The Mesoamerican codex re-entangled : production, use, and re-use of precolonial documents

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3. The Lifecycle of the Mesoamerican Codices

The previous two chapters focused on the process of creating a codex. In selecting this focus, the entanglements of the process of creating a codex have been explored. It has been shown that making these books requires a lot of materials, knowledge, technology, and people. The connections of these books with other "things" (as defined by Hodder, 2012, pp. 7-9) do not end there, however. Their use, which is relatively well understood from their contents, forms a further web of relations. This third chapter focusses on the life of the codex as a useful object within its originally intended context. It is in their use and thus in the interaction between these objects and human beings, that these books acquire meaning (Gosden & Marshall, 1999). A number of seemingly separate uses can be distinguished. Based on their content it is clear that they often acted as guides for ritual, though in some very different contexts. A secondary use is didactic. Any text can in theory be used as an example to help new scribes acquire skills. And to entangle the function of these books further, it must be considered that every use would have taken place within a certain physical setting and in relation with other objects. Even when not in use these books needed to be kept somewhere. This storage needs to be rather careful as the material used to make them is susceptible to wear. Even the best care cannot avoid damage to these books entirely. In the last part of this chapter, the processes that may have caused – or at least had the potential to cause – damage to these books are discussed based upon what can be observed on the codices as they are today. Processes of deterioration that continue, even if the books are treated with the utmost care as they are in modern libraries and museums, must have had an even bigger impact during their time of regular use. Some codices exhibit strategies of repair or reuse intended to reinvigorate the books. But, still, eventually books will reach an end of their useful life. A discussion of the life cycle of these codices, then, would not be complete without an examination of the intended end of these books.

3.1 CONTEXT OF USING A RELIGIOUS CODEX

The practical use of large parts of the religious codices is relatively well understood. The contents as they have been reconstructed are indicative for the setting of use. Different types of texts may be incorporated in one document, however. For example, in the codex Yoalli-Ehecatl there are clearly different sections that may have been consulted on separate occasions. Their incorporation in one physical book, however, means that even if different types of texts were incorporated which were each meant for a separate occasions, the book as a whole was in use in both occasions. Thus, when dealing with the use of the object, it is not helpful or informative to subdivide these religious documents into separate sections. This observation applies equally to the three Maya books, which contain texts in a genre similar to the central Mexican religious books. The only types of books discussed in a separate subsection of this chapter are the Mixtec historical documents. As will be shown, these books are also in a sense religious, however, their use did take place in a different setting. Analysis of the Mixtec historical documents, therefore, allows for us to identify at least two types of usage of the codices: private and communal.

Private usage of a religious codex would take place when an individual or a restricted amount of people consulted with a ritual specialist in order to resolve or avoid a problem. In the codices there are numerous pages that illustrate what such problems could have been. The pages on marriage, childbirth, and health, for instance, found in the codices Mictlan, Yoalli-Ehecatl, Tezcatlipoca, and Tonalpouhqui are good examples of potential problems (Anders, Jansen, & Cruz Ortiz, 1994; Anders, Jansen, Pérez Jiménez, & Reyes García, 1994; Anders et al., 1993a, 1993b; Boone, 2013, pp. 134-141). What characterises the private use, therefore, is that it arises out of a specific need, and not because of a predetermined timing mechanism. So rather than being texts used to predict

the future, as some see fortune telling presumes to do today, the private use of the codices indicates that these by nature ambiguous texts were likely used as tools to come to the (re)solution of problems. The healing specialist, for example, may ask specific questions and by consultation of the calendar and the sacred text, find a solution for a person who is feeling unwell. It is likely that such consultation involved practices that continue today, such as the reading of maize (see Anders et al., 1993c, pp. 71-80; Rojas Martínez Gracida, 2012, pp. 143-166).

As with contemporary psychotherapy, the resolving of personal problems works best in a safe environment. In some cases, especially if a person is sick and cannot leave the house, the calendar specialist will have to make a house-call. Codex Tonalpouhqui, with its diminutive size and sturdy wooden covers, was renamed thusly by Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2004) because of the great likelihood that this book was a true "working manual" that the specialist could take with him or her. Other documents are very unlikely to have travelled far. The clearest example of this is the codex Yoalli-Ehecatl. The size of this document in particular makes it simply impractical for frequent transportation. It is likely that this book remained in a permanent context, such as a temple. The most effective way of creating a private space is to physically block off prying eyes; i.e. construct a space where one can work in peace. Two archaeological sites discovered near each other may offer a glimpse into such an environment.

The murals found in Ocotelulco and Tizatlán exhibit iconographic features similar to those found in the codex Yoalli-Ehecatl. In Ocotelulco, an altar was uncovered which displays on the front an animated bowl on top of which a large flint is depicted from which a face of Tezcatlipoca emerges (see figure 3.1). On the sides of this central image and on the sides of the altar, descending fire-serpents can be seen. A series of skulls, hearts, hands, and eyes decorates the banks on either side. This structure was built in three phases. During the first phase, the bank and altar were made and used. This phase is roughly dated to 1400-1450 (Contreras Martinez, 1993). After this an adobe wall was build, effectively closing in the bank and altar in a room. This room was still accessible through a door in the adobe wall. In the third phase, roughly dated to 1500-1550, the altar was no longer used, and the room was filled in with earth containing abundant fragments of figurines and ceramics vessels (Contreras Martinez, 1993, p. 55).

At nearby Tizatlán two more painted altars were recovered (see figure 3.2). These altars have different shapes, however, being larger, more rectangular, and lower than the one at Ocotelulco. What is more, there is no bank next to these altars. These two altars are located within a building on a platform which can only be accessed by a staircase on the southern side (see figure 3.3). This staircase was almost two meters high, thus severely limiting the visibility of whatever went on inside the building.

The iconographical similarity between the murals of both these sites and the codex Yoalli-Ehecatl has been noted extensively (Boone, 2013, pp. 222-224; Caso, 1927; Contreras Martinez, 1993, p. 59; Noguera, 1927; Peperstraete, 2006). Both the murals and the codex fall within the widespread Mixteca-Puebla style (see Rojas Martínez Gracida, 2006, p. 16). Because this style was so widespread, the presence of these murals cannot be used as evidence for the provenience of the codex from either of these sites specifically. However, because of the highly religious nature of these murals, which would have a function beyond simple decoration, it is safe to assume that these murals are located in a context where the use of a codex like the Yoalli-Ehecatl would not be extraordinary, if out of the ordinary at all.

Communal ritual is by definition open to the community. In the codices there are numerous indications of rituals that would be performed to the benefit of the community. These rituals are not related to the lifecycle of the individual, but rather to natural or social processes that affect all. Some examples are rituals related to natural phenomena such as rain or the passage of celestial bodies; all sorts of subsistence activity such as planting and harvesting of crops or hunting; but also rituals concerning warfare. Many of these rituals are timed, sometimes indirectly, by the movement of the celestial bodies. The movement of the sun causes the seasons, which in turn dictate the agricultural cycle, which dictates other activities

Figure 3.1: The altar at Ocotelulco, showing the flint scene on the front, flanked by fire serpents and skulls, hearts, hands, and eyes on the adjacent banks (photos by the author).

Figure 3.2: Altars at Tizatlán (photos by the author).

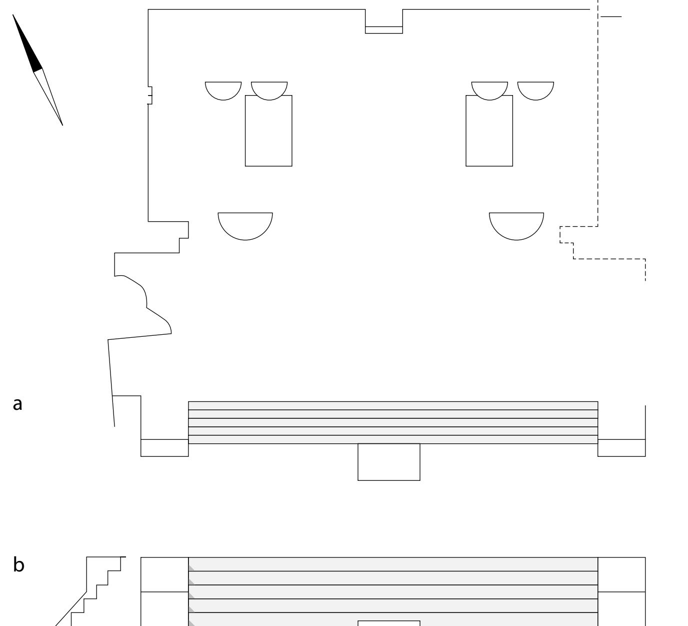

Figure 3.3: Plan of Tizatlán temple (a); frontal and side view of the stairs of the Tizatlán temple (b) (after Moedano Koer, 1943 Plano 1).

such as hunting and even plays a role in the timing of battles. Others are based on the 260 day calendar, which means they are structure by human invention. In these cases, it may have been the codex itself, through consultation of the calendar it embodies, that prompted the performance of a ritual.

Performance of a large scale ritual would have to happen in exterior space. Depictions of such rituals can be found in the precolonial codex Yoalli-Ehecatl as well as in the colonial Codex Borbonicus and in descriptions of Spanish chroniclers. Although the latter two tend to exaggerate the amounts of human sacrifice and general bloodiness of the rituals, the fact that such communal rituals took place is certain. The archaeologically well distinguishable temple and plaza complex, as well as the ball court, were the ideal setting for this. The rituals as they are depicted in the codex Borbonicus pp. 23-37 (see Anders, Jansen, & Reyes García, 1991, pp. 191-231), and those depicted in the codex Yoalli-Ehecatl pp. 29-46 (Anders et al., 1993a, pp. 175-245), show the large amount of material culture involved in such ritual or ceremonial events. Every ritual would require a distinctive ceremonial dress for the priests. Incense, firewood, flowers, and tobacco would have been common objects consumed during ritual. Plants, paper, and animals – especially birds – would have been sacrificed. The rituals involved also performance, such as dancing, which in turn depended on the performance of music. Although not depicted, the large amount of people gathered must also have been fed and supplied with drink.

The role that books such as the Yoalli-Ehecatl played in such ceremonies is not recorded anywhere. There are no depictions or descriptions of these books being present at the ceremonies. One possibility, then, is that the books were used solely for the preparation of the ritual and perhaps as directives “behind the screens”. It may be that the knowledge encoded in them was restricted to the initiated few. In any case, even if a book was used and held by, for example, the “high priest”, if he or she was standing on the top of a pyramid, the general populace standing in the plaza would see nothing of the text.

Intertwined with these rituals is a second use of the codices as objects which were instructional in nature. While the mantic texts are open to interpretation,

Figure 3.4: Detail of page 15 of Codex Añute. The bottom lines shows the marriage of Lord 3 Death and lady 3 Lizard and her parents. The top line shows the birth of lord 1 Monkey and the defence of the town of Añute by lord 3 death against his father in law (from Jansen & Pérez Jiménez, 2007b).

the sections on the counted offerings found in the codices Mictlan, Tlamanalli, and Tezcatlipoca (see Boone, 2013, pp. 159-169) are rather explicit in their instructional ambition. They show, for example, how an altar needs to be laid out and with what amount of what material. It may well be that the selection of which altar to build is open to interpretation, but once selected the instructions seem rather strictly defined. In this sense, these pages function more like the astronomical tables in the Maya codices. These also encode complex information that the user does not have to remember. These texts can be consulted individually. Building altars and bringing sacrifices is often an integral part of a ritual. This continues in indigenous communities today, with altars being built and sacrifices made at significant places such as mountains tops, caves, and other striking features in the landscape (see Akker, 2015; Macuil Martínez, 2015; Posselt Santoyo & Jiménez Osorio, 2015). The books that contained the instructions on building an altar may have had to be carried to all these places. The physical size of the codices containing these instructions, therefore, would indeed need to allow for easy transportation.

3.2 USING A HISTORICAL CODEX

Analysis of the practical use of the Mixtec historical codices has received less attention than the interpretation of their content. Because they are so rich in information for western researchers, who have had to base much of their knowledge about the precolonial Mixtec culture on these texts, it requires some effort to place the codices back into a living context as useful objects. The name "historical codex" makes it seem that these books are simple records of events that happened in the past. However, they are far more complex. Like the religious codices, these books are not made for individual reading, but require background knowledge and elaboration to be made understandable. As such, they cannot have been made – like texts in the western context – for communication without the interference of human interlocutors (see Ong, 2013, pp. 77-78). To Western science, a book is a self-contained whole, something which one can read, as long as language and jargon are familiar, even when one does not yet know the story. To read the Mixtec historical codices one requires a certain familiarity with the subject matter, one which goes beyond the familiarity with pictorial

Figure 3.5: Codex Añute page 16. Bottom line shows the daughters of Lord 3 Death and Lady 3 Lizard getting married and going to a temple. Then line II also records the death of Lord 3 Death, followed by his succession by Lord 1 Monkey, his marriage and subsequently his defence of the town of Añute. (from Jansen & Pérez Jiménez, 2007b).

conventions which is obviously needed as well. A short example taken from Codex Añute can make this more explicit. Based solely on what is represented in this book, but following the names as translated by Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2007b, pp. 264-268), the reading of this small passage (see figures 3.4 and 3.5) would be as follows:

On page 14 lines III can be read that in the year 5 Flint on the day 10 Rabbit Lord 3 Death Precious Bird and Lady 3 Lizard Flower Garland get married. She comes from a town depicted as “Black Mountain with Waterhole” ruled by Lord 8 Eagle Rain, War of Heaven, Venus-Sun and Lady 11 Rain, Precious Hair, Spider Web with Fog. Then on line IV it can be read that in year 1 Flint Lord 1 Monkey, Rain-Sun, was born. Then in the year 9 Flint, day 2 Eagle the aforementioned Lord 3 Death defends his town of Añute against an attack by his father in law.

Lord 3 Death’s daughters, who are mentioned on page 16 lines I and II, get married and the oldest goes to a temple, but they do not succeeded him after his death in the year 11 Wind, day 3 Flint. It is the aforementioned Lord 1 Monkey who does, depicted as marrying Lady 7 Water, Plumed Sun. She comes from Black Town ruled by Lord 4 Flower Precious Bird and Lady 7 Vulture Quetzal Fan. Lord

1 Monkey than defends the town of Añute against an attack by the Lord 3 Monkey Jaguar of the Mexicans in the year 8 House, day 5 Serpent.

This sequence may be a bit unusual, having to defend a kingdom against ones father in law was likely not the norm. It becomes stranger if the dates are analysed and compared in chronological order (see Jansen & Pérez Jiménez, 2007b, pp. 264-268). The first glitch is that the marriage of Lord 3 Death and Lady 3 Lizard is described as taking place when Lord 3 Death was only 5 years old. Normally the birth of a person depicted after the marriage of a couple would indicate that this is the child of that couple. In the case of Lord 1 Monkey this is impossible, as he is described as being born four years before the marriage, when Lord 3 Death was only one year old. Who this Lord is remains unclear, but his unusual positioning in the story would suggest that that he is the reason for the attack of Lord 8 Eagle on Añute. If this is indeed the case, there are only two explanations: either Lord 8 Eagle went to war because he wanted Lord 1 Monkey on the throne of Añute, in which case he eventually got his way; or he did not get his way and Lord 1 Monkey got the throne despite the attack of Lord 8 Eagle. Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2007b, pp. 258-278) are able to show, by using data from other codices, the context of this passage and to fill in a number of blanks. However, within this one document, many things do not fit, or at the very least require much more explanation than is given in this document itself. It is thus clear that the entire story is not described, and so required knowledge to be completed; i.e. somebody with knowledge of the situation would have to explain what happened and why. As such, these books must be considered as useful objects within the context of an oral performance of the historical narrative.

If analysed from this perspective, there are a number of ways in which these texts could have facilitated oral performance (see Ong, 2013, pp. 31-76). The most obvious is the way in which people were named. The naming structure conforms to the expectation of an oral culture in the sense that it is aggregative. Every person in the codices that is of any importance is named with what is called his or her personal, or given, name. These names, however, are more like epithets as they are used in, for example, Homeric (oral) narratives such as the "Clever" Odysseus or the "Wise" Nestor. Thus, they conform to what Ong (2013, p. 39) calls obligatory stabilization. Especially the names of the Lords seem to be highly formulaic as they centre on either large raptorial birds or felines. For the Ladies, the names may be just as formulaic, often involving jewels, feathers, and elements incorporated in the quechquemitl, which Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2005, p. 15) have shown to be translatable as virtues. The range of actions portrayed in the codices and thus, it has to be assumed, the backbone of the oral narrative, is narrowly defined. In essence, there is the display of three moments in life: birth, marriage, and occasionally death. These moments form the basic temporal structure of the narrative, but do not add much in the sense of information about actual events, other than the linking of different places at different times through marriage. The actual events that seem to be noteworthy are in general only of two kinds: the performance of rituals at temples and the attack and defence of places. Reference to actual events, therefore, is concerned mostly with moments of external crisis or, through appropriate ritual practice, the aversion of crisis. As such, these action can be seen to be highly agonistic, another characteristic of oral performance (Ong, 2013, pp. 43-45).

The Mixtec writing style itself further facilitates oral performance of the text by presenting events in clearly distinguishable and coherent blocks. This gives flexibility in the sense that there is no inherent direction of reading, as opposed to an alphabetic text which has to be read in one direction. Although translations of these codices generally start in the beginning of time and go from there to the present, the narrative could be told starting in the present and working back. According to Macuil Martinez,[35] in present day narratives during the Day of the Dead this is the form in which the ancestors are recalled. The narrative is started with people that are known to the listener – i.e. their immediate ancestors – and goes further back in time from there. The pictorial script

35. Macuil Martinez is one of the co-researchers at the Faculty of Archaeology of Leiden University. He is a native speaker of Nahuatl and recalled the way his grandmother used to tell about their ancestors during this celebration.

also makes it easier to jump through the document as passages are easily found. This would allow the performer to be both redundant and repetitive (Ong, 2013, pp. 39-41), mentioning important characters and events multiple times and referring back and forth throughout the narrative.

Even though these books are important tools for oral performance, they are also more than that, as Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2007a) already made clear. First of all, this type of recitation may facilitate the creation of community identity through a shared cultural history or memory. It is clear that the individual documents deal with the history of individual communities, even though because of the nature of the Mixtec political system it shares this history in part with many other towns in the area. Through such shared memory a sense of community could be created. However, the documents themselves are heavily focussed on the deeds of the leader, even though in certain cases it is clear that the leader is actually too young to perform the deeds recorded, making clear that the leader is more a symbol of the community as such. Second of all, these books not only describe past actions but encode proper future behaviour: instructions, that is, about how individuals and communities are to comport themselves and about what etiquette they are to adopt and encourage..

These performances would likely take place during important moments in royal and community life. One of the most probable moments would be the marriage of a new ruling couple. This can be better understood in relation to what is known about the Mixtec political system. The structure of the Mixtec political landscape and actually of many Mesoamerican areas is one of loosely integrated collections of autonomous units. This means that in general there were no large empires in Mesoamerica, with only a few obvious exceptions, which were able to muster the coercive force needed to control larger areas. Even the largest of these, however, the Aztec empire, was based on tribute extraction and indirect rule, rather than complete conquest. The basic political unit in the Mixtec region was called the ñuu. More than a simple designation of political autonomy, the ñuu had, and has today, a meaning combining community, territory, and religious-political centrality (Jansen & Pérez Jiménez, 2011, pp. 14-16; Terraciano, 2001, p. 103). The ñuu was led by what is termed the yuvui tayu (Jansen & Pérez Jiménez, 2011, p. 505), literally the mat and throne, which can be seen as a metaphor for the ruling couple. It is important to stress that the basic political actor was the ruling couple. From what can be seen in the historical codices, such a couple consisted of the child of the previous couple who generally married with a child of the ruling couple of another ñuu. Because of this, every yuvui tayu connected two ñuu (see Terraciano, 2001, p. 158). It would seem that such a system would integrate the whole area within a few generations by a network of familial relations. Such alliances were, however, only temporary, as both members of the ruling couple would designate their own heir for their own ñuu, thus dividing their temporarily joined realm amongst their children (Jansen & Pérez Jiménez, 2011, pp. 242-243; Terraciano, 2001, p. 173). This system allows for the creation of many loose alliances over a longer period of time without necessarily creating large, monolithic power blocks. In fact, this system maintained the autonomy of individual ñuu very successfully for even when two ñuu were joined together for a longer time – as with when, for example, a ruling couple only had one heir – subsequent generations would ideally distribute the individual ñuu when they would have the necessary heirs (Terraciano, 2001, p. 174). Each ñuu thus had a specific lineage, which, while it had many ties with other ñuu, was unique. A marriage involved a whole complex of ritual performance. This started with the visit of a family member of the groom or special marriage broker to the family of the intended (Terraciano, 2001, p. 172). And this occasion in particular may have provided the first opportunity for the display and use of a codex, when both parties showed the deeds and valour of their own ancestors in the brokering process.

The actual marriage ceremony has been described in the Relaciones Geográficas del Siglo XVI:

> *"Y, asimismo, cuando el cacique se había de casar con hija de algún cacique de otro pu[ebl] o, [dicen] que se juntaban muchos principales y grandes para ir por la d[ic]ha cacica, y llevaban muchos presentes de mantas, joyas de oro y piedras*

Figure 3.6: Codex Yanhuitlán page 5r, showing a gathering akin to the parlamento described by Acuña (form Biblioteca Digital Mexicana http://bdmx.mx/ accessed 06-01-2016).

preciosas; y llevaban muchas gallinas, venados, conejos, y otros muchos bastimentos para celebrar la d[ic]ha fiesta y traer la d[ic]ha cacica. Y, traída la cacica a casa de su marido, tornábanse a juntar de noche todos ellos, y los sacerdotes con ellos, y hacían su parlam[en]to. Y, después de hecho el parlamento entre todos ellos, tomaban el canto de la manta que traía esta el cacique, y asimismo tomaban el canto de una ropa que traía la cacica, la cual ropa llaman en su lengua HUIPILE, y añudaban los dos cantos de la d[ic]ha manta y HUIPIL de manera que quedaban atados, y, hecho este ñudo, les traían de comer. Y el cacique partía un pedazo de pan de la tierra y un pedazo de carne, y la daba el bocado a comer a la d[ic]ha cacica, y la cacica hacía lo mismo, y así quedaban casados. Y éste era el casami[en]to entre ellos."
(Acuña, 1984, p. 286)

What is important in this description is that during the marriage ceremony a large number of elders and priest are said to have congregated as a type of conclave (the parlamento). Only after this conclave was the marriage ceremony performed, by tying the clothing of the couple together and beginning the sharing of food.

There is no precolonial description or depiction of such a conclave, thought page 5 recto of the colonial codex of Yanhuitlán (see figure 3.6) may show such a type of gathering.

Although it is not mentioned explicitly, it stands to reason that the historical codices had a large part to perform during such a parlamento. The recitation or performance of the historical narrative is more than a form of simple entertainment. It would have created a direct link between the present or future ruling couple and their ancestors. That the ancestors are important is clear even in the present day celebration of the Dia de los Muertos, but the ancestor cult is visible in precolonial society as well. The mummy bundles visible in some parts of the codices and the archaeologically registered re-entry of tombs (Middleton, Feinman, & Villegas, 1998) testify to this. These ancestors were in direct relation with other Sacred elements such as the power of specific trees or creator forces, the Ñuhu (Jansen & Pérez Jiménez, 2011, p. 256).

As the ancestors throughout the document move through and act within the political landscape, the political system as a whole becomes sanctified. This system is by no means a natural given, but by giving the founders of the socio-political order a sanctified origin, one which exists in contradistinction to their non-human predecessors, the stone people (Jansen & Pérez Jiménez, 2011, p. 327), the system become naturalised. The more ancestors continue this system the greater its sanctity. The whole process can be seen to function exactly according to Rappaport's ideas on the relation between ritual and social structure:

"Sanctity [...] stabilizes the conventions of particular societies by certifying directives, authorities who may issue directives, and all of the mythic discourse that connects the present to the beginning, establishing as correct particular

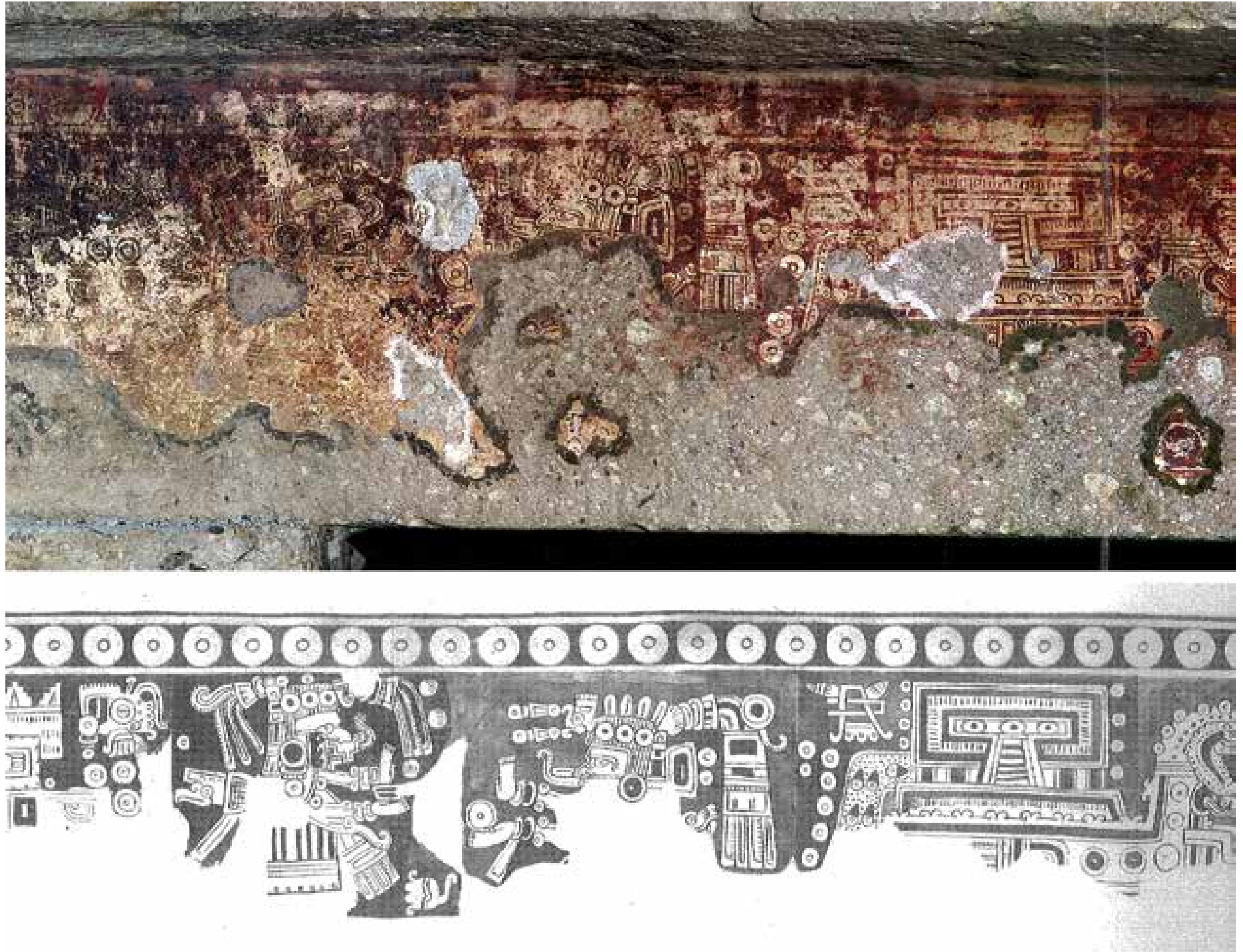

Figure 3.7: Detail of Murals in Mitla, Church Group, Patio A, North Lintel. Notice the difference between the photo and the drawing, indicative of the rapid decay of these murals (photo from Fuente, 2005; drawing from Seler, 1895).

meanings from among the great range of meanings available."
(Rappaport, 1999, p. 321)

In practice, the connection between the current rulers and the ancestors needs to be established in performance with the active participation of the congregation; i.e. the people who support the ruling couple. Participation in a ritual performance that recounts the achievement and the proper behaviour of the ancestors would create an implicit obligation (Rappaport, 1999, p. 123) for the new ruling couple to behave in a similar manner. It would also create an obligation for the community to act in a similarly responsible way. None of the Mixtec states were very large. Important towns that are known from the codices are archaeologically rather insignificant. For example, the valley of Tilantongo, about which much is known from the Codex Ñuu Tnoo-Ndisi Nuu (Bodley), covered according to Kowalewski et al. (2009, p. 75) about 900 ha and had 18,000 inhabitants. These inhabitants were spread over a large area, probably reflecting their reliance on agriculture, and there was very little monumental architecture. With such low population densities and a dispersed settlement pattern, concepts such as right to rule may not be that applicable (see Jansen & Pérez Jiménez, 2011, pp. 204-205). If rulership is considered in terms of a service to the community rather than a right, it becomes clear why ritual reinforcement of the bond between the ruling couple and the community is important.

Next to marriage, other events may have called for the performance of the narrative. It is highly possible that a certain periodic festival existed at which the narrative was performed. Moreover, it is likely that the codex would be consulted at moments of crisis; i.e. the death of a ruler, a conflict over succession, or a conflict with neighbouring communities. This last function, the solving of conflicts, became a much more important aspect, if not the only aspect, for which these books were used after the arrival of the Europeans. When land became property, conflicts over where borders were to be drawn ensued. The indigenous peoples, who had encoded their political relations in these codices tried to use them as evidence in Spanish courts. Perhaps similar conflicts – though likely about tribute gathered from other communities, rather than the actual possession of land – may have prompted their use in the precolonial situation. In his discussion of the Murals of Mitla, Pohl (1999) argues that this site had a central function in resolving such conflicts. The murals at this site (see Fuente, 2005; Seler, 1895) are very similar to the texts found in the codices (see figure 3.7). They are located on lintels above doors and are severely damaged. This decay has continued during the last century, as a comparison of the work by Seler (1895) with the recent photographs in the work by de la Fuente (2005) shows.

That they are found above doors means they are very visible to anyone who is in the vicinity. They are, however, only found above the doors that surround the patios, not on the outside of the buildings. Thus one first has to enter the building before the murals can be seen. However, these patios are larger by far than the spaces that contained the Ocotelulco and Tizatlán murals. Thus, here a larger group could observe the supposed narrative in these murals together. The content of these murals is, because of the severe damage to them, still a matter of debate (see Arfman, 2008, pp. 52-55; Pohl, 1999; Seler, 1895). That they contain a narrative similar to the historical codices is clear. In fact, the murals are the best explanation for the, due to their fragility somewhat puzzling, description by Burgoa of codices being hung on walls (see Boone, 2000, p. 23). These so-called palaces at Mitla give a window into the setting of codex use. The parlamento described by Acuña, and possibly depicted in the codex Yanhuitlán, may well have taken place in patios like these in Mitla.

Although there is not much evidence to support the hypothesis that the occasions for using the historical codices were drunken revelries as Pohl (1999, p. 191) suggests, the fact that such large gatherings involved the sharing of food and drink is very likely. Other things that would have been needed for such ceremonies would have depended on the occasion. Seeing as they are intimately related with the ruling couple, one thing would have to be present, however: the symbol of Mixtec rule, the mat and the throne.
All the pre-colonial historical codices that have survived come from the Mixtec area. This seems to be the result of a lack of preservation more than anything else. Motolinía (1969, p. 5) lists five types of books that were known to the Aztecs, one of which was a recounting of years. Although none of these books survived, a hint of what they may have looked like can, as Douglas (2010, pp. 96-97) suggests, be found in the early colonial documents, such as the many lienzos from that area. From the Maya area very little is known about how, or even if, lineages were recorded in the Postclassic period.

3.3 SECONDARY USES AND NON-USE

From the contents of the codices it can thus be made out what the principle use of each codex must have been. However, these codices were likely not in this use continuously. There are two more settings in which each of them may have been placed. The first of these settings is the teaching of writing skills to pupils; the second is simply the storage of the books between uses; i.e. during periods of non-use. Teaching of writing skills requires learning materials. No clear internal evidence can be found in any of the codices for this use, but any type of writing could serve as an exemplar text. There is relatively little known about the context in which writing was performed or where it was learned. Some inferences can be made based on archaeological evidence, though none of this evidence is contemporary to the remaining codices. Late Classic Maya murals, for example, have been encountered in the Los Sabios household group of Xultun (Guatemala) that contain astronomical calculations which could have been used as tools in

Figure 3.8: Classic Maya ceramic vase showing the instruction of young scribes by older men (from Kerr database K1196).

the creation of books (Rossi, Saturno, & Hurst, 2015, pp. 120-121). A burial near the building housing these murals contained a bark paper beater and a smoother for gesso, leading Rossi et al. (2015) to the hypothesis that the person in the grave was a paper maker or scribe. The problem with identification of localities that were used to write books, however, is that the activity itself leaves very little material traces that can be recovered archaeologically. While numerous workshops of specialised activity have been recovered in Mesoamerican archaeology (see Manzanilla & Hirth, 2011), this is mostly only possible because of the material traces that the production activity leaves behind. Thus, a lithics workshop is recognisable because of the stone debris it leaves behind. Writing a codex, on the other hand, although it requires many materials, does not leave behind many long-lasting traces. Archaeological evidence for the practice of writing or painting is mostly limited to the pots used to store inks while working. In Teotihuacan, ink containers carved from stone were recovered, while the Maya tended to use cut shells. Cutting a conch shell in half yields a container with multiple compartments (see M. D. Coe & Kerr, 1998 Figures 66,118,119). That these were ink containers is clear from the fact that some conch shells that have been archeologically recovered still have ink in them. One ceramic vessel in the form of a shell was found in a burial in the Classic Maya site of Tikal and has glyphs on it that read “inkpot” (M. D. Coe & Kerr, 1998, p. 151).

Some depictions of scribes at work do exist. Quite a large number of Classic Maya so-called codex-style vases show scribes at work creating codices, which are recognisable by their jaguar skin cover. One vase in particular shows how scribes would be taught the skills necessary for writing. The codex style “vase with two scenes of Pawahtun instructing scribes” (see figure 3.8) held at the Kimbel Art Museum (Dallas, Texas), shows an elderly person or deity instructing two young scribes. The older man or deity is depicted once as saying “receive my bad omens[36]” a rather poetic way of indicating that he is pointing out errors that were made by the pupils. According to Tedlock (2011, p. 153), the glyphs above the head of the older man are out of order to indicate what the error was. The second time he is depicted, he is pronouncing numbers. The order of the numbers starts again above the head of the older person and in this case also shows some strange order, it reads 7,8,9,12,13 and 11. Thus, the number 11 is out of order while 10 is missing. Rather than being some difficult to follow numerical sequence, it appears that the older man is again simply showing the arithmetic error that has been made (Tedlock, 2011, pp. 152-153).

Other ceramic vessels also depict scribes at work (see M. D. Coe & Kerr, 1998; Reents-Budet & Ball, 1994). These vessels, however, only rarely show any context for the activity. A few do show a context, such

36. Translation given in Museum database, www.kimbellart.org, accessed 06-01-2016.

as K717, which shows a scribe at work in a workshop together with carvers of masks; or K511, which shows a one at work in a palace scene. However, neither of the scribes depicted in K717 or K511 is depicted as human. The former seems to represent either a deity or a person dressed as one, while the latter is a rabbit depicted in the act of writing. It is, therefore, difficult to ascertain if these are to be construed as actual contexts for writing, or if these are scenes from some (sacred) narrative that are depicted. In the murals recently discovered at Calakmul, one scene may depict a scribe, albeit in a rather unusual setting. On the left a vomiting man is depicted, who is faced by a second sitting person holding an elongated object, possibly a pen, and a bowl. This person also wears a headdress often worn by scribes. The glyphs above it, however, read "ah mahy" or "he of tobacco". This has lead (Martin, 2012, p. 66) to interpret the scene as a person performing a cleansing ritual rather than a scribe. A very similar scene is found on K6020 (see Reents-Budet & Ball, 1994, p. 58). In this instance, a person is depicted seated and vomiting, surrounded by a number of people. Facing him is a person that can be securely identified as a scribe. It may be that this scribe was simply there to record the events. An alternative interpretation is that what is represented should be seen as a scribe or, more specifically, specialists of the written word, performing a ritual curing. The context of the Calakmul murals indicates that these persons plied their trade in a market context. Considering the vast amount of texts found on the most mundane objects it is not unreasonable to think that the Maya scribes in the Classic period worked in a market context. Objects become clearly marked as personal property with the use of the Primary Standard Sequence. During this period, the work of the scribe itself also becomes increasingly personal, with artists signing their work and even incorporating their own portraits in their creations (Reents-Budet & Ball, 1994, p. 46). Beyond the Maya area, scribes are in general not so personally present in the visual arts. In the material culture of the Mixtecs, there are hardly any depictions of scribes. Thus, the scribes of all the historical codices remain anonymous and there is very little evidence to inform how scribes learned their trade. The only clear depiction of someone writing is found on page 48 of the codex Yuta Tnoho, in the form of Lord 9 Wind; i.e. the god Quetzalcoatl. This deity introduced the art of writing to humans, together with a range of other arts. This does indicate the importance and the high status that writing in itself had in Mixtec society. The Spanish chroniclers give a little more detail on the training of Aztec scribes. Reading and writing was one of many skills taught at the Calmecac. This was in principle a school for children of noble birth, though in the codex Mendoza it is claimed that commoners could enter as well. The Calmecac in the centre of Tenochtitlan was dedicated to Quetzalcoatl. Children that entered the school lived there for multiple years. They were not allowed to go home and were harshly punished for disobedience (Durán, 1964, p. 132). Most likely depending on their aptitude, they were taught skills in warfare; those needed to govern; or those needed to be priests (see Boone, 2000, p. 26).

The Calmecac is also a rather likely place for the storage of codices, at least for those codices that were used in the "teaching programme". Besides that, Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1979, p. 184) suggests that the house of books that Moctezuma had probably also functioned as an archive of tribute lists. Temples may have stored books, but individual calendar specialists would likely have owned their own books as well. Alva Ixtlilxóchitl (1985, p. 468) describes the destruction wrought in Texcoco, which included the partial burning of the royal archives. Whether these archives also mainly contained tribute records or included other texts as well, is not recorded. The presence of late precolonial libraries or archives in the Mixtec area is documented in colonial testimonies (Jansen & Pérez Jiménez, 2011, p. 68). Of all these Central and Southern Mexican places designated to store books, there is no more information than the occasional mention in a colonial source. None of these archives have been found archaeologically and neither were they depicted or extensively described in precolonial sources.

From the Maya area, there is again only direct evidence of the existence of archives from the Classic period. Ajch'uh huun is a title found on a Classic Maya ceramic vessel, which means "he who looks after books" (Tedlock, 2011, p. 155). Although there is no information on how many books there were in the Classic Maya society, the frequency of writing

itself on all sorts of other media indicates that books may have been relatively common. Having someone characterised as "the one who looks after the books" seems to indicate a librarian or archivist type of functionary. If such an individual existed, then there must also have been areas specifically designated for the keeping of books. This may not have been more than a chest in a room, but it would have needed to be some kind of a specialised area to help protect the books. At Copán one building was discovered that was decorated on the outside with a carving of a scribe (Fash, 1991, pp. 118-120). This may be one of the best candidates for either a scribal workshop or, perhaps, a place where books were kept.

At the time of the conquest, multiple descriptions were given that indicate that indeed a large number of books was present. Diego de Landa, for example, described how large numbers of books were encountered, which all had to be burned as they were books of the devil (see chapter 4). The materiality of the books sets certain requirements for their storage akin to contemporary conservation concerns. Tedlock (2011, p. 241) states that a book shown to de Landa was covered in Verdigris to prevent insect and fungal damage. Although it is unclear whether or not this material was indeed Verdigris – a copper carbonate or acetate – it does show a concern of the possible dangers to the codices. The growth of moulds and the essential edibility of the codices for insects were real problems that needed to be dealt with.

3.4 DECAY OF BOOKS

The codices are fragile objects, yet some have survived for hundreds of years. It is not known how long these books were in use in their original context, but they must have been cared for to have lasted for so long. The fact that in the Maya codices information is incorporated that was gathered over centuries, shows that either the documents themselves were in use for very long time periods or they were copied multiple times. Use inevitably brings wear. In the case of the codices, either this wear was repaired or the document at some point became illegible and needed to be replaced. Close study of the few remaining books shows that both these practices may have been common.

Figure 3.9 left: Water damage to the codex Dresden: Detachment of gesso layer on page 23; right: Blurring of the paint lines on page 37 (from www.slub-dresden.de, accessed 06-01-2016).

In spite of being given the best of care, codices would invariably start to deteriorate from the moment that they were finished. Some catastrophic events have left the most obvious types of damage on the remaining books. The most recent example is the damage to the codex Dresden. This damage was caused by the bombing of Dresden on the night of February 13th 1945, after which the codex sustained severe damage when the cellar in which it had been stored stored for safekeeping flooded with water (M. D. Coe & Kerr, 1998, p. 177). Water dissolves many natural binders which, in the case of this document, meant that large flakes of the gesso fell off from the paper support. This is clearly visible on page 23, where a whole section detached and shifted to the bottom left (see figure 3.9 left). A second problem with the Dresden codex is that the binders that hold the paints in place dissolved as well. As a result of this dissolution, the lines became fainter and blurrier, making the texts illegible (see figure 3.9 right). The only reason that the codex survived at all was because of the set of glass plates between which the book was kept. In their original contexts without such a protective layer, the books would simply have been lost if it had been similarly submerged in water for days.

The damage to the Codex Yoalli-Ehecatl may be representative of a tragedy that could have happened in a precolonial context. At one end of the document, fire and water damage can both be seen. The fire

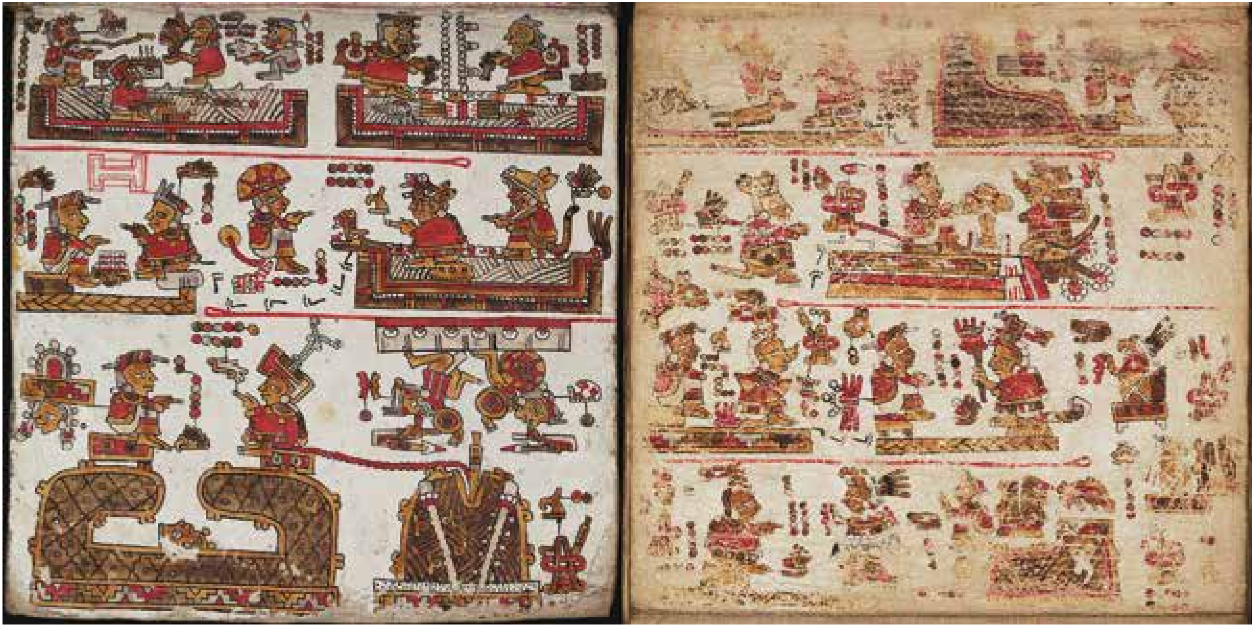

Figure 3.10: Comparison of pages 1 and 19 of codex Añute shows the dramatic consequence of using a thinner leather for a codex (after Jansen & Pérez Jiménez, 2007b).

damage is limited to three sections: the cover; pages 1 and 2; and their reverse pages 76-74. The fire damage is rather limited, both when considering the size of the damaged areas, as well as the number of pages affected. It is clear from the position of the damage, that the document was closed when it caught fire. It was probably the salvation of this document that it was made on leather rather than bark paper, which would probably have burned much more rapidly. A second effect resulting from the application of heat to leather is visible on these pages, however. This effect can only be appreciated when the original document is closely studied, though the result is visible in regular photographs as well. The heat has induced localized shrinkage, which means that the surface is no longer flat, but has become waved. Thus, when the book is closed, some areas touch the adjacent page, while other areas do not. This means that friction is concentrated on the areas of contact. In photographic reproductions this is visible as areas where the gesso is severely damaged. The water damage on this codex seems to be related to the fire damage. It is concentrated on the same pages as the fire damage, only coming from a different angle. It may be that the book was burned on one corner, the top right, and that someone tried to save it by throwing some water over it from the bottom right corner. Clearly, however, the water damage was left to dry rather quickly as it did not do as much damage as was done to the codex Dresden.

The type of water damage seen on these two examples as well as fire damage is severe, though relatively easy to prevent. Thus, while accidental fires and floods both could have played a role in precolonial loss of written material, it does not seem to be the biggest threat. What would have been a more severe problem is simple wear through use. This type of damage is caused by the combination of materials that constitute these books. The flexible leather and paper, combined with the rigid gesso, is a potential recipe for disaster. When the support bends, the gesso will crack and start to flakes off. This is most clearly visible in the Codex Añute, where on the last five pages an inferior quality of support has added to the problem. The last five pages are made on thinner leather. This thin leather is more flexible, which has dramatic consequences, as can be seen in figure 3.10. The gesso layer is severely worn. As a result, the entire page seems more yellow, as the underlying leather shines through. When the gesso flakes off, the paint also largely disappears. With

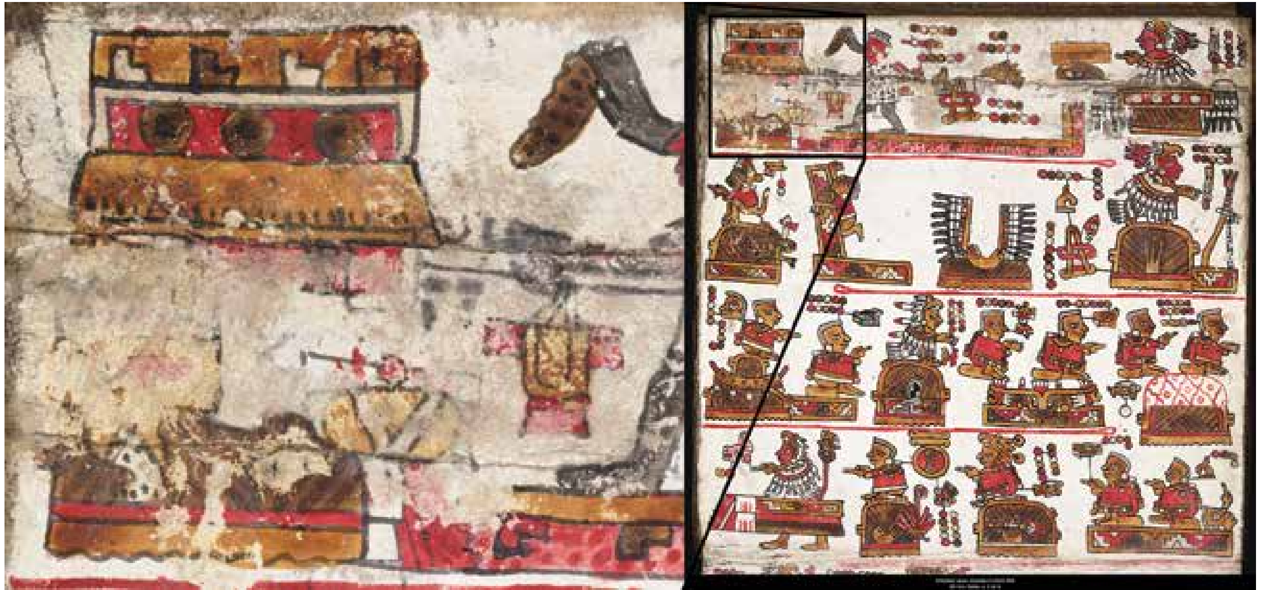

Figure 3.11: Damage on page 4 of the Codex Añute caused by the connection of two pieces of leather (after Jansen & Pérez Jiménez, 2007b).

wear of the gesso, the paint flakes off as well. The black outlines are most completely erased, as the carbon black paint does not bleed through the gesso surface. Paint that does penetrate the gesso, such as yellow and to a greater extend cochineal red, leaves more traces.

The problem of a flexible support is also encountered in the codex Tonalpouhqui. Some of the pages of this small, but long, codex are so thin that the page has curled up. This causes severe damage to the surface, which can be seen on page 62 of that codex. Flaking of the gesso is not limited to areas where the support is too thin. It also happens where two pieces of leather are connected, such as on page 4 of the Codex Añute (see figure 3.11). Because there are two overlapping pieces of leather in this area, combined with the adhesive that holds them together, this section is more rigid than the surrounding page. Consequently, when the book is opened, force is applied and the page slightly bends. Because of the localised higher rigidity of this page, however, a stress concentration is created just besides the thicker area. As a result, two large cracks in the surface run parallel on either side of the thicker section. Similar problems plague most codices, though in some, such as in the Codex Mictlan, this is partially avoided by attaching the pieces of leather in such a way that one ends exactly at the fold. Although these sections are more rigid and thus protected from bending, they are more susceptible to friction as the increased thickness makes it a point of contact with the other page. The wear that takes place is similar to that previously described on the fire-damaged pages of the codex Yoalli-Ehecatl.

Cassidy (2004, pp. 146-147) suggests that the Codex Yoalli Ehecatl (Borgia) and Tlamanalli (Cospi) have water damage caused by salt water. This is based on the idea that salt water combined with an iron based red could make pink stains by the formation of iron iodine. Although it is clear that the Codex Yoalli Ehecatl has water damage, such damage is not found in the places Cassidy indicates. And so the conclusion that damage to Codex Yoalli Ehecatl was caused by salt water is not warranted. As is now clear from the investigation of Codex Tlamanalli (Miliani et al., 2012), the red colour does not contain a significant iron compound. Furthermore, the Codices Ñuu Tnoo-Ndisi Nuu (Bodley) and Añute

Figure 3.12: Detail of codex Ñuu Tnoo-Ndisi Nuu page 3, showing the flaking off of the red paint (after Jansen & Pérez Jiménez, 2005).

Figure 3.13: Detail of Codex Añute page 1, showing some of the last traces of blue paint (photo by the author, courtesy of Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford).

both exhibit this type of pink staining due to damage. What is seen on the Codex Yoalli Ehecatl, then, is not some discoloration of the paint, but rather the bleeding effect that the red paint often exhibits. It may well be that the damage observed along Codex Yoalli Ehecatl's bottom edge is actually caused by mechanical friction caused by sliding the document over a bookshelf. This hypothesis is substantiated by the fact that damage of this kind only occurs on what is the bottom of the codex. What is clear from the damage on the last pages of the codex Añute, is that once a section loses its gesso, it becomes more flexible, thus resulting in the loss of still more gesso, thus creating a downwards spiral of continuing damage. If the Tlamanalli was stored in a vertical position, it stands to reason that this created repeated stress along the bottom of the document. Furthermore, the damage is not consistent over all pages. If the document had become wet, the damage would follow a distinct pattern. On the Tlamanalli, however, some pages have damage all along their bottom edge while others have only partial damage.

The codex Tezcatlipoca also exhibits what could be considered damage, but may in fact be something caused as the result of the impatience of its creator. Throughout the document, yet most clearly visible on page 37-38 and 20-19, imprints of the opposing page can be seen. These imprints are mostly limited to the black outlines. This may have been caused by the creator of the book closing it too soon after writing, or it may have been caused by moisture dissolving the binder and making it adhere to the opposing side. There is some indication for the latter option on pages 24-23, where whole sections of paint lifted of one page and are now stuck to the opposing one. The physical removal of paint layers from the surface is not limited to the Codex Tezcatlipoca, as it is a very clear problem of the Codex Ñuu Tnoo-Ndisi Nuu as well. Here it is the red paint that has disappeared. Unlike the Codex Añute, the red has left very little trace on Codex Ñuu Tnoo-Ndisi Nuu. As figure 3.12 shows, only the red paint has flaked off. The surrounding design is almost perfectly preserved, indicating that the damage is not caused by any external force. It must be, then, that something inside the paint itself deteriorated, causing it to fall off of its own accord.

Next to physical decay due to friction and stress, these books also face chemical decay. This is also what causes the loss or change of colour of the paints themselves. Close study of the codex Añute shows that the decay of the blue colour is still at work in this document. Although it is completely lost on most pages, on page 1 there are some faint traces left in the skirt of Lady 8 Rabbit and in the clothing of Lord 4 Eagle (see figure 3.13). It can be seen in these instances that the blue is fading to a light grey colour. Also clear form the edge of the quechquemitl of Lady 8 Rabbit is that the green colour was made by overlaying yellow with blue. This is obvious in the case of, for instance, the yellow edge of the

quechquemitl, which has become green as traces of blue have spilled over the black partition line. Thus, the decay of blue is a process that also affects the green colour. This, in turn, explains the rather brown look of areas that must have originally been green in this codex.

In the Codex Yoalli-Ehecatl, a similar brown can be seen which must also once have been green. When he copied this codex in the early 19th century, Aglio made a similar observation (see chapter 5 figure 5.3). In both the Codex Yoalli-Ehecatl and the Tonalpouhqui, the blue colour itself has not decayed as much as the green colour. It therefore seems likely that two different materials were used to make both colours. A yellow or orange colour is faded in the codex Tezcatlipoca, which was used for fine details on the bases of temples on, for example, pages 31 and 32. The conservation state of the yellow paint is variable throughout the document. However, in the codex Tezcatlipoca both blue and green are well preserved.

Changes in the colour of paint can be caused by a number of factors, such as the absorption of optical light or microbial growth. In organic paints, the complex molecules that give the material a certain colour are broken down into subsequently smaller, eventually colourless parts. Thus, the paint becomes transparent. Microbial growth of any kind requires some level of moisture (Petersen, 2006, p. 247). Next to the dissolving effect of water on the binders, moisture also has this secondary, though no less damaging, effect.

In order to better understand the deterioration of the materials used in the codices, a series of samples was made using the paints used in the experimental replication described in chapter 2. These samples are currently undergoing a series of tests to be artificially aged.[37] One test will help determine the lightfastness of the colours in comparison with the Blue Wool Scale. And a second test will determine the effect of moisture on these colours. These tests, taken together, may help conservators to make more informed conservation and exhibition decisions in the future.

37. Publication of the test results by Ness and Snijders is in process.

3.5 DISPOSAL OR REINVIGORATION

The decay of these books was noticeable to their users as well. Paint faded and gesso crumbled. Some codices, however, exhibit changes that are human and intentional. Such changes can be either repairs or changes to the narrative that were deemed necessary. The latter is found extensively in the codex Tonindeye on, for example, page 47, 49, 51, and 53. However, since the figures that were erased were never coloured-in, it seems that these changes took place during the writing process itself. A very different situation obtains in the case of codex Tonalpouhqui. As Cassidy (2004) argued, this codex has been repainted with a white layer on pages 12; 71-73; and 95-96. Although this is not visible in any of the facsimiles, the pages have been repainted with a gesso that contained a glittering mineral, possibly mica. This difference in surface immediately distinguished it from the rest of the document and ascertains that these figures were made at a different moment in time from the rest of the book. This glittering white layer covers earlier drawings, which follow a distinctly different composition. In order to better understand why these figures were covered up, it would be necessary to recover these figures entirely. This would require further investigation. The most extreme version of a re-painted codex is codex Añute. As will be shown in chapter 6, this book was actually entirely repainted.

It is clear that a codex cannot be infinitely retouched, as the breaking-off of the gesso layer will make the surface too uneven to make good drawings. Unless the surface is completely re-covered in gesso as happened with the codex Añute, at some point it would have to be replaced. The old document then needs to be disposed of. As should be clear, these books were not commonplace, everyday objects. Their sacred nature meant that they would have to be desacralized before they could be thrown away or else they would have needed to be kept in a new, sacred environment. This second strategy may have been applied by inclusion of books in burials. Multiple colonial sources tell of documents being interred with people. Diego de Landa, for example, is explicit about it in his description of mortuary practices in Yucatan:

"Enterrábanlos dentro de sus casas o a las espaldas de ellas, echándoloes en la sepulture algunos de sus ídolos; y si era sacerdote, algunos de sus libros…" De Landa chapter XXXIII
(1966, p. 59)

"They bury them in their houses or on the sides of them, putting some of their idols in them and if he/she was priest, some of his/her books" (translation by the author).

Considering the sanctity of the ancestors, burial must have been a sacred environment, and thus one where it was deemed safe to deposit a sacred object. That priests would be buried with their books indicates that at least some codices, probably those used for divination, were the private property of the individual priest in question. De Landa's description also shows that not all books went with the priest into the grave. Those recording long-term astronomical observations may have been passed on to the next generation. The practice of burying codices with a deceased was common much earlier in time. At the Classic Maya site of Copan a burial was found in structure 10L-26 which included a desiccated codex (Fash, 1991, pp. 104-111).

A second important description is given in the Geografica Descripción written in the 17th century by Francisco Burgoa (1997). In this work, Burgoa describes the travels of his colleague Bernito Hernandez who encounters a cave near Chalcatongo (Oaxaca) that was filled with the bodies of the Kings of many towns in the Mixtec region. Amongst many objects of clothing, stone, and wood, these Kings also were accompanied by "lienzos de pinturas" (Burgoa, 1997, p. 340).

Putting the old historical books with the bodies of the ancestors would also solve a number of issues. As sacred books, they need to be disposed of in a respectful manner. What's more, they needed to be disposed of every time that a new book was made, as they reify a political situation that, because of shifting alliances, may no longer be the correct one. This also may help explain the lack of books from earlier periods. The Mixtec people may not have had the same obsession with collecting and keeping all the records of earlier times that is common in the Western World today.

Besides being a safe way of disposing of a book, there may have been another reason for interring the codices with the deceased. The cave at Chalcatongo is described as a place where the bodies of kings were kept from a large area of the Mixteca. This cave must, therefore, have contained a large number of bodies, probably put there in the form of mummy bundles such as depicted in some precolonial codices (c.f. Codex Tonindeye page 82 or Añute 18-20). As was shown above, the veneration of the ancestors was important. It is also known that tombs were re-entered and re-used continually (Middleton et al., 1998). Thus, it stands to reason that there was interaction with the dead was common even after they buried. The codices that accompanied the dead in their burials, then, may have functioned as identifiers of these persons and of their personal lineage. If that was indeed the case, a problem would soon arise, as the decay of these books, like the ancestors themselves, would continue and likely even accelerate if the cave was moist. Other objects that accompanied the dead may have functioned in a similar, though more permanent, way to mark the identity of the buried person. In tomb 7 of Monte Alban, a Classic period tomb re-used in Post-classic times, as well as in tomb 1 of Zaachila, carved bones have been found, some of which contain narratives similar to those found in the codices. From these bones it is clear that although in the Mixtec area no codices have been found in funerary contexts, the narrative remained important after death. It may be that it was chosen to make these bones as a more durable form of "codex" which were interred with the dead after it was discovered that the codices themselves were not durable enough.

Not all history was sacred and books were also intentionally destroyed in precolonial Mesoamerica. Not unlike the Spanish policy that followed a hundred years later, the Aztec ruler Itzcoatl is described in book 10 of the Florentine codex (Sahagún, 1577b fo. 142r.) as the one being responsible for the destruction of books. The books that he destroyed recorded a part of the history of the Aztec people. Sahagún describes that a council took place where it was decided that

it was better if the common people did not know all this, so they burned the books.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In the previous two chapters, it has been shown how the material composition of the codices is proof of a web of relations that encompassed these books, connecting them with different materials, regions, and people. This chapter explored the idealised next steps in the biography of these books: their use and subsequent discard. It has been shown that these books had a central place in the religious and community life of the Mesoamerican peoples. It is in this performative context that these books attained or at least reaffirmed their meaning. In communal ritual, the Mixtec historical codices afforded the creation of community by setting out the proper behaviour of the ruling couple and reaffirming community support. Communal ritual was also one of the functions of the religious documents, both in the Maya and in the Central Mexican area. But it is also clear that communal ritual requires more than just a book; it requires communal participation in certain acts. Although detail of the specifics of these rituals is outside of the scope of this work, it is clear that the use of these books connects them in a relation of mutual dependence with monumental architecture, ceremonial dress, and general ritual behaviour. Without observation of the rituals, which is encoded in it, these books become nothing more than abstract curiosities.

Private consultation of these books had a different, though no less important, nature. It was aimed at resolving private or semi-private crises. Considering the nature of the topics covered in these books, the consultation of the calendar healing specialist was likely common and something that every person would have been accustomed to do. Thus, although the individual consultation may have been private, the importance of these texts was community-wide. This not only justifies the effort it would have taken to make one of these books, but also the construction of semi-private spaces that would have allowed the calendar specialist to work in peace. Whether any of the spaces shown in this chapter actually were the stage of use of any codex cannot be known. They are, however, spaces that would afford the use of specific types of texts.

As with any used product, at some point it becomes worn out. As was shown in the previous two chapters, some of the materials used in the creation process of these books make them rather fragile. Thus, the codices can be shown to have a continued dependence on proper care and repair. The codices that have survived do not show much repair, however. Still, they are not all in the best of condition, especially the Paris codices is in a poor shape.

The use of any object for ritual purposes requires society to observe a specific set of religious unquestionable ‘Truths’ (see Rappaport, 1999, pp. 293-297) within which the object functions. The sanctity of the ancestors and of certain deities that appear in these books forms a core ‘Truth’ underpinning the usefulness of these books. As objects describing or belonging to the ancestors and deities, proper care as well as proper disposal when needed was logical. Dramatic change can occur when an object no longer fits the Truth. It is likely that Itzcoatl’s burning of historical documents took place because the narrative that needed to become the official history contradicted the narrative that was encoded in those books. Rewriting history has happened everywhere. Rewriting religious Truth, however, is something altogether more violent. In the next chapter, just such a change is discussed. Again the affordances of these codices are of central importance, though the context is vastly different.