

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

FOCUS ON MESOMERICA

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

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

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

EPISTEMIC FRAMES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

MESOAMERICAN COMMONALITIES

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

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

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

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

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

SAHAGÚN'S ETHNOGRAPHIC ENCYCLOPEDIA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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