The man seated on a stone in the first image of Figure 2.2 is not pondering his somber destiny. Weeping is associated with vision, as discussed in Chapter 1. The naked man, devoted to Tezcatlipoca, is beginning his journey to reach the world of the ancestors and know his fate, which may mean death in battle or as a war captive, as also suggested in the above-quoted Nahautl text from the Florentine Codex. As further discussed in Chapter 8, the intellectual missionary experiment that led to the creation of the Florentine Codex demonstrates the limits of the cultural encounter when it is framed by evangelical ideology. It was the missionaries’ intention to represent, with the authority of the victor, Mesoamerican culture at the moment of its declared death. As modern heirs of Sahagún’s ethnohistorical and encyclopedic method, Western scholars fall victim to the same mistake all too often.

Anthropologists have long turned their attention to shamanism and ecstatic techniques, building on the classic study by Romanian historian Mircea Eliade (1964). Furst (1972), Harner (1973), and Wasson (1980) are the most important contributions for the present study, which seeks to uncover the shamanic aspects of Mesoamerican being in the world, as expressed through visual and other artistic means (see also Harrison-Buck and Freidel 2021). Mazatec ceremonies and their language provide a key to the identification of elements in the pictographic and textual descriptions of Indigenous ceremonies, which speak to an enduring Mesoamerican paradigm of vision quests (or, as Santiago suggested, quests for an encounter) and spiritual transformations.

2.2. Mazatec night ceremonies

Night ceremonies have been referred to as veladas (vigils) since the work of Wasson (Wasson et al. 1974, IX), who also provided detailed descriptions of the general outlook and development of the performance he attended (Wasson and Wasson 1957, 215–329, reprinted partially in Wasson and Wasson 2003). Velada is a translation of the Mazatec terms tsaka tio’nik or kjoabijnachon, both of which refer to the act of being awake at night. All ceremonies take place after dark, most often in the curandero’s house. Usually, people other than the curandero and the patient are in attendance, such as members of either family or close acquaintances. The entire ritual, which lasts between two and five hours, entails different kinds of activities. Every time that I attended a velada, the curandero or curandera made a divinatory reading both before and after the ceremony using corn kernels, eggs, or candles, as explained in the previous chapter, which helped to clarify the prospect and outcome of my visit. At the same time, it seemed to me that these divinatory rituals, held in daylight, also served as a kind of introduction and closing for the nocturnal experience by connecting the dark time with the light of day. Praying with Catholic litanies, such as Avemaría and Padrenuestro, in either Spanish or Mazatec, accompanied the entirety of the night ceremony. Long periods of silence and casual chatting were also part of the communication established between participants. Plants, such as hoja de Pascua, as seen in the preceding chapter, and aguardiente (a distilled spirit) were frequently employed; they were mostly rubbed on the head, temples, and forearms of the patient, a procedure that was intended to “raise” (levantar in Spanish) them—that is, to infuse strength or calm. Copal smoke served the same function, and it was often blown on the participant’s face and body. While these aspects are almost universal, every curandero has their own style of conducting the ceremony and sings in remarkably different ways. In my experience, the most important factor that determined the outlook of a ceremony was the severity of the issue to be addressed, which could be physical, psychological, or social (e.g., interpersonal conflict). If the curandero themselves had unresolved problems, these would also greatly interfere with and affect the quality or, more accurately, the intensity of the ceremony.

Although I attended five ceremonies, I was only able to record on three occasions because curanderos often do not want mechanical devices to disrupt the ceremony or their words to be recorded. During chanting, language could become rather obscure, but this was usually because recordings cannot reproduce the complexity of the lived experience and interactions shared by participants during the ceremony. Wasson’s 1974 publication is the only one that includes a complete tape recording, transcription, and translation (in both English and Spanish) of a ceremony conducted by María Sabina in 1958. By contrast, earlier published recordings (Wasson and Wasson 1957a) only contained excerpts from chants. For this reason, I believe that the latter publication only included partial transcriptions and translations, which could not be completed due to a lack of necessary context. In her later years in the 1970s, María Sabina was asked to perform a ceremony several times purely for the sake of being recorded, which she resented. She complained that the little mushrooms had lost their powers because of this. Even in earlier recordings from the 1950s, she agreed to the intrusion in the ceremony out of courtesy; however, in her own opinion, it came at a great cost (Estrada 1981, 90–92). The ceremony recorded in 1958 (Wasson et al. 1974) involved a young man called Perfeito José Garcia who had fallen severely ill. It is important to mention Perfeito’s illness because, as seen in some of the following chants or excerpts, the quest, struggle, and longing for knowledge (to identify the origin and cause of the illness to cure it) is a central aspect of and indeed the driving force for the ceremony. Without it, it is unclear what the purpose of the ceremony would be.

2.2.1. Marina Mendoza

As can be gathered from the full transcription in Wasson et al. (1974), ceremonies are punctuated by long and strenuous requests to God and saints to elucidate why the patient is suffering and to plead for clarity on the causes and outcome of the illness. For example, the following excerpt represents an invocation performed by Marina Mendoza on my behalf in Boca del Río, a dependency
of San Mateo Eloxochitlan located near Huautla on the federal highway, during a ceremony held on August 24, 2014 at her house (Fig. 2.3):

Na’inax xi so’nde, sije’ña kjoanda tjatse ndiliji
My Father of the World, I ask for a blessing for your little one

¿Cómo se llama? — Alessia
What’s her name? — Alessia

Nga’ini’sin’nga jtino ko’na nda’i, na’i xi tsi so’nde
She is here with me now, Father of the World

Kata én, katana kjoale koi’nixin, koi’nitjen je’ndai
May [God] consider your words, may he consider you, on this day, on this night, right now

Nga’ndai ka’ni ka’bijn nio’xtila’li ya’ni’ya oracion’li
Now you gave your bread in your house of worship

Ka’bi’ni kjoanda’li xi’koi’nixin je’ndai, na’i xi tsi so’nde
You gave your blessing on this day, now, Father of the World

Ji kajen’li sondeli ji, aliya’jin’sa, nai tao’ngo xi tsi so’nde
You won in your world and nobody else [but you did], only Father of the World

K’oasin si’isenli ji ndi’li
So you will enlighten your little one

Tisiko, chomi’tje, chomi’yajin me’ni chiin xi tjin’le
Help her, raise her, lift her from the disease she carries

Ñani, ñani nda, sate’ta ndi’li
Where, wherever she is blocked, your little one

Tojñani nga ñai chón, ji xi nkoali k’oana i’sain, na’i xi tsi so’nde
Wherever there are difficulties, you will shed light on the path, Father of the World

Na’inax Scribano, na’inax San Isidro, ndi na’inax Natividad, ndi’chjon Pastora, ndi’chjon nda ‘be
Father Notary (grandfather of the underworld), Father San Isidro, Mother Nativity, Lady Pastora, lady of the running water

Sijena án kjoanda xikoi nixin, je tsee San Pedro, San Pablo
I ask for a blessing on this day, of San Pedro, San Pablo

Na’inax San Miguel Arcangel, kata én, kata kjoali ji
Father San Miguel Archangel, consider her words, may he consider you
San Ramon, sijena án kjoanda
San Ramon, I ask for a blessing

Ndi’nanaa Guadalupe, José y María
Precious Lady Guadalupe, Joseph and Mary

Xi tjen, xi xo’ma katabitjo
May what drips like mucus go away

K’oasin si i’sen i, k’oasin k’oe je kjoandali
So enlighten here, so give your blessing

Tjana i’sen niji tsan meni xichon, meni xitjin, na’i xi tsi sonde
Enlighten, you, where the problems are, where there are issues, Father of the World

Kata én, kata kjoani
May her words be considered, may she be considered

Nga’i skotsen ndiasai, ndiajtsoko, ndili ji
(God) will look after the path of the calf, of the foot (her destiny) of your daughter

Transcription and translation by Alessia Frassani and Santiago Cortés Martínez

Although Marina refers to God as a Christian entity, as evidenced in her mention of the bread given in the house of worship, for example, several other supernatural beings are more clearly Mesoamerican. Na’inaa Scribano is an elderly and authoritative figure, akin to Cipactonal introduced in Chapter 1. Although rendered with a Spanish word meaning “notary,” Na’inaa Scribano’s powers consist in his ability to read and draft written documents, such as the ancient painted books. Ndi’chjon nda ‘be, the Lady of the running water, a well-known supernatural among the Mazatec, is the local equivalent of the central Mexican Chalchiuhtlicue (Fig. 7.4). Some of the same expressions are found again in the following chant, although the tone and intensity attained during chanting is quite different. On the same night, Marina performed only one chant during a three-hour ceremony.

Án’jña nga’niolé so’nde, ti’tso
I am the strength of the world, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé kjoa’kjin tokon, ti’tso
I am the strength of wisdom, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé so’nde, ti’tso
I am the strength of the world, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé na’chja ninda’jba, ti’tso
I am the strength of the grandmother of the broken bones, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé cho’o nro’jbi, ti’tso
I am the strength of the opossum, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé na’chja Lisibe, ti’tso
I am Grandmother Lisabe, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé xi ma’naa fe’e, ti’tso
I am the one who knows how to come forth, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé na’chja Lisibe ninda’jba, ti’tso
I am the strength of Grandmother Lisabe of the underworld, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé fitje’en, ti’tso
I am the one who knows how to fly, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé fe’e, ti’tso
I am the one who knows how to come forth, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé fe’e, ti’tso
I am the one who knows how to come forth, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé ni’ndayaa chjota, ti’tso
I am the one who knows how to cure people, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé chjota ninda’jba, ti’tso
I am the strength of the grandmother of the broken bones, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé bi’jñachon, ti’tso
I am the strength of life, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé na’chja ninda’jba, ti’tso
I am the strength of the grandmother of the broken bones, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé cho’o nro’jbi, ti’tso
I am the strength of the opossum, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé xi ma’naa fi’tjeen, ti’tso
I am the one who knows how to come forth, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé kjoa’kjin tokon, ti’tso
I am the strength of wisdom, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé so’nde, ti’tso
I am the strength of the world, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé na’chja Lisibe, ti’tso
I am Grandmother Lisabe, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé xi ma’naa fe’e, ti’tso
I am the one who knows how to come forth, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé fe’e, ti’tso
I am the one who knows how to come forth, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé ni’ndayaa chjota, ti’tso
I am the one who knows how to cure people, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé chjota ninda’jba, ti’tso
I am the strength of the grandmother of the broken bones, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé bi’jñachon, ti’tso
I am the strength of life, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé na’chja ninda’jba, ti’tso
I am the strength of the grandmother of the broken bones, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé cho’o nro’jbi, ti’tso
I am the strength of the opossum, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé xi ma’naa fi’tjeen, ti’tso
I am the one who knows how to come forth, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé kjoa’kjin tokon, ti’tso
I am the strength of wisdom, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé so’nde, ti’tso
I am the strength of the world, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé na’chja Lisibe, ti’tso
I am Grandmother Lisabe, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé xi ma’naa fe’e, ti’tso
I am the one who knows how to come forth, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé fe’e, ti’tso
I am the one who knows how to come forth, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé ni’ndayaa chjota, ti’tso
I am the one who knows how to cure people, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé chjota ninda’jba, ti’tso
I am the strength of the grandmother of the broken bones, is saying

Án’jña nga’niolé bi’jñachon, ti’tso
I am the strength of life, is saying

Án tisije kjoanda nai’taongo xi tsi so’nde
I am the one asking for a blessing, oh Father, guardian of the world

Tai’ nai kjoanda, tai’ nai nga’nio kjoan’kji tokon’li
Give me blessing, give me the strength of your wisdom

Ji’ni nai taongo xi tijli nga’nio, na’in
You are, my father, the one who gives strength, Father
Mesoamerican Codices

Ji’ni xi mali ni’ndaya’ai chjota
You are the one who knows how to heal people

Ji’ni nai’naa San Isidro
You are my father, San Isidro

Ji’ni nai’naa Escribano
You are my father, Escribano

Ji’chjon Pastora
You mother, Shepherdess

Si’jee án kjoanda
I ask for your blessing

Tai’ñe kjoanda’li, tai nga’nioli ji
Give your blessing, your strength

Ni’kia’jinla ti’ska’ngini x’oa’inañaa
My incense burner will never fall and break

Ni’kia’jin koi’tsaoya’jin x’ao’inaa
My incense burner will never stop burning

Chanting is a particularly lively aspect of Mazatec culture and not restricted to night ceremonies (Quintanar Miranda 2007, Faudree 2013). Baldomero Pineda (Fig. 2.4) from Santa Cruz de Juárez, a small dependency of Huautla, composes and performs his own songs for the yearly celebration of the Day of the Dead (Cortés Martínez and Frassani 2017). During one such occasion, when Santiago Cortés and I visited him in his shop in Santa Cruz, on November 2, 2014, he sang the following chant:

Jonga inda jonga nangi, tso el oro
Slowly, calmly, says the gold

Án k’jinten, k’jitje tojme tikina, tso
I jump, I overcome any obstacle, says

Jñan kjoa’nii, jtji ma, jti’tsa kja’ngi, tso el oro
Wherever it is hidden, concealed, says the gold

Án k’jinten, k’jitje tojme tikina, tso
I jump, I overcome any obstacle, says

Jñan kjoa’nii, jtji ma, jti’tsa kja’ngi, tso el oro
Wherever it is hidden, concealed, says the gold

Án fa’xoe án fa’nia, tso
I implore humbly and reverently

Tojñan kjichoi’ñen
As far as you reach

Atsin ma’sinlee, atsin ma’sinlee
Don’t you feel bad for me? Don’t you feel bad for me?

Nga k’oasin ti’jnan nion’noo án
That you are keeping me closed in?

Tonga nda’i tokjoa’ mana
Now I feel nothing, I have no fear

Tjen k’aøñan chjota titjona
I now come with my big people

An’nan xi koan’na si’tsin si’faneña
I am the one who knows how to thunder and rumble

Tsatsin k’oakonai ñan’ tinamali
If you do not tell me where you keep it hidden

K’oa me kjoa’ni ximeli, Jo kjoa’tijn taön jme’li jì
What do you want? How much do you want?

Kjoe’e kiechi’tjaña án, chjota’na án
I am coming to pay for my people

Marina closed the sentences with the verb tso (says) or ti’tso (is saying), with the subject of the verb left implicit. Munn (1973, 89) remarked on this characteristic of Mazatec chanting, in which the speaker appears to quote someone else: “I am the strength of the world, I am the strength of the opossum, etc.” It appears that God or another religious authority is telling the women (i.e., bestowing upon them) the strength and powers of various animals. At the same time, the use of direct quotation makes the “I” in the embedded sentence a co-reference to the subject of the main clause “says/is saying,” whose subject is implicit. Not only is the “I” an indexical pronoun, but it also moves in a continuum from the relational stance of the present speaker to the fixed proposition expressed in the sentence: “The curandera is a spotted jaguar.” Thus, the speaker fluctuates between simply being themself to being the narrator of the event and seeing themself from the outside looking in, finally returning to the initial quoted proposition: “I am the spotted jaguar.” This initial and final statement is not declarative but rather expresses an embodied experience: knowing is not believing but experiencing.
Night Ceremonies and Chants

Tsatsín k’oañkoi jñan k’o ko’oa’ni tjima títsa’kjangi, tso
If you do not show where it is hidden, where it is covered, says

Tsatsín k’aokoi ji chjota nda xi tjén’koa jñan
If you do not show it, I come with my capable people

Ngo tjo si’xkoa si’ndenai jñami ngatinai ji
You will destroy me swiftly, wherever you are

Jonga faxoe, jonga fania jña, nga’i kjo’eñañ
I bow with reverence and humility, now that we have come here

Ji kjoa koakonai án, nga’ya júina manai
You will show me where you keep me hidden

jñanin koa sai’li, tsoa kjoa’sai kjoanion’nan
Where you found it, there I will also find the strength

Jmeni jé xi ya án, nga koasin tijnamani’nain
What sin have I committed for which you are hiding from me?

Jmeni jé xichon nga koasin tjima tisakjangili
What is the sin for which you keep it hidden and covered?

Tonga ndai án kotsen són, kotsenta’nán
But now I am the one who is looking carefully, the one who is searching

Niyaa ti’jñan ñañ
There I am

Atsin ma’sinlee án nga k’oasin ya tinanio’nina
Don’t you feel for me, since you are keeping me hidden there?

Tonga tjen kaonan chjota tijona
I am coming with my important people

Ngo tjoas’koena, skoeya skoetañañ
Swiftly he will rescue me, he will receive me

Tsimasianañañ, likoi tibeñañ
Poor me, I am not aware

Nga k’oasin tjima, tjitsakjangili kjoa’ai tsen senixina án
Because you keep it hidden, you keep it covered, my spirit

Tsi’masinle, atsi’masianañañ
Don’t you have any compassion, don’t you feel for me?

Ni’ya tsoatinianiole jña’i tinai ji
You have sequestered me, you have hidden me there where you are

Jetsabe jña’nga jñaniniolí
I have seen now where you have it hidden
K’oa jotjin ma taon jmeli ‘an k’oechitje, ân
How little money do you want, I will pay, I

Tjen kaona chojta nda’ñan
I am coming with capable people

Tjen kaona ân xi kjoa’axin
I am coming with the person who will unveil (clear) it

Jhanga tijna ta’nio’oa án
Where I am chained

Ani k’oasın jnó tı́ta nai’ñan
Why do you keep me in chains?

Tonga nda’i jhan
But now I …

Koen a kjoa’xoec, kjoaania jı́na, ti kao kjoachan kjoa’ti, tso
You will show reverence and humility to me, let the anger go

Kao kjoanda, tso
With goodwill, says

Kjoxoec fannia, tso
With reverence and submission, says

án kotsen són, kotsen’tañan so’nde xokji
I look carefully at this world

So it says, when our ancestors kept the vigil

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Transcription and translation by Alessia Frassani and Santiago Cortés Martínez

Baldomero’s song is unique in that it is not a night chant but rather a recollection of what his grandparents used to sing during the ceremonies. Baldomero himself has never taken mushrooms, which is not uncommon in the Mazateca despite their widespread consumption. Some people, including Baldomero, have never partaken in veladas, explaining that they have not received a calling to do so. Thus, the chant should be analyzed alongside the songs that Baldomero composes for the Day of the Dead as a tribute to the ancestors. At the same time, it clearly belongs and relates to the tradition of night chants, as several features indicate. In a manner akin to what was discussed before, the grandparents, who are the guardians of the world of the dead, and the singer, Baldomero himself, sometimes exchange roles. It is often unclear who is speaking, although it is explicitly stated at the beginning that “gold” (el oro) is speaking. Baldomero explained that gold is the same as cacao beans, one of the most common offerings used to communicate with the dead and the gods. Thus, in the chant, the gold-cacao is an animate intermediary that can speak and carry a message, but it is the chant itself that brings the ancestors’ message from the world of the dead to that of the living. As noted in the case of Marina, the often impersonal “says” (tso in Mazatec) conveys the idea of a message that stands on its own and depersonalized from whoever created or sent it in the first place.

However, Baldomero’s night chant differs from previously presented ones in that there is no claim of supernatural embodiment. While the speaker claims at some point to be able to thunder and rumble—thus equating themself to a storm, as is often the case with María Sabina—Baldomero does not mention any animal, natural phenomenon, or god. The singer becomes angry and at times confrontational, but the chant is clearly a quest—a persistent search for someone or something that is hidden. What is out of reach and invisible, purposefully covered, sequestered, or tied in chains, is unclear, but it is explicitly stated at some point that this is indeed the senixin, a word composed of the term sen that can mean “image,” such as one’s double, and nixin (day). Alan Suárez Ortiz suggested to me in a personal communication (2022) that senixin corresponds to the Nahua word tonalli, which refers to both the day (hence tonalpohualli, the calendar, as the “count of days”) and the character of a person (the “spirit” closely related to the day of birth; Martínez González 2006). In this light, it becomes clearer that in the chant it sometimes appears as if the speaker is the one sequestered and hidden and other times it seems that something is hidden, sequestered, and looked for. I’sen also refers to a place of clarity and knowledge, as in the expression ndosen seen in Section 1.1, and wisdom is thus equated with self-knowledge. A longing for clarity and the relentless pursuit of enlightenment and knowledge on one’s destiny becomes the central issue in the following chant.

2.2.3. Leonardo Morales

Santiago Cortés Martínez and I participated in a ceremony with Leonardo Morales on July 29, 2014 in the locality of Barrio Mixteco in Huautla. The ceremony lasted around five hours and Leonardo not only prayed and sang several times but also whistled and spoke a non-existent language (glossolalia). Whistle speech is a well-known characteristic of Mazatec language, even in everyday use (Cowan 1948), and glossolalia has been recorded in María Sabina’s chants (Wasson et al. 1974, XI–XII). In the case of Leonardo’s, I had the impression that he was speaking Italian, given that the ceremony was directed at me and Italian is my native language.

Ngo’la’ni, koin … koin’chaa
First, I will talk

K’ianga’ma nga’tjin’naa canto
It can be done, when we have some canto

K’ianga li’saa joxo’sin nga’tso’ba án
It is when … this is how I am going about
Night Ceremonies and Chants

Ali’me xi’tjinaa nga’tso’ba
I have no problem while I am going

To jngo sa’te canto, nga’ma’na, nga’ba’jme
It is only a chant, because I can go

To’sa to jngo
It is only one

Un perdón de Dios, un perdón de Dios
God’s blessing, God’s blessing

Perdón del Cielo y perdón de aquí
Heaven’s blessing and earthly blessing

Como así se comunica que …
As it is communicated …

Está dando de todo nuestro Señor
Our Lord is giving us everything

Da gracias a Dios Padre Todopoderoso
Thanks to our Lord, almighty

No más tengo un canto
I only have a song

Jí ni’jñe, nga ji ni’jñe, nga jngo kjoanda xi’tsi
You, you are you, your blessing

Nga ji, jí, jí, nga ji, jí, jí, nga’i nga’jo nga’sin ta’ba nda’i
Because you are you, the reason why I am going around now

Nga ji bix’kicé, nga ji sánta, nga ji nga ji, nga kó jíni, kao ji nga nda’i
Because you read, you are saintly, you are unique, with you in this moment

Jí bix’kicé, nga ji sánta, j’e … chakaomni’ña, nga i’so’ba, nga i’koj’ö e
You read, you are saintly, but talk to me, because I am wandering around here, I arrived here

Nga ngo kjoanda, ngo kjoanda, ngo kjoanda sije’lee nda’i
A blessing, a blessing, a blessing is what I am asking for at this moment

Ti’se’kao’na’iña, ti’se’kao’na’i ji
Help me, help me

Nga ji mamá, nga ji nga nda’i
Because you are the mother, because you are you in this moment

To jngo nga ji, to jngo nga ji, to jngo ni’nda’i
You are the only one, the only one, the only one in this moment

To jngo nga’jo, nga i’so’ba, nga i’jo’ nga, ngo kjoanda xi’tsi
It is only a hole, because I am wandering around here, because here is your blessing

Ngo kjoanda, nga kao nga ji nga kao josin tso’ba
A blessing, I am truly going around

I’so’nde xo’chón, i’so’nde xo’chón
On this world, on this world

Jini nda’i, ngoji’ni nda’i, nga jngo kjoanda
You are, you are now a blessing

Jini, ji, ngoji’ni ji, ji nga’nda’i
You are, because you, you are at this moment

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Transcription and translation by Santiago Cortés Martínez and Alessia Frassani

This chant is rather different from Marina’s and María Sabina’s and seems more akin to Baldomero’s. While both women claimed to have greater powers and become animals and supernatural beings, neither Baldomero nor Leonardo made such claims. The insistent and even threatening requests for clarity and knowledge in Baldomero’s chant are absent in Leonardo’s. He repeatedly and rather plainly states that he has a chant and is singing it. A term that Leonardo often employs is kjoanda, which can be translated as “blessing,” although the word has other meanings: offering, ceremony, grace, bounty, or something good in general. The same meaning applies to the word perdón (forgiveness) that Leonardo uses in the Spanish portion of the text. If so, the entire chant is about asking a supreme spiritual authority (the Virgin or the Father) for a blessing. Leonardo’s chant revolves around singing for its own sake without any explicit message or contents. The impersonality of the utterance, which was suggested in previous chants through the use of direct quotation with an implicit subject, becomes the central theme developed by Leonardo. Consequently, the text is full of deixis (i.e., terms that can only be understood in a relational context), such as “you,” “here,” and “at this moment,” which refer to a context without explicitly describing it. The place where Leonardo finds himself is only suggested but cannot be clearly identified. Although he directly addresses the Father and the Virgin, he may not be in their presence but rather longs for them. Leonardo never describes a situation that he sees or something that he hears.

Leonardo relied on the rhetorical and ontological trope of the mise en abyme to sing about himself singing. Caught in a labyrinth of his own construction, he disappeared into it. In a separate discussion, he compared chanting to the voice of a radio, which, unattached to its speaker, can rapidly move around and allow everyone to hear and enjoy it until the radio is turned off and the chant returns to where it originated (which I believe is God). In this light, we can also understand Leonardo’s glossolalia: words in a chant do not refer to anything but rather express the process of creating language itself (Munn 1973).

The narrator’s shifting and often ambiguous position in all the chants discussed underscores a specific feature...
of the language employed. As in daytime divination (e.g., the reading of maize), the wise person seeks signs and clues for a client, but only during night ceremonies do they embody the signs, the gods, to themself become divine agents. Their ability to speak to the gods and invoke them is taken a step further, and the performer becomes the god and claims their powers. Such a transformation occurs when the curandero simultaneously describes a situation that they participate in and see themself from the outside as if a spectator to the story. The ability to enter, inhabit, and then leave the attributes of a certain god or supernatural being increases their power. Although I was able to participate in a limited number of ceremonies and, in even fewer cases, to record and eventually study the texts, two aspects stood out in the chants. On the one hand, the chant is a search characterized by feelings of longing, solitude, hopelessness, desperation, and anger at times; on the other hand, there are moments of communion and even transformation into gods, whose powers and knowledge are claimed by the performer.

2.3. Colonial chanting

Some of the features highlighted in modern Mazatec chants can also be found in the few examples of colonial texts that reproduce chants and songs either in their entirety or in short excerpts. The performer’s consistent use of the first person and the conflation of several identities are frequently found in the so-called incantations collected in the early seventeenth century by Ruiz de Alarcón, as are exhortations from the singer, who sometimes angrily pled with the gods (Andrews and Hassig 1984). Ruiz de Alarcón gathered his material from several Nahua communities in the modern states of Morelos and Guerrero with the intention of creating a manual to extirpate enduring activities within the temples, where the image of the god usually resides. Thus, the songs are an aspect of the cult that is more directly related to activities within the temple, a divine manifestation akin to the image of the god itself. They are only indirectly related to the public aspects of the cult, which are presented in the main part of the second book, and are more accurately described as part of secluded activities within the temples, where the image of the god usually resides.

In Primeros Memoriales (Sahagún et al. 1997, paragraph 14, ff. 279r–280r), the chant performed during Atamalcualiztli (the Feast of the Water Tamales), a ritual that involved fasting with water and unseasoned tamales, begins with an invocation to the mother goddess Tlazolteotl before switching to a description of Tamoanchan, the paradise of abundance, where the corn god Centeotl is said to have been born. Then, the setting seemingly changes to a marketplace on the earthly realm (tlalpan), and the verse reads as follows:

Ca niman aman. Nohmatca nehuatl.
It will indeed be I, immediately at this moment.

Nohxomoco. Nicipactonal. Nicmati huehue, nicmati ilamah
It is I in person. I am Oxomoco. I am Cipactonal. I know Old Man, Old Woman.

Nimictlanmati, nitopamati
I am knowledgeable about Mictlan, I am knowledgeable about Topan.

Nohmatca nehuatl. Nutilmacazqui. Ninahateuctli
It is I in person. I am the priest. I am the nahualli-lord.

(Andrews and Hassig 1984, 151)

The priest claims to be both Oxomoco and Cipactonal, the old diviner couple, and immediately follows by saying that they know them, seemingly because they have visited Mictlan and Topan, the otherworldly realms that surround the terrestrial plane. Thus, the “I” in the sentence shifts position and apparently indicates different identities and enunciators. As a result, the attributes of both the ancestral couple and the man-goddess (nahualli-lord) diviner are conflated, creating a complex image previously seen in the discussion of the primordial couple of the Codex Vienna in Section 1.2.

Around eighty years before Ruiz de Alarcón, Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún collected another important corpus of sacred texts (Sahagún et al. 1997, 128–129). They are referred to as cuicame (sing. cuicatl, song) and are formally different from Alarcón’s incantations. Despite the early date of Sahagún’s “sacred hymns,” as they have been called since Garibay (1958), their current form and context of production may have been influenced by early modern European poetry, as Tomlinson (2007, 9–27) suggested for another corpus of poetic texts, the Cantares mexicanos. In other words, it would appear that Sahagún’s cuicame were an early attempt to normalize Nahua ceremonial chants according to the canons of European poetry, as discussed in the Introduction. I do not think that it is coincidental that the songs were attached as an appendix to the second book of the Florentine Codex, which is dedicated to the veintena ceremonies, the most important ritual cycle of Nahua communities. In the same appendix, Sahagún discusses the temples, their rituals, and their gods. Thus, the songs are an aspect of the cult that is more directly related to activities within the temple, a divine manifestation akin to the image of the god itself. They are only indirectly related to the public aspects of the cult, which are presented in the main part of the second book, and are more accurately described as part of secluded activities within the temples, where the image of the god usually resides.

Oyatlatonazqui tlavizcallevaya
The sun has come forth, the morning has dawned

inan tlachichinaya nepapé quechol
And sundry red spoonbills sip nectar from flowers

xochitlacaca yyātala, yantata, ayyao, ayyave, tiliyiao, ayyave oayyave