The preceding chapters established the importance of calendrical knowledge and night ceremonies among the activities that the Mesoamerican priesthood was supposed to master. In Chapter 3, on the tonalpohualli, it was argued that the so-called veintenas constituted a liturgical calendar based on a specific partition of the tonalpohualli (65 × 4), which, while approximating the solar year, was eventually drastically refashioned during the colonial period according to Spanish missionaries’ ideas. Earlier in Chapter 2, modern and historical Nahuatl and Mazatec chants clarified the primordial roles that ritual and lived experience played in the process of knowledge acquisition in Mesoamerica. This chapter explains that both calendrics and rituals played an essential role in the reinterpretation of the yearly ceremonial cycle in the ancient and colonial painted books.

4.1. Teotleco

Chjon na’ná nda’nitsian, jñe
Our mother woman, water of the center (or marketplace), you are

Chjon na’ná, josin fana ntjao’na
Our mother woman, like our blowing wind

Chjon na’ná, josin nginde, jñe
Our mother woman, like underground, you are

Chjon xaa kamai, jñe
Woman who turns into a jaguar, you are

Chjon ná xa kamai, jñe
Our mother woman, who turns into a jaguar, you are

Chjon xon ndijin, jñe
Woman charcoal-stained paper, you are

Chjóon ná xon ndijin, jñe, tso
Our woman charcoal-stained paper, you are, says

Maria Sabina (Wasson and Wasson 1957a, side 2, band 1) (https://youtu.be/_KQwV3JixyI)
Transcription and translation by Santiago Cortés Martínez and Alessia Frassani

This short excerpt from a chant by María Sabina offers an insightful starting point for understanding some scenes from the veintena ceremonies. The chjon chjine claims to be like water, wind, and earth—three major natural forces. She quickly moves through different realms, much like the speaker in the chants collected by Alarcón and Sahagún (discussed in Section 2.3). The last two verses refer to perforated stencils and charcoal stamps that women use to embroider textiles, chiefly huipiles (female garments; Fig. 4.1). Women use stencils to leave small charcoal dots...
on the huipil, which outline the figure to be embroidered. In the words and experience of María Sabina, this almost exclusively female activity becomes analogous to transforming into a jaguar. The realization comes when she sees black spots appearing on the huipil. María Sabina knows how to become a jaguar because she knows how to interpret signs. The huipil is a common garment, and women know how to embroider them, but she is the only one who can recognize these charcoal shapes as the jaguar’s spots. It is also noteworthy that she describes the embroidering—the process of creating a garment rather than the final product. She brings attention not to the outcome of the activity but to surfacing the signs that a transformation is taking place. Figure 4.6 depicts an image from the Codex Tudela (f. 21r), in which the earth goddess Toci, also known as Tlazolteotl, patroness of the veintena of Ochpaniztli, is accompanied by a priest. Her skirt has black stains, usually understood to be liquid rubber, which resemble jaguar spots. This image of a female goddess seems to represent quite literally what María Sabina refers to in the chant transcribed above. The same skirt, identified as a manta (cloak), is depicted in the Codex Tudela (f. 87v; Fig. 7.6).

Figure 4.2 depicts the ceremony of Teotleco from page 31 of the Codex Borbonicus (Nowotny 1974, 19–22, Figure 4.2. Teotleco. Codex Borbonicus, p. 31. Bibliothèque de l’Assemblée nationale, Paris.)
Couch 1985, 74–75, Anders et al. 1991, 214–215). At the center is the *ixiptla* (impersonator) of the goddess Chicomecoatl-Xilonen, who is associated with ripped corn. She is stretched on a bed of maize cobs covered with black-stained paper strips. A Spanish gloss underneath the figure reads, “Goddess of magic who turned herself into a lion or a tiger and other things” (*Diosa de los hechizos que se hacia león y tigre y otras cosas*). This sentence clearly indicates the ascription of powers to a priest, akin to those of Mazatec curanderos and María Sabina in the excerpt above. While the gloss initially seems to be unrelated to the image, since no sign of transformation is evident, Anders et al. (1991, 215) noted that it probably refers to the act of seeing the nahual (image or double) of a god on a bowl filled with either maize dough or *yaautli* (marigold leaves), which was left in the temple during the celebration of Teotleco. For example, according to the alphabetic text of the Codex Tudela (f. 22), an old priest would regularly check whether the footprint of “roosters and lions and many other animals” (*gallos y leones y muchos otros animales*) appeared on the bowl during this veintena. The revelation could occur at midnight, dawn, or midday. Footprints were taken as a sign that the gods had come—thus the festivity’s name, Teotleco, which means “God arrives.”

The gloss in the Codex Borbonicus does not explain the image that it accompanies but rather complements it. The writer of the gloss evidently did not refer to the image but another source; at the same time, they implied that the woman stretched out on the stained paper was a priest or priestess, identifiable by her attributes as the goddess Chicomecoatl. When combined, the text and the images suggest that the ability to read signs equates to transformation and, ultimately, divine presence, albeit from different perspectives. The annotator of the Codex Borbonicus was able to read something that was not readily visible into the image. The same could be said of the priest or priestess themselves: only the one who can read the signs is able to transform. In many contemporary Indigenous communities of Mexico, the ability to read and interpret signs is still considered the prerogative of curanderos and healers (Monaghan and Hamann 1998). Munn (1983, 475), paraphrasing Maria Sabina, stated that curanderos are the ones who examine the tracks of the feet and of the hands, as a hunter tracks his animals.

Similar to the Codex Borbonicus, the text in the Codex Tudela (f. 22r) explicitly relates to signs on dried dough or leaves, but the corresponding illustration does not bear any visual elements of this (Fig. 4.3). Yet, the two representations of the same feast are quite distinct despite being seemingly characterized by similar events. In later colonial manuscripts, a naked body, which is only partially visible from a temple on the left, cannot be identified with any god or goddess due to the lack of any iconographic features. It lies on top of a series of round and yellow shapes, which may be identified as corn, although this is unclear. The hidden body’s nakedness and loose posture hint at death by sacrifice, which is akin to the central figure in the Codex Borbonicus, whose hands and feet are tied by four priests, possibly indicating that a sacrifice is imminent (Anders et al. 1991, 216). Batalla Rosado (1993, 127–130) further suggested that the central character in the Codex Borbonicus is not supine but rather in an elevated and diagonal position because the head does not rest on the bed of corn cobs. The black-stained paper and the two short poles that culminate in long strips on top of the structure should be understood as being much longer and in a vertical position in reality. The fact that the priest-goddess should be understood as standing is corroborated by several sources that attest to the use of a litter to parade a god impersonator of Chicomecoatl during Ochpanitztli, a festival that largely overlaps with Teotleco in this manuscript, as extensively discussed below (Batalla Rosado 1993, 129).

In the Codex Tudela the priest in the center of the illustration assumes the same outstretched position of the Codex Borbonicus’ central image, while his black body paint recalls the four officiating characters around the goddess in the Codex Borbonicus. The two white feathers on the priest’s head are usually attributes assigned to sacrificial victims, which would identify him as the sacrificed rather than the sacrificer. Finally, in the representation of Teotleco in the Codex Tudela, the last image on the right depicts a god, identifiable as Xipe Totec, ascending a temple stairway. This is an explicit reference to the name and celebration of the veintena of Teotleco (which means “God arrives”). The frontal depiction of Chicomecoatl in the bottom left corner of the Codex Borbonicus can be considered the equivalent of Xipe Totec in the Codex Tudela.

Compositionally, in the Codex Tudela, the priest is the central and connecting figure between the lifeless body on the left (perhaps his former self) and the fully manifested god on the right. He is also naked and painted black; he is no longer who he used to be or yet what he will become (Olivier 2003, 188). By contrast, the Codex Borbonicus, an earlier and stylistically pre-Hispanic manuscript, conflates and blurs the attributes and appearances of three images and bodies: the god or goddess, the priest, and the sacrificed. The ambiguity of the central image’s position in both manuscripts underscores its shifting ontological status: from sacrificer to sacrificed and from god or goddess impersonator to god or goddess revealed.

As remarked by Batalla Rosado (2002, 210–211), later scenes that are cognate to those of the Codex Tudela in the Codices Magliabechiano and Ixtliixochitl...
(Fig. 4.4) add gruesome details, such as blood spurts and flames around and inside the temple, that are not found in the Codex Tudela. The earlier document follows the Codex Borbonicus more closely in its consistent lack of explicit depictions of violence and human sacrifice. Batalla Rosado considered the addition of horrific details in the Codices Magliabechiano and Ixtlixochitl to be a result of the progressive demonization of Mesoamerican religion within the intellectual circle of friars, who fabricated information and images from
earlier manuscripts rather than direct knowledge of the rituals depicted. While I concur that these changes were incremental, specific consideration should be given to their nature and purpose. By adding gruesome details, tlacuilos responded to the desire for a “reality effect” (Barthes 1989) in the narrative and assumed the point of view of a fictitious eyewitness. However, the account’s brutal realism is a mere rhetorical device; it is factually and historically inaccurate, as even the Codex Tudela was written approximately two generations after the conquest. In general, realistic and gruesome details served the purpose of legitimizing the account based on an “evidential paradigm” (Ginzburg 1989) that began to take hold in Europe in the early modern period. Equally propelled by the Holy Office of the Inquisition’s systematic ecclesiastical persecution of religious minorities in the Old World (Pereda Espeso 2017, 209–235) and the wondrous discoveries that accompanied the conquest of the New World (Adorno 1992), new and more convincing proofs of veracity began to appear in historical accounts. Cortés’ letters, written as a kind of journal to justify the conquistador’s actions to the King of Spain, constitute an early and clear example of this new historiographic and epistemological stance. Cortés’ written first-person testimony was in fact substantiated with objects and gifts sent to Europe, thus producing compelling evidence of the truthfulness and reliability of his account. Once in Spain, Cortés relied on the traditional historical writing of López de Gómara (1552) to provide authority to his story based on customary references to biblical and Classical texts.

A comparison of the later Codex Ixtlilxochitl (f. 99v) and corresponding images of the festival of Teotleco in the Codices Borbonicus and Tudela indicates that the manifested god is not depicted in the former. A few footprints can be seen descending from an empty temple in the background, but only drips of blood are visible on the stairway. Divine epiphany, which is seemingly the objective of the ritual itself, is completely bypassed here and replaced by blood, as an evidentiary clue of human sacrifice. A naked person, who is partially visible from the temple on the left, has black spots on their body—the result of burning at the stake, the form of human sacrifice to which the victim was subjected.

The casting of victims into the fire is an aspect of the ceremony of Teotleco described in numerous written sources, beginning with the Codex Tudela itself (f. 22v). The lengthiest narrative, however, is found in the Florentine Codex (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 2, ch. 31), according to which victims were cast into the fire while a priest danced around them and moved like a squirrel. He wore an animal crest and whistled as he approached the fire, making chirping sounds that mimicked the animal. Another priest was dressed like a bat; these are both descriptions of nahuales (i.e., humans who can transform into animals and other natural phenomena). After the sacrifice, a row of priests descended the temple stairs while firmly holding one another. This caused some to fall on their face and others on their side. In the Codex Magliabechiano (f. 39v), by contrast, it is stated that some of the sacrificed fled when they were led in procession to the temple top. The priests’ and the sacrificed’s ascending and descending movements were interchangeable and complementary in a manner that resembles the interchangeability of their positions, as noted before. The Codex Ixtlilxochitl (f. 99v) refers to the name Teotleco as “rise to the god” (subida a dios), while the corresponding image shows downward-pointing footprints.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that in the appendix of Book 2 of the Florentine Codex, two temples are listed in relation to the ceremony of Teotleco: Quauhxicalco, where the priests danced arrayed as animals, and Teccacalco, where the victims were cast into the fire.
However, the Sahaguntine description of the same ceremony, as previously mentioned, seems to indicate that the two events occurred in the same place and were concomitant. The somewhat confusing back and forth between sacrificer and sacrificed in both the images and texts, in addition to what appears to be interchangeable and concurrent places and actions, simultaneously encompasses the unilateral and terminal experience of death and human sacrifice. To explain these discrepancies, it is important to bear in mind that, as is frequently repeated in the sources, ceremonies involving human sacrifice took place in the temple at midnight, i.e., a time and place that were at once hidden from public view and quite propitious for rituals involving altered states. Therefore, information regarding large braziers in which the victims were presumably burnt becomes particularly interesting. Durán (1971, Gods and Rites, ch. 5) related that such a brazier was found in the temple of Tezcatlipoca. It was used to create a black ointment consisting of poisonous animals (e.g., spiders, centipedes, and scorpions) with which priests painted their bodies black. The concoction, which also included substances such as piciete (wild green tobacco) and ololiuhqui (datura seed), was also ingested to induce visions in the priests. Thus, large braziers may have been used not to burn people but to create a vision-inducing soot that was also employed to stain the priests’ bodies.

Archival sources corroborate this hypothesis. In 1544, during the Inquisition trials against the cacique and governors of Yanhuitlan (a Mixtec town in the modern state of Oaxaca), testimonies declared that the local Indigenous priest employed a black body paint made of charcoal soot to cover his own body (AGN, Ramo Inquisición, vol. 37, exp. 7, f. 40r, Sepúlveda y Herrera 1999, 210). Then, he proceeded to declare that he was no longer Christian and would duly follow the customs and mandates of the ancestors. Another example comes from a Nahua myth collected by Sahagún (1950–1982, bk. 7, 50) in the Memoriales con escolios about the gods Nanahuatzin and Tecuiztectli’s voluntary self-immolation, which occurred during the last creation in Teotihuacan. Initially hesitant, the gods ultimately jumped into the fire to become stars; they were soon followed by the eagle and jaguar, which were left with burns and bruises as a result of the experience—the characteristic spots that they still carry to this day.

In light of this information, I suggest that the black spots on the naked body seen lurking within the temple in the Codex Ixtlilxochitl (f. 99v) may be understood not as (or, at least, not only as) a sign of death by burning but as the stains produced by the black charcoal soot that appear on the body as one transforms into a jaguar nahuatl. Both the friars and, tragically, the Nahua pupils who were educated by them produced often exaggerated and dehumanizing portrayals of Mesoamerican ancestral religion that persist to this day. The priests cast themselves into the fire—that is, they ingested the concoction and transformed themselves into animals. Colonial sources’ insistence on human sacrifice, which is still viewed as the nucleus of Aztec (and Nahua) religion by many scholars (e.g., Carrasco 1999, Graulich 2005), had a specific and clear objective: silencing the visionary experience. Therefore, I propose here is not to discard colonial sources but to read them anew by using modern Mazatec experience as a wedge in the Spaniards’ and their Indigenous converts’ colonialist narratives.

I do not suggest that human sacrifice was not practiced by either the Mexica or other Mesoamerican peoples. Following López Austin and López Luján (2008) and, more recently, Restall (2018, 75–144), I propose confronting the abundant literature on human sacrifice with actual archaeological records. On the one hand, if sources are to be taken literally, thousands of victims were sacrificed every year in the Templo Mayor, the most important ritual site in central Mexico. On the other hand, while excavations are ongoing, only the remains of a few hundred people have been retrieved. Skulls, which are by far the most common skeletal remains, cannot provide any indication about the cause of death because decapitation was conducted post-mortem (López Austin and López Luján 2008, 139–141, Chávez Balderas 2010, 317–343). Skulls with perforated temples, frequently including those of female and even child, found in so-called tzompantli, altars with racks of skulls (Pijoán Aguadé and Mansilla Lory 2010, 307–310, Matos Moctezuma et al. 2017), suggest that these are secondary burials. The reuse of skeletal remains, especially skulls, in ceremonial contexts such as caches or sacred bundles is firmly established in both colonial sources and contemporary practice (Castillo 2001, 121, Tezozomoc 1997, ch. 94, Blom 1954, Jansen 2011, Maza García de Alba 2019). Indeed, it is a widespread phenomenon on the entire continent. In this context, many human remains in the sacred precinct of Tenochtitlán may be interpreted as ancestors’ relics.

The astounding difference between the extant archaeological evidence from the main locus of practice of human sacrifice and colonial sources not only disproves the latter but begs the question of which practices were actually performed that the friars fatally misunderstood and misinterpreted. Rather than viewing human sacrifice as the nucleus of Nahua and Mesoamerican religion, I believe that sacrifice should be understood as part of a larger ceremonial complex that in no way led to the death of the sacrificed. Schele and Miller’s (1986) now classic study famously demonstrated the importance of ritual bloodletting as a form of self-sacrifice among the Classic Maya. I believe that ceremonies involving altered states of consciousness, which implied a journey to the world of the dead (and back), were often misunderstood and ultimately mistaken by the friars as an ultimate sacrifice—the definitive termination of life. There may have been overlap between night ceremonies and human sacrifice. For example, Clendinnen (1995, 92–93) suggested that the sacrificed were drugged or sedated before execution with substances that may have been used to induce visions in other doses, combinations, and ceremonies, a practice
that has been both historically and archaeologically corroborated in the Inca Empire (McEwan and Guchte 1992). Another case of overlap and possibly confusion between death and altered states is accession rituals, which were often described as being akin to funerals (see below for further discussion). As seen earlier, travel to and from the world of the ancestors is a key aspect of knowledge acquisition in Mazatec ceremonies. Nightly rituals are deeply transformative experiences, and although they are perhaps existentially similar to death, they are not to be mistaken for physical death, let alone human sacrifice.

As studied by López Luján (2005), perhaps the most ubiquitous aspect of the archaeology of the Templo Mayor are the offerings—large caches of carefully placed objects that should be understood as a type of gift and which often included human remains (sacrificed or not). Offerings and sacrifices have often been said to have a similar underlying logic: giving to receive. In this context, the surrender of precious items or even life is intended to restore balance by giving what is due (Köhler 2001). In line with this book’s main arguments, I propose that offering and sacrifice can also be understood as an open gesture or a quest—a process in which participants partake and are fully aware of the outcome’s indeterminacy (Neurath 2010, 93). Indeed, sacrifice as offering allows for the possibility that an offer can be refused and a plea to the gods can remain unanswered. This view aims to question cosmological interpretations that rationalize human behavior and seeks to understand ceremony as an open-ended process that can generate meaning, not simply reflect a preconceived notion of reality or truth.

4.2. Emblematic and narrative representations of the veintenas

The festivals of the yearly calendar can be grouped according to their style and iconography (Kubler and Gibson 1951, 37–41). For example, the Codex Borbonicus depicts full-fledged ritual scenes, including priests, gods, and temple structures. Other manuscripts, such as the Codex Telleriano-Remensis (see Section 7.1), only represent the tutelary god or patron of the veintena, who, as remarked by Quiñones Keber (1995, 136), should be more accurately understood as a godly impersonator. The Codex Tudela alternates ceremonial scenes and godly depictions in its representation of the veintenas. Another type of veintena representation consists of rather emblematic and glyph-like images that appear within larger scenes as a sort of temporal markers. In colonial manuscripts, this type of representation can be found in tributary accounts, such as the Codex Mendoza, Matricula de Tributos, and the Humboldt Fragment (Fig. 4.5), that depict the four tribute periods of the Aztec Empire: Tlacaxipehualiztli, Ochpaniztli, Etzalcualiztli, and Tlacaxipehualiztli (Long 1942, Barlow 1943). Tlacaxipehualiztli is represented by the conical hat of Xipe Totec, the tutelary god of the ceremony; Ochpaniztli is depicted as the broom of Tlazolteotl, the main goddess of this celebration; Panquetzaliztli, which means “the raising of banners,” is identified by an upright banner; and Etzalcualiztli, a festival dedicated to Tlaloc, is depicted as the head of the rain god.

The Codex Borbonicus employs emblematic markers within the larger narrative of the veintenas. As extensively recognized in the literature (Paso y Troncoso 1898, 165–179, Couch 1985, 70–82, Anders et al. 1991, 214–215, Graulich 2008), the twelfth festival of the year, Ochpaniztli, is given a larger and more elaborate treatment than any other celebration in the cycle. It extends over several pages and overlaps with the subsequent veintenas. On pages 29–32, the priest of Chicomecoatl plays a central role, differently from most later sources, which assign the festival of Ochpaniztli to Toci or Tlazolteotl. For example,