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Here it is. A Nahuatl translation of European cosmology : context and contents of the Izcatqui manuscript in the Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam

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Introduction

Aims

The following research has been conducted as one of four doctoral studies within the Research Area, "Global Interactions of People, Cultures and Power" at Leiden University (from here on LGI: Leiden Global Interactions). LGI took off in 2009/2010 as a collaborative effort of the faculties of Archaeology, Humanities, and the Social Sciences. Together, these faculties have joined forces in creating an interdisciplinary platform to study processes and effects of global interactions in historical and contemporary contexts. Two themes are paramount in the approach towards global interactions; namely, mobility (migration in its different forms) and culture (heritage). These two themes have been articulated to varying degrees in individual research within a large and growing network of scholars associated with this Research Area. In addition to understanding different types of migrations and its consequences, these studies take a critical approach to historically developed social, political, and economic notions of local and global (or 'us' and 'other') that have co-created our current perspectives of world history and globalization. The repercussions of people and objects that travel, as well as of moving ideas and cultures, have had an impact at both the national and international level on matters of ownership, repatriation, cultural survival, and indigenous rights.

The term 'global interactions' incorporates such diverse fields and agents that the buzz term itself is anything but representative of how and where it is felt. Detailed and empirical research is necessary to demonstrate when and why 'things' are on the move, what such movement has led to, and how we are dealing with its consequences in the present. Through such micro-studies it is possible to describe the processes that current scholars have come to group under 'global interactions'. This is also an era in which post-colonial studies has come to rethink and destabilize certain presumed situations following colonial discourse and power relations that have led to inequalities in the world. It is within this perspective that LGI has created an interdisciplinary platform that has allowed this current study of cultural interaction in Mexico in the colonial period to take place.

This research is initiated by an interest in culture and cultural contact. The first encounters between people from the Old and New Worlds are part of a violent history of colonialism. In 1521, the Aztec leader Cuauhtemoc surrendered in the capital Tenochtitlan – in the central Valley of Mexico – following an 80-day siege by the Spanish army lead by Hernán Cortés. This event was the beginning of a period of over 500 years during which Mesoamerica was the stage of one of the most intense and continuous processes of cultural interaction. Its indigenous population suffered from European diseases that affected millions, from continued violence and from enforced changes of cultural, political, and economic circumstances. The ramifications of these events are still felt today and are reflected in ongoing discrimination and unequal rights for those of indigenous ancestry. Their position is taken as a point of departure in this study. In the present, elements of the enormously rich Mesoamerican culture (or cultures) are under daily pressure as the result of discrimination. In some case, this pressure is so great that there is genuine threat of extinction. This marginalized position of indigenous peoples, their languages, and their culture(s) is the legacy of a colonial discourse founded on the principle of making negative associations with 'indigenousness'. But this negative perception of indigenous peoples was

often based on pure imagination and speculation, and, moreover, was formed just as much by those who were outside of the New World as those who had travelled to its continent.[1] In reaction to this state of affairs, post-colonial studies try to counteract the paternalistic tendencies of colonizer over colony and to destabilize unequal power relations posited and reinforced in a period of colonialism.

The targets of the present research are twofold. First, it aims to create a better understanding of intercultural contact of people from an indigenous and non-indigenous background in colonial Mexico through the exploration of the development of a new genre of texts in the Mesoamerican area. The argument presented is that these texts are examples of 'global interactions' in practice, and so reveal what such global interactions actually meant for people and objects (in this case texts) on the move.[2] Second, this study aims to present an appreciation of indigenous languages, texts, and readership by analyzing what took place 'in between' the lines of a story of destruction and loss. This will be a story of human interaction, mutual interest in cultural values, and their new products.

Izcatqui: Research Question

One product of the cultural interaction that took place in colonial Mexico can be found in the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. It is the only original Mexican indigenous manuscript in the Netherlands. This manuscript (numbered 3523-2) of 121 folios is written in the Nahuatl (or Aztec) language spoken in Mexico and is titled after the first word to appear in its text: *Izcatqui*, or "here it is". The Nahuatl language is spoken nowadays by an estimated 1.5 million people (Figure 1 below indicates the areas where the language is spoken, as well as the location of the city of Xalapa in the state of Veracruz where manuscript 3523-2 was located until the 1960s). According to the database of the Tropenmuseum, it is described as "an *extraordinarily important* manuscript [that] was never published or studied and [which] is a *very important* colonial item for the museum's collection" (translation from Dutch and emphasis mine). This statement triggers the research question that lies at the heart of this thesis: what is the content of this manuscript that is classified nowadays as very important?

The manuscript is situated within a long trajectory of colonial writing. Alphabetic writing followed a history of beautifully illustrated codices that expressed a variety of themes, ranging from history and genealogy to religion and divination in Mesoamerica. Although the alphabetical system that was introduced into the pictographic repertoire would eventually take the upper hand, there was a long period during which colonial writings were characterized by fascinating hybrid forms as a way to reconcile the two systems.[3] The earliest books that were produced in Mesoamerica itself in alphabetical writing were dictionaries and grammars to explain indigenous languages to non-native speakers. Alongside were books known in the Old World that travelled from Europe to Mesoamerica. Locally produced dictionaries and grammars functioned as guides in the process of converting the indigenous population to Christianity throughout the mainland. This "spiritual conquest" was described by Robert Ricard in the 1930s as a way to transform "heathens" into believers of the "true" faith. More recent scholarship has pointed out that this "spiritual conquest" was less rapid and thorough than Ricard

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[1] See for excellent studies on European perceptions of the native population of the Americas the work by Peter Mason (1990) *Deconstructing America – Representations of the Other* and Karen Ordahl Kupperman (ed.) (1995) *America in European Consciousness 1493-1750*.

[2] In the Spring of 2013, together with colleague Dorrit van Dalen, a symposium was organized entitled 'Canon on the Move: a Symposium on Texts and Transformation'. During this symposium, researchers working in the fields of colonial Mexico, early modern Africa, and classical Europe compared strategies and appropriations of a variety of texts.

[3] This was a period in which a myriad of literary expressions in various forms were produced, as "both groups recognized the importance of writing from the very first encounters." (Olko, 2014: 14).

thought (see, for example, Schwaller, 2000; Restall, 2003 and Tavárez, 2011) and has provided us with a more detailed and closer approximation of how Christianity was accepted, appropriated, and at times discarded by indigenous peoples. The Spanish Crown legitimated its quest for new land by legally supporting the "law of preaching" (*ius praedicandi*), by which it justified its financial support of missions and sending out missionaries. Some instrumental tools in this process were religious writings – in the form of catechisms, confessional guides, sermons, and songbooks – that were translated into indigenous languages and disseminated among the local population by missionaries (see for example Karttunen & Lockhart, 1976; Lockhart, 1992; Alva, 1999; Schwaller, 2000).

Figure 1. The only known location of Izcatqui in Mexico.
The green areas indicate where Nahuatl is spoken today and the red dot where the city of Xalapa, Veracruz is situated – the location of Izcatqui prior to its acquisition by the Tropenmuseum

Research Question: Further Specifications

The religious products of writing discussed above have been the main focus of philological studies. With Izcatqui however, a genre other than purely religious texts comes to the fore that has received less attention, but in reality, is very much part of a story of mutual interest in cultural values. In a previous study, the present author has argued that the Izcatqui manuscript is the result of translation efforts and is representative of how people saw the world around them and how they were supposed to act and live within that world (Heijnen, 2015; Wichmann and Heijnen, 2008).

By noting that Izcatqui is a product of translation, the research question of this dissertation – *What is the content of Izcatqui?* – can be further specified according to the following sub-questions:

1) Content: which source(s) lie at the foundation of Izcatqui? Is a reconstruction possible of how it or they were selected? In which context was Izcatqui produced?
2) Text: how were words converted from one language into another? Are there terms that do not exist in one of the two languages? And, if so, how is this resolved?
3) Cultural translation: are there signs of cultural terms and/or practices translated that are unfamiliar within one of the two cultural frameworks?

"Global interactions" as a general term for worldwide phenomena has been a frequent topic of theorization: it concerns when, where, why, and with what consequences culture contact has taken place. From the 1940s onwards, many terms have been coined to describe either the process of culture contact

or its results. To name but a few, researchers have made reference to cultural appropriation; transculturation; syncretism; hybridization; and more colloquial terms such as stew, melting pot, and potpourri have been applied more vividly to refer to the composition of a society after an initial period of contact. In this myriad of literature, the term "cultural translation" as used by Peter Burke (2007) is selected for this study as the most suitable on a theoretical level.

The idea of "cultural translation" or "translation of culture" was first described by anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942). As a Polish migrant in England, he conducted fieldwork in Melanesia and claimed that "the learning of a foreign culture is like the learning of a foreign tongue", and through his writing he tried "to translate Melanesian conditions into our own" (Burke, 2009: 55). It was not until the 1950s and 1960s, however, that the idea that the effort to understand a foreign culture resembles the act of translation was fully taken up by anthropology. According to Talal Asad (1986: 142), it was Godfrey Lienhardt (1954) who first linked social anthropology to translation in a paper entitled 'Modes of Thought'. First as a student of and then later as a collaborator of famous anthropologist Edward Evans-Pritchard (1902-73), the notion of "cultural translation" developed in (British) anthropology into what was seen as a skill: the capacity to translate one culture in terms of the other (Asad, 1986: 142-143; Burke, 2009: 55-56). In this period, the notion was still confined to the field of anthropology and thus anthropologists' difficulty in understanding and describing unfamiliar cultures. However, it was soon picked up by historians who came across similar issues in the periods they studied (see Burke, 2007). Nowadays, "cultural translation" is taken to be applicable to any context of cultural interaction in which foreign cultural elements are interpreted. In fact, some even consider every type of communication to be an act of translation, even when two people speak the same language.

Communication, especially across languages, often results in problems of translatability on two levels: first, the level of translating a term into another language; and, second, the translation of a cultural concept pertaining to a specific worldview that might or might not be present in the culture in which language it is described. Interlingual and intercultural translation, therefore, is a process of negotiation and renegotiation to make sense out of something that did not make sense before. Burke sees this as a process of "decontextualization" and "recontextualization" in which the foreign is appropriated first and then domesticated within a context that makes sense to one's own culture (2007: 7-10). The advantage to theorize about cultural interaction in terms of translation is that this process is enabled only through deliberate actions of agents. Cultural interaction is thus not a state, nor the outcome, of something that would have evolved naturally (as the term hybridity suggests): it is brought about by the intentional actions of real people. Six questions proposed by Burke in his volume on translation in early modern Europe will be used in this study as well. In essence, these are very straightforward, but at times prove to be difficult to answer: 'Who translates? With what intentions? What? For whom? In what manner? With what consequences?' (*ibid.*: 11).

The discussion of the manuscript is placed within a context of cultural interaction between (a group of) individuals from a Nahua and Spanish background. In addition, I place it within a presumed period in which its thematic content was known and produced. By adding similar documents (both hybrid and alphabetic) in the Nahuatl language, I provide a chronology of the development of the genre from the sixteenth through eighteenth century. On the one hand, it becomes clear that these manuscripts are local, and time specific interpretations of European matter. On the other hand, by discussing them in chronological order it becomes possible to envision a larger tradition of writing about such matters that goes beyond these specific examples that have survived the test of time. It is an object of collection and research, but, moreover, it is an object representative of one of over 100 indigenous languages spoken in Mesoamerica (Carmack et.al., 2007: 407) of which 68 in Mexico (INALI 2015)[4].

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4 http://site.inali.gob.mx/Micrositios/estadistica_basica/estadisticas2015/pdf/general/general6.pdf consulted on March 22nd 2017. The number of indigenous languages is difficult to attest, depending on the selective criteria for languages families and branches

The dissertation is divided into six chapters. Chapter One discusses the manuscript's codicological information: its material characteristics and restoration, the type of handwriting used, the number of writers likely involved, and the dating of its production according to an ownership statement. This is followed by a short summary of previous research of Izcatqui. Furthermore, the content of the complete document is summarized. This summary is divided according to the themes of its content and for each theme I have added a list of the section headings and a description of illustrations that are part of each thematic section. I have done this in order to do justice to the lay-out and character of the full document as this work does not contain a full transcription.

Chapter Two provides an overview and background of a Spanish genre that was used as a source text for Izcatqui. This *reportorio* genre has been published in both Spain and across the Atlantic. By listing these *reportorios* it becomes possible to draw comparisons with Izcatqui. The aim here is to establish as accurately as possible which *reportorio* or *reportorios* were selected, read, and (in parts) translated for Izcatqui. And, consequently, to determine which Spanish source(s) were read by a larger indigenous audience.

Chapter Three is a discussion of other manuscripts in indigenous languages that include the *reportorio* genre one way or another. In Nahuatl, there are three other handwritten documents that – together with Izcatqui – span three centuries in which the *reportorio* genre was known to have been translated and/or copied into an indigenous language. This chapter also includes fragments from the Books of Chilam Balam in Yucatec Maya. These books from the seventeenth and eighteenth century are rich sources of pre-colonial Maya history, calendar, medicine, and ritual life including a form of communication in riddles, typical in highly ritualized and political discourse in the area. In addition, they also represent an intellectual desire to reconcile Maya knowledge with European traditions of the abovementioned aspects of human life. The *reportorio* genre is very clearly a source of inspiration for three of the Books of Chilam Balam. I discuss these books and compare them with Izcatqui, which was written in the same period. Within this context I consider them to be part of what Peter Burke has called "cultures of translation".

Thereafter, I follow a thematic approach in which the content of Izcatqui is divided into three main parts. The first ten folios and their religious character are discussed in Chapter Four. Chapter Five is an analysis of the folios that treat the *tlacuiloque* interpretations of European worldview. This worldview includes the calendar, the cosmos, and astrology. Chapter Six deals with references of human interaction with nature in the form of medicinal advice, recipes and ecology and agriculture. Each chapter includes transcriptions and translations that are discussed according to the levels described above: translation in terms of content, linguistics, and culture. As a result, my methodology is, so to speak, to take apart the document as it appears in its totality and then to fit together those fragments that treat a single topic. I am aware that these topics overlap at times and that their boundaries are somewhat arbitrary. However, this exercise enables me to highlight in detail how several concepts were interpreted and explained to a Nahua audience through the efforts of indigenous authors. My study thus, moves from the broader context of a specific genre throughout the colonial period and throughout the mainland of Mesoamerica, to the details of one of its rare and exceptional examples.

(see also Carmack et. al. 2007: 407). According to Ethnologue, in Mexico there are 281 indigenous languages in the present (https://www.ethnologue.com/country/MX), consulted on March 22nd 2017.