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This study is about Zapotec religion as it existed around the time of the Spanish Conquest. Our knowledge of ancient Zapotec religion, like ancient Mesoamerican religions in general, comes principally from Spanish colonial documents (Nicholson 1971:396–97). From an analysis of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century documents, the nature of ancient Zapotec religion will be described and interpreted. This description and interpretation includes an identification of Zapotec deities, the role of ancestor worship, the nature of the Zapotec cosmos, the composition of the Zapotec priesthood, the rituals and ceremonies performed, and the use of the Zapotec sacred and solar calendars in religious activities. This study also relies on the archaeological record from the Postclassic, the time period leading up to the Spanish Conquest. Archaeological evidence of the nature of Postclassic Zapotec temples, tombs, ritual areas of palaces, and representations of deities in murals and artifacts also will be discussed. The role of religion in ancient Zapotec society will be examined in the conclusion to this study.

SOCIETY, CULTURE, AND RELIGION

To place religion within the context of society and culture requires some definitions. A *society* is a group of people who have a history of interacting with one another behaviorally, such as the ancient Zapotecs, and a *culture* is the behavior patterns that characterize their

interactions. Together, a society and culture form a *sociocultural system*. From an analytical perspective, a sociocultural system consists of technology, social organization, and ideology. *Technology* is the manner in which the members of a sociocultural system interact with their habitat. *Social organization* involves the interaction of members of a sociocultural system with one another. *Ideology* represents the ways that the members of a sociocultural system interact with regard to ideas. Ideology encompasses religion.

Anthropologists have found religion difficult to define. Saint Jerome evidently first used the term *religion* in Western civilization in the late fourth century AD, but the term was not widely used in Christianity until the Reformation (Insoll 2004:6). Edward B. Tylor (1960:202), seeking to define religion universally, as it applies to all human groups, first defined religion in anthropological terms as the “belief in spiritual beings.” More recently, Clifford Geertz (2005:14) has defined religions as “systems of ideas about the ultimate shape and substance of reality.” Marcus Winter (2002:50) simply defines religion as an “institutionalized system of beliefs and practices relating to the supernatural or gods.” Zapotec religion generally conforms to all these definitions. There is no Zapotec word for religion, but instead the concept of “sacred” exists (de la Cruz 2002a:xxix).

Approaches to the study of religion reflect approaches to the study of sociocultural systems in general. The neo-evolutionary, or processual, approach regards technology as the driving force in a sociocultural system. Social organization is determined by technology, and ideology or religion functions to reinforce social organization (White 1949; Sahlins and Service 1960). In this view, religion is seen as ultimately determined by technology (Harris 1974). More recently, the post-processual approach, associated with action theory or agency, views ideology as the driving force in the sociocultural system (Bourdieu 1977; Ortner 1984). In this view, the ideas (thoughts and actions) of its individual members determine all aspects of the sociocultural system (Hodder and Hutson 2003:30–31). In this regard, Insoll (2004:22–23, figure 2) has argued that religion determines the sociocultural system.

Lars Fogelin has reviewed both processual and post-processual approaches to the study of religion in archaeology. “Archaeologists studying religion often focus on ritual” because “ritual is a form of human activity that leaves material traces, whereas religion is a more abstract symbolic system consisting of beliefs, myths, and doctrines” (Fogelin 2007:56). Processual archaeologists “see rituals as the enactment of religious principles or myths” (Fogelin 2007:55). Post-processual archaeologists focus “on the ways that the experience of ritual and ritual symbolism promotes social orders and dominant ideologies” (Fogelin

2007:55). Herein, Zapotec religion is conceived as a shared worldview that helped integrate Postclassic Zapotec city-state culture, a point that will be explored in the conclusion to this study.

ANCIENT MESOAMERICAN RELIGIONS

Ancient Mesoamerican religions are best known for the Aztecs—or more properly and generally, the Nahuas—and the Maya because of the numerous documentary sources pertaining to them combined with the ritual or religious codices and the Classic Maya hieroglyphic records.¹ Eduard Seler (1904) pioneered the study of Nahua and Maya religions and wrote extensively about them. Seler (1904:273) also wrote a lengthy article that still stands today as a pioneer study of Zapotec religion, although he noted the limited amount of information available on Zapotec religion compared to the Maya and the Nahuas. An unpublished AD 1910 manuscript by Martínez Gracida also deals with Zapotec religion, although it lacks the scholarly approach of Seler (Adam Sellen, personal communication, 2011). Most recently, Victor de la Cruz and Winter (2002) have published a series of articles that includes a Spanish translation of Seler's original work and provides new insights into various aspects of Zapotec religion from linguistic, archaeological, ethnohistoric, and ethnographic points of view.

Seler (1904:266–75) was perhaps the first to point out a basic unity among Mesoamerican religions. Nahua, Maya, and Zapotec religions, among others throughout Mesoamerica, share many basic concepts, exemplified by the 260-day sacred calendar. Alfonso Caso (1971a) agreed with Seler that a basic unity existed among Mesoamerican religions and argued that we should speak of a Mesoamerican religion instead of Mesoamerican religions. Caso (1971a:199) believed that we can speak of a single Mesoamerican religion from as far back as the Classic period (AD 300–900). de la Cruz (2002b:279), who agrees with Caso about the unity of Mesoamerican religion, has suggested that this unity is best exemplified during the Late Postclassic (AD 1200–1521), when the merchants and soldiers of the Aztec Triple Alliance imposed religious uniformity throughout much of Mesoamerica. Wigberto Jiménez Moreno (1971) opposed this view and considered there to be a plurality of Mesoamerican religions with differences comparable to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the Middle East. He argued that the crucible of Western civilization in Mesopotamia, a region comparable to Mesoamerica, produced these identifiably different religions that, despite their differences, share many basic concepts. The same could be said for Mesoamerican religions. The problem of the unity of Mesoamerican

religion will be taken up in the conclusion to this study insofar as ancient Zapotec religion can shed light upon it.

More recent studies of ancient Mesoamerican religions, especially Nahua (López Austin 1980; Burkhart 1989) and Maya (B. Tedlock 1992; D. Tedlock 1985) religions, have sought to search out their underlying theological principles. Louise M. Burkhart (1989), in particular, has noted how many colonial documents relating to Nahua religion in reality consist of an active dialogue between Nahuas and Christian missionaries; missionaries learned as much about Nahua religion as the Nahuas learned about Christianity. The underlying theological principles of these religions were at the center of this dialogue. For example, Nahua religion had no concepts of “good” and “evil,” the underlying theological principles of Christianity, but instead manifested the concepts of “order” and “chaos” (Burkhart 1989:34). The research into underlying theological principles has been made more amenable to the study of Nahua religion because of the plethora of colonial documents relating to it. However, attempts have been made to identify the underlying theological principles of Zapotec and Mixtec religions. Kent V. Flannery and Joyce Marcus (1976) have cited the concept of *p̄ee* that they relate to “vital force” as an underlying theological principle of Zapotec religion. Also, John Monaghan (1995:127) has considered the concept of *yii* that he relates to “potency, vitality, or fecundity” as an underlying theological principle of Mixtec religion.

Compared to Nahua and Maya religions, the study of Zapotec and Mixtec religions are in their infancy and lack the volume of documentation available for study. No comprehensive study or identification of Zapotec deities exists like those for the Nahuas (Caso 1958; Nicholson 1971) or the Maya (Taube 1992). There is also no comprehensive study of the Zapotec priesthood as there is for the Nahua (Acosta Saignes 1946). The Zapotec sacred and solar calendars have only recently been studied in detail (Alcina Franch 1993; Urcid 2001; Justeson and Tavárez 2007; Tavárez and Justeson 2008), whereas Maya and Nahua calendars have a long history of scholarly research. Zapotec ceremonies and rituals are little known compared to those of the Nahua and Maya, which have received, especially in the case of the former, ample discussion.

It is not the purpose of this book to examine the underlying theological principles of Zapotec religion. Instead, the principal tasks of this book are to present a comprehensive study and a new perspective on ancient Zapotec deities, the priesthood, the sacred and solar calendars, and the rituals and ceremonies. Unlike most other studies of ancient Mesoamerican religions, this book also presents a comprehensive study of the archaeological remains of temples, tombs, ritual spaces in palaces, and murals and artifacts relating to deities.

THE ZAPOTEC

At the time of the Spanish Conquest, the Zapotecs occupied the southern part of the present-day state of Oaxaca, Mexico, including the large Valley of Oaxaca, the small mountainous valleys surrounding it, and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (figure 1.1). The Valley of Oaxaca, the Zapotec heartland, manifests three arms or sub-valleys: the Tlacolula arm in the east, drained by the Río Salado; the ETLA arm in the north; and the Zimatlán arm, or Valle Grande, in the south. The Río Atoyac drains both north and south arms (figure 1.2). The small mountainous valleys surrounding the Valley of Oaxaca include the Sierra Juárez to the north; part of the Peñoles region to the west; the Sola, Coatlán, Miahuatlán, and Ejutla Valleys to the south; and the Ozolotepec and Chichicapa regions to the east. Extending east-southeast of the Valley of Oaxaca along the Tehuantepec River drainage are the areas of Nexapa, Jalapa de Markez, and Tehuantepec that the Zapotecs occupied late in their Prehispanic history. Zapotec is not a dead language; it is still spoken by nearly half a million native speakers today who continue to live in the Valley of Oaxaca, the small mountainous valleys around it, and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

ANCIENT ZAPOTEC SOCIETY

Shortly before the Spanish Conquest, the Zapotecs lived in numerous city-states, or small kingdoms. Called *queche* in Zapotec, these city-states varied in size and importance but were composed of a capital city that controlled a small territory and the subject communities within it. In the Valley of Oaxaca, at least thirteen different city-states and an unknown number of additional city-states occurred in the small mountainous valleys adjacent to the valley and in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Oudijk 2002:80–83). A king (*coqui*) and queen (*xonaxi*) who lived in a palace (*quihui*) in the capital city ruled each city-state. They appointed nobles (*xoana*) to govern components of the city-state and the subject communities within it. In addition, barrio headmen (*collaba*) collected tribute and organized communal workgroups from their neighborhoods, and guardians (*copa*) policed their neighborhoods and conscripted citizen soldiers in times of war (Oudijk 2002:77–78). The *collaba* and *copa* were commoners.

The *coqui* and *xonaxi* were hereditary rulers. They traced their ancestry directly back to the real or mythical founders of the city-state who had formed their *yoho*, or royal house: “The main legitimating aspect of this *yoho* was the possession of a sacred bundle or *quiña*, i.e., an actual bundle of paper, cloth,



FIGURE 1.1. *The Zapotecs and their neighbors in Mesoamerica (redrawn and modified after Paddock 1966b: 80, map 1).*

or vegetable material which contained a sacred object symbolizing the deified founder of the yoho” (Oudijk 2002:77). *Lienzos*, pictorial genealogies of the rulers of some city-states painted by Zapotecs after the conquest, depict their ancestral Prehispanic rulers as far back as seventeen generations to the real or mythical founders of their royal houses (Oudijk 2008:107). Xoana also traced their yohos back to real or mythical founding ancestors who were secondarily related to the rulers’ founding ancestors as junior or cadet lineages. These nobles also maintained *quiña* (Oudijk 2002:77). The ancestors of Zapotec rulers and nobles played a very important part as intermediaries with the deities. The role of Zapotec religion within these city-states will be the focus of this study.

ZAPOTEC RELIGION

There have been basically two different approaches to Zapotec religion. Most experts regard Zapotec religion, like Aztec religion, as being characterized by

Córdoba's (1578a) definition of *pitào* as "god" or "deity," maintaining that *pi-* is the same as *pèe* and that *tào* means "great." Therefore, *pitào* should be translated as "great wind," "great breath," or "great spirit" and not "god" or "deity." She concludes that *pitào* "never referred to a specific deity but rather to the great and sacred life force within lightning or a supernatural being" (Marcus 2003a:345).³

For Marcus (2003a:348–49), the different names of the gods, mentioned in the AD 1579–1581 *Relaciones Geográficas* (Geographical Reports) relating to the Zapotecs and written by Spanish colonial administrators, were not gods but Zapotec rulers (*coqui*) deified after their deaths and perceived as intermediaries between the people and the supernatural forces. She also maintains that the Zapotec gods mentioned in Córdoba's (1578a) *Vocabulario en lengua zapoteca* (Dictionary of the Zapotec language) and in Gonzalo Balsalobre's (1988) report on Zapotec religion, written in AD 1656, were names for the different supernatural forces. Therefore, according to Marcus, the Zapotecs did not have a pantheon of gods that they worshipped but instead attempted to appease supernatural forces through rituals, reciprocity, and the intervention of the spirits of deceased and deified *coqui*.

Alfredo López Austin (1998:8) distinguishes "two great categories of supernatural entities: supernatural forces and gods. Supernatural forces are impersonal entities," as Marcus proposes, like lightning and earthquakes.⁴ On the other hand, gods possess a personality "so similar to the human [personality] that they can comprehend the expressed desires of men and so that they are willingly susceptible to being affected by human actions" (López Austin 1998:9).⁵ Furthermore, as Henry B. Nicholson (1971:408) has observed with regard to Mesoamerican religion, "Most of the deities were conceived anthropomorphically; even those ostensibly in animal form are often portrayed in the disguise (*nahualli*) of an anthropomorphic deity." Gods or deities, then, look and act a lot like humans, whereas supernatural forces do not and are impersonal.

The *Relaciones Geográficas* repeatedly refer to "idols" made of stone, wood, or ceramics that represent Zapotec gods. For example, the *Relación de Teguantepec* (Tehuantepec) reported that "the principal idols that they had were idols of precious green stones [*chalchihuites*] and ceramics and wood that they worshipped as gods" (Torre de Lagunas 1580:114).⁶ And according to the *Relación de Tecuicuilco* (Teococuilco), "all these natives of these towns worshipped the Devil in the figure of a statue made from wood and stone which they called gods" (Villagar 1580:91).⁷ Furthermore, they mention that these "idols" were "stones carved in the manner of persons" (Zárate 1581:198) with "very ugly faces"

(Pérez de Zamora 1580:111), and “they were given different names” (Espíndola 1580:117).⁸ Likewise, “four green stone idols, in the shape of men, although deformed and with frightening features,” have been described by Francisco Burgoa (1989: II, 90), a Spanish colonial priest.⁹ These descriptions clearly indicate that Zapotec idols looked a lot like humans and fit both Nicholson’s characterization of them as anthropomorphic deities and López Austin’s description of gods having human attributes as opposed to being impersonal supernatural forces.

Marcus selected two natural but inanimate forces, lightning and earthquakes, to support her animatistic hypothesis. But Córdova (1578a:141) lists a whole series of other Zapotec deities in his dictionary that are much more difficult to accommodate under animatism, including the maize deity, the deity of omens, the deity of hunting, the deity of merchants and good fortune, the deity of misery, and the deity of the underworld. Furthermore, Córdova (1578a:141) defines Cociyo as “dios de las lluvias” or the “rain god,” indicating that his Zapotec informants considered Cociyo the god of rain, although his name literally means “lightning.”

There are two large plaster sculptures of Cociyo attached to the walls of a special room in the palace of a priest from the Late Classic Xoo phase (AD 650–850) archaeological site of Lambityeco in the Tlacolula arm of the Valley of Oaxaca (figure 1.3). These sculptures clearly depict Cociyo in anthropomorphic form, although his face might seem quite ugly or deformed to a sixteenth-century Spaniard. Like a Zapotec noble, Cociyo wears a fancy feather headdress, earpools, a necklace with a pendant, and beaded bracelets. His human arms end in human hands with fingernails. In his left hand he carries lightning bolts and his right hand holds a vase with water (rain) pouring from its mouth. The vase is of a type whose neck is frequently adorned with an effigy of Cociyo’s face. This indicates that nearly a millennium before the Spanish Conquest the Zapotecs portrayed Cociyo as an anthropomorphic deity, not an impersonal supernatural force.

Marcus (2003a:345) criticizes Spanish colonial priests and administrators for calling Zapotec supernaturals “gods,” suggesting that they were being ethnocentric by forcing Zapotec sacred beings into their preconceived Western notion of Greek and Roman gods. She likewise criticizes anthropologists for considering animatism to be associated with so-called primitive societies, such as bands and tribes, and not with more complex preindustrial state societies, such as the Zapotecs. With regard to the latter, she is right for the wrong reasons. Zapotec religion was not totally animatistic, but aspects of animatism were in Zapotec religion, such as worshipping stone, wooden, or ceramic idols

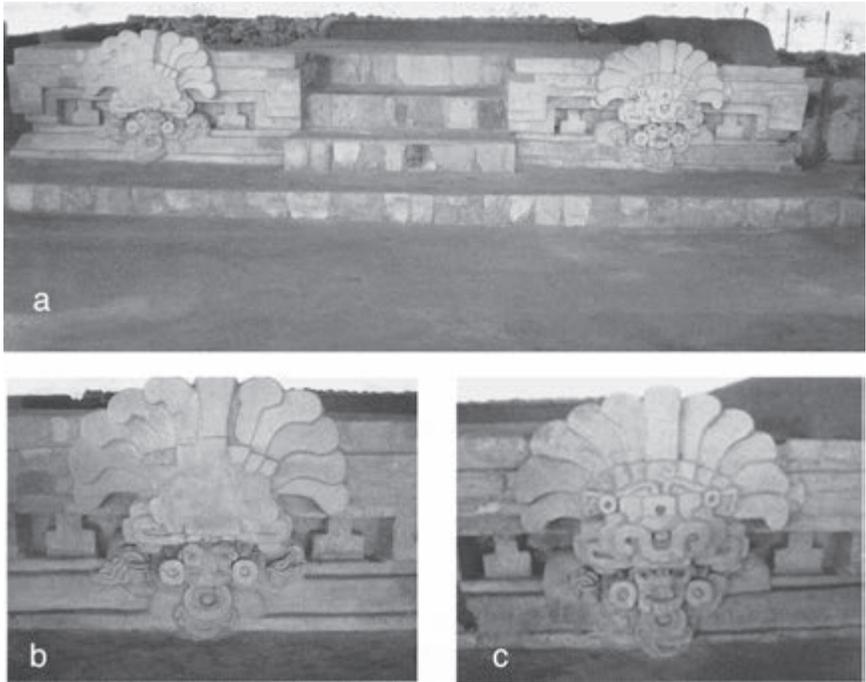


FIGURE 1.3. *Plaster sculptures of the rain deity, Cociyo, Mound 190, Lambityeco, ca. AD 775–800: (a) West room of Patio 4, Structure 190–4, Mound 190, Lambityeco; (b) South Cociyo; (c) North Cociyo (photos courtesy of Robert Markens).*

of deities thought to be imbued with supernatural forces. It can be argued, however, that all religions have aspects of animatism, including the religions of modern industrial nations, with their plastic dashboard Jesuses, crucifixes, and statues and medallions of saints—inanimate objects thought by many, if not most, practitioners to be imbued with supernatural forces.¹⁰ Marcus is absolutely correct in stating that animatism is not restricted to so-called primitive societies but incorrect in characterizing Zapotec religion as solely animatistic and devoid of deities. Zapotec religion included a pantheon of deities.

In the following pages, the nature of ancient Zapotec religion will be explored. Chapters 2 and 3 deal with the identification of Zapotec deities and the nature of the Zapotec cosmos. Chapter 4 describes Zapotec temple priests and temple ceremonies. Chapters 5 and 6 examine the nature of Zapotec temples and priestly residences uncovered in archaeological excavations at Mitla and Yagul. Chapter 7 treats Zapotec community priests, or *colaní*, who lived

in their own local neighborhoods and practiced their rituals with the aid of sacred books. Chapter 8 explores the Zapotec sacred and solar calendars and their relationships to religious rituals and ceremonies. Chapter 9 analyzes a series of Prehispanic murals from Mitla and examines their religious content. Chapter 10 concludes with a summary of the nature of ancient Zapotec religion and how it fit into ancient Zapotec society.

NOTES

1. Codices are indigenous books made from *amate* paper or deerskin in the form of screenfolds instead of loose leaf. The only Prehispanic Aztec codex that survives is the Borbonicus (Caso 1967:103–12), which is a religious or ritual codex geared to the sacred calendar with depictions of deities and rituals or ceremonies. Other religious codices include those of the Borgia group: Borgia, Laud, Fejérváry-Mayer, Vaticanus B, and Cospi. Among the Maya religious codices are Dresden, Madrid, and Paris.

2. Traditionally, the name of this supernatural being has been written as Cocijo and pronounced *Ko see hoe*; the correct spelling should be Cociyo and pronounced *Ko see yo* (Urcid 2001:36n3).

3. Marcus unfortunately chose the term *supernatural being*, which is usually associated with gods or deities.

4. Translated into English by the author. Hereafter, only the original Spanish will be quoted. The original Spanish reads, “dos grandes categorías de entes sobrenaturales: las fuerzas sobrenaturales y los dioses. Las fuerzas sobrenaturales son entidades impersonales” (López Austin 1998:8).

5. “tan semejante a la humana como para que puedan comprender las expresiones de los hombres y para que tengan una voluntad susceptible de ser afectada por las acciones humanas” (López Austin 1998:9).

6. “los principales ídolos que tenían, eran ídolos de piedras de chalchihuites, y de barro y de palo, a los cuales adoraban por dioses” (Torre de Lagunas 1580:114).

7. “Adoraban, todos estos naturales destos pueblos, al DEMONIO en figura de estatua, hechas de palo y de piedra, a los cuales llamaban dioses” (Villagar 1580:91).

8. “unas piedras labradas a manera de personas” (Zárate 1581:198).

9. “cuatro ídolos de piedra verde, con figuras de hombre, aunque disformes, y espantosas en las facciones” (Burgoa 1989: II, 90).

10. Among world religions, only Islam has attempted to purge itself of animatism through the teachings of Mohammed, but even it has the meteorite at Mecca as an inanimate object imbued with supernatural force and, some might argue, the Koran and prayer beads as well.