoples have a strong emblematic value, providing cultural roots for the national societies (Bonfil Batalla 1996).

Before the Spanish conquest, Mesoamerican peoples had developed several original writing traditions, the most important of which are: (1) the syllabic hieroglyphic script, i.e. phonetic writing, of the Maya peoples in East Mexico and Guatemala (which often included pictorial illustrations of the texts in hieroglyphs), and (2) the pictography of the Mexica (Aztecs), Nuu Dzau (Mixtecs) and other peoples in Central and Southern Mexico (expressing complex messages in coherent sequences of polychrome figurative images, which might contain the use of phonetic signs as well in toponyms or personal names).¹

Manuscripts generally consisted of large pieces of cotton cloth (lienzos in Spanish) or of books (now referred to as

'codices'). These books were made of strips of deerskin or native paper (amate), glued together, folded in a screenfold manner, and covered with a delicate layer of stucco on which polychrome images or hieroglyphic texts were painted. The Spanish conquest brought this tradition to a halt. Less than twenty of such screenfold books have survived the dramatic cultural transformations that followed the conquest. This small pre-colonial corpus is enriched by scores of early colonial works in the same style, often accompanied by comments in Spanish or in indigenous languages written with the alphabetic script. In addition, ethnohistorical sources (such as the works of Spanish missionaries) provide crucial information, but are often incomplete and biased, as their descriptions form part of a 'crusade' against indigenous beliefs. Few Mesoamerican manuscripts remain in the place where they were made; most became victim of colonial disruptions and alienations. Collected as curiosities, they are nowadays kept in libraries, museums and archives either in Mexico itself, or in European countries or in the United States of America, where they are now kept as unique testimonies of the intellectual and artistic achievements of that fascinating Amerindian civilization, which form part of a shared and mutual Mesoamerican-European heritage. Together with the relevant colonial reports, which are equally limited in number and dispersed over the world, they form a corpus which is our main historical source for studying the ancient Mesoamerican history and 'philosophy of time'.

According to their contents we may distinguish two main groups within the corpus of pre-colonial books. One deals with the world of kings and queens, concretely the history of the dynasties that ruled the city-states of the Mixteca Alta region (State of Oaxaca, Mexico) in the six centuries before the Spanish invasion. These manuscripts may also contain references to rituals and divine powers, but their overall structure is descriptive and narrative in character (for an overview, see: Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2011). They provide a valuable access to pre-colonial memory.

The second group is the main topic of this article: it consists of a handful of pictographic books with religious contents. These unique manuscripts belong to the sacred texts of humanity. For most of them the place of origin is not known, but their contents can be related to the colonial documents that inform us about Aztec religion. The Aztec language (Nahuatl) therefore is our main language of reference.

This corpus, however small and fragmentary, has an enormous value, as it contains original works of art, of great aesthetic impact, which are also examples of original Mesoamerican religious texts. The latter is the more important, as most of the information about the Mesoamerican intellectual world comes from colonial chronicles, especially the accounts by Spanish monks, who were engaged in a spiritual crusade against indigenous religion.

In the colonial diaspora of these manuscripts, the information about their place of origin and about their contents was often lost. Many were called after the collections that hold them, after people who collected or interpreted them, and in some cases after socially or politically prominent figures that the name-giver wanted to honour. As such names have no relationship with (nor relevance for) the peoples who produced them, Mixtec investigator Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez and I have proposed to rename the main manuscripts in Mesoamerican terms and call them after their place of origin or after salient topics in their contents (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2004). For example, scholars have baptized the corpus of pre-colonial religious codices the "Borgia Group", after the main manuscript which was named after its European owner at the end of the 18th century: Cardinal Stefano Borgia (1731-1804). In the Aztec language, however, this genre was known as *teo-amoxtli*, literally "divine book(s)". This is the reason for proposing to introduce the new designation "Teoamoxtli Group" or "Books of Wisdom" (table 1). According to Mesoamerican tradition, the 'original' *teoamoxtli* was formed by Huemac, a ruler of the Toltec realm, which preceded the Aztecs and was considered by them the exemplary ancient civilization par excellence (Ixtilxochitl 1975/77, I: 270 ff).²

Although the provenience of most members of the Teoamoxtli Group is not precisely known, it is clear that three of these codices (Yada, Yecu, Yauhtepec) are related to the Oaxaca region and that this group in general shares many stylistic and iconographical elements with the Mixtec historical codices. On the other hand, there are important links to Aztec manuscripts such as Codex Cihuacoatl (Borbonicus). Codex Yoalli Ehecatl has parallels with frescos from the Tlaxcala region (Tizatlan, Ocotelulco) in Central Mexico, but also with the frescos of Mitla in the Southern Mexican State of Oaxaca. Last but not least there are important parallels with the few surviving Maya books, especially the codex preserved in Dresden.³ All this suggests that we are looking at products that stem from a long and widespread tradition, which included the practice of copying earlier works, and that share an artistic and religious horizon as well as a historical background in which this tradition could develop and diffuse. Historical and archaeological data point to the cultural interaction in the Early Postclassic as the closest by phenomenon that could have been responsible for this connection. This interaction coincides with the Toltec expansion and its aftermath. The strong links in contents and iconography of the Teoamoxtli Group to the different parts of Mesoamerica provide support for the idea that this genre has indeed a Toltec antecedent.

The key for interpreting the pre-colonial images is the corpus of early colonial manuscripts that were produced under supervision of Spanish monks in order to document

Traditional name (institution where preserved)	New name (meaning)	Edition / commentary
Codex Borgia (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Rome)	<i>Codex Yoalli Ehecatl</i> (‘Book of Night and Wind’)	Nowotny 1976; Anders & Jansen & Reyes García 1993; Batalla Rosado 2008
Codex Vaticanus 3773 / “B” (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Rome)	<i>Codex Tonalpouhqui</i> (‘Book of the Diviner’)	Anders & Jansen 1993
Codex Cospi (Biblioteca Universitaria, Bologna)	<i>Codex Tlamanalli</i> (‘Book of Offerings’)	Laurencich Minelli 1992; Anders & Jansen & Van der Loo 1994
Codex Fejérvàry-Mayer (City of Liverpool Museums)	<i>Codex Tezcatlipoca</i> (‘Book of the Smoking Mirror’)	Anders & Jansen & Pérez Jiménez 1994; León-Portilla 2005
Codex Laud (Bodleian Library, Oxford)	<i>Codex Mictlan</i> (‘Book of Death’)	Anders & Jansen 1994
Codex Porfirio Díaz ¹ (Biblioteca Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City)	<i>Codex Yada</i> (Book of Tututepetongo)	Anders & Jansen 1994: part IV; Van Doesburg 2001
Codex Fonds Mexicain 20/21 Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	<i>Codex Yecu</i> (Painting of the War Ritual)	Jansen 1998; Simonin 1998.
Codex Yauhtepec ² (in community)	<i>Codex Yauhtepec</i>	unpublished

Table 1 The Teomoxtli (Borgia) Group

the ‘pagan’ religious convictions that they wanted to eradicate.⁴ The Mesoamerican calendar is the main subject matter and structuring principle of the ancient books. Inscriptions show that this specific time count was already in use more than 2000 years ago. The system used in Central and Southern Mexico (Caso 1967) differed slightly from that of the Maya area, but the fundamental characteristics were the same. The basic unit was a cycle of 260 days, formed by combining the numbers 1 to 13 with twenty day signs in a fixed sequence. With this unit many more periods were formed. Within the continuous sequence of 260-day cycles, solar years of 365 days were distinguished and marked as units for agricultural purposes (including rituals) and for dating historical events (fig. 1). The solar years were subdivided into 18 ‘months’ of 20 days, with 5 ‘superfluous days’. The feasts of these periods were the hallmarks of community life. The solar years were grouped into units of 52 (the “Calendar Round”). In Central and Southern Mexico each solar year was named after a specific day, the “year bearer”. Full dates consisted of a day and a year bearer. The Maya achieved a similar connection of the 260-day cycle with the 365-day cycle by registering each day’s position in a ‘month’. For mathematical reasons only four day-signs may occur in year-bearer positions. Classic Maya dates counted the number of years that had elapsed since a virtual ‘zero point’ in 3114 BC. The inscriptions often contain astronomical references, such as lunar positions, heliacal

risings of Venus, solar eclipses, etc. (Freidel et al. 1993).

Much more than a chronometric device, the calendar was the paramount structuring principle of religious and social life. Each of the 260 days, but also each of the many periods defined within the calendar, was associated with specific patron deities, mythical personages and events, as well as with cosmologic realms (world-directions, earlier creations, layers of the universe). In spells and ritual speech, days appear as esoteric names for artefacts, places and natural elements. Each moment in time thus had a symbolic value, which was crucial for divination and ritual. A person’s day of birth became his/her ‘calendar name’, and this defined character, personhood, possible marriage partners and destiny. According to the day on which crucial events happened or problems (such as illness) manifested themselves, the priests predicted the outcome and prescribed ritual remedies and appropriate behaviour (Anders and Jansen 1993).

In the religious manuscripts we find different calendar units and periods associated with symbolic statements painted in figurative form and/or hieroglyphic signs, which, taken together, suggest the good and bad times for certain activities, respectively which rituals have to be performed in order to guarantee the desired outcome. The predictions and related ritual prescriptions make use of a wide-ranging and complex symbolic vocabulary that offers insights not only into their perception of time but also into the community’s ethos, psychology and attitudes toward nature.

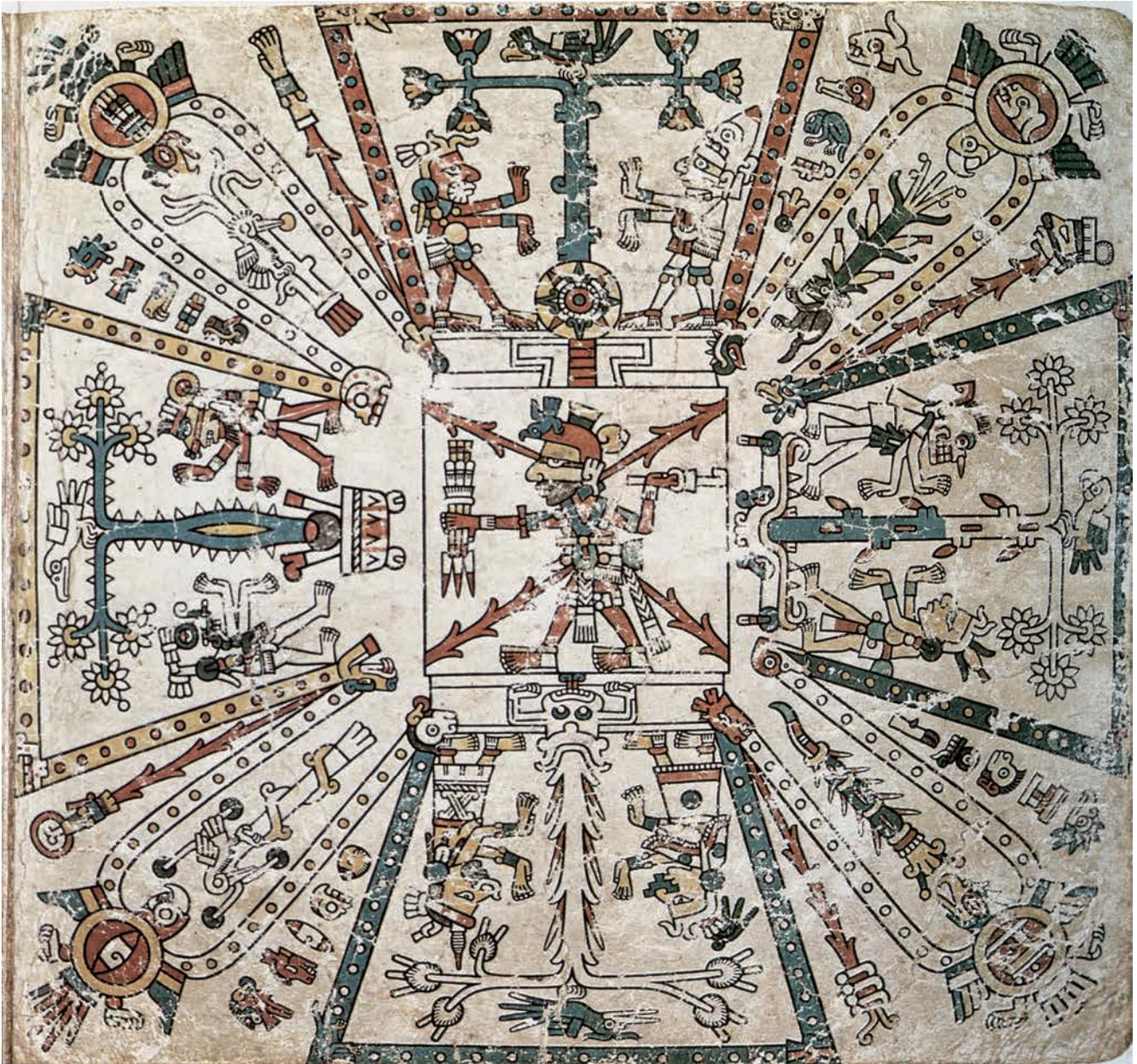


Figure 1 Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, p. 1 (Mexican pictographic book, Liverpool). The calendar count of 260 days encircles the four directions and the 9 Deities of the Nights, with symbolic references to the four directions (trees, birds) and harvest predictions. The East-West axis is represented by an altar with the rising sun and a white being carrying the moon (in the upper and lower segment respectively).

3 COLONIAL TRANSFORMATION

The 16th century colonization connects the history of Middle America with that of late- and post-medieval Europe. The Spanish conquistadors and missionaries (e.g. Motolinia, Sahagún, Durán, Ruiz de Alarcón and Landa) already refer to the social importance, the astronomical complexity, the symbolic associations and ritual dimension of the calendar used by the Aztecs, Mixtecs, Mayas and other Mesoamerican peoples, but, being children of their time, they considered the religious aspects of the native calendar “diabolical” and consequently provided incomplete and biased descriptions (Gruzinski 1988; Burkhart 1989). In their zeal to replace the native religion by Catholicism, they tried to erase this calendar, by prohibiting its use and by burning the pre-colonial manuscript books in which its religious meanings were registered. This religious persecution was part of the same process as the contemporaneous witch trials in Europe (e.g. Ginzburg 1989; Cohn 2001).

In the decades following the Spanish conquest of Mexico (AD 1521), religious and ideological processes were set in motion that would transform Middle America’s world and symbolic universe drastically. The colonizers and the colonized coexisted during hundreds of years, combining complex interaction with a persistent mental segregation. In inscribing their own, new sacred landscape on the earlier Mesoamerican locales, the Spanish Dominican missionaries, together with native artists and workers, built monasteries and churches, which in their architecture and art (altarpieces, sculptures, frescos) expressed the Christian ideas, but also, in directing themselves to the native population, made use of the pre-existing Mesoamerican idiom of terms, techniques, spatial organization, and symbolic associations. In many cases the locations for these Catholic buildings followed an underlying pre-colonial indigenous conceptualization of geography in terms of cosmic order.

On a more abstract level the same phenomenon affected the perception of and dealing with time. Particularly interesting is the development of the fiesta cycle and the related world-view during the colonial period (e.g. Ingham 1986; Curcio-Nagy 2004). Here we find a “symbolic reconfiguration” and “double encoding” of religious ideas and practices in both native and Christian terms, a special form of what commonly is referred to as “hybridity” or “syncretism” (e.g. Burke 2009; Witter 2011), which allowed for a strengthening and revival of traditional values and ritual life in the face of violent, disintegrating forces from the outside. Ancient deities and myths were fused with saints and Christian concepts. Widespread examples of intercultural translations are the identification of Christ as Lord Maize or acts such as making the sign of the cross (both a Christian symbol and a reference of the four directions) and praying to ‘Lord Sun’ at daybreak as ‘Eternal Father’ to watch over the supplicant’s road during daytime.

In the process of cultural interaction, indigenous authors produced some fascinating documents, which constitute a central concern within ethnohistorical studies (Wood 2003; Berdan 2009; Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2009). The study of documents in indigenous languages is crucial for understanding the dialogues between Europeans and Mesoamerican peoples, rather than focusing on the European monologue. These documents – partly in Spanish, partly in Mesoamerican languages – contain valuable details on the structure and use of the calendar, the divinatory meaning of days, associated ritual practices and related sacred narratives. They show how on the one hand pre-colonial ideas were continued, and on the other new terms and elements from Europe were incorporated and adapted. Particularly interesting is the relationship between calendar-based prophecies and indigenous resistance movements (cf. Ouweneel 2005).

The Books of Chilam Balam, for example, constitute a corpus of texts in Yucatec Maya, written with the alphabet that was introduced by the Spaniards. These texts connect references to historical events with prophetic images associated with specific days and periods, resulting in a remarkable form of “mantic historiography” based on a cyclical view and interpretation of time (Farriss 1987). Another example is the translation of European astrological texts, almanacs, ‘books of hours’ and reportorios de los tiempos into Mesoamerican languages – one example is the Izcatqui manuscript in the Aztec language, preserved in the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam.⁵ These documents provide new insights into the translation, interpretation and discussion of the European world-view by indigenous daykeepers, in the wider dramatic context of colonial transculturation and changes in symbolic meaning and ritual structuring of time and their consequences for collective memory and identity. The particular consequences of this process manifest themselves today in the ways in which indigenous diviners make use of Spanish astrological and other ‘occult’ texts (e.g. the Oráculo de Napoleón and the Libro de San Cipriano, which are widely distributed and easily available). This particular intellectual interaction between Mesoamericans and Europeans in the colonial period is an interesting chapter in the global history of ideas but has not yet received the scholarly attention it deserves.

4 DECIPHERMENT OF THE TEOAMOXTLI GROUP

The exiled Jesuit Joselino Fábrega, working in Rome for Cardinal Borgia at the end of the 18th Century, was the first to write a commentary on Codex Borgia, comparing it to the colonial religious manuscripts, explained by Spanish friars (Fábrega 1899). Fábrega’s work (nurtured by indications from the great Mexican scholar Antonio de León y Gama, his contemporary) was eclipsed by the interpretive studies of Eduard Selser (1845-1922), which produced generally very

well-founded iconographical descriptions and identifications of the individual signs (cf. Anders 1967). According to the ideas of his time, which saw religion as a metaphoric representation of natural phenomena, particularly those of the sky, Selser tended to interpret the contents of these books in terms of symbols that ultimately had an astronomical meaning (*Astraldeutung*). Selser's influence has remained very strong. His commentary on Codex Borgia, originally published in German (Selser 1904-1909), was translated into Spanish and published in an accessible edition in Mexico (1963), which has been reprinted several times since. Obviously this publication could be connected easily with rising modern interest in archaeo-astronomy. We should remember, however, that although his contributions to iconographical analysis are fundamental and lasting, Selser's interpretive paradigm already had become obsolete in the mid-20th century (Dorson 1955).

The basis for the modern interpretation of the few religious books of the ancient Mesoamerican civilization that have survived colonial destruction, is the work of the Austrian scholar Karl Anton Nowotny (1904-1978). Having been introduced to the astronomical interpretation during his university study in Vienna before World War II, Nowotny started a series of innovative in-depth investigations of Mexican visual art after the war was over. He made a thorough analysis of the place signs in the Aztec Codex Mendoza, providing nothing less than a nutshell pictographic dictionary (Nowotny 1959; cf. Reyes García 1997).

In parallel to the work of the Mexican archaeologist Alfonso Caso, he discovered the historical character of the Mixtec codices – that other part of the corpus of pre-colonial pictorial manuscripts – and commented on their ritual scenes. His profound knowledge of religious texts and divinatory systems in Medieval Europe and other cultures (evidenced in his edition of Agrippa von Nettesheim's *De occulta philosophia*) enabled Nowotny to recognize the Teomoxtlí codices (Borgia Group) as priestly manuals dealing with the art of divination and with prescriptions for rituals, based on the Mesoamerican calendar and its multiple symbolic associations. A synthesis of this breakthrough is his major work: *Tlacuilolli, die mexikanischen Bilderhandschriften, Stil und Inhalt, mit einem Katalog der Codex Borgia Gruppe*, published in 1961. This magnum opus is more than a compendium or manual; it is a paradigmatic change with respect to Selser. It is not a polemic work but presupposes a good knowledge of Selser's contributions. Like Selser, Nowotny parts from a superb overview of the whole corpus of codices and related texts, and from a conviction that the scenes are not to be seen or used as mere illustrations, but are impressive, coherent works with their own voice. He qualified the genre of most religious codices as "mantic" and "ritual", and analysed the scenes not as occult codifications

of astronomical cycles, but as sets of symbols that give meaning to calendrical structures. The Maya codices do contain astronomical calculations but in this same mantic context. Methodologically Nowotny identified a number of pitfalls and criticized particularly those who wanted to rush to premature, fanciful speculations. Nowotny did indicate the road to arrive at that stage of more advanced interpretation, however, by emphasizing the cultural continuity in Mesoamerica as a crucial clue for understanding the ancient images. As parallels in Europe he mentioned the research on toponyms and legends (*Flurnamenforschung, Sagenforschung*) in connection with a general documentation and study of lore and oral tradition (*Heimatkunde*). More field research was necessary – an activity which he himself was not able to undertake, due to his limited possibilities before and after the war.

As he organizes and discusses the scenes in terms of the distinct calendar counts, with few explanations of the symbolism used, Nowotny's text is condensed, technical and abstract. Still, his work inspired a next generation of students, such as Ferdinand Anders, Werner Stenzel and Hans Biedermann, and formed the point of departure for a long-term project of facsimile editions of Mexican codices at the Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt (ADEVA) in Graz. In 1976 Nowotny himself contributed to this series an important commentary on Codex Yoalli Ehecatl (Borgia), which became the basis for a less technical and more accessible study of this genre by Biedermann (1989).

Teaching at the Institut für Völkerkunde of Vienna University, Ferdinand Anders followed Nowotny's focus on the connection between the ancient Mexican civilization and the cultural heritage of contemporary indigenous peoples, and started a project of fieldwork in the Ñahñu (Otomí) village of San Pablito in the Sierra de Puebla, a centre of traditional amate-paper production. In the curing and planting rituals, involving figures cut from *amate* paper, Anders and his students discovered important conceptual and even iconographical parallels to the codices (cf. Anders and Jansen 1986).

Continuing in this line of scholarship, which combines a historical-geographical dimension with references to rituals and sacred narratives, Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez, working at Leiden University, and I have tried together with several students and PhD candidates, to reconnect the images of the codices to on-going cultural traditions, in the wider context of the struggle of indigenous peoples for emancipation, dignity and cultural rights.⁶ For the Teomoxtlí group an important moment was the prolonged workshop organized at Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C. (summer of 1982) with the participation of Ferdinand Anders, Elizabeth Boone, John Carlson, Henry B. Nicholson, Edward B. Sisson, Peter van der Loo, Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez and myself.

At the occasion of the 500th commemoration of Columbus' fateful voyage, a collaborative effort of the Fondo de Cultura Económica (FCE), Mexico, and the Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt (ADEVA), Graz, made it possible to publish in the 1990s a series of facsimile editions with new commentaries in Spanish: the series *Códices Mexicanos*, actually one work in 13 volumes, under supervision and editorship of Anders, Jansen and Reyes García (1991-1997). Our main aim was to let the ancient books speak for themselves, as a testimony of the great civilization that had suffered the onslaught of colonialism. Inspired and guided by the cooperation of Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez and Luis Reyes García with their active knowledge of respectively Mixtec and Nahuatl oral literature, I designed the commentaries as 'readings' of the pictorial texts, based upon detailed iconological analysis and a review of the relevant historical and ethnographic data (finding their way in the introductions and notes).

For the historical ('descriptive') codices a reading in the form of a narrative was logical, but for the predominantly religious ('prescriptive') codices this method was more difficult, as we are dealing here with a different genre. Following Nowotny's analysis, we tried to interpret and read

their contents as mantic texts or as prescriptions for rituals. Confronted with these colourful sacred books, one might feel tempted to look precisely for mystical theological-philosophical speculations or narrative structures of myths. Mantic texts, however, although using arcane expressions and religious associations, generally aim to do the contrary, namely to present relatively straightforward statements about the influence of specific deities on a variety of quotidian human activities during certain time periods. These mantic expressions are intimately tied to the daily life and cultural surroundings of the expected clients (fig. 2).

From a comparative perspective we know that mantic texts tend to be fundamentally ambivalent and 'open', a quality created through the use of the literary, arcane language, full of metaphors. This brought us to consider the forms of Mesoamerican ceremonial discourse, e.g. the 'speaking in pairs' (difrasismos), present in early colonial documents and still alive in oral tradition.⁷ It is precisely from this perspective that we have tried to read the images in the codices by connecting them to the historically documented and/or still living traditions. We have found that the very effort to read the scenes in terms of indigenous languages, metaphors and conventions of oral literature is a fruitful



Figure 2 Codex Borgia, p. 21: In this period, indicated by the days [3] Water, Alligator, Reed, Serpent and Movement and six following sets of days, the merchant carrying precious goods (quetzal bird) travels under the auspices of the deity Red Tezcatlipoca ("Smoking Mirror"). He may encounter bad luck: the tree (success, continuity, lineage, rulership) breaks; serpents and dangerous animals bar the road. A mysterious enemy (Black Tezcatlipoca) throws a burning stick with spikes at him.

heuristic procedure. Of course, we do not pretend that our interpretation is final and definitive; on the contrary we stress that our commentaries should be used as tools to produce improvements and further understanding.

The commentaries of the *Códices Mexicanos* series, therefore, contain ‘direct readings’, transliterations of the images, as their central part, while the arguments that support the underlying interpretations are given in introductions and notes. This new way of writing commentaries, in combination with the fact that we followed the breakthroughs and methodological principles of Nowotny, which – being published only in German – had not yet become generally known, was bound to cause surprise and bewilderment among several colleagues. In spite of the abundant supporting data given in the multi-volume work, some reviewers asked for even more evidence for our interpretations, as they limited their attention to some specific sections and maybe were not always aware of the real state of the art in this complex field (cf. Jansen 1999).

5 NEW COMMENTARIES

Fortunately several new books have appeared in the past five years, which will permit a new appreciation of these beautiful pictorial manuscripts. First of all we should mention the English translation of Nowotny’s *Tlacuilolli* (1961), published by the well-known University of Oklahoma Press (2005). The idea for this translation was born already in 1982 at the Dumbarton Oaks summer workshop and then realized through the collaboration of George Everett (associate professor of German) and Edward Sisson (an archaeologist specialized in the style and iconography of Postclassic Mexico). These two scholars have done much more than a translation: by adding notes and a bibliography they provided a very useful update of this now classic monograph. The foreword by Ferdinand Anders explains its importance and gives valuable background information.

Although all modern research on codices should build on Nowotny’s work, this proves to be not so easy, as he wrote in an aphoristic style. Who looks through the pages for a straightforward interpretation of specific scenes will often suffer a disillusion. The value of this magnum opus is in its method and scope. Therefore, in order to understand Nowotny’s contribution one really needs a good previous knowledge of the subject matter (e.g. reading his texts against Seler’s), as well as concentration, discipline and patience, which in the end will be rewarded with critical insights.

Another outcome of the above-mentioned Dumbarton Oaks summer workshop (1982) is the new monograph on the Teoamoxtli (Borgia) Group by Elizabeth Boone, entitled *Cycles of Time and Meaning in the Mexican Books of Fate*

(2007). Boone applies an art-historical focus on the composition of the pictorial scenes, presenting comprehensive and clear descriptions of such aspects as reading patterns, different types of almanacs (lists, tables, diagrams), and different series of deities. When it comes to meaning of the scenes and to the discussion of provenience, she follows existing literature, but provides a very well-ordered and illustrated presentation with good explanatory tables, notes and bibliographical references.⁸ Although Boone’s monograph is not based on fieldwork or other personal familiarity with living Mesoamerican culture, and is consequently limited in what it offers as original interpretations, it is a much needed overview and a very instructive and comprehensive introduction to the complex world of the Mexican religious codices. It is a worthy counterpart to her earlier synthetic presentation of the Aztec and Mixtec pictorial manuscripts with historical and geographical contents (Boone 2000).

Shortly after Boone’s study, the Biblioteca Apostólica Vaticana itself brought out a magnificent new edition of Codex Yoalli Ehecatl (Borgia). Author of the monumental commentary (2008) is Juan José Batalla Rosado, a historian specialized in the study of Mexican codices, teaching at the Universidad Complutense, Madrid. His text goes much further than explaining the images of the codex: it contains a detailed introduction to Mesoamerican archaeology, religion, calendar and writing system (more than 200 pages), furthermore a detailed discussion of the whole Teoamoxtli (Borgia) Group, its provenience, the problems and methods of interpretation (some 60 pages), and finally a page-by-page discussion of the Codex Yoalli Ehecatl (Borgia) with multiple cross-references to other manuscripts. In his thorough treatment Batalla Rosado explicitly reproduces and discusses earlier interpretations.⁹ His analytic descriptions are detailed and excellent. The erudition is impressive, the methodology of source criticism in the best historical tradition, the codicological research is original and meticulous.

With its broad introduction and its comprehensive and critical references to the different interpretations of each scene, Batalla Rosado’s commentary complements very nicely the more generally structured book of Boone. Taken together, both works form an excellent point of departure for new modern studies of this subject matter.

Both Boone and Batalla Rosado offer new ideas about the famous enigmatic central chapter of Codex Yoalli Ehecatl (Borgia), pp. 29-47. Seler, inspired by Babylonian texts (*sic*), saw in this section the descent of Venus into the Underworld, while Nowotny interpreted these pages as a sequence of rituals in a specific ceremonial centre. In the FCE series, I followed Nowotny’s indication and elaborated this considerably further, identifying the central figure in these rituals as the priest of Cihuacoatl, a complex skeletal

Goddess, associated with the nightly sky and with the ancestors, a power of death and birth (Klein 1988; 2000).

Boone takes from Selser the idea that these scenes tell a religiously charged narrative, but she proposes that the narrative deals with creation. The first scene or episode (page 29), where I see hallucinogenic smoke rising from a central bowl and producing a visionary experience, represents in Boone's opinion a burst of creative energy and power – one would say some form of Mesoamerican 'big bang' (fig. 3). In a similar way Boone interprets the following episodes not as rituals but as different stages of creation. Batalla Rosado also tends to combine Selser's narrative interpretation with Nowotny's focus on ritual. He suggests that the scenes might refer to the visionary voyage of a priest through the underworld.

These suggestions are interesting and should provoke new research. Do the different scenes in which objects are animated and in which certain beings emerge from concrete elements, indeed represent creation acts or rather the forces that are invoked and liberated through ritual?

Clearly, ritual is a central element in the temple scenes of Codex Yoalli Ehecatl (Borgia). Many acts are ritual in character: self-sacrifices, opening of the Sacred Bundle, bathing, etc., and take place in typical ritual spaces, such as temple buildings and chambers, plazas, and ball courts, connected by roads. Selser already noted that there are abbreviated parallels of all this in the Mixtec codex Tonindey (Nuttall), p. 15, which shows similar buildings as part of a ritual event in a historical context. In the colours surrounding the temples in Codex Yoalli Ehecatl (Borgia), pp. 29-32, we observe the progression of night, dawn and day (Nowotny 1976), which seems to specify the moment of ritual activity.

The distinction between a ritual and a narrative interpretation is less essential than one might suppose. Rituals are obviously priestly activities which often have cosmological connotations and are connected to the world of visions and ancestors. They are often connected with (enactments of) sacred narratives, deal with similar themes and bring out similar roles, personages, environments, objects, metaphors and dramatic structures (cf. Turner 1990; Tilley 2000).

In connection with these two new commentaries one should certainly consult the really transcending new interpretive monograph *El Lenguaje Enmascarado: Un acercamiento a las representaciones gráficas de deidades nahuas* (2008), by Katarzyna Mikulska-Dąbrowska (University of Warsaw). This extraordinary and well-documented work takes a technical iconographical question concerning the representation of deities as point of departure for an in-depth study of religious metaphorical and ceremonial language and a profound search for the very character of those deities and for the nature of Mesoamerican religion itself. On the basis

of a well-explained philological and semiotic-iconological method, in the best European tradition, Mikulska guides us through the world of the Mexican pictorial manuscripts in a very original, yet coherent, well argued and founded manner. She discusses the different divinities, the body parts and animic forces, the value of various materials, cosmology, ancestor cult, visionary experiences and the alter ego (nahual), bringing us back to the thought and conceptualization of the authors of the ancient books, and showing the process of their artistic creativity in speech and painting.¹⁰ Among the interpretive problems she solves is that of the deity Omoteotl, whose name has been translated as "two (ome) - god (teotl)" and interpreted as a pre-colonial philosophical concept: a deification of the idea of duality (a notion particularly popular in the current of structuralism). After a detailed discussion, Mikulska concludes in favour of an alternative interpretation which reads this name as omi(tl) teotl, "God of Bone(s)", i.e. a reference to a deity of death and the world of the ancestors.

6 CULTURAL CONTINUITY

Both Boone (2007) and Batalla Rosado (2008) base themselves on the commentaries published in the Fondo de Cultura Económica series, but they themselves do not follow the method, indicated there, of enriching interpretive potential with the results of ethnographic fieldwork and collaboration with indigenous experts. Still, for a full understanding of the ancient Mexican books, a much better analysis of mantic symbolism with related ritual practices, narratives and ceremonial discourses is indispensable. And, as only a limited number of mantic texts from Mesoamerica have been adequately registered, the valuable (but biased and incomplete) information of the colonial sources should be complemented by contemporary oral traditions.

Nearly everywhere on the American continent did the colonization lead to the annihilation of ancient time-counts. In Mexico and Guatemala there are, however, a few communities where (part of) the pre-colonial calendar is still in use (originally identified by Schultze Jena 1933/38; cf. Miles 1952). The question of what can be derived from cultural continuity (also referred to as "analogy") was a subject of much contention back in the 1980s, but that debate has since largely been superseded by the introduction of long-term perspectives (inspired by the Braudelian "*longue durée*"). Needless to say, cultures are in permanent development, change and renewal. Yet, at the same time, they tend to keep on grappling with recurring, relatively stable matters. These are identified by López Austin's authoritative studies (1990; 1994) as a core ("*núcleo duro*"), i.e. a coherent set of traits and tendencies that show long continuity over time and that may be used as building blocks in the interpretation process. Specialists on this topic

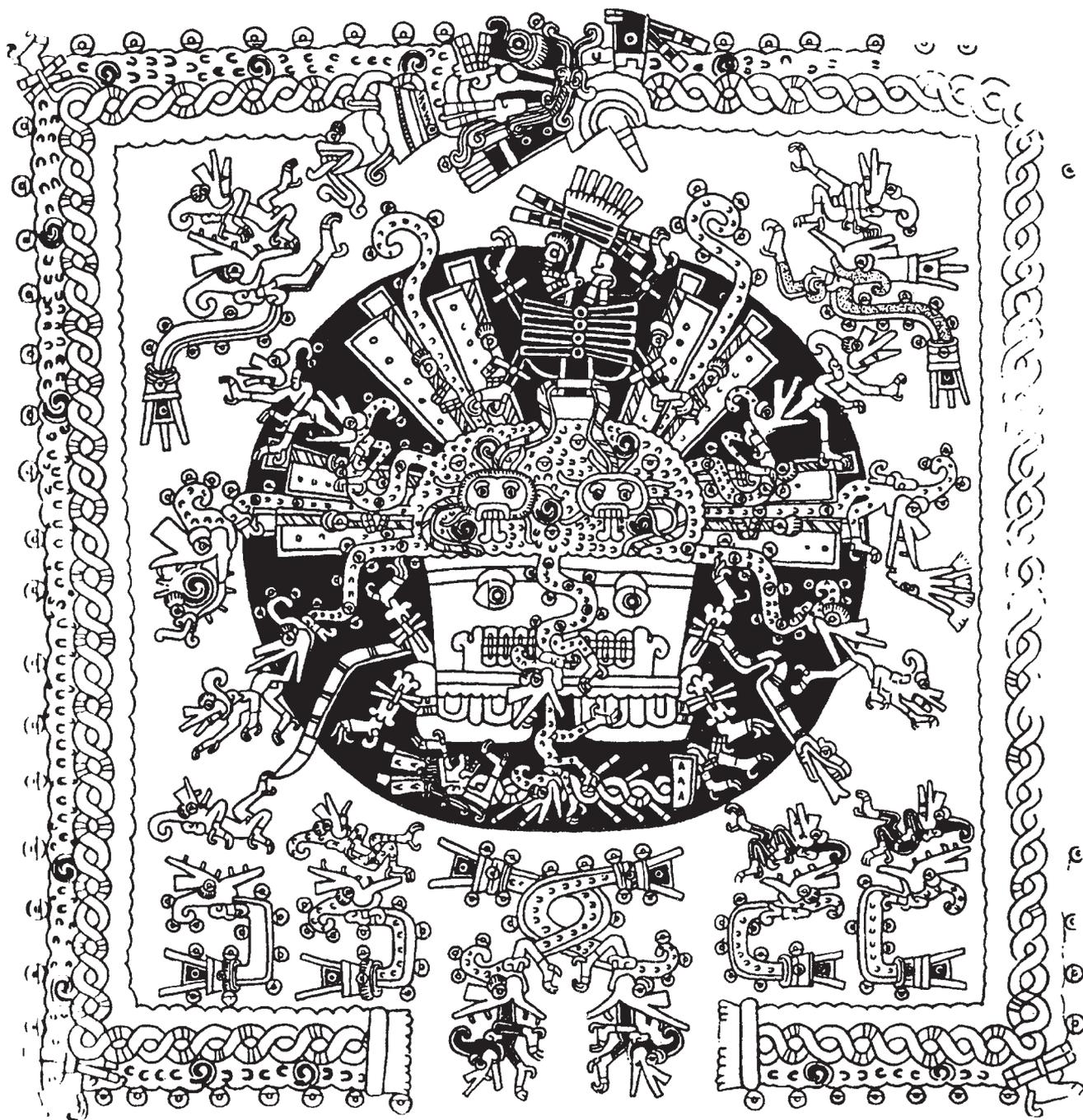


Figure 3 Codex Yoalli Ehecatl (Borgia), p. 29 (Nowotny 1961).

generally accept that the contemporary indigenous calendars with their specific characteristics are continuous from the pre-colonial calendar with the same characteristics. Tedlock in her classic monograph (1982) states on the first page: “*But it is among the Highland Maya rather than among their Lowland cousins that time continues to this day to be calculated and given meaning according to ancient methods.*” Thus, our comparison between past and present stages is not aimed at demonstrating that there is a stable continuity between the two, but that – while taking account of principal differences and historical processes – there are recurring patterns, which allow us to follow and understand the indigenous tradition in changing cultural-historical contexts. Of course the comparison between cultural elements of the present (oral traditions) with those of the past (visual art, historical sources) is a critical procedure, which implies that we should examine and take into account the changes and innovations that have occurred. In other words, we have to situate this comparison always in the context of an in-depth study of cultural-historical differences and developments (cf. Lightfoot 1995; Joyce *et al.* 2002).

Today elements of the Mesoamerican calendar still survive among the Nahua, Mixe, Mazatec, Mixtec, Zapotec, K’iché, Ixil, Kanjobal, and several other peoples, precisely in mantic and ritual contexts, associated with traditional healing rituals in the widest sense.¹¹ Here the ancient calendar is used by “daykeepers”, religious specialists who act as traditional healers and mediators in conflicts. They fulfil a crucial role as interpreters of the divine will, which they recognize and read in the names of days and associated deities. Time gives diverse kinds of information to the daykeeper, so he/she can recommend specific ritual treatments. The 260-day count, with its different divisions, is still the basis for their divinatory practices and complex counting-mechanisms, involving the casting of beans and/or crystals, and calendar ceremonies at specific locales in the sacred landscape in and around the villages. In accordance with the four day-signs that can occur as “year bearer”, the solar years of 365-days are connected to the four world-directions with their symbols and auguries. The New Year is ‘greeted’ in a ceremony at one of the four sacred mountaintops that represent those cardinal points. Many of the feasts associated with the ancient calendar have been incorporated into the Christian ritual year.

The Mesoamerican liturgical year (set of rituals in relation to agriculture and astronomy) was overwritten with the Christian calendar of saints and feasts, but remained present in a syncretistic manner as an underlying structure. This process determined the choice of certain Patron Saints and certain feasts as being particularly important. The focal points of the indigenous liturgical cycle became the Days of the Dead (Oct. 31st / Nov. 2nd) and the Day of the Holy Cross (May 3), the first being a family ceremony which to

some extent continues the ancient ancestor worship, the second involving a collective ritual for the Rain God. Carnival has taken the place of the five-day period at the end of the year, while the Holy Week coincides with the end of the dry season, when the Maize God – Christ – has died. In this way much of the calendar’s cosmological character and ritual function is (often implicitly) maintained. Some aspects of related astronomical lore may still be found (Remington 1977).

The divinatory calendar dictates which date is ‘good’ and appropriate to do or start a particular petition or heal the body. The starting moment of an illness or a bad dream is very relevant. If somebody falls ill on a day considered not that good, with unfortunate auguries accompanying it, this means that the sickness will be hard to cure or that somebody else having transformed into an animal-companion (*nahual*) may have caused the injuries. The prayer texts associated with the calendar rituals are generally esoteric in character and language, using archaic terms, metaphors and literary forms (parallelism, hendiadys), e.g. ‘stick and stone’ for punishment or misfortune (fig. 4). The divinatory meaning of a day is often expressed through ‘mnemonics’, i.e. short expressions that are phonetically similar to or otherwise associated with the day name (Tedlock 1982).

Almost no consultation of the calendar is complete without complex and esoteric divination rituals, such as the casting of maize seeds (Rojas Martínez Gracida 2012). The symbolic categories, used in divination, often correlate with the meanings attributed to dream images. Dreams are connected with time and have complex symbolic implications: they are vehicles to communicate with the Other World, where the elders and owners of nature (hills, rivers, etc.) live, and consequently they may reveal important facts on the health of the dreamer or other specific persons and indicate negative or positive influences on them, as well as contain indications for future actions. The deceased do not disappear from the world of the living and do not stop being social agents: they constantly interact with the living and if they are not kept in mind and respected, they can cause problems (bad luck) or illnesses. If elders that have passed away appear in the dream, it means that they are asking for ritual attention, including prayers, candles and food offerings. Consequently, dreams are very important in Mesoamerican culture, and a main topic of daily family talks. The examination of dreams helps the daykeeper / healer to recommend a proper ritual treatment. Similarly, revelation dreams are a common aspect of the vocation and initiation of ritual specialists (Anders *et al.* 1994; Rojas Martínez Gracida 2012)

The symbols and divine powers are intimately connected to the calendar, that is, to structured and symbolically charged time, contributing to the sense of order and security. The continuous and ‘logical’ reference to complex external



Figure 4 Left: traditional Mixe altar with offerings today on the sacred mountain Zempoaltepetl (photo: courtesy of Araceli Rojas Martínez Gracida). Right: offerings of bundles of 11 fir needles or flowers, laid out in two rows of 10 and one row of 11 on an altar for a Deity of Light on the day 1 Death, together with burning fire wood, against harm and dangers symbolized by thorns and biting or stinging animals - Codex Tezcatlipoca (Fejérváry-Mayer), p. 5.

data (the calendar and its symbols) as well as to the authority of tradition and world-view, lends a sense of ‘objective’ value to the message and the vision of the future, removing it from purely subjective guesswork. This is reinforced by the ritual acts and ceremonial speech (cf. fig. 4), which may involve special mnemonics, including phonetic or other associations, as may be observed in several contemporary cases worldwide (cf. Tilley 2000; Zeitlyn 2001; Hatfield 2002; Keane 2004).

Several ritual acts, as well as symbols and metaphors associated with contemporary calendar use, also appear in the ancient manuscripts (cf. Dehouve 2007). These scenes do not reveal the future but the dispositions of unseen powers, and present sets of symbols from which the human mind selects what seems adequate for the situation. In this manner the specialist, making use of his/her profound experience, local knowledge and psychological insights, enables the person who consults him/her to recognize and interpret the different aspects of the situation, and so provides psychological guidance. Analysing the symbolic images together and trying to apply them to the concrete situation, the expert (priest) and the one who seeks council discuss which road to go and may arrive at a shared determination or concrete advice.

Divination usually concludes with a moral message: one should live carefully and attend the superhuman powers with respect, humility and piety, bringing offerings and performing self-sacrifice; all of the recommendations are in

accordance with the traditional value system (the “canonical messages” discussed by Rappaport 1999).

Mantic operations should not be seen as ‘tricks’ in which the expert pretends to know the future, but as valuable shared psychological examinations under the guidance of an expert. Usually they have a profound and positive effect: the application of cultural symbols to interpret and explore the different aspects of a problem may transform a state of anxiety, doubts and affliction into one of reflection and serenity (a state that promotes proper decision-making). The result of this exercise generally is a *katharsis* and a new confidence that the situation is understood and will end well, an inner power and sense of hope, which enables the individual to confront problems and find consolation.

This psychological-social approach takes divination seriously as an important cultural phenomenon, related to the perception and symbolic evaluation of time. As such, it escapes from the discussion about the relationships between magic and science (cf. Curry 2010).

Unfortunately Mesoamerican cultural memory, in particular the remains of religious thought and practice, are rapidly eroding under the influences of discrimination and violence, as well as modernization and globalization. While Catholicism, imposed in the colonial period, has had a negative impact on Mesoamerican religion but also permitted its partial survival in syncretistic forms. However, the more recent introduction of Protestantism has also become a seriously detrimental factor as it strongly condemns

traditional ideas and practices. Large-scale migration to the cities and to the U.S. is an element of both disruption and new consciousness (Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2005). Younger generations, very much influenced by modern urban life-styles and media, are often no longer aware of calendar knowledge and its symbolic-ritual dimensions, but, on the other hand, may start a new quest for their origins.

Similarly, the ancient calendar has been discovered by revitalization movements in Guatemala after the period of genocide as a marker of ethnic/cultural identity. The K'iche' calendar, for example is now being reproduced and modelled by cultural revitalization activists all over Guatemala (Paz 1992; Wilson 1999; Frühsorge 2010). In fact, such widespread revitalizations make it difficult to see or uncover original local traditions. Another, more disturbing factor is the hype of popular fascination with the 'Maya calendar' in the context of 'Western' spiritualist-esoteric-tourist movements and sensational fantasies concerning 'the end of the world in 2012'.

All in all, we are now seeing the very last remnants of traditional calendar uses and knowledge. A further more detailed documentation of these endangered traditions and concepts is therefore urgently needed.

7 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The difference between the Middle American calendar and the European/Christian calendar has been characterized as 'cyclical' vs. 'linear' (reformulated as 'polychrome' vs. 'monochrome'). Although this dichotomy is much too facile (Farriss 1987; Hassig 2001), we adopt these terms here for the sake of brevity. These designations are not mutually exclusive: both calendar systems (and world-views) have cyclical and linear aspects. Middle American tradition focuses on natural forces and rhythms: human activities may be presented in a linear way (e.g. genealogies of rulers), but generally subordinated to the cycles of sacred, cosmic time, which give them quality and meaning. The Christian calendar, although keeping track of seasons and other cyclical aspects, is predominantly structured along an eschatological time-line (*Creation > Birth and Crucifixion of Christ > Last Judgment*). The 'Western' focus on causality in history, and the scientific concept of evolution have further strengthened this linear view. On the other hand, European astrology is quite 'cyclical', which facilitated its incorporation in colonial Mesoamerican culture.

An examination of Mesoamerican stories, story-telling and memory, reveals different structures: linear vs. non-linear, cyclical or multilinear. Linear structures are plot-driven, based on some form of causality, and as such are easily recognized and understood by a 'Western' audience, accustomed since Antiquity to such forms of story-telling, still the dominant practice in Hollywood movies (Bal 1997).

Quite a few native accounts do not conform to such an arrangement, however, and may be qualified as 'non-linear'. A similar phenomenon may be observed in contemporary myths and folktales. The Teoamoxtli group contains many examples of cyclical compositions, but also the Codex Yuta Tnoho (Vindobonensis) is not 'plot-driven': instead it presents events in sacred time according to symbolic considerations and spatial cosmivision.

The transformation of the pre-colonial sacred landscape and symbolic universe (new religious norms as well as new economic structures) under Spanish rule called for new ways of identification with the world, informed by an ideational representational system based upon different conceptions of time, landscape, divinity and the self (Gruzinski 1988). Such a context confronts individuals with conflicting realities, and demands creative mental openings for the negotiation of identity (Bhabha 1994). In the contemporary markings of ethnic identity, such as community liturgy (fiestas such as Holy Week, the Patron Saint and the Days of the Dead), we see the social-cultural potential of concepts, actions and texts to provide a narrative cohesion, an identity to groups and individuals. Historical trauma and contemporary processes of modernization, globalization and migration shape and affect these identities, while also offering challenging opportunities (Alexander *et al.* 2004).

The analysis of the identitarian and intercultural dynamics in past and present brings us into the field of postcolonial studies, in particular the deconstructive analysis of Eurocentric representations (e.g. Mason 1991; Shohat and Stam 1996; Loomba 1998). Given the dramatic historical changes and conflicts in the region, "identity" is not to be explored in a reifying or essentializing ("nationalist") sense, but rather from a postmodern perspective (following philosophers such as Deleuze and historians such as Hobsbawm) as a dynamic process of "multiple becomings", a "nomadic" movement, in changing webs of affections and social relations (Braidotti 1994; 2006; Ríos Morales 2011).

Traditionally the pre-colonial world is investigated by archaeologists, the colonial period by (etno-)historians, and the present by anthropologists. This produces a fragmentation of knowledge. Furthermore, the indigenous cultures have often been studied, interpreted, collected and measured according to Western parameters of interest, a circumstance which may include the danger of Eurocentric bias and a lack of structural connections to indigenous agency in the field of education, cultural creativity, defence of rights etc. The situation is now changing. The indigenous peoples, generally living in disadvantaged conditions, victims of outside exploitation, discrimination and social conflicts (see the U.N. report *State of the World's Indigenous Peoples*, 2009) are internationally recognized in I.L.O. convention 169 and the U.N. Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

(after twenty years of preparatory work, adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in 2007 and also recognized as normative document by the European Union). These documents argue strongly for the respect for and protection of the cultural diversity embodied by the indigenous peoples.

This asks for rethinking methodology, theory and practice in order to create new forms of understanding, dialogue and partnership. Traditional divisions have to be replaced by a truly interdisciplinary approach with a focus on intercultural communication, and a further elaboration of “decolonizing methodology” (Tuhiwai Smith 1999; Denzin *et al.* 2008). This implies a connection of in-depth studies of indigenous languages, cultures, history and religion, with postcolonial theory (cf. Rios Morales 2011) and, first and foremost, the prominent active participation of indigenous experts.

Notes

1 The interpretation of these pictorial manuscripts has been a prominent part of the research I have carried out at the Faculty of Archaeology over the past three decades, together with Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez and several PhD candidates. With the support of the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), we have focused in the past years on surviving Mesoamerican time symbolism and memory, with the participation of Araceli Rojas Martínez Gracida, Caroline Aretz and Søren Wichmann. An Advanced Grant of the European Research Council makes it possible to develop this line of research further in the coming years.

2 It is now generally accepted that the term ‘Toltec’ not only refers to the archaeological culture associated with Tula (Early Postclassic) but also comprises the earlier, Classic civilization of Teotihuacan. The concept of civilization associated with this Toltec tradition is synthesized in the Aztec term *toltecatoytl*.

3 An important Aztec parallel is Codex Cihuacoatl (Borbonicus), which likely comes from Xochimilco and was sent by Aztec nobles to the Spanish king: it is mentioned among the possessions of Phillip II (Anders *et al.* 1991). The three Maya codices (Dresden, Madrid, Paris) have been published in an exemplary manner by Ferdinand Anders at the Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt in Graz, Austria (e.g. Deckert and Anders 1975): his exemplary facsimile editions have been reproduced by others several times. For advances in their interpretation see: Love 1994; Davoust 1997; Schele and Grube 1997; Vail and Aveni 2004; Bricker and Bricker 2011.

4 Most important in this respect are the codices Telleriano-Remensis (Quiñones Keber 1995), Vaticanus A (Anders and Jansen 1996), Tudela (Batalla Rosado 2002), Magliabechi (Anders and Jansen *et al.* 1996) and Ixtlilxochitl (Van Doesburg and Carrera González 1996). For Aztec calendar and divination: see also the explicit information in the work of Sahagún and the analytical study by Hinz 1978.

5 At present this text is topic of PhD research by Ilona Heijnen at Leiden University.

6 As for the Mixtec codices, we have built on the ground breaking work of Alfonso Caso, and followed the orientation of expert

teachers such as Wigberto Jiménez Moreno, Mary Elizabeth Smith, Nancy Troike and Emily Rabin. Our work has initiated what has been called the “Dutch school” or “escuela holandesa” in the interpretation of Mexican codices (Oudijk 2008; Batalla Rosado 2008). This term seems unfortunate to us, however, as this line of research started in Vienna, Austria (Ferdinand Anders), and was further developed at Leiden University in cooperation with colleagues from other institutions such as CIESAS in Mexico, the Faculty of Political Sciences of the University in Messina, Italy, and the Abteilung Altamerikanistik of Bonn University, Germany. Consequently this “school”, or rather line of research, is not limited to the Dutch environment, nor are all of its practitioners Dutch. More principally, a specific scholarly perspective should not be identified with a nationality. A general designation as “ethno-iconological method” (De la Cruz 2008: 20-21; cf. Jansen 1988) or “postcolonial hermeneutics” (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2011) seems more fitting. Examples of applications to Native American religion are the dissertations of Loo (1987), López García (2007), Witter (2011), Rios Morales (2011), Rojas Martínez Gracida (2012), which all concern Mesoamerica, and – focusing on the Yukon First Nations’ art in Canada – Van Kampen (2012).

7 For the Mixtec use of *difrasismos* see López García 2007 and Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2009.

8 “Although I do explain the iconography and mantic properties of a number of almanacs in some detail, readers should consult Seler as well as Anders *et al.* for the details of other almanacs, passages, and supernaturals.” (Boone 2007, 10).

9 “In synthesis, our position in interpreting the Borgia Group is generally in accordance with the current of Nowotny, developed with more amplitude by Ferdinand Anders and Maarten Jansen, although we will not hesitate to include the opinions of other authors and our own when we believe this is convenient.” (Batalla Rosado 2008, 268, my translation).

10 In a paper for the AHILA conference in Leiden, Mikulska (2009) elaborated upon the use of metaphors in pictorial writing. The topic was also discussed in several papers presented at a conference at Louvain-la-Neuve, edited by Sylvie Peperstraete (2009).

11 Nahuatl: Stresser-Péan 2005. Mixtec: Weitlaner Johnson and Weitlaner 1963; Miller 1966; Lipp 1991; Duinmeijer 1996; Rojas Martínez Gracida 2012. Mazatec: Weitlaner and Weitlaner 1946; Van Doesburg and Carrera González 1996. Chinantec: Weitlaner 1936. Mixtec: Van Liere and Schuth 2001. Zapotec: Van Meer 1990. K’iché: Tedlock 1982; Molesky-Poz 2006; Hart 2008. Kaqchikel: Maxwell and Hill 2006; Scott 2009. Q’eqch’i: Wilson 1999. Ixil: Colby and Colby 1981. Kanjobal: LaFarge and Byers 1931; Hinz 1990; Deuss 2007. Mam, Popti and Chuj: LaFarge 1947; Oakes 1951.

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Maarten E.R.G.N. Jansen
 Faculty of Archaeology
 Leiden University
 P.O. Box 9515
 2300 RA Leiden
 The Netherlands
 m.e.r.g.n.jansen@arch.leidenuniv.nl