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 themselves 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 Mesoamerican ceremonial practices. The texts that he transcribed constitute an important historical source for the present study because the original context of their production and execution seems to be very similar to those presented in the main part of the second book, and are more accurately described as part of secluded 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 the verse (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 description 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.

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-god (nahuali-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.

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 description of the earthly realm (itlapan), and the verse reads as follows:

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


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

- Nohmatca nehhuatl. Nitimacazqui. Ninahateuctli It is I in person. I am the priest. I am the nahualli-lord.

(Andrews and Hassig 1984, 151)

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

in an tlachichinaya nepapã quechol And sundry red spoonbills sip nectar from flowers

xochitlacaca yyãtala, yantata, ayyao, ayyave, tililiyao, ayyave oayyave
Where flowers stand erect yātala, yantata, ayyao, ayyave, tiliiyao, ayyave oyayave

Tlalpã timoquetzca
On earth you are standing
tianquiznavaquj a
By the marketing place, ah

Nitlacatla niquetzcoatl yyantala yãtanta, yyao, ayyave, tiliiyao, ayyave, oayyave
I am the lord Quetzalcoatl yyantala yãtanta, yyao, ayyave, tiliiyao, ayyave, oayyave

(Sahagún et al. 1997, 145–146)

The last verse marks an abrupt intermission on the part of the narrator to boldly state that he is the supreme priest whose cult is also related to the aforementioned marketplace. The song then shifts to the underworld, where Xolotl plays in a ball court, and back to a marketplace in Cholula, where the main temple of Quetzalcoatl was located. The last verse reads,

Cochina cochina cocochi
The sleeper, the sleeper is dozing

Ye nicmaololo nicanj ye ciuatl
I turn the woman here over

Nicochina yyeo ovayeo, yho, yya, yya
The sleeper I am yyeo ovayeo, yho, yya, yya

(Sahagún et al. 1997, 146)

These concluding lines seem to refer to the next chant, which is dedicated to Xipe Yovallavana (the Night Drinker; i.e., the one who falls into a state of trance, like the night sleep) and may not belong to this chant. It is in this state of trance that the performer first sees someone sleeping; then, they turn the person over and realize that the person is actually the sleeper whom they just saw. Another important aspect that both Nahua texts share is the mention of different realms, such as Mictlan, Topan, and Tamoanchan, as places visited during the chant, which indicates that singing is in itself a journey to and from another world where knowledge and power reside. Both Mictlan and Tamoanchan are places of the dead; thus, traveling back and forth between them is akin to entering and exiting the land of the dead and defeating death itself.

As I just said, the verses at the end of the cuicatl for Atamalcualiztli seem to introduce the song to Xipe as follows:

Xippe icuje, totec iovallavana.
The song of Xipe, our Lord the visionary

Ioalli tlavana, iztleican, timone
You, you are in trance, why do hide yourself?

nequja xjiaaquj mjilalta teucuj tlaquemtitl, xjmoquenti quetlovjia.
You are hiding your golden cape. Put it on!

Noteuhoa chalchimmama tlacoa
My Lord is holding a precious shield

pana itemoia, oiquetzallavuevuetl,
comes down in the middle of the water, precious drum

ayquet zalxjucoatl nechialiquino
precious turquoise serpent
cauhquetl ovjia
Poverty has left us

Manajiavajia, njia njia poliviz
I shall be happy, it shall not perish

niyoatzin, achalchiuhlta noiollo
I am the purple corn, my heart is a place of precious water

ateucujtlatl nocoiatztatz noiolce
I shall see golden water

vizqujtlacatl achoquetl tlaqu
My heart shall be content

vaia otlacatquj auitlatoa quetl ovjia
The warrior who leads into battle is born ovjia

Noteuhoa centlaco xaailivizco
You will grow the height of maize plant

noa yioatzin mopepeoicpa mjtz
You are the purple maize on your mountain

valitta meteuhoa, vizqujntla
Your followers will see you

catl achoquetl tlaquvavaa etla
I shall be content. The Lord ripens, the one who comes first

catqui auitlatoaovjia
The warrior who leads into battle is born ovjia

Transcription and translation by Osiris González, Raúl Macuil Martínez, and Alessia Frassani

The two variants of this chant found in Primeros Memoriales and the Florentine Codex have been translated several times (Seler 1902, 1071–1078, Garibay 1958, 175–185, Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 2, 213, Sahagún et al. 1997, 146–147). The epithet attributed to Xipe, yovallavana, found in the title head of the chant, is usually translated as “night drinker” (the corresponding illustration in the Florentine Codex indeed shows Xipe Totec in the second image drinking from a cup; see Fig. 8.4). However, I believe that, although drinking may refer to an intoxicating beverage such as the fermented agave drink pulque, the term yovalla should be better understood as the effect of the drink:
inducing a state of trance. Andrews and Hassig (1984, 79–80, 262) proposed a similar translation for the same term in the incantations collected by Ruiz de Alarcón.

The paleography and translation of the manuscript version from the Florentine Codex by Osiris González, who studied “classical” Nahuatl at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in seminars led by León Portilla, and Raúl Macuil, a Nahuatl speaker from Tlaxcala, highlight the text’s close relationship to the corresponding image (Fig. 8.4). For example, we translated chalchimamna as “he who holds a precious shield” (from chimalli, shield) rather than “precious water,” as was the case in all preceding translations. Quetzallavuevetl became “precious drum” (from huehuetl, drum; see also Rojas Rabiela 2000, 248–249); previously, ahuehuete had been translated as “cypress tree.” In both cases, we opted for a closer adherence to what is found in the illustration, and I believe that the tlacuilo chose to adhere to elements found in the chant, such as the shield in the upper image and the upright drum in the one below. Finally, we translated yoatzin as “purple maize,” the meaning of the term in modern Nahuatl, rather than “green stalk of maize” (Sahagún et al. 1997, 147). Previous translations relied on an annotation found in Primeros Memoriales (f. 280r), which referred to yoatzin as “the green maize stalk, my ear is like a jade” (Sahagún et al. 1997, 147). However, in the early twentieth century, German archaeologist and ethnographer Konrad Preuss (1905, 371) proposed translating yoatzin as “deplorable night” (bejammernswerte Nacht in German, deplorable noche in the Spanish translation from German given by Neurath in Preuss 2008, 97)—from the word for night (yohual) and the reverential -tzin. This interpretation was strongly opposed by Seler (1905, 463), who by that time had already produced his own translation, which has remained the standard reference for all subsequent studies (Seler 1902, 1071–1078). Finally, the interpretation proposed in this book, “purple maize,” reconciles both versions, as the darkness of the night indicates the purple color of the maize.

This colonial chant presents interesting similarities to modern Mazatec equivalents. In Baldomero’s chant, the god is hidden at first. The chant is itself a quest and a request to encounter the god. The singer challenges the god to manifest themself because the well-being of the performer and their community depends on it. While Mazatec chants tend to be repetitive and have little progression, Prof. Eloise Quiñones Keber rightly indicated to me in a personal communication (2016) that the god progressively manifests himself in the song to Xipe, growing and blossoming like a plant. This stylistic difference may be due to a refashioning of the cuicatl to conform to the canons of written poetry, losing much of its performative, repetitive, and pleonastic value in favor of a progressive narrative (Tomlinson 2007, 28–40). Singing, on the one hand, is in itself a quest for clarity and knowledge, a constantly unfolding process. Written poetry, on the other hand, tends to favor a self-contained structure. This explains Sahagún’s complaints about the obscurity and demonic nature of the cuicame found in the introduction to the appendix.

Chanting is a performance that intensifies the process of knowledge acquisition. It is through experience rather than doctrinal teaching that real wisdom is attained. While Mazatec chjota chjine are not directly aware of the existence of their sacred books in European collections, they frequently mention them in ceremonies. Marina calls the guardian of the underworld by his first name, Escribano (notary), the one who produces official documents. Leonardo refers to God as “the one who reads.” María Sabina mentions books several times in her chants, along with notarial acts and pencils (Munn 2003). The acts of writing and reading are an inseparable process of pursuing knowledge. Books, as sacred sources of wisdom, are constantly reinvented every time they are invoked. The next chapters are dedicated to the ancient sacred books and the calendar that informs their structure.
The Mesoamerican Calendar

The codices of the so-called Borgia Group, which are named after the codex that is considered its finest example (see listing in the Appendix), offer an unadulterated window into ritual, divinatory, and calendrical knowledge as it was practiced in Mesoamerica before the arrival of the Europeans. Today, all pre-Hispanic religious manuscripts are housed in European collections, where they arrived in the first decades after the conquest as gifts and objects of curiosity for ecclesiastical and political dignitaries throughout the continent. It is unknown how many more manuscripts of this kind circulated in Mesoamerica. The extent of the deliberate physical destruction of Indigenous knowledge on the part of the friars cannot ultimately be quantified. Many other specimens may have been forgotten and destroyed over time once they were hidden to spare them from Spanish and missionary fury. Lack of provenance notwithstanding, it is quite remarkable that the few surviving manuscripts of the Borgia Group form a very consistent corpus in terms of both calendrics and iconography. Nowotny (1961) was the first to conduct a comprehensive study of the manuscripts as a whole based on calendrical concordances, upon which iconographic similarities are largely based. Colonial manuscripts that feature religious content, such as the Codices Borbonicus, Telleriano-Remensis, and Tudela, also focus on the Mesoamerican calendar and related iconography, although in a much simpler manner, which likely reflects the limited knowledge of ancient religion and calendrics on the part of the lay Indigenous informants who contributed to their creation. This chapter focuses on the Mesoamerican calendar, especially its different configurations, in the pre-Hispanic religious manuscripts. An in-depth analysis of the calendar’s functioning and use is essential to gain an accurate understanding of the pictorials.

3.1. The tonalpohualli

The 260-day calendar is one of the diagnostic characteristics of Mesoamerican civilizations, as was first recognized by Kirchhoff (1943). The earliest archaeological record of it dates to the Formative Period in the sixth century BCE, and its use extends to the present, albeit restricted to Indigenous communities in southern Mexico and Guatemala. Mazatec diviners, as noted in previous chapters, no longer rely on the 260-day count, although German ethnologist Wilhelm Bauer (1908) documented the use of a twenty day-sign calendar in the region in the early twentieth century. Thus, in my field work, I could not account for the use of the 260-day count in divination. Instead, I largely relied on a study by Paul van den Akker (2018), a colleague from the Faculty of Archaeology at Leiden University, who conducted extensive field work in the Maya K’iche’ community of Momostenango. Paul’s knowledge of the intricacies, functioning, and logic of the calendar, known as chol q’ij in K’iche’, was gained through his training and collaboration with don Rigoberto Itzep Chanchavac, a K’iche’ aq’ij (diviner) from Momostenango.

Spanish friars extensively discussed the use and characteristics of the ancient Mexican calendar in their writings. Most notably, Bernardino de Sahagún (1950–1982, bk. 4) devoted an entire book of his great opus to “judicial astrology or art of divination.” Figure 3.1 is an illustration from the appendix at the end of the book, where Sahagún explains to the reader the table that the diviner, whom he refers to with the Nahuaalt word tonalpohuque, used to count days and make prognostications. Tonalpohuque literally means “those who count the days,” from the words tonal (day) and pohualli (to count). Tonalpohualli is the word for calendar, as the “count of days.” The table combines twenty day signs (Fig. 3.2) and thirteen numerals, which are consecutively counted to yield a unique and fixed sequence of 260 days. Beginning on 1 Crocodile (Cipactli in Nahuaalt), the count reaches 13 Reed (Acatl), at which point the numeral starts again from one with 1 Jaguar (Ocelotl), reaching 7 Flower (Xochitl), then 8 Crocodile. After 260 days, both the thirteen-day period and the twenty day signs return to the initial position of 1 Crocodile. It should be noted that, in contemporary communities such Momostenango, where the tzolk’in (as the tonalpohualli is known among Mayanists) remains in use, no fixed day functions as the first in the calendar; rather, the count seamlessly and endlessly continues. By contrast, in the ancient manuscripts, the count almost always appears to begin with day 1 Crocodile, although the diviner could easily start counting from any point in their chart.

In Sahagún’s table, numerals are indicated with Arabic numbers, while Indigenous documents, such as the codices of the Borgia Group, utilize a dot for a unit to reach a maximum of thirteen dots. Although a complete and unequivocal date can only be given with a combination of a day sign and a number, numbers in the ancient manuscripts are often omitted and implicit in the progressive count of day signs. Dots are often used to indicate a period or lapse of time between signaled day signs. As also remarked by Mayanists (Aveni 2011), such a use of numbers in Mesoamerican calendrics indicates that intervals and lengths of time between events were at least as important as the time when the events occurred. Replacing dots with Arabic numerals, as Sahagún did in his table, erases this important aspect of Mesoamerican time reckoning and philosophy.