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 Nahua 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 Gruziński (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 Gruziński 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 Gruziński, 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’
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 teoamoxtli (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 Coatlán (Place of the Serpent), which is located between the towns of Yautepex 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 Cuauhnahuac (modern-day Cuernavaca), where the petroglyphs are located, as the Mesoamerican calendar’s place of origin. However, the

Figure 1.8. A priest is born from the skeletal body of Cihuacoatl. Codex Borgia, p. 32. Kingsborough 1831.
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.
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 Yoaltecuhlti (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,