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Sorcery and Witchcraft in the Mesoamerican World

An Introduction

JOHN M.D. POHL AND JEREMY D. COLTMAN

In 1632 Thomas Gage, a Dominican friar of English ancestry, was ministering to the highland Maya community of Petapa, Guatemala, when he became involved in a remarkable encounter with the leaders of two rival political factions within the community.

They told me that the report went that Juan Gómez was the chief wizard of all the wizards and witches in the town, and that commonly he was wont to be changed into the shape of a lion, and so to walk about the mountains. That he was ever a deadly enemy to one Sebastian López, an ancient Indian and head of another tribe, and that two days before they had met in the mountain, Gómez in the shape of a lion and López in the shape of a tiger, and that they had fought most cruelly till Gómez, who was the older and weaker, was tired of it, much bit and bruised, and died of it . . . This struck me at the very heart, to think that I should live among such people, who were spending all they could get by their work and labor upon the church, saints and in offerings, and yet were so privy to the counsels of Satan. (Gage 1958: 275–276)

Juan Gómez had been a person of considerable wealth and power in Petapa. Gage even refers to him as a kind of “ruler.” He had been entirely dedicated to the church, attending morning and evening prayers regularly and contributing generously with gifts that supported the Dominicans in their missionary activities in the region. Even more surprising however was that, following Gómez’s death from injuries sustained during their supernatural encounter, his rival, Sebastian López, was incarcerated by

the town's indigenous administration while they decided how to resolve what was becoming an increasingly volatile situation, with the Gómez faction demanding that López be turned over to Spanish administration for trial as a murderer, while the López faction argued that such an action would result in both they, together with the rest of the ranking sorcerers in Petapa, being prosecuted for witchcraft. As a devout Catholic, Gage was appalled by the revelation that his parishioners were continuing to engage in such fundamentally pagan practices, but he was equally fascinated with the accounts of human-animal transformation, particularly in regard to how seriously the entire community seemed to accept the phenomenon not only as an explanation for Gómez's mortal wounds but also as an expected, even logical, outcome of the political rivalries that had divided the population for so many years.

The continuation of pagan beliefs and ritualism was of grave concern to the mendicant orders of friars serving in the Americas, many of whom wrote accounts of their personal experiences of what they identified as witchcraft, sorcery, necromancy, and related practices that they associated with a chief devil identified as Satan in the Christian theology of the time. What makes Gages's account so intriguing is how his inquiry into the death of Juan Gómez seems to anticipate so many of the questions that ethnographers would have about the same forms of behavior when they encountered it nearly four centuries later (Tedlock 1992). While the writings of his Spanish contemporaries were laden with evangelical rhetoric condemning pagan beliefs in response of the censorship of inquisitorial reviews, Gates's account was published in England at the conclusion of the Civil War and reflects a sense of the objective empiricism that was beginning to characterize serious scientific investigation in that country by the middle of the seventeenth century. Therefore, in many ways it anticipates comparable inquiries into the phenomena of sorcery presented by the scholars here.

John Monaghan examines witchcraft or *supersticion* as it was defined in Spain during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. *Supersticion*, literally superstition, was one of the major divisions in the Spanish theory of knowledge, but it was acquired through a pact with the Devil on the part of a practitioner who might be engaged in any of four major categories of ritualism: *brujeria*, *magica*, *ensalmanacion*, and *hechiceria*. For Spanish ecclesiastics, *brujeria* was by far the most sinister form of superstitious knowledge. Upon entering into an express pact with Satan, the brujo carried out her or his bidding and even worshipped the supreme devil as a god. Women in particular were believed to specialize in *brujeria*. *Magica*, on the other hand, was rooted in arcane knowledge handed down from classical times in books and formulas that were studied by men engaged in what they advocated was *arte* or *sciencia*. There were two principal forms of *magica*. *Adivinacion* or the art of predicting the outcome of future events was accomplished primarily through

the practice of astrology, casting lots, and the interpretation of dreams, whereas *nigromancia* was defined as the ability to control demons or the souls of the dead to affect the behavior of the living. *Ensalmacion* was the practice of healing the sick. Ensalmadores were credited with the power to heal by invoking through oratory, particularly invoking the psalms, while *saludadores* advocated that they had the ability to cure through their breath, saliva, or vision. Finally, *hechiceria*, also attributed mainly to women, was a term used to refer to individuals who had mastered combinations of *brujeria*, *magica*, and *ensalmacion* as well as more recognized forms of curing with the rituals and potions employed by *medicos* and *boticarios*.

By examining terminology as it was recorded in dictionaries among the Kaqchiquel and K'iche' Maya, Gage's friend Juan Gómez having belonged to the latter, Monaghan demonstrates that Spanish friars were not only very successful in identifying Maya terminology that matched their concept of *supersticion* but seemed to go so far as to map their taxonomy onto the indigenous culture. For example, a *balam* could be defined as an indigenous brujo who can change into a jaguar, like Gómez's rival Sebastian López, and were not perceived as being all that different from Iberian brujos who could turn themselves into cats, dogs, and other animals. For the Spaniards, the words differed, but the concepts behind the words were the same.

Renowned for their ethnographic research with the Nahuas of the Sierra de Puebla over decades, Alan Sandstrom and Pamela Effrein Sandstrom are more concerned with how sorcery and witchcraft fit into broader perspectives of Mesoamerican religion. Much of the ritualism they have examined focuses on the use of mesas or ritual tables—in reality more like miniature stages—upon which Nahua spirit entities are called forth to act as assistants to healers and rainmakers. Nahua healers attribute disease to both anthropomorphic and environmental causes (Sandstrom 1991, 2003; Sharon 2003). Many are generalized beings responsible for drought, rain, thunder, lightning, and other atmospheric phenomena. Others are the spirits of people who were murdered in factional disputes, the souls of neglected relatives, malevolent sorcerers, and witches. Diagnosis is performed through the use of maize casting and scrying while curing is affected through highly dramatic performances that include the manufacture of scores of miniature paper images of the offended spirits (Sandstrom 1991: 235–237).

Sandstrom and Effrein Sandstrom propose that pantheism fits the ethnographic data on the Nahua better than polytheism, thereby resolving many of the contradictions in traditional Nahua world view that are derived as much from scholarly assumptions about an ancient Aztec imperial cult as the beliefs of their present-day descendants (see Nicholson 1971 for discussion). In a pantheistic religion the cosmos partakes of the sacred manifested in an impersonal divinity that fundamentally

unites all objects, animals, and human beings. The Nahuas address this sacred principle as *totiotsij*. The root of the word *tiō-tl* is a regional variant of *teō-tl*, the term used by the sixteenth-century Nahuatl speakers to refer to both god and an animating principle that permeates everything in the environment, more of a cosmic life-force rather than a person-like deity (Pohl and Lyons 2010: 34–35). The multitudes of cut-paper images that portray different aspects of *totiotsij* do not represent separate spirit entities arranged in a polytheistic hierarchy. Instead, all spirit entities, all objects, and all living forms are fundamentally one and essentially the same. Thus, Nahua spirit entities may substitute for each other or shade into one another and exhibit all of the contradictions that characterize the world at large. As a consequence, a peculiarity of Nahua thought that derives from this pantheistic world view is that it is impossible to differentiate between what is ultimately good versus evil among spirit entities.

Although they keenly observed the sophistication with which Nahua physicians diagnosed patients, administered medicines derived from more than 1,200 plant species, and performed delicate operations, Spanish friars were nevertheless confounded by the indigenous physician's explanation for the primary causes of injury and disease as either witchcraft or transgression against spirit forces in nature. The mapping of categories onto indigenous practices by Europeans, as Monaghan proposes, seems to have the effect of dividing what had been a holistic theory of disease, curing, control over meteorological phenomena, astrology, and divination into what they regarded as positive or negative qualities of *magica* versus *supersticion*. Sandstrom and Efrein Sandstrom therefore argue that much of what we are discussing as sorcery and witchcraft is actually the result of the adoption of both Iberian and African diaspora ritual practices, first introduced into the Caribbean after 1492 and later spread throughout Mesoamerica during the early Colonial period. Their point is well taken. The widespread use of standard treatments such as rubbing an egg over the forehead for the diagnosis of disease or the sacrifice of black chickens to appease a spirit entity, spitting liquor, and so forth are clearly connected to practices of Iberian supersticion as well as being documented in Africa and the Caribbean (see Madsen and Madsen 1969 for discussion).

While the ritualism associated with curing, rainmaking, divination, sorcery, and witchcraft is remarkably consistent throughout Mesoamerica, suggesting some form of integrated social mechanism for its distribution, it nonetheless seems to be applied differentially according to variables in cultural, historical, social, political, and economic settings at any given time. Sandstrom and Efrein Sandstrom believe that the comparative lack of overt witchcraft in the communities in which they studied is the result of a concerted effort to reduce "envy" in these communities (Sandstrom 1991: 218–219). Envy is a complex topic, and it is associated with

terms in indigenous languages that express powerful and destructive emotions in Mesoamerican communities. The Nahuatl of Chicontepec, Veracruz, have one particular *mal aire* known as *Tzitzimicohecatl* (wind of envy and anger) (Báez-Jorge 2004: 134). In comparable fashion among the Teenek (Huastec) of Tantoyuca, envy and anger provoke an alliance with the earth and the recruitment of the evil spells of a sorcerer (Ariel de Vidas 2007: 183) while in Pedrano Tzotzil Maya thought, envy will also cause the *waybel* souls to cause harm (Holmes 1961: 158).

Lilián González Chévez discusses highly aggressive forms of witchcraft practiced by the Mixtec and Tlapanec communities of the Costa Chica Guerrero where illness is attributed to envy. Nothing escapes witchcraft's influence from personal health to the size of harvests, the fertility of animals, children's success in school, or even the arrival of remittance payments from migrants. Witchcraft is therefore responsible for a high level of psychosocial stress, as it affects not only one's physical and emotional states but also one's material well-being. For González Chévez much of the underlying causes of witchcraft are rooted in limitations in resources to which all members of a community otherwise have an equal right. A fundamental belief is that if someone profits in the community, others can suffer a downturn in fortune with an equivalence in loss. Whether literally true or not, a community uses this theory of "limited good" to maintain balance in social and cultural dynamics that is rooted in its population's common history and the systems of reciprocity that bind its kin groups together.

The appearance of unequal access to wealth, on the other hand, can lead to serious accusations of witchcraft within families, between families, and in other factional components of the community. A Mixtec *brujo* may become envious if someone has land, money, or livestock and will take it upon himself to relieve an individual of their assets by summoning powerful spirit entities such as the *brujo's* ancestors or the souls of those who have died a violent death. The objective of a defending *brujo* is to insinuate oneself with these entities to channel or direct these forces so that they inflict sickness, bad harvests, and death on the offenders. In this way, evil in the hands of *brujos* is never created or destroyed; it is simply transferred. Among the ritual objects that are employed in Mixtec witchcraft ritualism is the fascinating use of the skulls of former *brujos*, some of whom have been killed in earlier factional conflicts. They are believed to be the means by which one can summon the spirit entity of the dead and invoke its power to cause harm to the living. The practice brings to mind the Postclassic Mixtec custom of using skulls inlaid with turquoise and other precious stones as objects of veneration and even ornamentation in ritual dress. The conflict between Juan Gómez and Sebastian López that Thomas Gage witnessed threatened to divide the community of Petapa, suggesting that the rivalry between the two leaders could have erupted into armed conflict by their followers if it weren't

for the fact that the two factions feared the repercussions of the viceregal authorities more than one another and managed to resolve the issues through their own *alcaldes*.

Nowhere is the process of the breakdown of a once unified pantheistic system of thought and its reassignment into positive and negative attributes discussed by Sandstrom and Effrein Sandstrom more clearly demonstrated than in neighboring Oaxaca. The region is characterized by small, widely dispersed valleys surrounded by high mountains within which are situated indigenous communities with average populations of about 10,000. While anthropologists differentiate them regionally on the basis of language and customs, the peoples themselves tend to emphasize a community identity, specifically in regard to the cult of a patron saint whose church is frequently constructed adjacent to the ruins of the ranking palace of former dynastic rulers and a cult temple dedicated to a heroic ancestor. Among the Mixtecs, the term for a ruler or *cacique* was *Yya*, meaning both “king” and “god.” Some sense of the transference of that cult is found with the term *Yya* being used to address the community’s patron saint, whose spiritual “house” is the church. The saint personifies the religious and social ideals of the community in a way comparable to a city-state dynastic ancestor.

An equally significant component of cult, however, is found in the reverence for the Cueva del Diablo (figure 1.1) or Cave of the Devil, a shrine usually located in some more remote region of the community’s territory.

These caves are notable for being the locations in which the ritualism of superstition continues to be practiced, largely with regard to healing, rainmaking, or seeking financial gain but also what can be called “assault sorcery,” the invocation of spirit entities to attack members of rival communities frequently during boundary disputes (figure 1.2). Archaeological reconnaissance, however, has shown that the locations of many Cuevas del Diablo can be correlated with significant locations appearing in the Mixtec codices as places of creation where the founders of dynasties, whose cults were otherwise maintained in community temples, had first magically appeared from the caves as well as stones, the earth, trees, rivers, the sky, or more ancient ruins at the beginning of time. In some cases these caves represent major Postclassic funerary shrines where the mummified remains of Postclassic nobles were deposited. Sacred caves described by Francisco de Burgoa, for example, include those of Chalcatongo and Jaltepec and have been identified archaeologically (Byland and Pohl 1994; Pohl 2007).

By advocating sources of ancestral power through creation legends associated with the surrounding natural environment, Mixtec elites succeeded in co-opting environmental cults that might date back to as early as the Preclassic and in so doing bolstered their claims of political control over territorial city-states and yet also provided a sense of common origin for the members of the broader marriage alliance



FIGURE 1.1. The Cueva del Diablo, located in the southern end of the Nochixtlan Valley. It contained the funerary remains of Postclassic Mixtec nobles and was noted by the Dominican chronicler Francisco de Burgoa as being particularly sacred to women. It continues to be venerated by healers and sorcerers throughout the Nochixtlan Valley today. Photo by John Pohl.

system. Given the traditional sanctity of these locations in unifying the beliefs of peasants and elites, it is no coincidence that these sensitive boundary zones are frequently addressed as *tierra encantada* or “haunted land,” and the Cuevas del Diablo remain a significant place for curers to practice, especially in areas where federal and state-sponsored health services are unattainable (Pohl et al. 1997).

It is clear that we are dealing with indigenous forms of sorcery that have profound antiquity in Mesoamerica. Furthermore, there is an intentional and even

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FIGURE 1.2. Offerings of food for the spirit entity patron of the Cueva del Diablo at Mitla, Oaxaca. The lavish feast features chicken tacos, beans, rice, and pan dulce together with aguardiente. A chicken had been sacrificed, and its blood was spattered across the entire meal. Sheets of paper are inscribed with the names of deceased relatives who are petitioned during curing ceremonies. Other lists feature the names of members of neighboring communities with whom the petitioner is engaged in a boundary dispute and invokes the cave's spirit entity to inflict harm on his rivals. Photo by John Pohl.

purposeful use of ancient sites that indicate a perceived equivalency in many forms of ritual behavior as well as visual symbolism. In fact, the conditions under which present-day sorcery practices have evolved seem directly comparable to the transference of deity cults from temples to churches with their cults of Christian saints that has been documented more thoroughly throughout Mesoamerica. John Chuchiak and Tim Knab are interested therefore more specifically in the mechanisms for the transformation in sorcery practices during the early colonial period.

SORCERY IN COLONIAL MESOAMERICA

Investigating the significance of Yucatec Maya magical and medicinal practices on the development of colonial sorcery and curing, Chuchiak proposes that during

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the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries the racial composition of colonial Yucatan had changed so dramatically that it naturally fostered reciprocal encounters between Spaniard, Maya, and Afro-Caribbean and rapidly cross-cut the categories of race and class that were otherwise enforced by the viceregal administration under systems of “Casta.” Consequently, colonial Yucatecan medicinal and magical practices came to play a major role in the development of what can be considered a mestizaje of sorcery and medicine in the mixed racial environment that existed in the colony. By examining several cases of Colonial curanderos as well as a detailed analysis of court documents pertaining to accused sorcerers and witches, Chuchiak examines the cross-cultural importance and impact of traditional Maya medicinal and magical practices.

One case that he features is fascinating in that it recognizes the effect of Afro-Caribbean influence manifested in the physical being of a mulatto named Joseph de Zavala, who became expert at practicing his profession as a curandero in the manner of the indigenous Maya. De Zavala told the witnesses that he conducted ceremonies in order to expel the cause of illnesses by chanting incantations to the Maya god of death, *Yum Cimil*, and the god of disease, *Ah Puch*, who he claimed gave origin to all diseases. He invoked them to come and receive the fermented drink balché, food, and sacred copal incense in order to cure the diseases by conducting ceremonies at the entrances to caves and cenotes, traditional Maya ritual sites. De Zavala therefore represents a fascinating counterpoint to observations of Afro-Caribbean and European-affected witchcraft recorded throughout highland Mexico but still practiced at sacred sites associated with pre-Hispanic ritualism. For Chuchiak, the increasing interracial contacts that occurred in colonial Yucatan therefore actually ensured the survival of traditional Maya concepts of sorcery and medicinal curing.

Timothy Knab is fascinated with when, how, and why Mesoamerican sorcerers began to incorporate European perspectives and practices into their indigenous belief system in the Mexican highlands. While studying Aztec religion with Thelma Sullivan, Knab became interested in what if any of the Nahua cosmos might be reconstructed from a study of witchcraft in the Sierra de Puebla. In so doing he found himself working in an area that was renowned for its twentieth-century “witch wars.” During the first half of the twentieth century an extraordinary factional generational conflict broke out among Eastern Nahua villages in the Sierra de Puebla, during which scores of people were killed under the most perplexing circumstances, in some cases in ways that were directly comparable to the death of Juan Gómez. What Knab discovered was exactly what many of us had suspected; that during periods of factional conflict, curers ordinarily responsible for the health of the community could become killers in the defense of the community (Knab

1995: 93). The twenty-year-long conflict, Knab determined, was rooted in the changing fortunes of kinship groups as they grappled with the shift from traditional reciprocity to a cash economy following the introduction of coffee. The suppression by federal troops of firearm use in the region following the Revolution left the beleaguered with little choice but to carry on their disputes by more clandestine means. Knab recorded stories that were surprisingly similar to those written down centuries before, but he uncovered an extraordinarily ingenious kit of murderous instruments, from the administration of poisons; to gifts of fouled copal, the smoke from which could choke the practitioner who ignited it; to ambushes in which victims were viciously mutilated with weapons that mimicked the claws and teeth of predatory animals. No matter which technique was deployed, each was designed to mask the cause of death by appealing to explanations rooted in the traditional belief system rather than outright murder.

If witchcraft was as closely associated with factional conflict as Knab's conclusions imply, then his observations help explain the activities of the Eastern Nahuatl leaders of insurrectionist movements that unfolded within the first few decades following the Spanish Conquest. Martín Ocelotl (Martín Jaguar) was born in 1496 in Chinantla, a kingdom lying sixty kilometers southeast of the Tehuacan Valley. He was the son of a prominent merchant, but his mother was renowned as a powerful witch as well. After the conquest, Ocelotl engaged in lucrative business dealings, but he also gained a reputation for being able to transform himself into wild animals, to perform miracles, and to heal the sick. Holding secret feasts and rituals in the concealed rooms of his house as well as in remote caves, he preached that the Spaniards would be destroyed by the Tzitzimime, the monstrous creatures with whom he held personal council. He passed out gifts, claiming that they came from the patron god of the Eastern Nahuas, Camaxtli-Mixcoatl, and told his followers to plant as much food as possible in order to insure their survival during an ensuing drought, promising that they would be well looked after by his "sisters," the clouds that would bring life-giving rains.

In short, Ocelotl displayed all the characteristics of both sorcerers and witches as well as curers. Given the friendships he maintained with the indigenous nobility, he might have succeeded in fomenting rebellion if he had not been stopped in 1537 by the first bishop of Mexico, Juan de Zumárraga. Following Ocelotl's arrest, public humiliation, and subsequent disappearance, the call to rebellion was continued by Andrés Mixcoatl, who claimed at times to have been either Ocelotl's brother or even Ocelotl himself. Mixcoatl performed miracles of rainmaking for which he was richly rewarded in lands and property. He continued preaching, going so far as to denounce the Christian friars while holding his own communions, during which he distributed hallucinogenic mushrooms among his parishioners and

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called upon them to prepare an arsenal of weapons with which to kill Spaniards. Although Ocelotl and Mixcoatl were unsuccessful, their activities, together with those that succeeded them, point to institutional forms of belief in Nahua society by which witchcraft was perceived to be a logical proxy for warfare, particularly during factional disputes among the elite. They also suggest that the elite had formerly employed witchcraft as a particularly intimidating form of social power. Even in predicting the fate of children, a *tonalpouhqui* was serving as no less than an enforcer of the principals of class structure and social order (Pohl 1998: 196).

For highland Mexico, the subject of pre-Columbian sorcery has received comparatively little scholarly attention in comparison to the city-state cults dedicated to the pantheon of Nahua gods such as Tlaloc, Tezcatlipoca, Cihuacoatl, Tlazolteotl, Quetzalcoatl, and a score of others. Eduard Seler wrote a preliminary article on the subject that H. B. Nicholson subsequently used to formulate an addendum on magic for his classic work on Aztec religion (Seler 1991; Nicholson 1971: 439–442). Both scholars tended to treat the subject superficially, making no significant connection to the wider belief system. On the other hand, ethnographers studying sorcery in contemporary indigenous communities have tended to view it as the state cult gone underground by interpreting the various rituals they have observed as relics of the large-scale ceremonials described in Sahagún and Durán, among others. Research into the category of Nahua spirit entities called Tzitzimime, on the other hand, has changed our perspectives on the role of pre-Hispanic magic, sorcery, and witchcraft and its relationship to the Nahua deity pantheon and in so doing has redefined a system of belief that is directly antecedent to the practices that continue in indigenous communities today (figure 1.3) (Pohl 1998, 2007; Klein 2000; Coltman 2007). The Tzitzimime (sing. Tzitzimitl) represent a category of Erinys-like spirit entities that personified indigenous belief in a relationship between disease, drought, war, sacrifice, death, and divine castigation (see Boone 1997 for general discussion). The codices portray images of the Tzitzimime as frightening creatures with claws for hands and feet, teeth and eyes at their joints, necklaces of human hands and hearts, and a fleshless skull.

The Tzitzimime were most feared during climactic events, especially eclipses, when they were to emerge as stars from their nighttime world to attack the sun and bring an end to the present age of mankind. However, there was also a fertility aspect to their cult, for they were said to come from the clouds bringing rain, water, thunder, and lightning.

The Tzitzimime could be punishers or protectors and in so being they exemplified an indigenous axiom that what caused misfortune could also reverse it. They were considered to be the source of diseases, and yet they were invoked by curers. They could incite murder, drunkenness, and lasciviousness, but they were also the



FIGURE 1.3. Tzitzimítl
as it appears in Codex
Maglibechiano. Illus-
tration by John Pohl.

castigators of overindulgent sinners. They brought torrential storms that destroyed crops, and yet they were petitioned by the rain-bringers. In short, they represented a blend of the positive and negative qualities that composed both human social order as well as universal chaos. The Tzitzimime were particularly celebrated by Eastern Nahuatl nobles across the Plain of Puebla through a series of moveable feasts dedicated to calendrical spirit forces known as the Cihuateteo and the Macuiltonaleque. The Cihuateteo (sing. Cihuateotl) were believed to be the souls of women who had died in childbirth; therefore they were venerated by midwives in particular. Invoked during feast days for which they were calendrically named, they were patronesses of the five trecenas assigned to the West, or Cihuatlampa, a nether world of witches. The Macuiltonaleque (sing. Macuiltonal), on the other hand, were the male consorts of the Cihuateteo and represented the patrons of the five trecenas assigned to the South, the netherworld of sorcerers. Diviners invoked the Macuiltonaleque through their fingers, calling them the pearly headed Tzitzimime,

as they manipulated the codices and other sacred objects upon mesas and altars during curing rituals.

There is an iconographic theme of divisiveness and social violence as well as drunken intoxication in the cult of the Tzitzimime. Nahua polychrome ceramics presented during palace feasts feature the Tzitzimime theme of severed hands, human hearts, skulls, limb bones, symbols of sacrifice, and death and dismemberment (Lind 1994: 97–98; Pohl 1998, 2007). The symbolism reflects creation stories that recount factional strife between gods and other spirit forces in which the defeated are ultimately sacrificed and dismembered, a metaphor for the fragmentation of the greater social and political “body.” While the palace feast was the primary means toward alliance-building between political factions, Colonial sources describe them as being extremely violent as well, suggesting that displays of generosity, gift giving, and reciprocity did not always achieve the expected outcome of strengthening social bonds. Eastern Nahua politics in fact were plagued by factional disputes, including assassinations, which attended the succession to high office in kingdoms, for example. However, there is considerable evidence that it was not the intoxication itself that was ultimately blamed for homicides but rather by nagging social issues and the frequent disputes between close kinsmen over land claims and adulterous relationships that threatened to break up their otherwise highly profitable confederations.

Murderers in general were identified as Tzitzimime (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 10: 38). All societies view murder with abhorrence and exact punishment according to the conditions under which the crime was committed, but the evaluation of such conditions can be subject to widely differing social values. In traditional societies crimes are viewed as offenses against individuals, but they even more drastically affect the ability of extended families and their supporters to function together as social units. The goal of judgment is directed at restoring social harmony in ways that satisfy the kinship units involved rather than castigating a single offender. In Eastern Nahua society it seems that the conception of the sorcerer or witch, through its third-party participation, allows people to condemn the horrific nature of murder but facilitates the resolution of disputes between the affected kinship groups by blaming a substantial proportion of the act on an uncontrollable supernatural being manifested in the concept of the Tzitzimime. This is exemplified in the case of Juan Gómez and Sebastian López in Petepa, Guatemala, discussed above, where the resolution of factional conflict was resolved within the community by explaining the loss of a political leader to an act of the supernatural. In fact, the term Tzitzimime persists for spirit entities in highland Guatemala today (Tedlock 1992: 147–148).

Significantly, the Tzitzimime theme predates the imagery associated with the Nahua deity pantheon in the archaeological record. Stratigraphic excavations

at Cholula have produced a developmental sequence for the iconography of the Late Postclassic international style that clearly roots the origins of the theme in Classic Maya antecedents at a time when the Plain of Puebla was dominated by the Maya-affected Olmeca-Xicalanca of the Gulf Coast. Particularly notable is the symbolism associated with the Maya Maize God, which anticipates the Nahua Seven Flower–Xochipilli complex together with Akan and Mok Chih, the Maya *wahy* beings or spirit entities that are in many ways comparable to the Tzitzimime and associated with drunkenness and disease, which anticipated the cult of the Cihuateteo and Macuiltonaleque (see Coltman, this volume).

Finally, altars and ofrendas, some painted with frescoes that connect them directly to the divinatory rituals portrayed in the codices, have been excavated within Eastern Nahua palaces and represent the elite form of the mesas that are still invoked in diviners' household cults today. It is notable that while the names for gods like Tezcatlipoca and Cihuacoatl, the archetypal sorcerer and witch respectively of the Nahua pantheon, have all but disappeared from contemporary ritualism, Tzitzimime beliefs such as the mal aire Tzitzimicohecatl or wind of envy and calendrical terms for spirit entities such as Macuilxochitl or Five Flower (one of the five Macuiltonaleque) and Seven Flower (the Maize God) have persisted. Archaeological, ethnohistorical, and ethnographic evidence consequently points to two separate but interconnected cults, one serving the city-state or altepetl as a symbol of political unity, and the other manifested among noble households during the Late Postclassic. The former was quickly replaced following the conquest. With changes from the names of gods to those of saints and the elimination of public displays of human sacrifice, the Catholic cult continues to define the principal values of community identity through the church that could be compared to the ancient temple. Household sorcery practices, on the other hand, are not the relics of the state cult concealed within the home but rather the continuation of rituals tied directly to a projection of personifications of the natural environment through spirit entities associated with sacred landscape features, kinship systems, and factional conflict, all of which have profound antiquity in Mesoamerica.

FROM WERE-JAGUARS TO NAHUALS: SORCERY'S ORIGINS

The origin of settled life in Mesoamerica dates to between 5000 and 3000 BC. It is equated with the development of agriculture and the establishment of permanent communities that defined the landscape around them as territorial by investing it with the supernatural qualities of spirit entities and deceased ancestors. Anthropologists tend to think of early tribes as egalitarian societies that restricted the accumulation of personal wealth by continually circulating food and materials

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through reciprocal exchange networks. But while food-sharing and gift-giving may have promoted trust and bound tribal members together, the ability to generate surpluses with domesticated plant cultivation would have created status differences. Testament to the critical part that feasting played in establishing Formative networks of social intercourse are found in the refined and highly imaginative forms of ceramics that were developed during the Formative period (Clark and Blake 1994; Clark and Gosser 1995). What is significant is how this mastery of display for the feast was paralleled by the development of figurine traditions that represent an artifactual antecedent in clay of precisely the behavior exhibited with feasts and curing rituals conducted by the Nahua practitioners discussed by Sandstrom and Effrein Sandstrom (Marcus 1998). Considering that maize was first domesticated more as a ritual beverage comparable to “tesguino,” for example, the serving of intoxicating drinks in curing rituals together with specially prepared foods suggests a highly developed, fundamental, and broadly distributed form of ritual behavior throughout Mesoamerica as early as the second millennium BC that continues through the present day.

Once maize had become a staple, more intensive agricultural techniques were developed that led to the emergence of chiefly authorities from positions originally attributed to powerful healers and spiritual leaders. Chiefs coordinated their community’s undertakings from cooperative farming ventures to the redistribution of stored surpluses during feasts. If populations increased, competition for resources might follow and charismatic chiefs could coordinate military ventures against rival communities to seize goods and slaves or demand tribute. Having acquired coercive powers in this way, chiefs tended to institutionalize their authority within their most trusted followers, their own kin group, and thereby introduce a system of social stratification as chiefdom members determined their place in a social hierarchy by proximity through marriage to the chief’s hereditary family.

We know that by the Middle Formative period, chiefs or their more kingly descendants began to co-opt the religion, focusing on spirit entities belonging to a community at large, and to personalize creation stories as the history of their own kin group. This effectively made popular religion the same as elite religion, further binding commoners to the disposition of paramount authority. Consequently, scholars have long proposed that monumental portrait heads are testament to the charismatic powers of Olmec rulers while smaller works of statuary in serpentine and jade graphically portray the process of transformation by sorcerers from human beings into jaguars and serve as exclusive intercessors with the divine.

Peter Furst originally identified a jaguar-transformer theme in Olmec art by proposing that figurine images portraying human beings with feline attributes were “were-jaguars” and compared them to the belief systems of South American tribes

that credited their shamans with the ability to transform themselves into animal familiars, of which the jaguar was most common (figure 1.4) (Furst 1968). Many of these practitioners are perceived as “dark shamans” and are known for their use of witchcraft and assault sorcery to cause physical harm and even death (Whitehead and Wright 2004). Among the Bribri of Costa Rica, Usékars are “shaman-priests” thought to be descended from jaguars who can control the weather and become attackers through the use of black magic or assault sorcery. In former times Usékars were more than just individual practitioners but represented a distinct social group whose methods of sorcery and witchcraft constituted a form of social control (Hoopes 2007: 468).

By comparison in Mesoamerica, Villa Rojas (1947) looked at kinship systems based on patrilineal clans and the methods of social control exerted through nahualism among the Tzeltal Maya. The community of Oxchuc has rancherías tied to specific caves sharing the same name. All chiefs and elders are thought to receive supernatural help from a nahual, a system described by Villa Rojas as serving as a method of social control by emphasizing traditional customs as well as sanctioning the moral code of the group (1947: 583). The nahual’s role is absolutely pivotal in reinforcing social control:

Through the intermediation of these supernatural beings, the elders and chiefs are able to know the thoughts and actions of their subordinates and thus mete out punishment in the shape of illness or other misfortunes. Any person committing a sin, or who plans to violate the community’s mores, is exposed to this sanction. Because of



FIGURE 1.4. Basalt representation of an anthropomorphic jaguar from Tuxtla Chico, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas (AD 600–300). Illustration by John Pohl.

their ability to do damage at will, people with *nahual* are commonly known by the name of *agchomel*, meaning “maker of disease.” (1947: 584)

Furst further proposed that the Olmec transformer was invoking a jaguar *nahual*. *Nahualism* is the widespread Mesoamerican belief that each human being has a companion animal with whom one shares a soul, and hence a common fate. Individuals credited with superior powers in society such as a shaman, priest, chief, or king could have several *nahual* forms, and possess the ability to transform their physical being into their spirit companion. Mesoamerican peoples compare the relationship between a person and his or her *nahual* as being like that between a ritual performer and a mask in that one hides behind the other. Most definitions of *nahual* seem to refer to something hidden or cloaked (Serna 1953). Some Olmec scholars have compared transformative figurines to a *nahual*’s ability to control the weather (Gutiérrez and Pye 2010). Nowhere is this ritual practice more clearly expressed than in indigenous communities like Zitlala and Acatlan, Guerrero, where ritual performers conceal their identities within jaguar masked-helmets and engage in boxing matches that are meant to draw blood and in so doing call forth the rains during Holy Week in anticipation of the onset of the wet season and the time for planting of subsistence crops (Zorich 2008).

While figurines, both in clay and precious stone, reflect Formative household-to-palace sorcery practices of rainmaking, curing, and factional conflict artifactually, the representation of the human body to symbolize an emergent elite ideology of territorial possession is explicit in the portrayal of Olmec spirit entities and ancestors in pictographic reliefs and paintings that were applied to natural features in the environment itself at Oxtotitlan and Juxtlahuaca, for example (Grove 1970). The relief carvings at Chalcatzinco, Morelos, portray an Olmec woman seated within an anthropomorphic cave from which maize plants sprout as rain falls from the sky overhead (Angulo 1987; Grove 1970). Testament to the coercive powers of the *nahual* of Olmec nobles, on the other hand, appears with the depiction of jaguars tearing human beings to pieces.

At one point scholars hotly debated whether Mesoamerican societies were being governed by “shamans” or “kings.” Advocacy for the former tended to reify simplistic models of sociopolitical organization extending back to Morgan and Bandelier while Mesoamerican art was still categorized as “primitive art” and taught together with the “tribal” arts of Oceania and Africa in art history departments across the United States as late as the last quarter of the twentieth century (Klein et al. 2002). Consequently, while Peter Furst had emphasized the role of the shaman as a were-jaguar, Michael Coe (1972) proposed that in a hierarchical Olmec society the paramount rulers themselves would be depicted as the transformers. Using comparisons to the Aztec gods Tezcatlipoca and Tepeyollotl, he advocated that Olmec rulers

were presenting themselves as having a special relationship with the top predator in their world, a “king of beasts,” as it were, as a potent symbol of rulership. The jaguar is a predominant name or title for Maya as well as Mixtec kings, for example, the ranking members of the dynasties of Yaxchilan and Tilantongo being primary examples (Martin 2000: 116–137; Hermann Lejarazu 2013).

Linda Schele and David Friedel later reinvigorated the debate between Furst and Coe by proposing that Maya rulers were “Shaman-Kings” (Schele and Friedel 1990). Their criterion was based upon their own shamanic interpretation of a decipherment for the Maya term “wahy” by Houston and Stuart (1989). David Stuart (2002: 411) subsequently responded:

In our original presentation of the decipherment . . . we outlined the evidence and related the vessel images to the animal-like “co-essences” described in many ethnographic sources, but we never once used the terms “shamans” or “shamanism” in describing its significance. . . . I have since suggested that the way figures on pottery are better understood as dream figures, related to the nightmarish “spooks,” witches, and animated diseases of Maya folklore. . . . These are very closely related to widespread and ancient beliefs surrounding “nagualism” in Mesoamerica.

The study of Mesoamerican civilization has reached a state of maturity that enables scholars to recognize it as being among the most sophisticated in the world. Groundbreaking exhibitions like “Isis and the Feathered Serpent” and “The Aztec Pantheon and the Art of Empire,” along with their accompanying publications, have paved the way for comparing Mesoamerican, Egyptian, and Graeco-Roman civilizations behaviorally as the fields of anthropology and art history move toward global cross-cultural studies of art and ritual in the twenty-first century (Fernández 2007; Pohl and Lyons 2010, 2016). The results have led scholars to question assumptions about not only the primacy in sophistication of ancient Mediterranean art but also the “rational” ideologies with which they are equated. Our attribution of norms in everything from aesthetics to ritual behavior is just as much, if not more, the projection of Early Modern thinking onto the past as it is a reflection of those ancient civilizations themselves. Despite being credited with the roots of empiricism and objectivity that we value in our own systems of belief and logic today, the ancient Egyptian, Middle Eastern, and Mediterranean worlds were nevertheless heavily engaged in mystical thinking and projected their beliefs onto images in many ways directly comparable to those of non-Western civilizations throughout other parts of the world (Ogden 2004, 2009). Comparisons with Southeast Asian religions in particular might be most informative in this regard.

Nowhere does the complex relationship between sorcery and state religion express itself institutionally more than in Myanmar-Burma with pantheistic cults rooted in

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a seemingly infinite number of environmental spirit entities or “nats,” but organized in such a way as to facilitate the incorporation of polytheistic deities from Buddhism, Hinduism, and even Christianity (Spiro 1967). Its roots lie in a remarkable case of politics and religious accommodation. Anawratha, the eleventh-century founder of the Pagan Empire, was faced with the encroaching Hindu Khmer, on the one hand, and disunity over the investment in the more ancient native belief systems of his constituents, on the other. His solution was first to formalize a cult of thirty-seven of the most prominent nats and then to construct the imposing Shwezigon Pagoda as a place of worship for them as the attendants to Buddha, whom he had declared to be the patron of a Burmese state. This synthetic solution was successful and remains a fundamental part of the Burmese identity today by acknowledging the significance of nat cults as a very ancient and fundamental belief system associated with ancestor cults as well as the spiritual inhabitants of the natural environment at the village kinship-group level. It seems that what we are dealing with both in Southeast Asia and Mesoamerica are in fact two distinct forms of belief that have become intertwined through time but continue to exist in a state of parallelism and even capricious tension. At certain points they become syncretic, but in other periods they exist together as separate and distinct forms of belief, a revelation that may give us insights into the complexities of Classic Maya belief systems, for example.

THE *WAHY* BEINGS OF THE CLASSIC MAYA

Juan Gómez and Sebastian López, the Petapa sorcerers whose supernatural mortal combat had fascinated Thomas Gage, were the descendants of ancient Poqomchi lords, a Quichean-related people. Both the mythology and history of the Quiché is recounted in a remarkable work of literature known as the *Popol Vuh* or Book of Counsel, composed around the beginning of the eighteenth century by Dominican friar Francisco Ximénez. The accounts extend from the time of creation through the thirteenth century when Maya kingdoms engaged in lucrative trading ventures with the Toltecs of highland Mexico and established confederacies of independent Postclassic city-states throughout the Guatemalan highlands.

One of the most remarkable narratives in the *Popol Vuh* is the primordial story of the Maya Hero Twins, Junahpú and Xbalanqué, and their rivalry with the lords of an underworld called Xibalba. The offspring of a hero who was defeated but nonetheless succeeded in magically impregnating the daughter of one of the nine lords, the twins engage in a series of epic adventures using feats of sorcery, trickery, and murder to destroy their rivals. Eventually they journey into the underworld of Xibalba itself to avenge their father and find themselves confronting beings of truly frightening appearance with titles like Scab Stripper, Demon of Pus, and Bone

Scepter. The lords challenge the twins to a series of ballgame matches that include several deadly challenges. When the twins are incinerated and yet magically resurrect themselves, the lords are awed by their superior powers and beg the twins to show them their secret for transcending even death. The twins then decapitate each of the lords in turn—but of course revoke their promise to return them to life. Having reclaimed their family's honor in this way, the twins miraculously rise into the sky where they are transformed into the sun and moon to herald a new age of creation.

Recognizing similarities between the written descriptions of the mythic events in the Popol Vuh and specific scenes of what appear to be the Hero Twins on eighth-century Maya lowland polychrome vases, Michael Coe (1973) first proposed that these remarkable works of art in fact represented a Classic period interpretation of the Maya epic. His revelations have had a lasting impact on subsequent studies of underworld imagery in Maya art, not the least of which is the identification of an astounding array of creatures that are phantasmagoric, if not terrifying. Most are hybrid creatures that possess both animal and human attributes. K'ak' hix, or Fire Jaguar, for example, stalks around a vase on its hind legs while magically bursting into flames. These jaguar and incendiary attributes are shared with Junahpú and suggest a close connection between the sorcerer Hero Twin and the spirit entity *wahy*. Others represent an entire menagerie of tropical forest animals including deer, snakes, monkeys, lizards, coatis, peccaries, and turkeys, to name a few. These beings, however, frequently interact with entities with more human qualities possessing fleshless heads, extruded eyeballs, twisted limbs, and bloated torsos reflective of conditions of disease and death, not unlike the descriptions of the lords of Xibalba, suggesting that Classic Maya lords were concerned with depicting more than simply nahualistic animal counterparts on the vases.

Following up on his proposals for the powers of Olmec chiefs and kings, Coe subsequently went on to examine the jaguar among other creatures with regard to an underworld theme in Classic Maya art manifested in polychrome drinking vessels (Coe 1973). When Stephen Houston and David Stuart identified a glyph for *wahy*, basically a Maya equivalent to the Nahuatl term “nahual,” on these same vessels, no one was surprised to see that it was composed of the sign Ahau, meaning lord, half concealed behind a jaguar pelt.

Houston and Stuart then adopted the term “co-essence” over “nahual” as a more generalized reference for a Mesoamerican transformational state of being, following a recommendation by John Monaghan after his own research into the qualities of supernatural beings among the Mixtec. Examining the complexities of the supernatural universe portrayed on Maya vases, David Stuart presents a seminal paper in which he proposes that the categories of *wahy* beings are far more complex

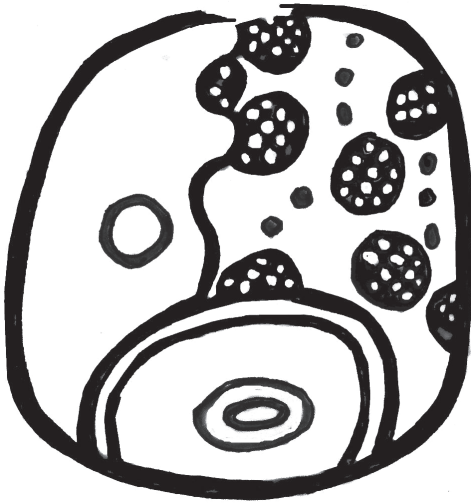


FIGURE 1.5. The *wahy* hieroglyph in a caption for a “Water Jaguar” on Kerr 771. Drawing by David Stuart.

than anyone previously had considered. For example, in making his original decipherment of the *wahy* glyph using Maya-language dictionaries, Stuart had every reason to believe that the term was more or less a Maya equivalent to the Nahuatl term “nahual” or the culturally more neutral “co-essence” because of the apparent relationship of the ancient depictions to historical and modern concepts of the companion animal spirit possessed by individuals as an aspect of the human soul. On closer inspection, however, Classic Maya *wahy* beings are not associated with specific individuals but rather with entire lineages and place glyphs. The noble families of Calakmul are associated with giant deer-snakes, for example, while the lords of Tikal are associated with jaguars and the Palenque lineage with monstrous centipedes. Stuart compares these names to the terms for diseases appearing in the colonial manuscript called the *Ritual of the Bacabs* that appear as personified entities with both hybrid animal and anthropomorphic designations. He proposes that it is the anthropomorphic beings in particular that appear to be the most capable of inflicting serious harm. They appear with the attributes of death and sickness comparable to the lords of the underworld in the Popol Vuh.

One of the most multifaceted of the *wahy* beings is the ominous Akan.

Originally attributed to Förstemann’s God A category of death deities, several scholars subsequently succeeded in defining this Akan *wahy* being’s attributes and behavior more specifically in terms of a Classic Maya belief system (Taube 1992: 1–17; Grube and Nahm 1994; Grube: 2004). Akan is less an individual and more of a complex that embodied themes of disease, drunkenness, self-sacrifice, and

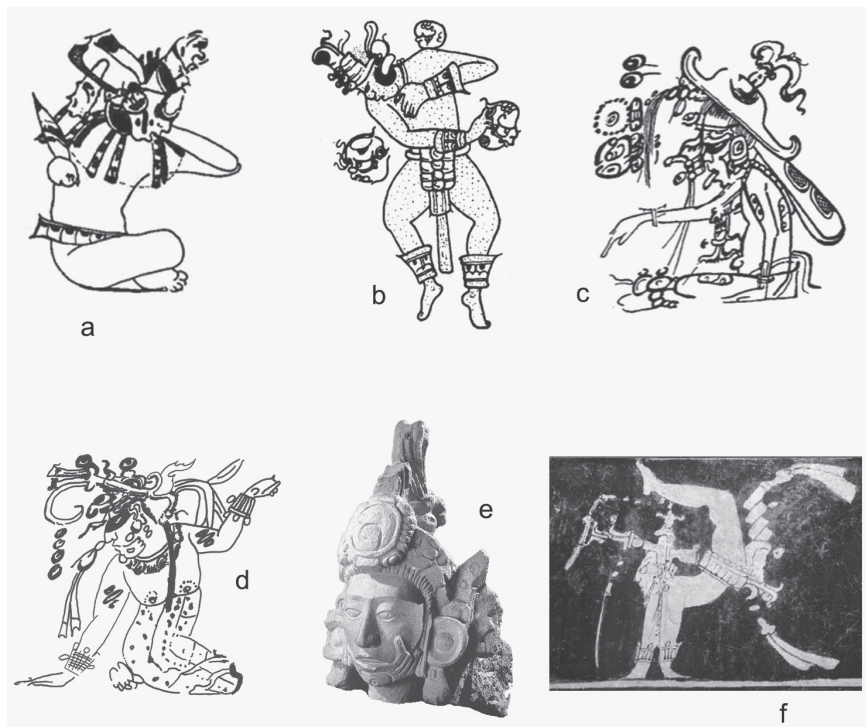


FIGURE 1.6. Representations of Akan. (a) Self-Decapitating Akan, vase from Altar de Sacrificios. (b) Stone-Throwing Akan, Kerr 791. (c) Mok Chih Akan, Kerr 2286. (d) Female Akan, Kerr 2286. (e) Copan sculpture of God Zero as Akan, Cleveland Museum of Art. (f) Maize God as acrobat, Kerr 4386. All other illustrations by John Pohl.

castigation, with the earliest manifestation appearing in the murals of Late Preclassic San Bartolo (Taube 2011: 50–57). God Zero, a closely related being, shares so many overlapping traits with the Akan beings that it is almost certain he can be counted as a variant within this complex (see Coltman, this volume). As such, God Zero may represent the beginning and end of time reckoning, suggesting that the Maya thought of Akan and its avatars as an infinite number of eternal beings.

One Akan avatar, Mok Chih, translates as “Knot Mouth,” one of his attributes being a bow tie affixed over his jaw, but the term also represents a homonym for “pulque sickness” that emphasizes the relationship between Akan and pulque, the fermented beverage made from the maguey plant. In one scene Mok Chih vomits while holding an enema syringe, a scene clearly evocative of the unrestricted alcohol consumption of both maguey-based pulque as well as *chih*, maize fermented with

honey, and the nauseous aftereffects that characterized palace drinking bouts. In many Mayan languages *Akan* is a term for “wasp,” and *Mok Chih* in fact appears with a pulque vessel surrounded by wasps and bees among other insects (Stone and Zender 2011: 39). Southern Mesoamerican creation stories describe wasps and other noxious insects as representative of both diseases and their treatment to alleviate symptoms with insect toxins (Grube 2004: 69, 70; Pohl 2007).

The appearance of the closely related God Zero on ballcourt markers at La Esperanza and Copan testifies to his importance with regard to sports as well as the high-stakes wagering. The connection between gambling and divination as acts of sorcery are particularly significant in this regard (Kowalski 1989; Fash and Kowalski 1991; Pohl et al. 1997). A closely related competition also associated with ballcourts was ritual combats such as boxing. Jatz’*on Akan* “Striking *Akan*” appears on Maya vases wielding a stone as a boxer and is named by a logographic sign of a hand grasping a stone (Zender 2004; Taube and Zender 2009: 202–203) (figure 1.6b). The symbolism is no doubt metaphorically related to acts of both ritual and supernatural castigation in Mesoamerica.

Akan engages in feats of magic that typify acts of sorcery among American Indian peoples in general. As the “Self-Decapitator,” he is capable of cutting off his own head with an axe, an act so impossible as to inspire the surreal equated with that unique sense of Indian “humor” that derives from juxtaposing the profoundly reverent with the outrageously absurd and characterizes comparable feats by the Maize God on Maya vases as well as the Hero Twins in the *Popol Vuh* (Grube 2004: 64) (figure 1.6a). Such behavior can still be observed in the ritual humor performed by costumed performers in Tzeltal and Tzotzil communities and has its roots in the performances of clowns and buffoons depicted in Classic Maya art as well (Taube 1989).

In many ways, Stuart’s proposals are comparable to what Sandstrom and Effrein Sandstrom advocate for the spirit entities that concern the contemporary Nahuas of the Sierra de Puebla and constitutes the basis for their advocacy of a pantheistic perspective in their understanding of Mesoamerican religion. Kings and other high-ranking elites were embodiments of social, political, and religious order; yet they were also morally ambiguous and possessed a complex notion of power that they called *ch’ab ak’ab*, a combination of two important and complementary operating principles of “generation” and “darkness.” For the Classic Maya these were the two sides of power and ceremonial “magic,” one positive and creative by nature (*ch’ab*) and the other more esoteric and negative.

Consequently, Stuart believes that the *wahy* represent an inherently ambiguous category of being that bridges extremes. He proposes that the traditional terminology and labels for defining supernatural entities, the scholarly tendency to want to

organize supernatural forms into neat categories of iconography or behavior and even construct pantheons, is simply too restrictive. Rather, Classic Maya religion is better characterized as a continuum of overlapping types that resist any rigid typology. The very fact that Maya themselves use the term *juun pik chan(al) k'uh kab(al) k'uh*, meaning “the eight thousand heavenly gods and earthly gods,” in hieroglyphic texts is indicative; the gods are simply infinite in number (Stuart 2017: 257).

Wahy beings should be viewed therefore as being far more than “nahuals” or “co-essences” in the traditional sense, but rather powerful beings in and of themselves that are rooted in the most primal conceptions of land and lineage. Furthermore, the *wahy* clearly lies at the root of indigenous concepts of social, political, and ritual power, and it seems likely that the possession of a powerful, possibly even institutionalized position associated with a *wahy* being would be a prerequisite for assumption to political office. We have seen that this is true for the Postclassic Mixtec where stand-ins and stakeholder positions that support systems of checks and balances in the royal administrations are filled by close relatives of the kings and queens serving as bundle priests and sacrificer-necromancers. They appear in the Mixtec codices, however, with all the attributes of underworld deities and hybrid creatures such as the Yahui or fire serpent. It is these hybrid creatures that fascinate Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos and Jesper Nielsen, and their respective examinations of centipedes and serpents as *wahy* beings reveal much in terms of the complexity in thought and detail in the belief systems surrounding these spirit entities.

Like their male counterparts, female versions of Akan appear in Classic Maya art as well wearing the diagnostic band across the eyes and the hand across the mouth (figure 1.6d) (Grube 2004: 70). They are the antithesis of the courtly Maya woman with their breasts exposed and disheveled hair, and as such they represent primeval figures who join the Hero Twins in calling forth the Maize God, the epitome of the divine Maya king, from a watery underworld. These female Akan characters allude to the role played by royal women as sorceresses like Lady Xoc and Lady Ik Skull, graphically depicted in the carved lintels at Yaxchilan (Tate 1992: 88–89). The fact that some of the serpents that they conjure depict men in warrior dress emerging from their jaws alludes to a role palace women may have played with regard to acts of psychic violence the royal court was expected to practice on their political rivals while ranking lords engaged in more remote cave-based sorcery rituals before they took to the battlefields to engage the enemy directly. Chinchilla Mazariegos, however, demonstrates that the serpents portrayed on the lintels signify an even broader diversity of symbolic actions on the part of royal Maya women.

Yaxchilan Lintel 13 portrays Lady Chahk Skull together with Lord Bird Jaguar. A serpent passes around her body, and its massive head reemerges, cradled by her

husband. The text describes the action as being the birth of a royal heir named Itzamnaaj Balam III. An associated scene on Lintel 14 shows Lady Chahk Skull conjuring the serpent itself, which is titled Chanal/Chahkbay/Kan, a name more specifically associated with a centipede evidenced by the serpent's segmented body and multiple appendages. Chinchilla Mazariegos therefore proposes that the act of giving birth is thus equated with the noble woman's power to conjure this creature through sorcery. After examining further evidence for his proposal iconographically with comparable scenes in other Classic Maya artworks, he then examines sixteenth-century sources where serpents and centipedes are even more clearly associated with feminine sexuality and in so doing proposes that a broad complex of beliefs existed that related these creatures to women's genitalia throughout Mesoamerica in general. Associated with the negative connotations of filth and pollution on the one hand, they are equally associated with opposing positive conceptions of power and mystery of feminine sexuality and portrayed as the channels through which rulers and deities were born into their divinity. Chinchilla Mazariegos further proposes a provocative analysis of the sarcophagus lid from the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque in which he reasons that the famous image of Pakal reclining on his back represents the king as the deified incarnation of the Maize God, while the mask with fleshless jaw from which he emerges is the great centipede itself, the creature of cosmic birth with which the female Akans were so closely associated together with the Hero Twins.

Just as significant a *wahy* being as the centipede-serpent is the deer snake. As we have already seen, it was the emblem of the Calakmul dynasty, the Campeche capital that had been responsible for subjugating the rival titan city-state of Tikal during the sixth century A.D. Jesper Nielsen is fascinated by the creature not only because of its source of potency for Classic Maya rulers but the fact that it was known to have had such a broad distribution throughout the Western Hemisphere that it may in fact represent a spirit entity that extended back to the first Paleo-Indian migrations, especially considering the equally significant role that horned serpents play in elite status and ritualism of Asian civilizations as well.

Nielsen's broad comparative perspective produces a review of the religious stories and beliefs centered on horned serpents that demonstrates a remarkable consistency in the meanings associated with this supernatural entity. Clearly, possessing both benevolent as well as malevolent aspects, horned and antlered serpents were closely related to water, rain, wind, and violent meteorological and geological phenomena as well as disease and curing. For example, as one of the feared *wahy* beings of the Classic Maya, the *Chijchan* or Deer Snake continues to be associated in contemporary Maya legends with the bringer of benevolent rains over the earth or destructive landslides, floods, and hurricanes (Coltman 2015: 24–25).

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Nielsen makes a significant point in that there appear to be a number of distinct serpent beings in Mesoamerican beliefs, including the feathered or plumed serpent, a war serpent, a maize serpent, a water serpent, and a centipede-serpent, but that these supernatural entities are not subject to strict and formal distinctions but rather possess overlapping features and attributes. Thus, horned serpents can appear with feathers or wings or both, which may point to some shared features with Quetzalcoatl; yet Quetzalcoatl is never shown with horns or antlers. Like Chinchilla Mazariegos, Nielsen uses ethnohistorical and ethnographic sources to amplify his arguments; what readily becomes apparent in the ethnohistorical and ethnographic literature largely derived from highland Mexico is that the “deer-serpent” (or *mazacoatl*, as it was known in Nahuatl), became associated with the Devil of the Christian tradition so soon after the conquest. Nielsen proposes that the characteristics of the “deer-serpent” or the horned serpent were shared with some of the most common representations of the Devil in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe, both in appearance and in many of its abilities, such as causing violent weather, geological disruptions, and being associated with pagan sorcery and witchcraft.

SORCERY IN THE POSTCLASSIC MESOAMERICAN WORLD

Teotihuacan and Monte Albán had emerged to dominate the Mexican highlands between AD 100 and 600, the former in particular having influenced the development of Late Classic lowland Maya civilization. By AD 650–850, a number of political centers emerged in the Morelos, Puebla, and Veracruz region, including Monte Albán, Xochicalco, Cacaxtla, and El Tajin. Scholarly investigations into sorcery in the art of these ceremonial centers have been limited, but depictions of certain spirit entities like the stellar anthropomorphic creatures from Cacaxtla are notable and represent prototypical forms of the Late Postclassic Tzitzimime on the Plain of Puebla (Pohl 1999b: 139) (figure 1.7).

With the collapse of the Classic lowland Maya, two new political centers emerged to dominate the Mexican highlands and the Yucatan peninsula respectively. Tula, the Tollan of Aztec legend, had been somewhat of a puzzle to archaeologists for over a century and a half because its development in such an isolated area of the northern Basin of Mexico seems so incongruous with the florescence of so many cities around Lake Texcoco itself in the Classic and Late Postclassic. We now know that the Toltecs had a special interest in both western Mexico and the desert lands of the so-called Chichimec peoples to the north. Building on an Epiclassic Puuc foundation on the other hand, Chichen Itza positioned itself to control much of the Atlantic coastal trade from Tabasco to lower Central America in a directly comparable way.

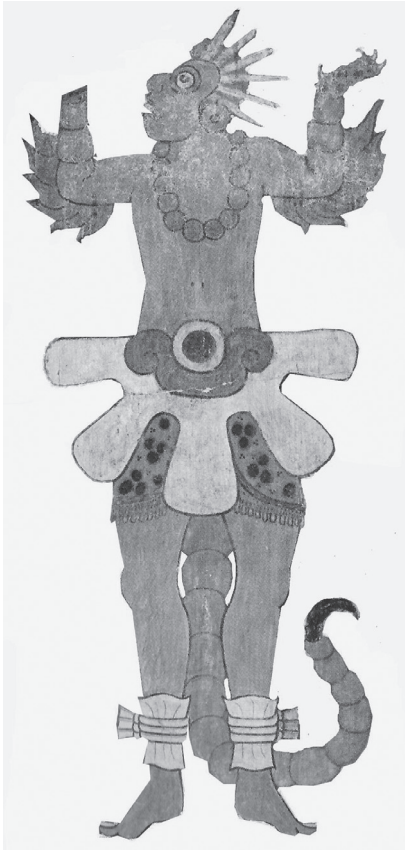


FIGURE 1.7. Mural depicting a blue anthropomorphic star being with scorpion tail and rain god eye ornament, Cacaxtla, Tlaxcala. Illustration by John Pohl.

Reevaluation of the Toltec power base as being mercantile and messianic rather than imperial has led a number of scholars to examine Tula's relationship with remote sites like La Quemada in the state of Zacatecas and Pueblo Bonito in New Mexico (Pohl 2016). As Ancestral Pueblo peoples engaged with the Toltecs, it is clear that the leaders responsible for directing the efforts for the acquisition and processing of materials like turquoise began to affect certain forms of Toltec political behavior, leading to an intensification of social stratification (Weigand 1992). Artifacts of precious turquoise, shell, copper, and cacao associated with burials at Pueblo Bonito, for example, are indicative of individuals who were clearly attributed paramount rank, and many religious stories related by contemporary Pueblo peoples through their oral traditions suggest that they possessed formidable powers of control over their people, subverting traditional systems of exchange that led to indebtedness and even enslavement through the actions of sorcerer leaders (Lekson 2008: 200–201; Pohl 2016).

Iconographic studies of Tula itself have tended to overlook the sorcery theme in favor of searching for icono-

graphic evidence for the later Aztec imperial deity pantheon such as Quetzalcoatl, Tezcatlipoca, Mixcoatl, and Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli. Nevertheless, indigenous histories attribute the Toltec city-state's collapse to violent internal factionalism among its administrators, the priest Quetzalcoatl, and the sorcerers Tezcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli in myth. Significantly, the Ancestral Pueblo center of Chaco Canyon was abandoned around the same time, and contemporary religious stories attribute its demise to comparable forms of behavior (Lekson 2008: 200–201).

During the Middle Postclassic, a representational art style was widely adopted throughout central and southern Mexico called the Nahuatl-Mixteca, Mixteca-Puebla,

or International horizon style (see Pohl 2007 for discussion). It was composed of highly conventionalized symbols characterized by an almost geometric precision in delineation. Colors were vivid, and imagery shared many of the attributes of contemporary cartoons, the exaggerated emphasis on the head and hands in particular being reminiscent in overall design to characters made famous by contemporary film animation studios like the Walt Disney Company. In full figurative form the style was primarily employed to convey historical or ritual narrative, but certain symbols could also be reduced to simple icons that symbolized either an idea or a spoken word. For example, the depiction of repetitive designs of such common motifs as birds, butterflies, and jewels probably invoke the spirits of ancestors. By AD 1300, the Late Postclassic International style had supplanted earlier pictographic and phonetically based scripts employed by the Classic period civilizations of La Mojarra, Teotihuacan, Cacaxtla, Xochicalco, Nuiñe, Monte Alban, and to some extent even the Maya. There is considerable evidence that the old writing systems were intentionally rejected and that the new system was adapted from figurative symbolism used to ornament elite artwork in precious metals, stones, wood, ceramics, and textiles. Far from representing any decline in literacy, therefore, the employment of this new abstract representational horizon style became an ingenious response to the redistribution of power among Postclassic confederations of city-states and great houses whose leaders communicated in as many as twelve different languages (Pohl 1994).

Stratigraphic excavations carried out since the 1950s confirm a Terminal Classic–Early Postclassic origin for the Late Postclassic International style in the polychrome ceramic tradition at Cholula, its appearance following the erosion of Teotihuacan's influence in the central Puebla region by AD 750 (Noguera 1954; Lind 1994). Although varieties of painted or burnished paste ceramics date to as early as the Formative in central and western Mexico, during the Late Classic the Olmeca-Xicalanca peoples of the Gulf Coast were producing variants of Maya polychrome, indicating a more direct technological and stylistic influence from the culture historically associated with Cholula prior to the Tolteca-Chichimeca intrusion (Lind 1994: 98).

An early Cholula Aquiahuac-phase plate dating to between AD 950 and 1150 depicts an anthropomorphic sorcerer's hand marked with an odd image that looks similar to the Maya Maize God, for example (figure 1.8). In fact, the overall composition of the face in profile featured in the center of the plate, with the radiating bands of color surrounding it, invokes at least some representations of the Classic Maize God depicted on plates originating in the central Peten a century and a half earlier. As we have already discussed, the human hand attribute over the face is associated with sorcery. Therefore, Cholula plates of this kind may represent a conflation of



FIGURE 1.8. Aquiahuac-phase plate depicting possible Maya nominal head glyph for the Maize God, formed as a human hand associated with the sorcery theme, Cholula, Puebla. (Photo by Jeff Evans, Courtesy Princeton University Art Museum y1967-147. Gift of Thomas C. Roberts, Class of 1921, Mrs. Roberts, and Gillett G. Griffin.)

attributes between the spirit entities closely associated in Classic Maya art that we have discussed above.

By the Tecama phase between AD 1150 and 1350, we see a standardization of the sorcery theme in Cholula ceramics. A predominant twelfth-century Cholula image appears on polychrome plates and cajetes in much the same way as earlier portraits of the Maize God. The face represents a male personage with a bulbous forehead and a mohawk-style hair crest. His face resembles a spider monkey with ribbon-like designs curving up over the lips and around the eyes. An elaborate song scroll emerges from the deity's mouth. In many cases the being is frequently painted entirely black and/or sports paint around the mouth and eye that is diagnostic of both the Maya God M or the Nahua god Ixtlilton (Spranz 1973: 339; Pohl 2003c: 202, 322–323). Other details link these two conceptions, including clown-like



FIGURE 1.9. Tecama-phase plate depicting a singing clown with attributes that anticipate the Late Postclassic Macuiltonaleque theme, including the yellow face band and the hand covering the mouth, Cholula, Puebla. Illustration by John Pohl.

attributes with distended lips, oddly shaped heads, and either phallic or pug-shaped noses (see Taube 1989 for discussion of clowns). A star symbolized as an eye appearing overhead accompanies both gods as well. The face painting is frequently marked or labeled as ash in codices, and the two gods clearly share attributes with the “ash-mouths,” a common name for the clowns of the Zuni, Hopi, and Rio Grande Pueblo peoples (Wright 1994).

These characteristics directly anticipate the iconography of members of the Late Postclassic Centeotl-Xochipilli complex who appear in the codices as musicians, singers, dancers, and jugglers (Seler 1990–1998 II: 242–243). The caricaturish, monkey-like appearance is suggestive of a jester or clown (Nicholson 1971: 417–418; Spranz 1973: 335–352). While Centeotl and Xochipilli are both associated with a maize cult, in other cases the musician-jester can be identified as the Nahua god Ixtlilton, “Little Black Face,” as the patron of scribes, diviners, healers, and octli drinkers, characteristics that Ixtlilton also shares with the Maquiltonaleque. Therefore, we shouldn’t be too surprised to see the Cholula deity’s attributes, such as

the white hand over the mouth and the yellow band across the face, anticipating the iconography of the Macuiltonaleque as well (figure 1.9). As with Centeotl-Xochipilli, the Cholula deity's relationship to both Ixtlilton and the Macuiltonaleque has a Classic Maya antecedent in a patron god of alcoholic drink known as Akan (Grube 2004; Coltman, this volume). Buffoonish with a bloated face and body, Mok Chih, "Knot Mouth," was named after an element of ritual dress with which he is associated (Grube 2004: 67). Four Macuiltonaleque appearing in Codex Vaticanus B wear knots over their mouths that substitute for the human hand in the same configuration as the Maya being. We have already seen that Mok Chih was regarded as a god of sickness and appears on Maya vases cradling an octli olla surrounded by insects, perhaps a Classic Maya allusion to a story that anticipates that of the Macuiltonaleque, the Cihuateo, and the creation of disease portrayed in Codex Borgia. The roots of the Late Postclassic International style therefore may lie in a form of feasting behavior originally associated with a Classic Maya sorcery theme.

The fact that the musician-jester aspect of the emergent Centeotl-Xochipilli and Macuiltonaleque-Cihuateo complexes was adopted as a fundamental symbol of the twelfth-century feast at Cholula should come as no surprise considering how fundamental this performer's behavior was to American Indian ritualism in general. The facial ornamentation around the mouth and eye represent the use of soot, ash, and clay for their facial decoration, the antithesis of proper face paint used by deity impersonators. Clowns have been enigmatic in ritual studies. From the Maya Blackman and Monkey impersonators of highland Chiapas discussed by David Stuart in this volume to the Zuni Newekwe, their behavior is regarded as the antithesis of a culture's most esteemed values, with their outrageous parodies combined with public displays of gluttony, alcoholic overindulgence, sexual intercourse, exposure of social transgressions among community members, and the consumption of garbage or excrement, among other forms of foul conduct. Consequently, art historians and anthropologists have tended to treat the subject as superficial, avoid it entirely, or bury it in complex interpretive frameworks. The fact is that clowning is integrally woven into the fabric of dance and performance as the essential part of American Indian ritual humor that juxtaposes the profoundly reverent with the outrageously absurd, thereby creating an atmosphere of the unworldly, even surreal, that characterizes feasts, dances, and ritual performances of the most sacred nature, while the clowns themselves may rank among the most highly regarded community leaders (Blaffer 1972; Bricker 1973; Taube 1989).

It is only after AD 1350 during the Late Postclassic Martir phase that we first see the appearance of Nahua-Mixteca style together with a complete symbol set, at which time it is deployed by over fifteen different language groups extending throughout southern Mexico (Lind 1994: 81). For the first time, we see representations of

people, places, and things in much the same way as they appear in the codices of the Borgia group of divinatory codices and the Mixtec group of historical codices. Many represent deities adopted from Early Postclassic prototypes originating at Tula and Chichen Itza, including representations of Mixcoatl, Quetzalcoatl, Tonatiuh, and Tezcatlipoca, clearly a response in ritualism to the intrusion into Cholula and across the Plain of Puebla by Tolteca-Chichimeca populations after the fall of Tula. Nevertheless, the principal theme continues to be one of sorcery. The ornamental bands of human skulls, hands, hearts, and shields that appear on vases and frescos were particularly diagnostic of the Tzitzimime, the supernatural patrons of the court diviners who served as intermediaries with the souls of the dead (Lind 1994: 92–97; Pohl 1998, 2007). However, rather than representing members of a diety pantheon *per se*, they appear as distinct representations of the Tzitzimime as the Cihuateteo and their consorts the Macuiltonaleque. Plainly stated, part of the roots of the Late Postclassic International style lie in a form of feasting behavior originally associated with a Classic Maya sorcery theme.

CASE STUDIES IN THE POSTCLASSIC ICONOGRAPHIC INTERPRETATION OF SORCERY

John Pohl and Jeremy Coltmán present two case studies in the decipherment of the ritualism associated with sorcery in Late Postclassic southern Mexico. Having written extensively on the contextual use of the divinatory codices by reconstructing the communicative environments in which they were displayed, John Pohl examines a significant manifestation of sorcery in the Late Postclassic in Codex Fonds Mexicains 20. It is not actually a codex but rather a single sheet of animal hide that was first described by Lorenzo Boturini in Mexico and then acquired by Joseph Aubin, who took it to France in the mid-nineteenth century. From Aubin, the manuscript passed to Eugene Goupil, who possessed it until his death, after which his wife gave it to the National Library of France in Paris.

Long recognized as a masterpiece of Late Postclassic Nahua-Mixteca style, it has been largely ignored by manuscript specialists due to its poor state of preservation and its somewhat enigmatic content. However, Pohl has created an artistic reconstruction of the imagery by examining both the original and a century-old watercolor executed by Wilhelm von den Steinen that details much of the iconography of the place signs together with the human and animal figures, thereby enabling him to present a more insightful interpretation of the imagery by comparing it to cognate scenes in both the codices of the Borgia Group and the Mixtec Group.

For some scholars, the two groups of codices represent a basic division in intellectual thought between the construction of retrospective narratives on the one

hand and divinatory almanacs on the other. In other words, the Mixtec Group manuscripts represent history books in that they describe events that took place in the past and will never recur again. The Borgia Group manuscripts are science books, on the other hand, and prescribe events that may take place at some time in the future. Pohl demonstrates that this perspective results from the projection of European divisions in intellectualism onto indigenous ideology and offers an alternative interpretation based upon his years of archaeological research with the actual Mixtec landscapes portrayed in the codices as well as the contemporary descendants of the people who painted them and upon his analysis of associated ritual objects and architectural settings within which the Borgia Group were actually deployed. For Pohl, the two manuscript groups therefore represent differences in ritual behavior reflective of the Nahuas of the Plain of Puebla on the one hand and the Mixtecs of the Mixteca Alta on the other. *Fonds Mexicains 20* presents something of a conundrum, therefore, in that the place signs identify distinctly Mixtec locations while the spirit entities ascribed to these place signs represent the Macuiltonaleque and the Cihuateteo associated with Nahua sorcery of the Plain of Puebla. Pohl proposes that it was produced in an intermediate area, possibly the Coixtlahuaca Valley or the adjacent Tehuacan Valley, where a number of different ethnic groups, including the Chocho-Popoloca, Mazatec, Cuicatec, and Chinantec peoples, combined elements of ritualism derived from both the Mixtec and Nahua ritual systems with which they were closely associated (Pohl 2014).

While codex scholars tend to view the pre-Columbian codices as books and the Nahua-Mixteca style as “writing,” Pohl points out that there is a lot more to the system from a performative perspective than the indigenous artists who composed the works are given credit for. Such works were in fact produced as more than just documents but served as portable altars for use in healing and divinatory rituals both within sacred architectural spaces as well as adjacent natural features such as nearby mountains. Furthermore, the images are pictographic because this is the means by which the diviner invokes the spiritual power of the representation of the actual thing itself rather than the more abstract invocation by means of a text that mimics verbal recitation. The images are therefore believed to be directly endowed with spiritual power, and by combining them and then invoking them orally through prayer, the sorcerer calls upon the spirit entities portrayed on the hide sheet and invites them to participate in the curing and divinatory rituals directly. Pohl calls this “image sorcery” and proposes that this form of behavior is what directly links the practices relating to the codices, censers, and serving vessels from the Late Postclassic Nahua-Mixteca style back to their antecedents in Late Classic Maya polychrome ceramics and therefore divinatory feasting behavior rather than anything relating to the extensive written texts associated with the erection of carved public monuments.

Although the Eastern Nahuas of today no longer create hide sheets like *Fonds Mexicains 20*, they do practice a comparable form of image sorcery through the creation of cut paper silhouettes that are displayed on altars and used to invoke the presence of spirit entities in directly comparable ways. Sandstrom and Effrein Sandstrom have discovered that some even possess the names of their pre-Columbian antecedents, including Seven Flower, the calendrical name for the Nahua Xochipilli, the Maize God avatar and patron of palace feasting and royal marriages, as well as Macuilxochitl, the Macuiltonal of the West, according to *Fonds Mexicains 20*, who was associated with gaming and gambling. In fact, it appears that the layout of the 260-day calendar on *Fonds Mexicains 20*, with its sequence of day names for the five Macuiltonaleque together with the red circle spacers, which must have been used to direct the sorcerer along a specific pathway between the place signs and the spirit entities, is directly comparable to a kind of board game known as patolli with which Macuilxochitl was specifically associated.

Archaeological evidence for patolli extends back to the Formative period (Voorhies 2012). The fact that pictographic designs for boards are found inscribed into elements of ritual architecture as well as sacred landscape features are a clear indication that patolli was more than an amusing pastime and obviously had sacred connotations as well. Patolli was both a competitive race and war game in which players competed with one another to move their pieces around a game board that was constructed of either hide or woven grass on which was painted four quadrants surrounding a center, not unlike the layout of *Fonds Mexicains 20*. Equal to if not surpassing the rubber ballgame as a form of high-stakes gambling, both commoner and noble players were known to wager everything from their jewelry to clothing, even their homes, going so far as to sell themselves into slavery if need be. After throwing a game piece to calculate the number of positions that can be advanced, each gambler attempts to complete an entire circuit around the board, thereby causing losing opponents to forfeit their wagers. Beans, maize kernels, carved bones, and pieces of jade among other markers were used.

The association between divinatory practices and gaming extends back millennia in many parts of the world, particularly among Asian civilizations, so it would be surprising if comparable behavior wasn't pervasive in the Western Hemisphere as well. There are a number of possible ways that one might use the *Fonds Mexicains 20* as a gaming board; we just don't know exactly how it would have been played, and different kinds of boards are portrayed in the pictorial manuscripts and in pictographs. Nevertheless, confirmation that *Fonds Mexicains* as well as the Borgia Group in general were functioning in this way is found in accounts by Colonial chroniclers like Diego Durán who describe the casting of lots with maize kernels upon the images of the gods as part of the use of divinatory codices in general.

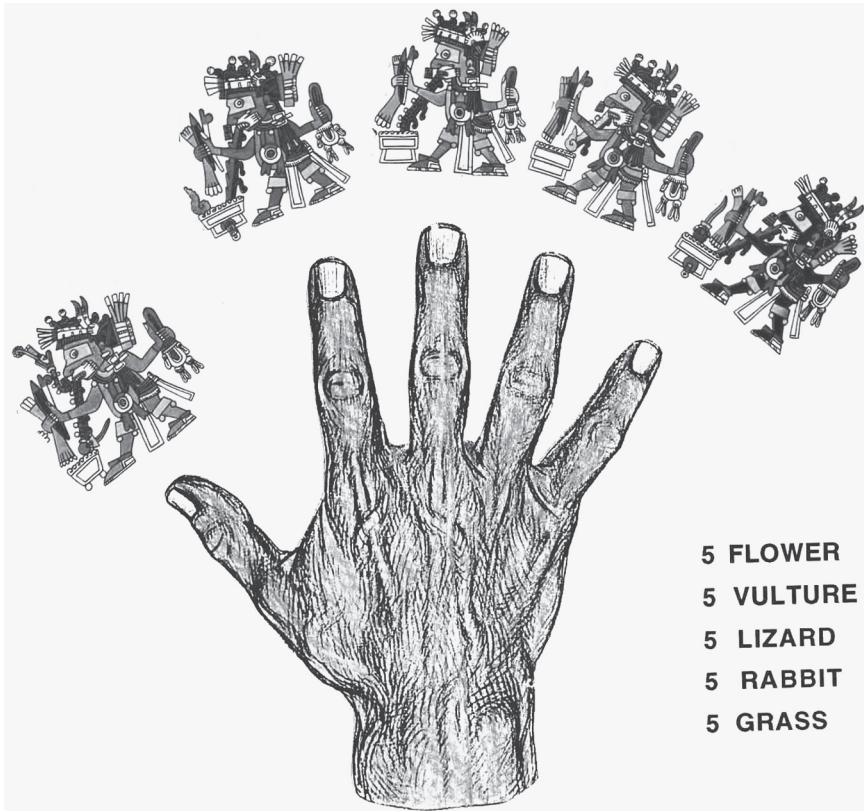


FIGURE 1.10. Diagram illustrating a Nahua sorcerer's hand by which the fingers are addressed as the five Macuiltonaleque. Illustration by John Pohl.

We have seen that the cultures of the Southwest were integrally connected to those of southern Mexico along Pacific routes of exchange and shared ideological, ritual, political, economic, and commercial forms of behavior over the course of the centuries between AD 1000 and 1500 (Pohl 1999a, 2016; Mathiowetz 2011). Testament to the power that gaming and gambling in the hands of elites might have over their subjects is found in a story related to Chaco Canyon. According to legends shared between the Navajo and Pueblo peoples, Chaco Canyon was ruled by a sorcerer named Noqoilpi, the Great Gambler, who subjugated his people by indebting them with a series of games that he continually won and was able to first seize their property and lands and then their women and children. He then told his people that he would return a portion of what they had wagered only if they would

agree to construct the buildings of Chaco Canyon (Matthews 1889). It would not be surprising if such behavior constituted more than myth but functioned as part of the exchange systems in Mesoamerica as well.

It is the performative aspect of codices and associated ritual objects that interests Jeremy Coltmán in focusing on the human arm and hand in sorcery ritualism. The appendages are what directly link the diviner to his patients through physical examination, diagnosis, and treatment as well as instruments of prophecy, such as scrying mirrors, censers, and counting pieces of various kinds such as maize, beans, bone, or jade for casting lots. The human hand is the basis for the vigesimal system upon which the *tonalpohualli* or sacred day count of the 260-day calendar used by palace sorcerers was predicated.

A human hand painted over the mouth was a diagnostic attribute of both the Classic Maya God Zero, a female variant of Akan, and the Nahuatl Macuiltonaleque. Coltmán argues that the origins of the Macuiltonaleque may be found with these Maya beings. The symbolic significance of the hand to Nahuatl sorcerers is found in a remarkable Colonial-period study of curing practices written by Friar Ruiz de Alarcón called *Tratando de las Supersticiones de los Naturales de Nueva España*:

After being well informed of the case and its circumstances, he (the diviner) carries out his sorcery, for which he prepares himself with tobacco with lime. Taking it up with the right hand, he puts it in his left palm, and there breaks it up with his thumb. Next he adjusts his clothing like someone who is getting himself ready for some important business . . . rubbing between his two palms the tobacco with lime which he had previously put on one of them . . . he kisses his crossed thumbs, his hands being joined together as in prayer and proceeds:

For I kiss the Maquiltonal
 For I have brought them forth
 My men, the Maquiltonaleque
 Those of the one courtyard
 The pearly headed Tzitzimime
 Let us go to see
 Our enchanted mirror.
 Who is the deity,
 Who is the marvel
 Who is breaking things
 Who is now smashing things,
 Who is effacing
 Our jade,

Our Jewel,
Our Plume.

(Ruiz de Alarcón 1982: 203)

Veiled in metaphor, the meaning of the ritual is nevertheless apparent. After dusting his hands white with the mixture of powered lime and tobacco, the sorcerer invoked the Macuiltonaleque through his fingers, addressing them as the Tzitzimime or demons; their pearly heads being a reference to his fingernails. The palm of his hand in turn was the courtyard around which the spirit patrons were to gather. Ethnobotanists have determined that lime served as an alkali accelerant. When mixed with potent forms of native tobacco or *picietl*, it would have affected the nervous system in a manner comparable to cocaine use in the Peruvian highlands (Pohl 2007). Consequently, there may have been more to rubbing the white substance over the hands and kissing the thumbs than simply ritual purification. Ruiz de Alarcón's observations suggest that by invoking the Macuiltonaleque, the diviner was in a sense asking them to possess his fingers as the means of guidance in his diagnosis and in the use of his instruments.

More generalized friezes of disembodied human hands, together with skulls and hearts, was characteristic of the Tzitzimitl theme in general in both polychrome ceramics and in frescoes (Pohl 1998, 2007). They appear to have represented a kind of prayer or song appearing on mesa or altar frescoes and polychrome vases (Pohl 1998; Urcid 2004). In some cases vases and frescoes are marked with designs that may relate them to certain deities of the Nahua pantheon such as Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli and Tezcatlipoca. Coltman looks at one of the many distinct groups of sorcerers discussed by Bernardino de Sahagún and relates their behavior to Tezcatlipoca in particular. Known as Temacpalitotique, these sorcerers coveted the left arm of a woman who died in childbirth and used it as a fetish object or magical charm to induce sleep on potential victims who would then be violated and robbed. Warriors also sought talismans from this woman's body such as a finger or a lock of her hair, which was supposed to give them courage in battle. Coltman notes examples from the Borgia Group of codices in which Tezcatlipoca is holding a severed arm with the palm placed directly over the lower part of his face, an action that may be invoking the Macuiltonaleque, who were the male counterparts to these deceased women whom the Temacpalitotique so desperately sought. While the severed arm was used for maleficent means, the disembodied hand symbolism that would come to in part characterize Eastern Nahua art in the Postclassic International style was indicative of curing. Coltman's article not only highlights the overlaps in sorcery and curing ritualism by looking at distinct groups of sorcerers but also shows that their practices are never that far

removed from one another and are in fact tied together much more than previous scholars have taken into account.

The tendency has been for scholars working with Late Postclassic iconography to identify nearly all human representations as members of the Nahua deity pantheon, which, it has been argued, had been spread throughout southern Mexico by the expansion of the Aztec Empire (Nicholson 1971). Much of what has been examined by Pohl and Colman, for example, has traditionally been ascribed to ritualism associated with the Aztec god Tezcatlipoca exclusively, while the Macuiltonaleque have been characterized as poorly understood (Nicholson 1971; Boone 2007). However, we have seen that the cult of the Macuiltonaleque is directly derived from sorcery ritualism practiced by the Classic Maya and together with the closely associated Maize God cult was conveyed into the highlands during a period of time when there was Olmeca-Xicalanca influence on the Plain of Puebla. Therefore, the iconography of the Macuiltonaleque as spirit entities and patrons of court sorcerers may very well precede the cult of the man-god Tezcatlipoca. Consequently, it may be more logical to think of Tezcatlipoca as being the representative of a sorcerer within the pantheon of gods by invoking iconography of the Macuiltonaleque. So what is the Nahua deity pantheon to which Tezcatlipoca belonged, where did it come from, and how did it spread?

We know that the Aztec Empire evolved by exploiting the preexisting regional “world system” founded by a confederacy of city-states, the “Children of the Plumed Serpent,” as they called themselves, which dominated southern Mexico a century and half before the rise of the Aztec Empire (Pohl et al. 2012). These city-states thrived within a larger international system that promoted shared traits among members who saw the advantages of forming exclusive long-distance economic relationships (Pohl 2003b, 2003c; Scheidel 2016). Standardization in commercial forms were then supported by a symbolic vocabulary that defined a field of common values through the promotion of internationalism in art and architecture, the spread of the Nahua-Mixteca style throughout southern Mexico, and the invention of a deity pantheon. The iconography of the deity pantheon therefore developed along with the Nahua-Mixteca style and symbol set around 1250–1300. Its origins lie in the introduction of the cults of patron deities associated with the various city-states associated with the Children of the Plumed Serpent confederacy. Some are directly inherited from legends associated with Tula such as Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca; others are incorporated from regional cults throughout southern Mexico. Xipe Totec, for example, was known to have been a patron god of the Zapotecs of Oaxaca while Tlazolteotl’s cult was incorporated from Veracruz.

As the Aztec Empire expanded beyond the Valley of Mexico, it found itself having to accommodate differing agendas both inside and outside of its imperial center.

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This was effectively achieved by co-opting the international identity of the Nahuatl-Mixteca world system in order to legitimize powers of taxation, maintain a military presence, and enforce laws among its subjects in distant lands. The Aztecs became supremely effective at this process, creating masterpieces of monumental public sculpture that capitalized on the basic meanings, forms, and functions of the Late Postclassic Nahuatl-Mixteca style but presented on a titanic scale.

Fascinated by the origins of the Aztec imperial pantheon, Cecelia Klein focuses on the cult of the Aztec goddess Cihuacoatl, who, like Tezcatlipoca, appears to have its origins in the ritualism associated with the primordial female Tzitzimil spirit entities known as the Cihuateteo. She presents her case by dividing the surviving visual resources that portray the goddess into three areas of investigation, beginning with the earliest Colonial representations painted by indigenous artists during the mid-sixteenth century. She compares these images to written descriptions appearing in the works of historians such as Sahagún, Durán, and Torquemada, among others. In so doing she shows that the goddess shared the attributes with a primeval avatar known as Tzitzimicihuatl or Tzitzimil and therefore was characterized as a dangerous, frightening, shape-shifting sorceress with wounds that alluded to a theme of defeated motherhood shared with the Cihuateteo, her vanquished form a stunning visual expression of misery, anger, and thirst for revenge clearly represented in monumental art as well.

In contrast to this image of the malevolent sorceress that prevailed in Aztec imperial art at the time of the conquest, however, Klein examines accounts of the goddess associated with politics outside Tenochtitlan, revealing a very different perspective. She was revered, for example, for being a culture hero who emerged from Chicomoztoc, led the seven Chichimec tribes into central Mexico, and according to some sources was even credited with being the mother of Quetzalcoatl. This more heroic perspective is also reflected in the goddess's appearances on two monuments, the Stone of Motecuhzoma I and the Stone of Tizoc, which are believed to be more historical than allegorical. Both feature carved representations of the emperors for which they are named, dressed in the guise of Toltec warriors capturing the defeated gods and goddesses of conquered city-states. For example, Xochimilco and Culhuacan were known to have worshipped Cihuacoatl as their patron goddess, but she is portrayed on these monuments not as a malevolent sorceress but as a vigorous young warriorress. Fascinating correlates appear in the discovery of ceramic figurines portraying either Cihuacoatl or the Cihuateteo as well. We have seen how the figurine tradition has its roots in the Preclassic, in which the representations functioned as an essential part of divinatory ritualism associated with life-sustaining themes of the promotion of fertility, curing, and birth. Klein concludes therefore that Cihuacoatl had undergone a dramatic transformation in

the hands of Aztec political strategists, particularly Tlacaelel, who even appropriated her name and ritual dress to represent his role as high priest at Tenochtitlan and for all intents and purposes the commander-in-chief of its army. Following the ritual defeat of the goddess as a culture hero and city-state patroness, Aztec artists then increasingly emphasized Cihuacoatl's darker side by equating her with the Tzitzimime, particularly the Cihuateteo, and casting her as a practitioner of sorcery whose dangerous powers had been harnessed by the imperial government to promote its own agendas.

We conclude our volume with a paper by Roberto Martínez González that brings us back to where we began. While John Monaghan was concerned with the Spanish vocabulary for priests, sorcerers, and witches, Martínez González examines the semantics of Aztec terminology and sees a trend extending back to the sixteenth century for the classification of two major groups of ritual specialists: the Tlamacazqui and the Nahualli. The Tlamacazqui are those most often equated with the Spanish term *sacerdote*, indicating that they served as public figures responsible for the moral and spiritual guidance of the Aztec citizenry. They organized the principal festivals throughout the year, collected and presented offerings, and conducted songs and dances. They maintained the temple cults by censuring the god's images, tending to their eternal fires, and conducting ceremonial offerings, especially blood sacrifices. Their principal role seems to have been to serve as intermediaries and agents in what was believed to be a very delicate balance in the relationships between the gods and their people. Ritualism focused on the symbolism associated with gift-giving and reciprocal exchanges. Prayers made during offerings refer to terms closely associated with debt payment and loans, as if the priests were negotiating financial transactions with the gods.

The Nahualli, on the other hand, were practitioners who conducted secretive or hidden forms of ritualism. One of their main functions was to deploy illness and death by supernatural means. However, this does not mean that they were inherently evil beings; rather, ethnohistorical sources suggest that these creatures also acted as protectors of their communities, especially with regard to conflicts with outsiders. They are credited with the ability to transform themselves into wild creatures of various kinds as well as the ability to use supernatural flight as a means of traversing real space. This was believed to occur during sleep, when the Nahualli left its human body in repose and awoke in the form of its animal counterpart.

One of the principal attributes of the Nahualli appears to be the difficulty in classifying them, for they are credited with a range of skills and powers and are described as "witches," "sorcerers," "curers," "spell-casters," "prophets," "hermits," and "monks," among other terms that were just as hard to categorize in the sixteenth century as they are today. Martínez González proposes that the translation of Nahualli and

Tlamacazqui, as “witch” and “priest” respectively, actually encompassed a multitude of different personalities that performed similar actions with some individuals simultaneously acting in both capacities. It is therefore two forms of logic that differentiate the two forms of practitioners rather than their attributes, skills, or abilities. Furthermore, they can express themselves through a wide range of social and political functions as well.

We have seen how the arch-sorceress Cihuacoatl was promoted from being the patron deity of a conquered city-state to the title for a Tlamacazqui deity impersonator who served as the second-highest-ranking administrative authority in the Aztec Empire while the Nahualli identity attributed to Aztec rulers empowered them to summon creatures like snakes, centipedes, and scorpions to watch over their kin or to transform themselves into fire serpents when going to war against their enemies. Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin was credited with the powers of a Nahualli. When he was plagued by visions of the fall of his empire, he dispatched sorcerers to attempt to kill the Spaniards before attempting any military action. The fact that sorcery seems to have played such an important role in the political lives of high-ranking leaders in the Aztec administration suggests that this had been a planned objective in the design of Aztec imperial policy since the fifteenth century.

The fact is that Aztec monumental art, the public reflection of this policy, is unprecedented not only in its scale and innovations in physical form but in its presentation of sorcery as a primary theme. Monoliths of decapitated goddesses wear necklaces of human hands, hearts, and skulls, the emblems of arch sorceresses—the Tzitzimime—the great mother sustainers who represented the ultimate protectors of the Mexica, on the one hand, and the vengeful punishers of those who sought to harm them on the other. The same symbolism is displayed on the Stone of Motecuhzuma to link the sorcery theme together with the rights of conquest ordained by Huitzilopochtli and carried out by his representative on earth, the tlatoani of Tenochtitlan. The great calendar stone is a pictographic testament to the creation of the world, but it also functioned as a kind of theatrical set for the bloodiest of human sacrificial rituals upon which hundreds of enemy warriors died. Aztec songs and stories described four great ages of the past, each destroyed by some catastrophe wrought by vengeful gods. The fifth and present world only came into being through the self-sacrifice of a hero who was transformed into the sun Tonatiuh. But Tonatiuh refused to move across the sky without a gift from humankind to equal his own. War was thereby waged to feed the sun his holy food and therefore perpetuate life on earth. The Aztecs did not use a term like “human sacrifice.” For them it was *nextlaualli*, a sacred debt payment to the gods. For Aztec soldiers, participation in these rituals became a means of publicly displaying their prowess, gaining rewards from the emperor’s own hand, and announcing their promotion in society. But

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these sacrifices worked just as effectively as a grim reminder for foreign dignitaries, lest they ever consider war against the empire themselves.

As we have seen, the evidence for Aztec sorcery practices first appears at the end of the first millennium in the symbolism associated with a polychrome ceramic tradition at Cholula with roots in Late Classic Maya. By 1300, evidence for sorcery practices appears across the Plain of Puebla. The archaeological context clearly indicates that this ritualism was practiced by the elite within their palaces in association with a system of moveable feasts timed to the 260-day calendar or *tonapohualli* and calculated with the use of the divinatory codices. The principal religious theme of these palace feasts was an encounter with the *Tzitzimime*, potentially malevolent spirit entities that also embodied a cult of the ancestral dead in general and the spirit entity patrons of palace sorcerers, the *Maquiltonaleque* and the *Cihuateteo*. Patron gods for each city-state, many of whom possessed the attributes of *Tzitzimime* as well, were worshipped in public cults that focused upon the community temple. In designing their empire, what more powerful statement of their militaristic ambitions could the Aztec imperialists of Tenochtitlan invoke than the imagery associated with the most formidable form of psychological power among those city-states they sought to dominate than the imagery of the *Tzitzimime* displayed on a monumental level?

CONCLUSIONS

The topic of sorcery and witchcraft in anthropology is far more developed in other areas of the world such as Africa, Melanesia, and the Amazon. It has been largely ignored in Mesoamerica. This volume has set out to change that. The introduction to this volume has sought to place these diverse essays in a historical context by looking at the wide distribution of sorcery practiced throughout Mesoamerica. The indigenous forms of sorcery have tremendous antiquity, and while much of this ritualism regarding sorcery, divination, curing, and witchcraft are consistent throughout, it should nevertheless be noted that any number of cultural, historical, social, political, and economic variables contribute to how and why it is practiced. While many of these practices developed independently from one another, we have presented evidence in this introduction that at least part of the roots of the Late Postclassic International style and writing system may lie in a form of feasting behavior originally associated with a Classic Maya sorcery theme. It is no wonder then that Late Classic Maya polychrome drinking vessels invoked the dangerous *wahy* beings. Furthermore, while it is difficult to investigate sorcery practices among the earlier Olmec, images from Oxtotitlan, Juxtlahuaca, and Chalcatzingo certainly suggest it. To put it quite simply, sorcery is power, and this power is often manifested in

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distinct ways such as the ability to transform into one's nahual. Oftentimes these familiars are animals of the dark and untamed forest wilds such as snakes, jaguars, mountain lions, eagles, and deer. This brings us back to an important point regarding the relationship between rulers and the natural environment.

So where do we go from here? The terminology we use will continue to be debated for sure. The historical and historiographical problems regarding these terms as well as others like "shaman" and "nahual" are far from being resolved (see Klein et al. 2002 for discussion). Despite the recognized problems of these terms, they will in many ways have to suffice, at least for the moment. It is certainly better than unnecessary jargon. For instance, the term "witchcraft" was adequate enough for Clyde Kluckhohn who preferred "Navajo Witchcraft" as a title over the more jargon-filled "Navaho idea and action patterns concerned with the influencing of events by supernatural techniques that are socially disapproved" (1944: 5).

Another direction that needs to be taken is in regard to comparative approaches. As previously noted, recent attempts have sought to compare Mesoamerican, Egyptian, and Graeco-Roman civilizations behaviorally. While this trend has existed for some time, comparing the Classic Maya court and Aztec imperial strategies in art and architecture with those from antiquity, the more esoteric behavior involved in courtly feasting and ritual has been largely ignored. It would be beneficial to compare these specific types of behavior. We have also turned briefly to practices in Southeast Asia, which we think is also a worthwhile line of inquiry. But what of other Amerindian traditions? While far-reaching global comparisons are well warranted, the traditions of Amerindian people "closer to home" provide an array of mythic traditions concerning sorcery and witchcraft throughout North America and deserve comparative study (see Walker 1989). The southeastern United States is particularly rich in beliefs related to sorcery. One of the most explicit examples of sorcery in the Southeast occurs in a drawing generally credited to Theodore de Bry. The description of this striking image describes Outina, chief of the Timucua, consulting an aged sorcerer to reveal the disposition of his enemy (de Bry 1976).

The old man requests a shield that he puts on the ground and proceeds to draw a circle around it and then draws letters and signs within the circle. From here, he begins unintelligible chanting, gesticulating, and contorting until his bones can be heard cracking. Finally, he emerges exhausted and confused and reveals the number of enemies and where they are waiting. This is a fine example of "image sorcery" at work.

Some of the mythology regarding powerful sorcerers still exists in contemporary oral traditions and titles of religious authority. The Great Gambler of Pueblo Bonito, who used sorcery to enslave people through indebtedness, is an example

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of the use of the kind of authority that we have discussed in this volume for the greater Southwest (Matthews 1889). Southeastern legends describe hereditary secret societies that used sorcery to coerce their people and were put to death (Fogelson 1984). Prior to the formation of the Iroquois League, the Onondaga nation had a sachem named Tadodaho, who according to oral tradition was an extremely powerful sorcerer. Also a warrior, he was said to pose quite the menacing image. According to several sources, he was a “misshapen monster” who had a twisted body and snakes in his hair (Hale 1883: 12–20; Barr 2006: 9–12). The legend of Tadadaho puts him at odds with Hiawatha since he opposed the Great Law of Peace; however, they eventually won Tadadaho over by soothing the seven crooks in his back. His legend is still told and his name endures as a title for the most spiritual of leaders in the Iroquois Nation.

Our goal then has been to offer a sensitive and sympathetic study of sorcery and witchcraft in ancient and modern Mesoamerica. Serious caution has been required in regard to approach, and we have attempted to examine this behavior

not as something irrational and steeped in superstition but rather as highly rational and rooted in significant social and cultural values. In doing so, however, we also recognize the unavoidable question of who speaks for the “Other”? This remains one of the key questions anthropologists struggle with. Presenting the politically

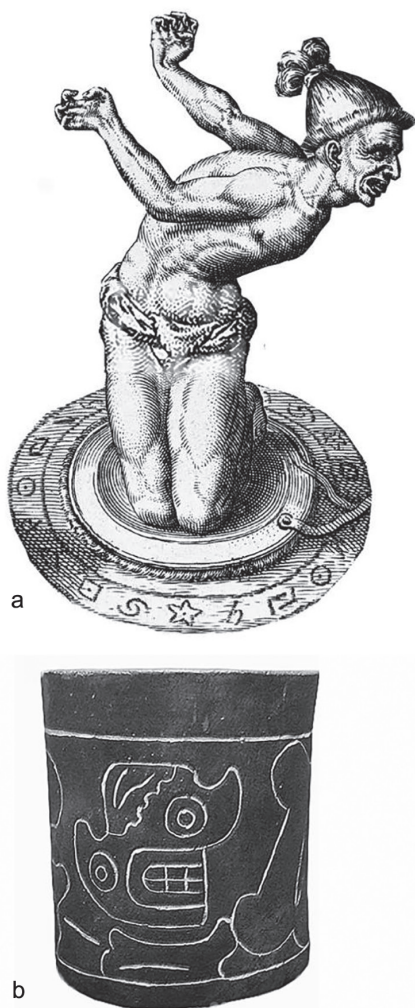


FIGURE 1.11. Southeastern sorcery. (a) Timucua “Magician,” after a print by Theodor de Bry. (b) Drinking cup with skull and bone motif, Moundville, Alabama. Illustrations by John Pohl.

acceptable publication of the Other has become an increasingly difficult task with post-Colonial, revisionist, and even “denialist” critics (Watanabe 1995; Demarest 2007: 592–594, 599). We do not intend to separate indigenous Mesoamerican peoples from “the human family.” These practices are universal. To deny that ancient and modern Mesoamericans practiced or believed in such things would be to unashamedly designate and keep them as the Other and would only further remove them from a cross-cultural phenomenon known from around the world. We do advocate strong caution, however, when looking at these forms of ritual behavior and would strongly agree with historian Matthew Dennis, who notes:

... we must distinguish between the “witchcraft” attributed to Indians by ignorant or biased white observers—misrepresentations of misunderstood native rites and beliefs, which had nothing to do with any diabolical force—and the witchcraft that Indians believed actually troubled their existence, an indigenous craft uniformly regarded by them as nefarious and dangerous. (2003: 22)

Such practices do not make Mesoamerican people primitive nor does it make them superstitious natives. As such, we are not describing “exotic bugaboos, but beliefs actually held by actual people who accept them and take note of them in their everyday lives” (Middleton 1967: x). To deny them their beliefs because of our fear of perpetuating the Other only keeps them as such and speaks volumes about our own psyche, namely our discomfort of them not being “just like us.” We hope this volume has placed them in a more human context as people engaged in a rational and logical system of behavior.

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