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, Incháustegui 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, Jacrzyński and Rodríguez 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 toxkooa, 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), Seler (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 jkioatexoma, which can be translated as “norm” or “law.”

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

Nga chjota chingga 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 tsiekjiao, tsakajté, tsakakjao jechao
xanda’be, jechao najño’be
when they put together, when they wrapped the bundles of chicken eggs, turkey eggs
Figure 1.1. Don Isauro Guerrero reading maize. Cerro Palmera, San José Tenango. Photo by Santiago Cortés Martínez.

Figure 1.2. Don Isauro Guerrero preparing the offering. Cerro Palmera, San José Tenango. Photo by Santiago Cortés Martínez.
After wrapping a number of small packages of paper containing wild green tobacco, don Isauro advised me on where to place the offerings in my room and then proceeded to list all the mountains and hills that surround the region:

Na cuarto ñatíñani ngi nachan ñja’bana chjon
In the room where she lives, below the bed where the woman rests

Koe nangi, koe nangi nachan
There she will place the offering, she will leave [it] below her bed

Jende tsomi, koe najin ndininde
In the sand, she will deposit it in the earth.

Ngo bote inakji ndikicha koe naya, koi nyaya
She will deposit it in a metal container, she will put [it] inside it

K’oasin koendani
That’s how she will prepare it

Jilani chikón Nindo Ya’chinra
You, guardian of Cerro Liquidambar

Koa jilani ñabakaoli ndichikón Naxinganai, naina Naxinganai
And you, who owns the guardian of Peña Caballero, father Peña Caballero

Koa jilani ñabakaoliji Nindo Setanai
And you, you who owns the Hill Where the Sun Shines

Kao Chinkjao
Cempoaltepetl

Ngayije, yije … nga tse nindo tsomij xokoja
All the things, everything belongs to the mountains

Koi basin batji’ta ni’ndaa
That’s why we do an offering

Koa tejan cera xitsee nina xibasen kao titjon naina tina
And we offer thirteen candles that belong to God, but Our Father is the first

Koa ya fa’asen tsee nangi xokji, koabe tsatsaán
That is how you deposit in the earth, that is how it is prepared.

Santiago was not able to identify all the mountains don Isauro mentioned, because Mazatec names often differ from Spanish ones. Don Isauro also mentioned another notable feature of Mazatec highlands: caves.

Ya, ya, ya Náa nainda, Ndá nachoonda, centro principale Tenangondâ,
There, there, there … in Agua Caballero, Agua Calabaza, main town of Tenango

Doña Luisa Guerrero performed the thirteen-candle ceremony (ceremonia de las trece velas), known in Mazatec as cera nima (candles of the souls, dead), for me on August 6, 2014. As with Don Isauro, the number thirteen still carries important symbolic associations even for curanderos who do not have direct knowledge of the Mesoamerican calendar, the tonalpohualli, whose 260 days are generated by a combination of thirteen numerals and twenty day signs. In the Mazateca the number thirteen is associated with the end of a cycle (called trecena, from “thirteen” in Spanish, since colonial times), which begins and ends at the ancestors’ place. The ceremony is meant to invoke the client’s family members who have passed away in order to seek their protection. While lighting the
candles one by one, Luisa Guerrero implored the ancestors to protect me:

Nik’oasin sijeeno jngo kjoanda
So I am asking you for a blessing

Nii tsobai ndinojon
Here is your precious daughter

Nikoa titso ngaje
She is imploring you

K’ianga jexoni, jexo nandaa je xi koasin siki nroenino
It is her, just her, who is asking to be heard

Xi k’oasin jnyanon tjin xko yongoonoo ngajon
You, who are on your knees with your claws and nails out

K’ianga koetoasoan, koetoasoaan
You can intercede for her

K’ianga ngasin, nganda
With patience, with calm

Koachikoson, koachikotain ña’nile xitso bakasai
May she receive your blessing and grace that she is looking for

Nga tseni kjoaxkon, nga tseni kjoangoa
Sorrow is big, big is the evil that surrounds us

Nga tseni soo, nga tseni kji’ne
There is a lot of heat, a lot of suffering

Nga tse ixroa, nga tse inda
A lot is broken, there is a lot that is fragile

Ni k’oasin sijeno nga tsio
So, I ask all of you

Jotjin mañoo xi koasin kafeson, kafetuo
All who are gone, all who have perished

Koa ni koa xotisin ‘tasain xkoli, ‘tasain xkoyongoli
You have to place your knees, go on your knees and take your nails out

Xitsa kinli María Sabina
You, who bore the name of María Sabina

Josin k’ianga nga tibitjoi, nga’ji
You are still famous, you

Koaxosin te tsoasoin, koaxosin te tsoata’in
Please, pray and intercede for her

Koaxosin, koaxosin te tsoasoin, te tsoata’in
Please, pray and intercede for her

Ngasin nganda, katamachikonson, katamachikonta’in
Slowly, with patience, give her your blessing, your grace

Luisa explicitly named María Sabina, the great *chjon chjine* (wise woman) whose ceremonies and chants were recorded in the 1950s. She then said the names of relatives and other famous wise people from Huautla, the Mazatec capital where she lived, who had already passed. Luisa called on her own curanderos and ancestors, whose strength was indicated through the expression “get on your knees, take your claws and nails out” (*koai ni koa xotisin ‘tasain xkoli, ‘tasain xkoyongoli*). The ancestor was described as a nahual, such as a jaguar or an eagle, whose strong grasp could protect living descendants. She also said that they should not fall asleep (i.e., lose focus or attention on their task of protecting living descendants). This could also have been a reference to what happens to a curandero in a moment of weakness during a vigil or a night ceremony.
1.2. Priests and diviners in ancient and colonial images

In the excerpts above, don Isauro and doña Luisa referred to the ancestors as the founders and guardians of divinatory knowledge. In the codices and alphabetic colonial sources, ancestral diviners usually appear as a couple: a grandmother and a grandfather known among the Nahuaas as Oxomoco and Cipactonal. Perhaps the most emblematic illustration of this couple can be found on page 21 of the early colonial Codex Borbonicus (on the left in Fig. 1.3), where they are seated facing each other inside a square temple enclosure. Oxomoco is on the left casting maize, while Cipactonal, whose name in Nahuatl means “Day Crocodile” (the first day of the tonalpohualli), faces her on the right. He holds a sacrificial bone knife and an incense burner. Both have gourds, used to carry piciete, tied to their backs with a red rope. The couple on page 21 form a couplet with Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca, who are found on the following page (on the right of Fig. 1.3). The two pages are framed by fifty-two year signs, which comprise a cycle that begins with the year 1 Rabbit on the bottom left part of page 21. While the image of the old diviner couple is often cited to illustrate the art of divination, the full picture of the two couples is usually omitted (e.g., Boone 2007, 26, Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2017, 20). However, it is clear that Oxomoco and Cipactonal are not the only ones to engage in acts of divination, and both couples and their mutual relationship must be addressed to gain a fuller picture of the meaning and characteristics of Mesoamerican divination.

Quetzalcoatl as an archetypal diviner has been extensively studied in the literature, given his presence in early colonial Indigenous sources. Most notably, López Austin (1989) and Gruzinski (1989) extensively discussed so-called “man-gods,” both before and after the conquest. As culture heroes, these men were responsible for the foundation of lineages and cities. They gifted their people civilization itself, knowledge, and craft, including the art of painting, day counting, metallurgy, stone, and feather work. After the imposition of the Spanish regime, they continued to act as the community’s intermediaries, and their powers often took on religious overtones. Both López Austin and Gruzinski highlighted the conflation of history and religion in oral and written accounts about the man-gods, an aspect that was also discussed by Nicholson (2001) in his classic essay on Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl. Historical feats often have a paradigmatic quality that defines the ethnic identity of a group, a lineage, or an entire people. As noted by Gruzinski, man-gods acted as progressively acculturated messiahs during the colonial period, especially during times of social crisis.

The important role history played in the religious manuscripts, especially after the conquest, is addressed in Chapters 6, 7, and 8 of this book. However, it is important to emphasize the transcendental importance of the man-gods as intermediaries, who are simultaneously capable of embodying different social, political, and religious roles in not only a rather purposeful but also an idiosyncratic manner. In the Mazatec cases discussed above, don Isauro called on the ancestors, characters akin to the old diviners Oxomoco and Cipactonal, but did not refer to any priests that could be identified as Quetzalcoatl. In fact, I believe that don Isauro himself played the role of the diviner priest during the ceremony. Moreover, doña Luisa directly placed herself within a long lineage of great local diviners to revive their powers during the ritual. Several depictions

Figure 1.3. Oxomoco and Cipactonal (left), Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca (right), surrounded by fifty-two year signs. Codex Borbonicus, pp. 21–22. Bibliothèque de l’Assemblée nationale, Paris.
of ancestral couples recur throughout the Codex Vienna, an account of the origin of the Mixtec people, which further exemplifies the coexistence of several types of priests and diviners and their close relationship. At the beginning of the manuscript on page 51, a pair of ancestors named Lord and Lady 1 Deer (Fig. 1.4) sit facing each other, casting tobacco and burning incense; these are typical activities of diviners, as seen in the Codex Borbonicus (Fig. 1.3). A long list of offspring follows on the next two pages. Colonial sources from the Mixteca refer to a primordial couple who existed before the dawn of time (García 1981, ch. IV, Jansen 1982, 89–90). Their skeletal jaws indicate that they are deceased ancestors, but the red-beaked headdress and black-and-red feather headdress indicate the imagery of the wind god Ehecatl, a manifestation of Quetzalcoatl. On a later page (Fig. 1.5), Lord 9 Wind Quetzalcoatl is indeed born from a giant sacrificial knife. Just before this event, on the register above, a pair of ancestors with skeletal jaws and clawed hands and feet are scattering green tobacco and burning copal, which indicates that Quetzalcoatl is born from their offering, sacrifice, and knowledge. At the same time, as seen on page 51, the primordial diviners also bear the attributes of one of the offspring, Quetzalcoatl.

The Selden Roll, an early colonial manuscript from the Coixtlahuaca Valley in the northern part of Oaxaca, depicts a regional narrative of creation and dynastic foundation in a similar manner to the Codex Vienna, albeit shorter. Figures 1.6 and 1.7 show two scenes from the story. First, Lord and Lady 1 Deer are in the sky facing each other. Red and white horizontal bands punctuated with star-eyes indicate the different layers of heaven. At the center, between the couple, sits Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl, who is recognizable from his characteristic attributes, such as the conical hat, peaked mask, and curved staff. The event takes place in the year 13 Rabbit and day 2 Deer. Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2017, 305) suggested that the day sign 2 Deer results from the sum of the two elderly characters’
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Figure 1.6. Lord and Lady 1 Deer in heaven with Quetzalcoatl. Selden Roll. Kingsborough 1831.

Figure 1.7. Lord 1 Jaguar as fire serpent flying from Chicomoztoc. Selden Roll. Kingsborough 1831.
names. The other date, 13 Rabbit, is the year before 1 Reed, a date associated with the beginning and creation, especially in Mixtec manuscripts. Thus, the episode takes place in heaven before the establishment of worldly things. In a subsequent scene, a priest in the guise of a flying fire serpent, a powerful supernatural creature with a tortoise carapace known as yaha yahui in Mixtec and xiuhcoatl among the Nahua, descends from a cave, a sacred place of origins (Hermann Lejarazu 2009). His black body paint and calendrical name, 1 Jaguar, are elements that indicate that he is a priest who is conducting a ritual in the cave. His activity follows a path of flint knives and star-eyes that begins at the cave, eventually reaching a place where the priest performs a ritual known as the New Fire, which is related to the foundation of dynasties. The star-eyes and flint knives of the path denote both the heavenly and the sacrificial quality of the priest’s travel, which contrasts with the terrestrial and historical narrative developed on the other path, which departs from the cave along a series of footprints. A similar image of a downward flying priest surrounded by star-eyes and sacrificial knives can be found on page 32 of the Codex Borgia (Fig. 1.8), on which a naked priest passes through the elongated body of the goddess Cihuacoatl, whose skirt displays nightly and sacrificial attributes. The skeletal quality of the Cihuacoatl’s body suggests that she is an ancestor who not only generates but also protects the priest’s flight and travel into the terrestrial realm.

Burland (1955), Boone (2000, 152–160), and Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2017, 299–357) have exhaustively commented on the Selden Roll and its place in the creation and historical narratives of Oaxaca and the Coixtlahuaca Valley in particular. Here, what I would like to remark on is, once again, the existence of “another” type of diviner and priest other than the elderly couple (e.g., Oxomoco and Cipactonal, Lord and Lady 1 Deer, etc.). The character can be identified as either Quetzalcoatl, indeed himself a primordial priest, or a priestly reincarnation of him. He appears to be created by the elderly couple and, as in the Codex Borbonicus, to complement their function. In the Selden Roll, he descends from heaven to establish local lineages and connects the ancestral time and place of the ancestors with the historical and terrestrial time of humankind. He is a man-god, according to López Austin’s (1989) definition. Both the Selden Roll and the Codex Vienna belong to a specific genre of ancient Mesoamerican pictography that combines history and religion. The characters found therein are neither historical, such as those in Mixtec genealogical manuscripts, nor gods or god impersonators, as in the teoamoxtl (the religious manuscripts). In the latter, which are the focus of this book, the presence of these intermediary figures may sometimes be difficult to ascertain despite their primordial importance.

Another example, not from pictography but from rock carving, offers an opportunity to address the issue in a different context. A few boulders in Piedra de los Reyes (Stone of Kings) in Coatlan (Place of the Serpent), which is located between the towns of Yautpec and Cuernavaca in Morelos, depict a well-known carving of Oxomoco and Cipactonal (Robelo 1910). The two old diviners are shown in profile and face each other, as in the previously discussed images, while the center of the carving is occupied by a frontal depiction of a reptilian creature’s open mouth; the day sign 2 Rabbit can be seen inside it (Fig. 1.9). Caves are usually depicted as the open jaws of a reptile, indicating the entrance into the underworld through the mouth of the living earth. Due to the specific physical placement of the three boulders and their respective images, when a person stands between the two boulders with the ancestors, they look as though they are coming in or out of the open mouth of the earth while feeling the embrace of the ancestors. A full understanding of the iconography of the Piedra de los Reyes requires consideration of the ritual action and actors that would enact or activate the place. The subjective position and experience of the priest-diviner who stands between the three stones must be considered in the analysis of the carved images. While the ancestors can be iconographically identified in the carvings, the priest’s lived experience must be imagined. Nonetheless, the priest’s or performer’s role is pivotal in the development of the scene and ritual.

Robelo (1910, 342, 349) was the first to identify the couple as the primordial diviners, further noting that colonial sources identified Cuauhmahua (modern-day Cuernavaca), where the petroglyphs are located, as the Mesoamerican calendar’s place of origin. However, the

![Figure 1.8](image-url)
same author (Robelo 1910, 350) was unable to clarify the meaning of the date and name 2 Rabbit found on the central boulder inside the crocodile’s mouth. In Nahua lore, Ome Tochtli (2 Rabbit) is the calendrical name assigned to the gods of pulque, a beverage obtained from fermented agave, which is still popular in central and southern Mexico today. According to the Codex Magliabechiano (ff. 49r–49v), both Tepoztlan and Yautepec, two towns in the Cuernavaca area near Piedra de los Reyes, had pulque gods as their patron deities. Thus, it is possible that Ome Tochtli represented at the site is a specific reference to the local founding god and its birth as it emerges from the earth with the embrace, support, and sacrifice of the elderly couple. A priest standing between the boulders depicting Oxomoco and Cipactonal could personify Ome Tochtli and derive their powers from the elderly couple and the earth.

The interchangeable roles of old diviners and powerful priest-gods can be found on a series of pages in the Borgia Group that represents protocols of rituals (Nowotny 1961, 272–275, Anders, Jansen, and Loo 1994, 267–300, Boone 2007, 157–169). Each page depicts a mesa (sacred table) for the correct number and placement of candles and other offerings, as seen in both don Isauro and doña Luisa’s ceremonies (see also Sharon and Brady 2003, Dehouve 2007). In Fejérváry-Mayer, a long sequence of eighteen pages (pp. 5–22) depicts several mesas. The top portion of each page or mesa shows a god engaged in a ritual activity in front of an offering, whose number and placement are specified on the lower part of the page. Of the eighteen scenes, the priestess is present in only one instance on page 7. She is seated in front of a god, most likely Xochipilli, with whom she is interacting, as indicated by their gestures (Fig. 1.10). Both priestess and god are seated on a petate (straw mat), while an offering of white feathers and a burning ball of hule (rubber) is placed between them. The elderly diviner on the left has seemingly invoked and summoned the young god. The offerings of white feathers and flowers are depicted in the bottom register, along with numeral dots and bars. The remaining pages of this section in the manuscript only depict one character on
each page, seated on the right, the place of the god on page 7. Although the identity of each character cannot always be determined, their divine status is indicated by their rich and varied iconographic attributes. On page 14 (Fig. 1.11), for example, the god takes an active ceremonial role; he holds two sacrificial tools, a maguey (agave) spine and a bone, in his right hand while pointing his left index finger to a bundle of burning ocote (pinewood) sticks in front of him. As on all other pages in this section, the god on this page seems to be performing an officiating role usually played by a priest or priestess. The god is seemingly about to perform a ritual bloodletting that should be performed for him rather than by him. Although this may seem odd, this example of a god performing a ritual that ought to be performed for them is not a rare instance in the religious manuscripts (see, for example, Fig. 3.3 and 6.9).

Patton (2009) discussed a similar situation in a series of Greek vases that depict gods conducting libation rituals that should be performed for them. This paradoxical situation turns the otherwise pragmatic relationship of giving an offering to obtain a favor (do ut des) into a purposeless, self-referential act. The gods become the generator of their own cult, with no other outcome than the ritual itself. Patton (2009, 13) calls this type of depiction “divine reflexivity” and explains that, in such instances, the painted image does not prescribe a ritual but rather depicts an idealized moment of the ritual realization. The image of the god becomes a form of self-expression; the divine realm is at once the objective and the source of all ceremonial actions, including human ones (Patton 2009, 174). In the Introduction, I referred to the work of Jewish scholar Seeman (2004) who, in analyzing the relationship between the existential philosophy of Levinas and Rabbinic thought, stressed the selfless nature of the so-called “medical gesture,” defined as an act primarily driven by altruism. The “medical gesture” is an imperative to act rather than an explanation or rational justification of a fact or situation. I believe that the pages of the codices that depict mesas constitute another instance of the generosity of ritual (i.e., a ritual that goes beyond the limitations imposed by strict pragmatism). This is not to say that no objectives are pursued in a ceremony. On the contrary, seeking a cure for an illness is almost always the reason that people consult Mazatec healers. Finally, the curandero’s vocation goes well beyond any pragmatic objectives and may be better described as a lifelong pursuit of knowledge for its own sake.

Figure 1.10. An old priestess and Xochipilli; counted offerings below. Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, p. 7. Loubat 1901.
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The god of Figure 1.11 illustrates another specific iconographic feature that indicates a high degree of reflexivity in the image-making process. His yellow and gray facial paint is replicated in the small head mounted on his forehead. Both heads also produce a gray and smoky volute accompanied by star-eye symbols. An image that contains a smaller version or copy of itself is a rhetorical and stylistic device known as *mise en abyme*, French for “into the abyss” (Dällenbach 1989). The visual and literary rhetorical trope of repeating the entire image or narrative in a detail of itself has the rather destabilizing effect of creating an infinitely regressive situation in which the reader or viewer is being read and viewed at the same time in an endless spiral. The image or story appears to generate itself. Subject and object interchange so that the viewer’s and reader’s placement in the story is confused and their identity and existential status are questioned. The interchangeability of object and subject also has the effect of nullifying the boundaries between external reality and internal or enclosed fiction or projection. The image ceases to draw its meaning from an external point of reference and becomes its own source of referential meaning, which is evinced by the iteration of certain features. In our case, the iconography of the god is syncretic or ambiguous, mixing as it does the attributes of Patecatl and Yoaltecuhtli (Anders, Jansen, and Pérez Jiménez 1994, 218–219), but this is not a mistake, because the exact replication does not leave any doubts about the tlacuilo’s (painter’s) original intention. Iterability rather than prototype constitutes authority (Derrida 1988). Self-referentiality is typical of the reflexive nature of divinity, according to Patton (2009, 176). The priest can read themself in the book while reading it, as suggested by the superimposition of roles in the images from the previously discussed codices. There is no need for an external myth to explain why the gods perform the ceremony the way that they do or sport certain attributes; they simply do. As modern scholars, we often make this mistake and look for external and reliable sources while forgetting the process by which a source does indeed function as such. In the field, a lack of explanation for certain ceremonial activities or beliefs is often taken as a sign of loss of meaning, without considering that willful repetition of a certain behavior is in itself tradition.

1.3. Divination and ceremony

Scenes that clearly depict the mantic reading of maize or other comparable divinatory practices can only be found in two cognate illustrations in the Codices Tudela (f. 49r; Fig. 1.12) and Magliabechiano (f. 78r). Figure 1.12 depicts presumably three stages of a visit to the diviner, proceeding from top to bottom. First, two men consult with a woman, who is not only talking to them, as indicated by the gray volutes, but also weeping. Then,
the central and main scene depicts a female diviner seated on a mat to the left. She is throwing maize kernels and black beans from a conch shell onto a white cloth. In front of her is an image of Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl, which also rests on a straw mat. Finally, a person who is talking and crying, presumably the client, is depicted below. While the act of crying is clearly an expression of the concerns that afflict the patient, it could also be interpreted as the tears that often accompany the vision and clarity attained during the ceremony (Jansen 1982, 196–197). In this case, knowledge of one’s condition passes from the priestess in the first scene to the person directly afflicted below through the reading of the maize in the middle. While the curandera in the first scene could immediately understand the situation, the clarity that comes from divination helps to communicate knowledge to the person below.

Comparing this image with the ones from pre-Hispanic codices, it is noticeable that the kernels and table are not present or naturalistically depicted in the latter

Figure 1.12. Priestess reading maize in front of Quetzalcoatl and a patient. Codex Tudela, f. 49r. Museo de América, Madrid.

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(FIG. 1.10–1.11); rather, the manuscript itself becomes a mesa whose stuccoed surface mimics the white cloth, while the dot-and-line numerals signify both the number and position of the kernels, bundles, and candles. In the Codex Tudela, kernels and beans are placed at the center of the image, floating in the air, which mimics the position that they may take once they are on the cloth. Moreover, in the ancient books, one always finds the god associated with the offering but never the client and very rarely the diviner herself. The image in the ancient books needs an external reader to function and be properly activated (Díaz Álvarez 2016), as it is not a mere depiction of a narrative scene with an explanatory intent.

Among the Mazatecs of Oaxaca, the altar on which the kernels are thrown is covered with a white cloth and adorned with sacred images, branches, flowers, and candles; it is referred to as adorned with sacred images, branches, flowers, and kernels are thrown is covered with a white cloth and

Álvarez 2016), as it is not a mere depiction of a narrative
diviner herself. The image in the ancient books needs an external reader to function and be properly activated (Díaz Álvarez 2016), as it is not a mere depiction of a narrative scene with an explanatory intent.

Among the Mazatecs of Oaxaca, the altar on which the kernels are thrown is covered with a white cloth and adorned with sacred images, branches, flowers, and candles; it is referred to as yamixa tse (white or pure table). It is always oriented towards the east, the place from which light, clarity, and knowledge originate. Don Isáuro Guerrero explained the following:

Tso xi ndichjota chingana: Ndosen
The revered grandparents say, clear and pure circle of knowledge

Ndonen ndona, kitsole chjota chingana ñaa
Wise father and wise mother, that it is how our ancestors called it

Ndosen, naskana, kitsole je chjota chingana ñaa
Circle of knowledge, they gave it a really beautiful name, our ancestors

Koa ya kjiroani ña bitjoni tsui, kjooma kjotaajo
That is where the sun rises; from there the ceremonies and the rites (knowledge) came.

The expression ndonai ndona, which we translated as “wise father and wise mother,” refers to a place of supreme clarity, where knowledge is acquired (Carrara González and Doesburg 1996, 189–190). Ndosen, mentioned in the second line, has a similar meaning as a place found in the east, which in Western cultural terms could perhaps be indicated as “heaven” (Boege 1988, 174–183). Sen or ísen evokes the idea that one’s nature or identity rests in a double, an image or representation of sorts.

According to Mesoamerican lore, the great culture hero Quetzalcoatl disappeared into the east at the end of his life. In the Codex Vaticanus A (f. 9v), the place is called Tlapallan, the Colored Place, a name related to xitilli in tlapalli (black and colored), a metaphor for knowledge and the ancient books, whose figures comprise a black outline and colored areas. In the Codex Tudela (Fig. 1.12), Quetzalcoatl, the tutelary god of priestesses, sits in front of a wise woman, where today we see images of saints (Fig. 1.1). Behind the priestess is a gray circle decorated with star-eyes. Quetzalcoatl, the supreme deity of priestly knowledge, is seated in the east and opposed to the west, which is associated with night and obscurity. Through a consultation with the diviner, one leaves behind uncertainty and turns towards clarity. Previously, Anders and Jansen (1996a, 214) interpreted the night symbol as an indication that the ritual of divination took place at night. María Sabina once related to Álvaro Estrada (1981, 63) that Toribio García, a chjota chjine of Huautla, used thirteen kernels of corn for divination. She said that he used to cast kernels during night vigils and again at dawn. In my experience, however, the reading of maize is not part of night ceremonies and is more often performed during the day, although it may be conducted in conjunction with night ceremonies, as explained in Chapter 2.

In pre-Hispanic manuscripts, star-eyes on a gray background not only indicate the night as a temporal marker but are also frequently an attribute of gods and ceremonial tools. On page 12 (Fig. 3.3) of the Codex Cospi, for example, two officiating priest-gods extend their censers towards a temple. While the character in the top scene can be identified as Tonatiuh and his related sun cult, the god below, Itzlacoliuhqui (Curved Obsidian Blade), wears a headdress with star-eye symbols and dark, smoky hair, which highlights his relationship with night and obscurity. A large smoke volute emerges from Itzlacoliuhqui’s incense burner and the temple itself, presided by an owl, which contrasts with the colorful bird and bejeweled offerings of the temple above. The calendrical arrangement on the left associates the top image with the east, while the image below corresponds to the north (Jansen 2002, 288–302). In the Codex Tudela (Fig. 1.12), the priestess is an intermediary figure between opposing forces: the realms of clarity and knowledge versus the “other” realm—the place of the unknown, obscurity, and the ancestors.

Olivier discussed the intermingling of rather than the opposition between obscure and possibly negative forces on the one hand and clarity and knowledge on the other in his research on the identity of Tezcatlipoca (Smoking Mirror; Olivier 2003, 2015b). In both texts and images, Tezcatlipoca is almost inextricably related to Quetzalcoatl, the primordial priest of the east. By contrast, Tezcatlipoca, as his enemy brother, embodies night and darkness. The dynamic relationship between the two is clearly expressed on page 22 of the Codex Borbonicus, as previously discussed. Olivier (2003, 22) also highlighted that sacrifice, especially self-sacrifice or immolation, is closely related to music and prayer. Self-sacrifice is often represented in pictographic form as a flint knife, as previously explained in the birth of Lord 9 Wind Quetzalcoatl and the ecstatic flight of priest 1 Jaguar in the Selden Roll. The impalpable but pervasive quality of music and prayer is a primary manifestation not only of wind, Quetzalcoatl-Ehecatl himself, but also the “night wind” (in yohuanli in ehecatl in Nahautl), which is more commonly an attribute of Tezcatlipoca (e.g., Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 6, ch. 1). Visually, smoke, soot, and charcoal produced by burning flames were often used for the black body paint of priests (Olivier 2003, 185–189).
Following this interpretation, the night is not only a temporal accident but also a constitutive element of ceremonial action. On page 29 (Fig. 1.13), the scene that opens the long central sequence of the Codex Borgia is dominated by a large anthropomorphic incense burner with eyes and a fleshless mouth. Smoky volutes emanate from it, and their ends feature the head of a wind god, Ehecatl, a clear indication of a nightly smoke or wind. In this instance, the juxtaposition between night and Quetzalcoatl-Ehecatl becomes a blending, which indicates that the opposition is dynamic and not fixed. In the lower part of the image, the square enclosure opens to the next scene on the following page of the manuscript, where two intertwined smoke serpents generate two priestly figures from their mouths; their beaked masks and claws indicate that they are nahuales. The image suggests that it is the smoke that generates the priests. Ceremonial actions, such as the burning of copal and other substances on a brazier, are not so much performed by the priest as they bestow the status of priesthood on a person.

Marina Mendoza of Boca del Río, a small village in the vicinity of Huautla, expressed the power and importance of incense burners in ceremonies with the following words:

Ni’kiajin’la tiskangini nroa’i nañaa
Our incense burner will never fall

Ni’kiajin ko’tsaoya’ni nroa’i naa
My incense burner will never cease burning

Figure 1.13. The incense burner. Codex Borgia, p. 29. Danzel 1923.
Finally, incense burners from the region of Tehuacán and Teotitlán, which are commonly referred to as xantiles, offer an example culturally and geographically close to both Huautla de Jiménez and the codices (Fig. 1.14). The term “xantil,” used today in the region to refer to any archaeological object, probably derives from the Spanish word gentil (meaning “pagan”) in reference to the religion practiced before colonization. Seler (1895, 35) was the first to identify the most-represented god in the xantiles as the central Mexican Macuilxochitl (Five Flower), a god of game, dance, and music who is similar to Xochipilli (Lord of Flowers). Despite its clear central Mexican iconography, the xantil is a typical artifact from the southern Nahua region, including the Mazateca and other areas of the northern state of Oaxaca. Although southern Nahua iconography’s bearing on the interpretation of the codices and Mazatec night ceremonies are discussed at greater length in Section 3.4, it is worth mentioning the work of John Pohl (2007) on a xantil now housed at the Princeton University Art Museum. He identified the character on the xantil as Macuital (Five Soul), a patron god of sorcerers, diviners, and healers, thus emphasizing the intrinsically ceremonial nature of feasting, music, and dancing as activities that are more commonly associated with the Macuilxochitl-Xochipilli deity complex. A comparison of the Tehuacán xantil with the incense burner on page 29 of the Codex Borgia (Fig. 1.13) and the god on page 14 of the Codex Fejér-váry-Mayer (Fig. 1.11) reveals the complexity of this type of object, which conflates the smoke, the representation of the god, and

Figure 1.14. Xantil, Mixteca-Puebla. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.
the priest who impersonates the god. Once the censer is activated by placing burning wood and other substances in it, smoke emerges from the holes in the nostrils, mouth, and chest. This fuming body, as seen in Figure 1.11, is not only a metaphor for knowledge but also an actual ritual and devotional object. Pictographic symbolism closely adheres to a lived experience and vivid perceptions of the senses (sight, touch, smell, etc.). Both Jansen (2002) and Pohl (2007) related the use and symbolism of the censers of southeastern Mexico to the consumption of substances such as piciete (wild tobacco) or sacred mushrooms, which induce altered states of consciousness as a means of attaining knowledge.

The ritual consumption of mushrooms, which takes place exclusively at night, is perhaps the aspect of Mazatec culture and ceremonies that is best known to outsiders. Sacred mushrooms are called ndi’xitjo (little ones that spring forth) in Mazatec, a reference to the fact that they spontaneously grow during the rainy season and cannot be cultivated. Since Gordon Wasson’s numerous visits to the region, a Mazatec woman called María Sabina (Fig. 2.1), who was from Río Santiago—a small village located around half an hour’s drive from Huautla—and lived in the main Mazatec town until her death in 1985, became a world-renowned chjon chjine (wise woman; Estrada 1981). While written references to the use of sacred plants can be found in colonial sources from the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (e.g., the Florentine Codex, bk. 11, ch. 7 and Alarcón and Serna in Andrews and Hassig 1984, bk. 1), I discuss two clear pictographic representations in this section. First, the colonial Codex Magliabechiano (f. 90r; Fig. 1.15) explicitly and succinctly illustrates the consumption of sacred mushrooms. On a small page that depicts different and perhaps unrelated scenes (see also Section 7.2.5 for further discussion), a man seated on a straw mat appears to be in the act of ingesting a round object with a white stem while holding a similar object in his other hand. The man is probably ingesting mushrooms, which are sprouting from a patch of land right in front of him. A large skeletal figure looms behind him and touches him with his right claw. The composition suggests an opposition: on the one hand, the man performing the ritual is leaving darkness and death behind him thanks to the power of the sacred plants in front of him, which in this case would indicate clarity. On the other hand, the skeletal character can be understood as an ancestor who guides and touches or protects the man who undertakes the ritual. The

Figure 1.15. The ingestion of sacred mushrooms (lower right). Codex Magliabechiano, f. 90r. Florence, Biblioteca nazionale centrale, Banco Rari, 232.
The colonial image of the skeletal figure creates a terrifying depiction of the power of the plant, perhaps suggesting diabolical overtones, but it can also allude to the fact that mushroom ceremonies can have terrible outcomes when they are not properly performed by knowledgeable people.

The only pre-Hispanic depiction of a ceremony involving the consumption of mushrooms can be found on page 24 of the Codex Vienna (Fig. 1.16). First identified by Caso (1963), this scene is part of a long sequence of rituals that precedes the rise of the first sun on page 23 (the manuscript’s page count proceeds backwards). The ceremony takes place in Apoala, a town in the Mixteca Alta that is considered a place of origin for the Mixtec people, as indicated by the toponym on the bottom right corner of the page, where the reading of the scene begins. Next to the toponym, two spirits are engaged in a conversation on the day 4 Lizard, year 8 Reed. The narrative then proceeds upwards, alternating from right to left and from left to right. The ceremony is performed by Lord 9 Wind Quetzalcoatl, who first meets with an old priest, Lord 4 Lizard, seated on a temple platform before bringing forth the mushrooms in the form of two goddesses, Ladies 4 Lizard and 11 Lizard, whom he carries on his back. Both women have white mushrooms sprouting from their heads. Jansen (1982, 196) noted that characters or gods with these calendrical names only appear in this scene and are not mentioned anywhere else in extant Mixtec codices. Next, the scene depicts a mortuary bundle placed on the ground and emanating smoke volutes, followed by a representation of the rain god Tlaloc and a maize plant; the same images can be found in a preceding scene on page 27 that relates to the invention of agriculture. This cluster of images is associated with an unspecified year 1 indicated by one dot and a year sign (interlaced A-O sign) in front of the mummy. It is unclear whether these chronological markers are a reference to specific times during the year when the ceremony must be performed or the establishment of the ceremony itself. The ceremony begins with Quetzalcoatl playing and singing with a human bone and skull to invoke the presence and help of the ancestors. In front of him sits a character who is visibly crying and holding two white mushrooms (to this day, mushrooms are consumed in pairs). In the Codex Tudela (f. 49r), I interpreted the act of

Figure 1.16. Mushroom ceremony. Codex Vienna, p. 24. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna.
crying as a reference to diviners’ ability to see what afflicts a patient. The weeping character bears the calendrical name of 7 Flower—Xochipilli among the Nahua, the god of music and feasting, who is similar to the xantil discussed above.

Jansen (1982, 197) transcribed an excerpt from a chant by María Sabina in relation to his interpretation of the ceremony in the Codex Vienna. It is worth reading the text again:

Chjon nga kjindia nia, tso  
Woman who cries I am, says

Chjon nga bixia nia, tso  
Woman who whistles I am, says

Chjon nga sitsin nia, tso  
Woman like thunder I am, says

Chjon nga sikane nia, tso  
Woman who rumbles I am, says

Chjon spiritu nia, tso  
Woman spirit I am, says

Chjon nga kjindia nia, tso  
Crying woman I am, says

(Wasson and Wasson 1957a, side 1, band 1)  
(https://youtu.be/EqExyGM7FOA)  
Transcription and translation by Santiago Cortés Martínez and Alessia Frassani

In this excerpt, María Sabina associates the act of crying with meteorological manifestations, such as storms, wind, and rain. Her tears are like raindrops, and her cries reverberate like thunder. At the same time, the subject—María Sabina insistently referred to herself in the third person, as a woman—becomes an immaterial spirit who can inhabit the falling drops and resounding thunder. María Sabina describes an atmospheric phenomenon as a self-ascribed attribute in a manner similar to the night and star-eyes seen in the several aforementioned depictions from pre-Hispanic codices. Rain and thunder are not external and circumstantial meteorological accidents; they are constitutive of a subjective experience that occurs during the ceremony. It is clear that the words and chants of modern chjota chjine are analogous to images in the ancient codices and objects, such as the censer. Colonial sources, in contrast, despite being chronologically closer to the ancient manuscripts, did not utilize the full potential of images as generators of meaning but rather relied on pictography as illustrations, which turned the subjective experience of knowledge acquisition into an external and ostensibly objective point of view. However, this point of view was usually openly hostile to Mesoamerican religious experience. The comparison of the two images of mushroom consumption in the Codices Magliabechiano and Vienna once again highlights the division in the depiction of sacred images and beings from the pre-Hispanic period and the colonial period. While ceremony participants in the Mixtec manuscript were gods themselves and performed a ritual of self-reflexivity, the solitary man’s ingestion of the sacred plant in the later colonial depiction was divorced from the ancestor that he was encountering. The latter image is descriptive or etic, an anthropological expression that indicates the observer’s external and analytical point of view. The narrative in the Codex Vienna, on the contrary, conflates human and communal experiences of the ceremony with the encounter with the gods to the point that the two fuse into a single complex image.

As previously mentioned, the mushroom ceremony in the Codex Vienna precedes and is actually the culminating event in a series of rituals that lead to the rise of the first sun on page 23. Participants in the ceremony (i.e., Lords 2 Dog, 1 Death, and 4 Movement and Ladies 9 Reed, 1 Eagle, 9 Grass, and 5 Flint) are well-known characters who prominently appear not only in the preceding chapters of the Mixtec creation narrative but also on the remaining pages (22–1), which relate the founding of regional dynasties. Therefore, the rise of the first sun is a liminal moment that marks the beginning of a new era in the world, out of the darkness of the ancestors’ primordial time. Compared to depictions in colonial manuscripts, it becomes apparent that death, darkness, and night have connotations in Mesoamerican thought that are quite different from the European tradition. Passage through night and darkness and the ability to establish a relationship and communication with the ancestors are instrumental to the rise of the sun, light, life, and social organization. Darkness is not a static position of ignorance or a lack of understanding but rather a dynamic quest towards knowledge and the establishment of new order.

This chapter discussed the ways in which Mazatec chjota chjine and Mesoamerican wise people or priests more generally can subjectively generate their own personae, powers, and scope of action. Divination, especially when it directly addresses the ancestors who reside in another world, entails active engagement with them in an often dark and unknown realm. Unlike any functionalist view of rituals that posits adherence to an established protocol to achieve the desired effect, Mesoamerican divination and its ceremonies are extremely inventive and open-ended processes; they are geared towards reunion with the ancestors, who are the only ones who can grant supernatural powers to the living. Wagner’s ideas on the “invention of culture” are especially relevant in this context (Wagner 1981, Zamora 2016).
Recordings of María Sabina’s chants (Wasson and Wasson 1957a, Wasson et al. 1974) by American mycologist Gordon Wasson turned a humble but powerful woman into one of the most famous figures in modern Mexico, both within and outside of the country (Fig. 2.1; Estrada 1981). Nonetheless, despite the publication of the recordings along with full transcriptions, annotations, and translations of the recited texts in both Spanish and English (Wasson et al. 1974), the remarkable knowledge of María Sabina and many other chjota chjine from the region has not been given the attention that it deserves.

This chapter is an attempt to critically present and discuss original Mazatec chants that were recorded, transcribed, and translated by the author and Santiago Cortés Martínez, a huauteco with a long-lasting interest in the preservation and promotion of his native language, ceremonies, and traditional medicine. The chants provide a unique entry point into Mesoamerican healers’ images of themselves and their knowledge and powers. Colonial poems and chants are also critically presented alongside contemporary examples to understand the historical depth and trajectory of Indigenous way of constructing personhood and agency in a ritual context.

2.1. Colonial views on night ceremonies

Along with other deeply misguided and negative terms, such as “idol” (idolo), that have been used to describe sacred Mesoamerican images in colonial and modern scholarship, “drunkenness” (borrachera) has been taken at face value when describing ceremonies, especially those performed at night, which are seemingly implied to be orgiastic, alcohol-fueled rituals. Such a misinterpretation is a direct result of the fact that every piece of information on the use of mind-altering, psychoactive substances in colonial sources was intended to demonize and extirpate their use. Treatises such as those by Ruiz de Alarcón and other friars compiled in the seventeenth century were veritable manuals for the identification of illicit Indigenous practices that involved substances such as ololiuhqui (datura seed), piciete (wild tobacco), and sacred mushrooms (teonanacatl; Andrews and Hassig 1984, Ponce et al. 1987).

The implications of such a prejudicial stance are seldom considered when relying on these sources for interpretation, perhaps due to common and long-lasting misconceptions of altered states in Western society and culture. Notably, Ginzburg (1983, 1991) unveiled how the witch-hunt craze...