Introduction

This book presents a study of Mesoamerican religious experience based on an analysis of ancient religious manuscripts, the calendar that informs their structure, and the author’s field work in the town of Huautla de Jiménez in the Sierra Mazateca of the state of Oaxaca. Collectively known as the Borgia Group, the Codices Borgia, Vaticanus B, Cospi, Laud, and Fejérváry-Mayer, and part of the Codex Tututepetongo concern virtually every aspect of Indigenous life. The 260-day calendar, known as tonalpohualli in Nahuatl, and its related iconography are the basic organizing principle of the pictorials, which have survived to the present day as the most important record of Mesoamerican religion from the pre-Hispanic period. The research was predicated on the idea that modern practices and ceremonies can shed light on the function and scope of ancient religious pictography in a way that other sources, such as those compiled during the colonial period, cannot, despite being chronologically closer to the ancient texts.

Iconographic and methodological advances in the study of Mesoamerican religious pictography have provided modern scholars with a fairly coherent picture of its contents and use. Written sources about the “customs” of the ancient Nahua or other Mesoamerican peoples that were produced soon after the conquest can be usefully applied to the study of ancient pictographic documents that date to the centuries—or perhaps even the few decades—before the arrival of the Spanish (Nicholson 1973). Furthermore, the production of religious pictography did not cease with the establishment of the colony and the forceful introduction of Christianity into Indigenous communities; rather, it was transformed to inform Europeans about the religion and customs. The pursuit of interpretation, which occurred in a formal and ritualized manner. Consequently, the images that accompany pictorials in ancient sacred books, on which the mantic reading was presumably based. For example, let us analyze the process by which the diviner deduced their mantic interpretation, which occurred in a formal and ritualized manner. Consequently, the images that accompany Sahagún’s explanatory text bear little resemblance to the pictorials in ancient sacred books, on which the mantic reading was presumably based. For example, let us analyze the images that correspond to the trecena (a thirteen-day period) 1 Rain in the Florentine Codex (Fig. 0.1), a colonial manuscript, and the Codex Borbonicus (Fig. 5.1), an early colonial document with virtually no Spanish influence. In Figure 0.1, the glyph for 1 Rain is represented
Mesoamerican Codices

rather naturalistically, with thick drops of water falling from a cloud that contains one circle for the numeral 1. In the vignette underneath, a goddess known as cihuateotl falls from the sky, bringing disease and death to Earth, as stated in the accompanying Nahua and Spanish texts (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 4, ch. 11). On the next page, a person signals to a crowd of naked men inside a house. The illustration refers to the act of casting judgment on people in jail, which is again explained in the accompanying text. Finally, two more scenes depict people caring for and bathing a newborn, an illustration often repeated in this part of the manuscript, in which human fate and character are discussed in relation to birth dates (Quiñones Keber 2002, 263–264).

The trecena 1 Rain in the Codex Borbonicus is rather different. It depicts the rain god Tlaloc on a mountain, from which springs a blue stream of water. Another, smaller Tlaloc god or priest stands in front of him, and the two actively engage with each other, talking, praying, or singing, as evidenced by volutes near their mouths. Several offering containers and another priestly figure, who is identified as Chicomecoatl, surround the two Tlaloc figures. The same trecenas in the Codices Borgia (bottom of p. 67) and Vaticanus B (p. 55) essentially depict the same iconography, which sharply diverges from illustrations for the same trecena in the Florentine Codex (i.e., female supernatural beings bringing destruction to the world or the judgment of imprisoned people). The interpretative logic of Sahagún’s Book 4 on divination reduces images to a corollary of a specific mantic reading and barely contains any references to the original on which the interpretation was based. Once it is brought within the limits of explanatory language, pictography becomes unrecognizable; most importantly, it cannot be reverted. What can be shown cannot be said, in the words of Wittgenstein. I do not argue that iconographic interpretations of religious matters are wrong, but they have limits, and these must be queried.

In his later work Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein (1953) changed (or better, evolved) his stance on intellectual inquiry. After exhausting the possibilities of language as a way to elucidate meaning, he pursued language as a form of therapy. Thus, meaning, both as significance and purpose, does not lie in the definition or “grasp” of an external reference or object but rather in the process of inquiry itself. As Wittgenstein stated, “A philosophical problem has the form: ‘I do not know my way out’” (Ein philosophisches Problem hat die Form: ‘Ich kenne mich nicht aus’; Philosophical Investigations, § 123). With this later position, Wittgenstein intended to
move beyond the limits imposed by analytical thinking by using language as a means of exploration rather than explanation—hence the therapeutic value of language in opening up new spaces of possibility, even beyond rational explanation.

Lehrich (2014) argued that the limitations of philosophical inquiry, which were so profoundly interrogated by Wittgenstein, have ancient roots in Western European intellectual tradition, dating to the founding of the philosophical discipline itself. The Greek philosopher Plato opined that poetry and painting were deceitful endeavors whose mimetic forms fooled the audience into thinking that they were in the presence of the real “thing,” not its mere representation. Art and human creativity can only generate partial reflections of an abstract concept; more dangerously, art and poetry can induce strong emotions in the audience, who would feel overcome at the expense of reason. Wittgenstein’s later suggestion of philosophical inquiry as therapy was meant to resolve the seemingly irreconcilable opposition between argument and prophesy, reason and emotion, prose and poetry.

Wittgenstein’s later stance echoes the reasons why Mesoamerican people consulted a diviner in the first place: to voice their own concerns and seek answers. The same holds true for diviners with regard to why they answered their own and others’ calling: to extend a helping hand. To quote Wittgenstein again, “The philosopher treats a question like an illness” (Der Philosoph behandelt eine Frage; wie eine Krankheit; Philosophical Investigations, § 225).

In other words, symptoms are like clues that the doctor must interpret to reach a diagnosis. When examining still obscure passages in religious manuscripts, I approach them as expressions whose semiosis purposefully escapes unequivocal verbal rationalizations, which calls into question our deeply rooted logocentrism. When it comes to understanding pictorial language, tautologies, and contradictions, meaningless and pointless expressions in the context of explanatory logic, become significant elements, such as composition, repetition, and assonance.

In this view, pictography is by no coincidence close to music and chanting. Tomlinson (2007, 9–26), a musicologist, articulated the most thorough critique of the prevalent approach to the study of Cantares mexicanos, a collection of colonial Nahua songs. The author argued that the current form of the songs, which was drafted in the middle of the sixteenth century, betrays a close knowledge and the influence of contemporaneous European modes of poetry, which reduced ancient Nahua songs to the form of written poetry. Adherence to Western literary canon came at the expense of melody, rhythm, and other performative aspects that are intrinsic to music. Tomlinson further argued that scholars such as Ángel María Garibay (1958) and Miguel León Portilla (1961) failed to recognize the Europeanized form of Cantares mexicanos and derived from them a somewhat distorted image of Indigenous thought and philosophy. Finally, he believed that singing in the New World was demonized and eventually domesticated as poetry precisely because performativity, in which meaning is acquired by enacting a text, escapes logos. As previously discussed, Tomlinson’s critique follows that of Lehrich, who argued that music and religion’s epistemological validity has largely been questioned in Western philosophy based on the primacy of analytic and verbal logic since ancient Greek times. In the present study, I rely on the experience of Mazatec ceremonies, particularly chants, to question the ways in which Western researchers have categorized and understood knowledge in Mesoamerica. Mazatec chants offer a great intellectual challenge and a unique entry into Mesoamerican thinking and conceptions.

Following Irwin (1994) and Ingold (2006), I argue that in Indigenous America, the world is not unchangeably constructed and cannot objectively be understood and reduced to a fixed verbal meaning; rather, it is in a constant process of unfolding. When conducting research on this world, the use of language as therapy rather than explanation almost becomes necessary. In Indigenous America, altered states, such as dreams, are an essential and constitutive part of consciousness and culture; in Western thought, dreams are, by definition, not real. This is precisely what Wittgenstein recognized as the limits of logocentrism. As argued in his late stance on language inquiry, Wittgenstein shifted from knowledge to self-knowledge and from the pursuit of a clear explanation of “facts” to the questioning of one’s positions and presuppositions (Wright 1998, Maurer 2010).

In the case of Indigenous America, “demonic,” “diabolical,” “drunken,” and “orgiastic” have been among the most common connotations assigned to Indigenous American religious knowledge derived from altered states since the time of conquest, when the majority of alphabetical sources that modern historians use to reconstruct ancient Mesoamerican religion were drafted. Human sacrifice, as I argue more extensively in Chapter 4, has also often served as an explanatory but generic label for rituals that purposefully set out to transcend the boundaries of death and the unknown. Following Wagner (1981, 2018), I also argue that culture is too frequently described as a set of established and somewhat fixed conventions, without considering that creativity is equally part of culture. People routinely reflect on their own culture by creating images of it and then changing these images. In other words, what we think of a certain cultural construct affects the way that we act on it. This is also what Wagner called the “object-subject reversal” or the “reciprocity of perspectives”—that is, the ever-present ability and even intellectual necessity of reflecting on one’s culture. Subjectivity and self-reflection are as important as convention and objectivity.

Ceremoniality accounts for the idiosyncrasies of mantic readings and the relational, contingent, and subjective experience of the ritual encounter. Instead of considering exceptions or inconsistencies as rumors that must be tuned out to detect the rules of pictorial language, I consider that pictography was based on inventiveness.
and unpredictability as much as conventions and shared meaning. Often, historians resort to mythology to explain ritual (e.g., Graftl 1999), thus fixing in unchangeable form what is actually a process. On the other hand, Seeman (2004) argued for the interpretation of ritual beyond meaning. Based on his studies of Jewish religious experience, the author argued that the “therapeutic” gesture, such as in curing rituals, is primarily guided by a willingness to help rather than the search for an explanation. In opposition to Geertz, Seeman proposed that configuring an illness within a coherent system of knowledge is not why people in “traditional societies” attend to healers (curanderos in the case of Latin America). Rather than rationalizing pain, confronting the “radical alterity of pain” (Seeman 2004, 61) opens up a space of intersubjectivity and transcendence beyond the limits of explanatory logic. In other words, a therapist, doctor, or other healer is primarily moved by the pain of others and by their inability and ethical refusal to reduce suffering to a rational explanation. Concerns and worries that cannot be explained away are the primary reasons why rituals are performed: to confront the unknown or that which defies rational explanation. This is, by definition, a process, not a given. I argue that this is what is lacking in both the objective and methodology of current research in Mesoamerican studies, especially when addressing religious topics and their sources in images and texts.

The fact that no researchers who have investigated Mesoamerican pictography, the current author included, belong to the culture that we purport to explain is no small matter. Overcoming our ignorance tautologically becomes the objective of research itself, as if pictography existed to explain Mesoamerican culture to ignorant but eager researchers. Thus, pictography is taken as the imperfect reflection of a “pure” (but indeed chimeric, pre-contact, and unadulterated) Indigenous culture. While I do not dismiss either iconographic or divinatory inquiry, I aim to discuss the process of meaning and the creation of doubts and rational slippages, over explanation and exegesis.

Recently, Díaz Álvarez (2009, 2013) critiqued the ways in which colonial sources and modern interpreters of these sources have systematized Mesoamerican religion and time as well as their depictions. She also questioned Nowotny’s divinatory paradigm, which posits a firm distinction between the time of religion—embodied in the teoamoxtl (the sacred books) as a sort of medieval astrology—and the time of history and natural phenomena found in historical and genealogical sources. This topic is the focus of Chapters 3 to 5. In her research, Díaz Álvarez (2016, 2019) relied on a critical reading of colonial sources while also including a reflection on ethnographic material. The 260-day calendar, known as tonalpohualli among the Nahua and tzolkín among the Mayas, is no longer in use in the Mazateca. Contemporary studies on the use of the Mesoamerican calendar in southern Mexico and Guatemala (Lipp 1991, Tedlock 1992, Rojas 2013, Rojas 2014, Akker 2018) have revealed a wide variety of functions and symbolism attached to it. Despite the tonalpohualli’s strict arithmetic (or perhaps in light of it), modern Mesoamerican priests use the combinatory nature of divinatory logic in a highly subjective and situational manner that can respond to the needs and questions of their clients.

Therefore, our current understanding and interpretation of the tonalpohualli as static, immutable, and largely incapable of keeping track of “real” time derives from specific historical circumstances, namely the colonialist endeavors of missionary friars in the post-conquest period. Explanatory models that presume the objectification of cultural “facts” should not be the ultimate goal of interpretation. Time and the means by which it is measured also fall under the category of subjectively constructed schemata that are constantly renegotiated and reinterpreted. Finally, beyond any historiographic consideration, recognizing how Platonic, Tomistic, or even more recent philosophical trends have influenced our current interpretation, systematization, and understanding of Mesoamerican cosmology calls for a different and alternative approach. I follow anthropologist Neurath (2010, 2016, 2019), who tried to bring the discussions on Amerindian ontologies and ritual practices (Viveiros de Castro 1998, Viveiros de Castro 2004, Severi 2002, Severi 2004) to bear on the interpretation of the iconography and archaeology of ancient Mesoamerica. All these authors have suggested ways to move beyond the dichotomy of logocentrism and performativity, myth and ritual, and object and subject by stressing the intimate, relational nature of Indigenous American “being in the world.” Perspectivism, which Viveiros de Castro defined as the embodiment of another being’s points of view, can be theoretically posited as a tenet of Amerindian cosmvision. In a much humbler way, I believe that field research and local collaboration can greatly help any researcher to understand the inherent limitations of scientific inquiry and the need to question their own motives and purpose in academic endeavors (Wagner 2016, ch. 2).

Huautla de Jiménez, in the northern part of the state of Oaxaca (Fig. 0.2), is known in the anthropological literature and popular culture for the ceremonial use of sacred mushrooms and the chants of María Sabina, a powerful wise woman who has captured foreigners’ imagination since the 1950s (Estrella 1981). Her chants were partially transcribed and translated with the help of local bilingual Mazatecs and North American linguists, who extensively traveled and lived in Mexico’s rural areas with the aim of converting local Indigenous peoples to Protestantism (e.g., Pike and Cowan 1959, Wasson et al. 1974). I conducted field work in Huautla with Santiago Cortés Martínez, an intellectual and cultural broker who was the coordinator of the Casa de la Cultura María Sabina (Fig. 0.3) at the time of my research. He introduced me to the world of the chjota chijine, wise people, whose authority and knowledge are still widely sought and respected in the region. I consider that, among the many aspects of Mesoamerican culture that have been marginalized, persecuted, and silenced for centuries since the Spanish invasion, ceremonies involving
the ingestion of mushrooms or other substances and techniques that alter one’s state of consciousness occupy a special place. Freud defined the unconscious as something irrational and uncontrollable. In the medieval and early modern periods, magic was demonized by the Church and portrayed as quackery by Enlightenment philosophers. Non-rational experiences were relegated to the diabolical by the Church or the insane by the State (Foucault 2006). Mazatec (and, in general, Indigenous American) religious experience forces us to question this long-standing paradigm in Western epistemology by considering what is acquired during dreams or visions as an acceptable form of knowledge.

According to Santiago, the term “vision quest” is not completely appropriate for describing the type of knowledge gained during a night ceremony despite being an accepted notion in Indigenous North American studies (see Irwin 1994). While “quest” (búsqueda in Spanish) correctly describes the striving and longing that characterize the ceremony (“I do not know my way out,” in the words of Wittgenstein), “encounter” (encuentro) should replace the term “vision.” While “vision” somehow conveys the notion of a possibly false projection, “encounter” describes a vivid experience of exchange at the interpersonal level. Santiago and I participated in several night ceremonies together and recorded many hours of chanting and prayers. The transcription and translation of the recordings was a difficult task, given that Mazatec primarily remains an oral language. However, the objective was to collect a corpus of texts that concretely expressed the experience of the ceremony and could be analyzed alongside pictography. While the contents of the chants illuminated the iconography of the sacred books at times, the research moved along the lines of analogy rather than metaphor. Chants do not explain pictography; rather, they share many of the same constitutive characteristics. As argued by Lehrich (2014, 144), it is precisely the elements that are meaningless in the logic of language that become fundamental in religious experience and music (and, I would argue, visual art and pictorial language): redundancy, repetition, rhythm, alliteration, pleonasm, and onomatopoeia. While the logic of language progresses through consonances of meaning, sounds and shapes take precedence in music and art, whose discourse is formed by metonymy and contiguity rather than semantic superimposition (Tomlinson 2007, 28–49).

The book begins with a description of Mazatec divinatory and ceremonial practices, which are presented within the wider context of past and present Mesoamerica. I focus on elements of Mesoamerican pictography that betray a clear and conscious awareness on the part of the creator to consistently invent and re-invent their tradition. Next, Mazatec chants are analyzed as a point of departure for inquiry on the visionary nature of the religious manuscripts. The Mesoamerican calendar is analyzed in depth, and new approaches to its use in ancient times are offered.
The narrative progresses from the present, through a re-reading of colonial sources, to passages in pre-Hispanic manuscripts that do not seem to have counterparts in colonial sources. How does pictography generate a different type of knowledge, one that counters the logic of objectivity and relies instead on self-referentiality, intersubjectivity, and ritual process?

This book argues that a major aspect of Mesoamerican ceremonial life, which has mainly been depicted in colonial sources, is deeply misunderstood. The so-called cycle of the veintenas is perhaps the most ubiquitous depiction of ceremonies in post-conquest sources that address Mesoamerican religion, but they are not recorded for the pre-contact period. I follow up and expand on Jansen and Pérez Jiménez’s (2017, 431–530) recent identification of the veintenas in the central pages of the Codex Borgia to propose a reconsideration of the entire ceremonial cycle as a visionary experience—indeed, a quest—on the part of the priest or diviner to foresee and secure the well-being of an entire community.

As was also argued by Abse (2007), I suggest that priests in ancient times played a larger and more public and political role than they do in Mazatec communities today. How did their knowledge and the way that it was encoded and transmitted change throughout history? How did significant events impact the process of knowledge production? Given the violent and enduring consequences of colonialism on the American continent and its peoples, resources, and landscape, it can be expected that not only the contents but also the structure and functioning of pictographic texts were deeply affected by historical events. Notions of history undoubtedly intersected with the explicit self-awareness that was inherent in Mesoamerican singing, pictography, and ceremoniality. Chapter 6 examines the impact of historical circumstances on the production of religious manuscripts. Finally, pictography of religious content that was produced after the conquest and under the sponsorship of friars provides evidence of late experimentation within a cultural context that was—and alas, often continues to be—violently against, profoundly discriminatory towards, and ultimately incapable and unwilling to consider Mesoamerican wisdom.
Mazatec divinatory practices are part of the larger Mesoamerican mantic tradition (Nowotny 1961, Durand-Forest 1968, Loo 1987, Boege 1988, 158–227, Anders and Jansen 1993, 31–162, Inchaustegui 1994, Rojas 2016, Olivier and Lambert 2019). They can be described as an array of ritual activities that take place between a patient or client and the curandero or healer to address physical illness or problems of a personal nature. The Mazatec term for a curandero is chjota chjine (wise person), a generic definition that reflects the diversity of their social and economic status, age, and gender. The wisdom possessed by chjota chjine cannot be learned, but is given without being requested. The pervasiveness and importance of wise people and their knowledge in Mazatec society is not an open topic of discussion, even though it remains quite common to seek their help. Children often participate in household rituals and are exposed to their language, instruments, and praxis from a very young age. Although no formal training is necessary to become a curandero, as far as I was able to determine, the ability and calling to cure people sometimes run in families. However, every curandero adamantly stresses that the gift was personally given to them by God or the gods; thus, it was not acquired or inherited.

As has been documented in other regions of Indigenous Mexico (Estrada 1981, Fagetti 2015), initiation into the knowledge and practices of the chjota chjine often occurs in a dream or during a night ceremony, when the candidate receives the power with the stated obligation of applying it for the sake of people’s well-being. The gift cannot be refused. A period of deep personal turmoil often precedes the calling, which can be described as the result of the healer’s personal quest to find their own “cure” or “way out” of an existential or physical impasse.

Similar to what occurs in Mesoamerican or “folk” and traditional societies, Mazatec ceremonies exist within a particularly fluid and informal situation and are not bound or reduced to specific institutionalized occasions. Every attempt to classify them is a reductive endeavor, which makes chjota chjine’s inventiveness and ability to speak to a common and shared tradition all the more remarkable. Like other Mesoamerican peoples, Mazatec curanderos routinely use maize kernels, candles, copal (incense), piciete (green tobacco), eggs, and plants (leaves and flowers) during their ceremonies. Catholic images of Jesus, the Virgin, God, the Holy Spirit, the Trinity, or other saints are widely utilized and almost invariably invoked. I believe that the striking similarities between contemporary ritual practices throughout Mesoamerica are more of a testament to the important and successful role that traditional healers have been able to maintain throughout the generations than any formal training. Early and pervasive exposure to objects, language, and ceremonies generates an enduring, versatile, and adaptable symbolic system. Although recent studies have mostly highlighted changes that have taken place in Mazatec rituals since the rise of so-called “mushroom tourism” (Feinberg 2003, Jaccorznyski and Rodriguez 2015), the larger and deeper Mesoamerican framework of Mazatec divination becomes clear once contemporary practice is studied alongside pre- and post-conquest sources.

1.1. Two examples of Mazatec divination

When we visited don Isauro Guerrero in Cerro Palmera, a small hamlet close to the main town of San José Tenango and an hour’s drive east of Huautla, he first prepared the leaves to do a cleanse (limpia). Known as hojas de Pascua in Spanish, in Mazatec they are called xka xo’ma toxkoa, meaning “leaves of the wise people.” Don Isauro threw maize kernels on an altar covered with a white tablecloth and decorated with images of saints (Fig. 1.1). He was able to identify some problems I was facing while conducting research in a foreign country and recommended that I place offerings that he prepared, consisting of eggs, bundles of wild tobacco, and cacao beans, under my bed (Fig. 1.2). While similar rituals have been documented in the Mazateca since the beginning of the twentieth century (Bauer 1908, Bassett Johnson 1939), Selé (1902, 78–86) was the first to discuss the continuity of Mesoamerican divinatory practices since ancient times.

In preparing the offerings, known as paquetes de pago in Spanish, don Isauro invoked the grandparents who established the cult by using the Mazatec term kjoatexoma, which can be translated as “norm” or “law.”

Jokisin, jokisin chjota chinga nii
The same way the grandparents did it, the same way

Nga chjota chinga nda nai jchaa xokji
He is a good old man, this old father

Jotonda ni ndichjota chingana’ña nga koakisin nga’sa,
It is good that our beloved old people established the ceremonies,

nga tsakienda, nga tsiekjao, tsakajté, tsakakjao jechao
xanda’be, jechao najño’be
when they put together, when they wrapped the bundles of
chicken eggs, turkey eggs