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Among the many spectacular pieces of monumental sculpture and carved reliefs preserved from the Late Postclassic now on display in the Sala Mexica in Mexico City's Museo Nacional de Antropología is a little-known and easy-to-miss rectangular carved-stone panel. It shows two warrior figures and a bird descending down a narrow band that is flanked by two bands of starry symbols arranged in what appear to be layers (see figure 1.4). The title on the display board reads *Lápida de los Cielos* ("Stone of the Skies"). To provide further explanation, a second, larger board next to the stone panel shows a scene from the late sixteenth-century *Codex Vaticanus A* representing a multilayered universe with an Aztec creator god seated in the uppermost layer of the sky, and below the earth the nine layers of the hell-like underworld of Mictlan. The accompanying text briefly describes the Mexica cosmos stating that there were 13 layers in the sky and nine in the underworld. Although the stone panel does not show 13 layers, nor portray any difference among the layers (in contrast to the *Codex Vaticanus A*), the visitor is naturally meant to conclude that the warriors and the bird are traversing the heavenly spheres—hence the name given to this unique representation, which can also be translated as "Stone of the Heavens." If the visitor continues his or her itinerary to the ruins of the former main temple of the Mexica, the *Templo Mayor*, also in the heart of Mexico City, a display board will confirm this cosmological model and describe how the

Introduction

*Rethinking the
Mesoamerican Cosmos*

ANA DÍAZ

temple was located at the center of the universe, connecting the thirteen and nine layers, again clearly referring to the *Codex Vaticanus A*. Similarly, most, if not all, textbooks on ancient Mesoamerica and the Aztecs describe the same general version of the precolumbian cosmos; indeed, scholarly consensus seems to have been achieved on this particular issue. This consensus, however, is relatively recent.

Descriptions of the form and functioning of the indigenous cosmos have appeared in several works written since colonial times, often in a fragmented and/or contradictory fashion, and it is nearly impossible to find two sources offering the same exact version of the cosmological structure. It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that Eduard Seler (1902–1923, 1907) was able to provide a more coherent interpretation and reconstruction of the Mexica cosmos by integrating contradictory data from a great variety of sources, among which the representation of the cosmos in the *Codex Vaticanus A* stands out. Based on this specific illustration, he formulated an explanatory model that conceives of the sky as a series of 13 levels and the underworld as composed of nine levels.

While Seler himself emphasized that Mexica cosmology was far more complex than this layered structure would seem to suggest (see Nielsen and Sellner Reunert 2015, chapter 2, this volume), the model's pedagogical efficiency and its similarity with classic Eurasian cosmographies undoubtedly eased the model's acceptance and its institutionalization as the fundamental cosmological structure shared by all Mesoamericans before and after the conquest. Seler's ideas have since been supplemented by an impressive list of renowned scholars such as Alfred Tozzer (1907), J. Eric S. Thompson (1934, 1954, 1970), Walter Krickeberg (1950), William Holland (1961, 1963), Alfonso Caso (1967), Miguel León-Portilla (1966 [1956], 1994 [1968]), Alfredo López Austin (1984, 1994, 2001, 2016), and Eduardo Matos Moctezuma (1987, 2008, 2013). Although the model of the 13 skies and nine underworlds has been slightly modified over time, it remains the basic model of the Mesoamerican cosmos, and has been formalized by scholars for more than a century to the point that it has become part of a set of standard truths about ancient Mesoamerica, and thus has been rarely questioned or challenged until recent contributions by Klein (1982), Knab (1991, 2004), Nielsen and Sellner Reunert (2009) Díaz (2009), Alcántara Rojas (2011), Valdovinos (2011), Mikulska (2008, 2015), and Neurath (2015).

Some of these works were presented and discussed at the Ciclo de Conferencias “Cosmologías indígenas, nuevas aproximaciones,” which took place in the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City at 2011. It was during those two intense days of discussions and fruitful exchange of ideas and

data that the idea of a book on the topic began to emerge, deriving from the collective volume that preceded the present edition (Díaz, ed. 2015). After years of continued fruitful discussions, meetings, and exchanging of ideas and data, we decided to integrate our reflections into a single volume and to invite other specialists to collaborate in the conversation. Common to our renewed attempts to understand Mesoamerican cosmological models were three main points of departure: (1) A reevaluation of precolumbian *vis-à-vis* colonial sources, (2) a critical revision of the idea of a multilayered universe composed of 13 and nine vertically arranged layers or levels, and (3) the proposal of new cosmographic alternatives to understand the composition of the Mesoamerican cosmos. This is essentially what this book is about: offering a new approach to a classic subject in Mesoamerican studies, namely the indigenous conception of the cosmos. Specifically, we are interested in reviewing the relationship between the spaces of sky, earth, and underworld.

By reanalyzing and recontextualizing the relevant sources, most of the contributing authors discuss and challenge the commonly accepted notion that these spaces were conceived of as fixed, static structures of superimposed levels unrelated to and unaffected by historical events and human actions. Instead, we propose that cosmological spaces were, and are, dynamic elements shaped, defined, and redefined throughout the course of history. The chapters in this volume thus aim to show that indigenous cosmographies could be subdivided and organized in complex and diverse arrangements, and that their constituent parts were constructed through modular articulations in orderly succession: 13 spaces, nine spaces, four cardinal points and a center, four or five color patterns, supernatural entities and phenomena, calendrical signs, and two daily qualities, that is, day and night.¹ These diverse arrangements are not fixed models, but rather components in a dynamic interplay, which cannot be adequately understood if the cosmological discourse is reduced to a superposition of nine and 13 levels.

Therefore, the segmentation or compartmentalization of the sky and the underworld cannot be reduced to the opposition of schematic horizontal and vertical arrangements. Indeed, these otherworlds are inhabited by a number of familiar phenomena or features, such as mountains, springs, palaces, roads, caves, trees, animals, and ancestors, which are also present on earth and can be recognized in the experienced environments of Mesoamerican communities.² All these elements, reflecting a shared daily reality, were, and in many areas continue to be, replicated in an almost specular fashion onto other cosmological levels. Through this type of process complex historical and regional cosmologies were, and are, generated.

In order to deemphasize and question some of the analytical categories that tend to predispose our understanding of these otherworldly spaces, the authors offer detailed analyses of the varied cosmological traditions in Mesoamerica, drawing upon a wide range of sources and data, including precolumbian texts and imagery, archaeological excavations, and ethnohistorical documents from the early colonial period, as well as ethnographic descriptions of different contemporary groups, focusing on the Maya, Nahuatl, Zapotec, and Wixáritari. Furthermore, several contributions offer historiographical background regarding the central cosmological concepts and models from medieval and renaissance Europe, thus extending the scope of our observations beyond indigenous forms of thought.

The contributing authors of this volume agree with the idea that documentary sources have their own independent cultural life, becoming part of different orders of discourse throughout history. One of our principal interests is thus to emphasize the historical contexts under which the cosmological models that have come down to us were envisioned and formulated. Our intention is not to propose another universalist model of Mesoamerican cosmology, but rather to call attention to the likely multitude of cosmographic repertoires or models that operated simultaneously as a result of historical circumstances and regional variations.

MESOAMERICAN COSMOS: FIXED STRUCTURES OR MUTABLE SPACES?

For late sixteenth-century missionaries—such as the compiler of the *Codex Vaticanus A*, Fray Pedro de los Ríos—and for late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Mesoamericanists, the Mesoamerican universe consisted of three basic, clearly defined, and differentiated spaces. According to them, the sky was conceived of as a well-lit, diaphanous place, the underworld as a dark, ominous region to which the majority of the dead are confined, and the earth as an intermediate, neutral space inhabited by men. This arrangement seems to coincide with the cosmological structure shared by all the so-called ancient civilizations, such as the Egyptian, the Sumerian, and ancient Greek, suggesting that they were all different versions of a universal cosmological structure (Jung 1984; Eliade 1981; Seler 1907; Olivier 2010; Matos Moctezuma 2010).³

However, this structure is only one of many possible ways of presenting what could very well have been a much more dynamic and less static cosmological model, as evidenced by ethnographies from various regions of Oceania,

Siberia, and the Amazonian lowlands, which *destabilize the ontological premises of classical studies of literate societies and civilizations* (Wagner 1991; Coppet and Iteanu 1995; Gell 1995; Mondragón 2015). Indeed, the notion that there is one sky (heaven) that remains the same—a perennial, immutable space—is mainly compatible with and derived from a Western tradition and Aristotelian metaphysics (Aristotle 1987). Several of the contributions to this volume identify and discuss aspects of Mesoamerican cosmology, specifically the earth, sky, and underworld, as highly complex spaces with territorial limits and qualities that do not seem to be wholly compatible with the Euro-Christian vision of the universe and its constituents.

First, several authors have suggested that rather than three clearly divided, vertically arranged spaces, ancient Mesoamerican peoples recognized an opposition between “above” and “below,” or perhaps rather between “here” (the earth) and “there” (the night/day sky/dream space/the remote past) (see for example Knab 1991; Mikulska 2015; Neurath 2015). This might not be understood as a static binary-opposition pattern, but as a conception that incorporates movement and change as part of the ontological machinery. Mikulska, Tokovinine and Neurath analyze this topic in detail in chapters 7, 8, and 9 of this volume, respectively. The apparent contradictions of the colonial sources—which refer to a heaven divided into sometimes nine, sometimes 13, sometimes seven or five partitions—make sense if we span our approach to incorporate multiple levels of semantic interaction, assuming that the cosmos can be ordered and approached in different ways depending on the context in which the agents relate to it. We seem to be faced with a fragmentation of the cosmological geography into a range of possibilities: two, seven, nine, or 13 regions, all depending on the historical moment and the specific cultural or even ritual context in which they are presented and named (in this volume, see Díaz, chapter 3; Hull, chapter 6; Mikulska, chapter 8; Nielsen and Sellner Reunert, chapter 1; Neurath, chapter 9; Tokovinine, chapter 7; Vail, chapter 4).

Second, the boundaries between these spaces question the image of discrete, separated areas. For example, both the sky and the underworld are home to a variety of beings (supernatural entities including gods, ancestors, and souls) who do not seem to have unique and fixed spheres of action. The geographical composition of these spheres also reveals a common organization of the places, which resembles the distribution of spaces on earth (palaces, gardens, springs, rivers) as once proposed by Knab in his ethnographic approach to the Nahuas of Puebla (1991, 2004). This argument is taken far in the chapter written by Tokovinine (chapter 7, this volume), who reveals the interweaving connections between linear and temporal distances in historical Maya narratives

in precolumbian texts. In another example, Tavárez (chapter 5, this volume) shows how ancient concepts of time, arranged in the Zapotec *bivé* (a count of 260 days), set in motion a pattern of days that walk along three houses (earth, sky, and the underworld), distributing time among the vertical layers of the cosmos. Tavárez proposes that the movement of days by the houses of the cosmos can be taken as evidence of the division of the upper and lower spaces in nine fixed levels above and nine below Earth.

Botta (chapter 2), Díaz (chapter 3), Neurath (chapter 9), and Nielsen and Sellner Reunert (chapter 1) analyze the conformation of colonial Amerindian cosmological programs (Mexican and Maya) that took as reference modern metaphysical conceptions. The imposition of foreign taxonomies and discursive forms to understand and articulate regional knowledges and experiences produced universal explanations that usually took for granted the voices of the “subjects of study.” To show some examples, precolumbian groups of the southern Maya lowlands seemed to emphasize the measures of time spent in travel to identify the nature of places (Tokovinine, chapter 7, this volume); Neurath discusses the constitution of the body as one of the main paradigms that affect the Wixarika social cosmos and its mutable composition (chapter 9, this volume). The organic quality of the otherworlds is underlined in the contributions of Díaz (chapter 3) and Mikulska (chapter 8) of this volume, and the complexity of the taxonomical orders observed in Maya calendrical practices—in operation before and after the contact with Christian theology—are discussed in the essays by Vail (chapter 4) and Hull (chapter 6) in this volume. These works show a fluid incorporation of principles, elements, and characters that update the complexity of American traditional chronological systems.

Finally, most of the contributions show that the analysis of colonial sources could be very useful for understanding the processes of translation, adaptation, and reconfiguration of the world, as they reveal the complex strategies used by the colonial Maya, Zapotec, or Mexica to incorporate ideas and practices that were congruent with their contemporary paradigms. Indeed this exercise shows an extraordinary example of the way in which the opposition between purely precolumbian and Christian cosmologies breaks down.

These descriptions call for a new way of conceptualizing the Mesoamerican cosmos in its different contexts, especially considering that in precolumbian times the arrangement of space (cosmological and earthly territory) was guided by patterns that possibly have not been recognized because they do not follow the discursive forms of classic and Judeo-Christian cosmologies, even when they incorporate Christian elements, which were resignified.

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The approach to the study of Mesoamerican cosmology presented in this volume and its underlying methodological and theoretical considerations are part of a broader framework within the field of Mesoamerican and early colonial studies. Several of the ideas and interpretations presented in the following chapters, as well the methodological approach to this topic, follow earlier, important contributions to the field dealing sometimes with the Americas as a whole, but mainly with either central Mexico or the Maya region. Specifically, we draw upon earlier interpretations of the transcultural processes that took place from the colonial period onwards and that lie at the heart of questions regarding cosmology in Mesoamerica. In methodological terms, we approach our sources critically, acknowledging the important part played by the native indigenous population in early colonial society in creating them, as well as their variability.

Recently, a growing awareness of the close collaboration and mutual influence between Mesoamerican and Euro-Christian individuals, religious concepts, cultural practices, and languages has changed previous views (e.g., Ricard 1966; Bricker 1981; Levin and Navarrete 2007; Schroeder 2010; Wolf, Connors, and Waldman 2011; Rappaport and Cummins 2012) about the period and the formation of postconquest Mesoamerican colonial societies. In this volume, the contributions that are focused on the early colonial period and on the sources produced in this dynamic time period follow in the path of a series of highly influential works that have reinterpreted the contact period and the colonial sources, asking new questions of old issues and challenging long-held views. Some of the most important include the seminal works by James Lockhart (1992) on the Nahuas after the conquest, those by Nancy Farriss (1984), Inga Clendinnen (1987), and Matthew Restall (1997) on the Maya in the aftermath of the Spanish invasion, as well as a series of works offering new perspectives on the roles of indigenous populations during the conquest (see Restall 1998, 2003; Matthew and Oudijk 2007; Restall and Asselbergs 2007).

A number of studies have focused on the religious beliefs and practices of the postconquest period, including the reinterpretation and appropriation of Euro-Christian ideas by indigenous populations, as well as indigenous roles in the production of religious images in books and on the walls of churches and monasteries in New Spain (e.g., Mignolo 1995; Peterson 1993, 1995; Schroeder and Poole 2007; and several contributions in Cecil and Pugh 2009; Olivier 2010). Furthermore, an increasing number of articles and books have been published specifically on the topic of the syncretistic process of intermingling of Old and New World religious ideas⁴—that is, the adoption and remodeling

of Christian themes and concepts that led to the creation of what can be called Mexican Catholicism(s), including what is sometimes referred to as Nahua Christianity and Maya Catholicism (Christensen 2013).

The issue of conversion and the question of the transmission of religious ideas and concepts across language boundaries have been closely examined. It was first treated in depth in Louise Burkhart's classic book *The Slippery Earth: Nabua-Christian Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Burkhart 1989). This work is a milestone in the research on the evangelization process in New Spain (see also Dehouve 2004; Díaz Balsera 2005). It deals with the highly complex situation of transferring Christian concepts onto an indigenous language, a subject also investigated by other scholars (Anderson 1993; Christensen 2013; Kirkhusmo 2007, 2009; Alcántara Rojas 2008). Jaime Lara's two impressive volumes (Lara 2004, 2008) on the architecture, art, and liturgy in early colonial New Spain are recent landmarks in the research on the complex cultural interactions and influences that together formed the basis for the production of religious buildings, texts, and images in colonial Mexico.

However, for a better understanding of transcultural processes it is important to emphasize that reinterpretation of Christian ideas in indigenous cosmologies was the result of a "struggle for recognition," not just a form of cultural hybridization (Dean and Leibsohn 2003; also see Botta, chapter 2, this volume). The work of David Tavárez shows an interesting example of how the original practices, such as those related to the use of the *biyé*, were affected not directly by the introduction of Christian concepts but by the transformation of the society in colonial times (Tavárez 2011). He investigates, for example, how the introduction of new technologies (such as alphabetic writing) and historical data (such as the introduction of Christian characters into originally indigenous stories) were incorporated to reproduce Zapotec cultural forms (Tavárez 2007).

We know that tapestries showing the most fundamental Christian concepts were annotated with glosses in native languages (using Latin letters) to instill in them the divine doctrine, and the invention of new liturgic genres also allowed for potential overlaps and reinterpretations between the two sets of religious images, discursive forms, and terminologies (Báez 2005; Schwaller 2006; see Nielsen and Sellner Reunert, chapter 1, this volume and Botta, chapter 2, this volume). The importance of images in the conversion process, as well as the indigenous population's contribution to the production of religious images, has been discussed in depth by Constantino Reyes-Valerio (1978, 2000), among others. Recent works on material and visual culture offer new perspectives for understanding transcultural dialogue that transcends the

notion of hybridism (Dean and Leibsohn 2003), as well as conceptions of absence and resistance (Mundy and Leibsohn 2012).

The religious transcultural dialogue evident in the colonial visual and material culture by which Christianity was taught, leads to the question of European influence in early colonial sources on Mesoamerican cultures and languages, and thus to a questioning of the use of these sources in our attempts to reconstruct precolumbian beliefs and practices. Constance Cortez, for instance described colonial art as an example of a cultural discourse (Cortez 2002a), using the Yucatec Maya scribe and artist Gaspar Antonio Chi, best known for his collaboration with Bishop Diego de Landa, as an example of an individual who could create works “that could be visually and mentally accessed by both cultures” (Cortez 2002b, 200).

In the colonial imagery, we indeed see how Mesoamericans strived to incorporate the old, sometimes very literally, within the new, a process that the friars often allowed to take place. Quiñones Keber previously noted that the Mesoamerican cosmologies reproduced in colonial sources were restructured for European consumption as consciously constructed cultural objects (Quiñones Keber 1995). Similarly, studies by Victoria Bricker and Helga-Maria Miram (Bricker and Miram 2002), as well as those by Erik Velásquez García (2009) and Timothy Knowlton (2009), have examined the Maya books of *Chilam Balam* in detail and demonstrated the influence of Euro-Christian culture, including imagery, in these pivotal sources on Maya religion, mythology, and cosmology. In the central Mexico region, George Kubler and Charles Gibson (1951) followed the transformations of the Mexican calendrical graphic discourse as a result of the introduction of Christian figurative cycles, a topic also studied by Betty Ann Brown (1977), Susan Spitler (2005), Ana Díaz (2011) and Anthony Aveni (2012).

A number of the best-known and widely used colonial sources, such as Bernardino de Sahagún's *Florentine Codex*, including their accompanying images, have been widely used as a visual “window” into the precolumbian past, in the sense that they have been thought to convey genuine precolumbian concepts and practices. However, it has become increasingly clear that a considerable part of these images are complex in character and often draw heavily upon Western, Euro-Christian templates. Sahagún's *Florentine Codex* has been well studied in this regard by authors such as Edmonson (1974), Klor de Alva, Nicholson, and Quiñones (1988), Schwaller (2003), and in particular by Pablo Escalante (1999, 2003, 2008) and Diana Magaloni (2003, 2004, 2011). Escalante has demonstrated the frequency with which the indigenous illustrators of the *Florentine Codex* found templates and models for their

representations of precolumbian Aztec culture in European books (e.g., the Bible and volumes on natural history such as the *Hortus Sanitatis*) that were kept in the monastery schools such as the College of Santa Cruz in Tlaltelolco (Escalante 1999, 2003, 2008; Bremer 2003; Boone 2003). Diana Magaloni revealed the ways in which indigenous painters of the *Florentine Codex* adopted certain European visual repertoires, techniques, and pigments in order to create new images, which were coherent with their own past traditions as well as with the new world that was taking form (Magaloni 2003, 2004, 2011; see also Wolf and Connors 2011).

In addition, recent studies related to the continuity and transformation of sacred space, including landscape and the built environment, further suggest that “native observances” were far from forgotten, but formed an essential component of the emerging colonial religious practices and beliefs (e.g., Solari 2013). Thus, the construction of Christian churches and monasteries were often constructed on sites that in precolumbian times had formed part of a sacred geography (Hermann 2015). Prime examples of such Christian appropriations of precolumbian sacred sites are Chalma in Morelos and numerous sites in northern Yucatan, as pointed out by Ralph Roys in 1952. Thus, rededicating the sacred site allowed for continuity in the beliefs or the *genius loci* associated with the site itself and its relationship with the surrounding landscape.

In sum, it is these active and ongoing processes of appropriation, borrowing, restructuring, and seeking compromises, and the resulting hybrid forms, that are at the center of the present volume. The contributions all take into account the roles that the indigenous population in early colonial society played in creating (as authors and artists) the sources, as well as the inhomogeneity and variability of the sources upon which we draw (in terms of time, place, and ethnicity, for instance). Thus, we try to avoid the kind of overarching generalizations that lead to reductionist simplifications or universalistic interpretations. Finally, in this volume we have all strived to familiarize ourselves with Euro-Christian traditions, be they religious, literary, artistic, or scientific (while admitting that we still have much to learn); something that we as Mesoamericanists sometimes tend to forget in our focus on the precolumbian past and in our efforts to reconstruct and understand precolumbian ways of thinking and believing.

CREATIVITY AND REINVENTION

Due to our interest in showing how the conceptions of cosmology have transformed over time, we must necessarily deal with concepts such as history,

tradition, and creativity. It is not our intention to write a detailed analysis of the discussions held around these terms, but it is fundamental to clarify our perspective regarding these. All the cases analyzed in the present volume are located in history. Knowledge, even sometimes ancient knowledge, permeates a given culture from one generation to the next, but we cannot assume that the Maya from Classic-period Naranjo are the same as the Maya from eighteenth-century Yucatan. While it is possible that they shared a set of common ideas and practices that transformed through time, especially after the contact with Europeans, this explanation assumes cultural uniformity in Mesoamerica and refers to a fundamental or structural continuity of thought across several generations: even when it accepts changes through time, the original nucleus survives. In this volume, rather than perceiving shared ideas and practices as a static substrate in continuous resistance to external agents, we propose to think about this process as a series of emic strategies that allowed for the adoption and integration of new concepts and ideas as historical, religious, and sociopolitical conditions changed over time. This took place not only after contact with the Old World, but—as archaeological and historical sources of Maya, Nahua, Mixtecs, and other groups indicate—change, adaptation, and creation can be found in this part of the continent dating back to the Preclassic. Therefore, more than visualizing a common nucleus affected by the introduction of new ideas, we prefer to use the metaphor of a flexible net, where the designs are created by the combination of strings of different colors manipulated by human hands. The designs reproduce patterns according to tradition (the correct way of doing things), but there is always space for creativeness and personal decisions. This flexibility affects even the cosmological conceptions.

In other words, more than mere syncretism or hybridization, understood as a collision between two cultures that interact and absorb each other, we should perhaps conceive of forms of knowledge that are flexible, active, and procedural. They make possible the integration of new knowledge, be it external or internal to the community, in order to update previous knowledge and experience to their specific conditions of life. Thus, the emphasis is not on cultural influence, but on historical suitability. While recognizing the stability and endurance of a substratum of religious beliefs, including cosmic models, over long periods of time, we must strive to refine our analysis by framing such phenomena in their specific historical context. Approaching the sources—precolonial as well as colonial and present day—from such a perspective, it becomes apparent that descriptions and representations of the cosmos and its constituents are best conceived of as emerging, unstable products,

and as the results of creative action in different places and historical moments. It is important to emphasize once again, that none of the contributors seeks to propose a new, all-encompassing “great model” that suggests a worldview shared by all Mesoamerican cultures.

Although several fundamental aspects were undoubtedly held in common, there was probably never one, stable pan-Mesoamerican vision of the universe from the Preclassic to the Postclassic. By creatively combining insights from previous historical and anthropological studies of Mesoamerican history with the analysis of Amerindian and Euro-Christian text and imagery, archaeological remains, and linguistics, this volume hopes to widen the analytical scope to reflect upon and cast new light on how the Mesoamerican cosmos was structured and restructured through history, but probably never so profoundly as in the aftermath of the Spanish conquest.

THE MESOAMERICAN COSMOS REVISITED: CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE VOLUME

The present volume is arranged in nine chapters, which are distributed in three symmetrical sections. While the chapters have been arranged according to key concepts, they have many more themes in common, and can therefore be connected in multiple ways.

I. RECOGNITION: ON DESCRIBING OTHERS' WORLDS

Jesper Nielsen and Toke Sellner Reunert (chapter 1) open the first section by approaching the overall problem of reconstructions of precolumbian visions of the cosmos that rely mainly on colonial sources, but without thorough, critical analyses of the historical context in which they were produced. The authors suggest that a generalization has taken place regarding the idea of a multilayered Mesoamerican universe, showing that this cosmic structure with 13 layers in the sky and nine or seven in the underworld has been inferred primarily from postcolumbian central Mexican sources and not from precolumbian evidence such as Maya hieroglyphic texts or iconography. Second, and more important, the present coauthors elaborate on their already-published hypothesis (2009) that the notion of a multilayered universe was not a Mesoamerican concept in the first place. They thus suggest that this cosmic model was introduced into the area in the sixteenth century, and that it ultimately derives from a European vision of the cosmos, referred to as the Dantean worldview, which was widely accepted in southern Europe at the time of the conquest.

The contribution of Sergio Botta continues this discussion. In the second chapter, Botta introduces the *aggionta* (addition) of the Italian antiquarian Lorenzo Pignoria to the mythographic Renaissance work of Vincenzo Cartari—the *Imagini delli dei de gl'antichi*—which is one of the most original attempts to shape a global religious comparative methodology in the modern age. The *aggionta*, published for the first time in 1615, adds illustrations and descriptions of gods and idols from Mexico, Japan, and India to Cartari's work. As for the Mesoamerican gods, Pignoria collected some images from the famous *Codex Vaticanus A* and invented a syncretic cosmology that combined indigenous and Christian features. Embodying Mesoamerican cosmology in a global representation of idolatry, Pignoria sketched a peculiar historical development of religion, which functioned mainly for colonial purposes. As argued by Botta here, it was through such comparative reflection, unique in its genre, that Pignoria contributed to building a modern and global language of religion.

The third chapter, by Ana Díaz, contrasts the visual discourses of the Mexican cosmos in colonial and precolonial sources, focusing in the configuration of the sky. The chapter offers an examination of the content, context, and production process of the early colonial sources that describe the Mexican cosmography, focusing on the reconstruction strategies used by the documents' authors to give shape to a completely new indigenous cosmological conception. First, Díaz analyzes the descriptions of the cosmos written and depicted in early colonial sources, exploring the contradictions present in them, then she explores the possibility of identifying the original images that may have served as their model. Second, by examining prehispanic visual sources and focusing on Citlalinicue—a main character in the foundational narratives or cosmogonies, who is recognized as one aspect of the sky—Díaz argues for the conception of a cosmos as a living entity. The sky emerges as a body and a threshold: as an entity who assumes different aspects or qualities, revealing a multiple and dynamic constitution. In résumé, Citlalinicue is present in most of cosmogonical narratives as a main character, but she seems to be disarticulated and displaced in order to build a cosmographical fixed structure with her iconographical elements.

II. INVENTIVENESS: RESHAPING EXPERIENCE IN COLONIAL COSMOLOGIES

The fourth contribution, by Gabrielle Vail, documents how conceptions of Maya supernatural entities changed between the fourteenth and the eighteenth centuries and influenced scholarly interpretations of prehispanic cosmology.

The analysis led Vail to explore colonial conceptions of the Maya underworld (Metnal or Xib'alb'a), drawing comparisons with prehispanic sources and Christian conceptions. The chapter examines the concepts of *ángel* (angel) and *diablo* (devil), introduced by Landa and included in later Yucatec language texts such as the Books of *Chilam Balam*. Through the analysis of different series of entities, Vail concludes that Mayan deities were considered to have existed in multiple realms, but after the introduction of Christianity, it became imperative to separate three realms and assign specific supernatural entities to each space, a view that is more compatible with a Christian worldview.

In the fifth chapter of the volume, David Tavárez offers an interpretation of the connection between time (*biyé*) and space in Zapotec cosmological conceptions. This essay provides the first analysis of a correlation between the feasts in the 260-day ritual calendar and various cosmological locations, as articulated in the corpus of Zapotec texts. The northern Zapotec manuals established a spatiotemporal continuum that linked time in the 260-day calendar with locations in a three-tiered cosmos, in which Tavárez identifies a further nine levels above and nine below Earth. Therefore, this text contrasts with the position of other authors of the volume, in that Tavárez seeks to demonstrate that the notion of a cosmos structured in nine upper and nine lower layers was a model that remained from prehispanic times to the eighteenth century. This chapter is fundamental to understanding that in the American continent, conceptions of time and space were deeply intermingled, in contrast to the cosmological explanations of the world produced in Europe and ancient Near East.

The last chapter of this section, chapter 6 by Kerry Hull, moves from the colonial period to contemporary time. It is an ethnographic work of synthesis about the worldview of the Ch'orti'. The work was included in this section because it dialogues with the previous two chapters, showing the way in which Maya communities adapted and updated knowledge from different cultural contexts, which is in continuous transformation in response to specific historical phenomena. Hull shows how, over more than a hundred years, there has been a steep decline in native ceremonialism and traditional religious rites, which could be attributed to three factors: (1) missionary work by the Catholic church and by evangelical Christian groups, (2) a climate of fear surrounding the labeling of traditional practices as "witchcraft" (*brujería*), which often results in the murder of the practitioner, and (3) a "folklorization" of traditional Ch'orti' beliefs by the Guatemalan government.

The text offers a reconstruction of the cosmology of the Ch'orti', a Maya group of southern Guatemala who have in their mythology a vast array of

otherworld beings who live, travel, or manifest themselves in water. Therefore, in many circumstances water is feared and avoided since it is conceptually linked to the presence of supernaturals—some good, but most malicious. In Ch'orti' thought, water is the primary portal between realms and, as a consequence, it operates as a facilitator of negative events in the lives of the Ch'orti'. In addition, water figures prominently in the cosmogonic structure of the heavens as well as the earth. Creation and global destruction in Ch'orti' mythology are acts of separating, manipulating, and organizing water. Furthermore, certain astral bodies are closely associated with water, both as bringers of life-giving rains, but also as conduits for evil spirits who afflict humans on earth. Finally, there are other cultural conceptions associated with cosmological phenomena in Ch'orti' society that create a causal link between events in the sky and resulting effects in the daily affairs of the populace.

III. COMPLEXITY: BREAKING PARADIGMS OF COSMOLOGICAL CONCEPTIONS

As announced by the subtitle, this section offers paradigmatic cases that were brought into light when the authors tried to follow new guides to understanding alternative cosmologies as presented in the sources. The section opens with chapter 7, Alexander Tokovinine's contribution, the only one that focuses exclusively on the precolumbian period, and therefore, one of the richest diamonds of this compilation.

Tokovinine explores Classic Maya narratives, highlighting travels to distant places as crucial life-changing events in personal biographies and in histories of entire dynasties. The chapter begins by addressing the problem of defining spatial, temporal, and social distances from the perspective of Classic Maya inscriptions. This work reveals that the narratives of origins and pilgrimage evoke distances on different scales, from places in deep time and historic locations, beyond the confines of the Classic Maya world, to the nearby royal courts. Thus, Tokovinine shows the connection between geosocial paths and nets, emphasizing the importance of working with primary sources to understand the principles of operation that connect cosmological conceptions with deep history and lived experience.

The eighth chapter, by Katarzyna Mikulska, contributes to our understanding of the *imago mundi* as expressed by the ancient inhabitants of central Mexico in the Late Postclassic and early colonial periods. Based on the analysis of the otherworld or the supernatural spheres, Mikulska suggests that there was no clear distinction between “up” and “down” that could correlate with the

fundamental dialectical cosmological scheme associated with heaven and hell in Euro-Christian thinking. For the Nahua, the difference seems instead to be based on the opposition of the night sky, the region of divine and primordial time, with the day sky, region of human and structured time. In this conception, the world of the dead ancestors, an eternal source of life and fertility, can be situated in the night sky as well as in the interior of the earth, a time-space of dreams and the unconscious. As such, it can be referred to with the number “nine,” which leads to the second issue analyzed in this chapter: the possibility that numbers had semantic value and as such were used to name places and divinities.

The ninth and last work of the volume, by Johannes Neurath, posits a criticism of the tradition of studying indigenous worldviews as collective representations about nature. It questions the homogeneity of conceptions that supposedly are shared by the members of a society. Instead, it advocates for a treatment of Amerindian *Lebenswelten*. As pointed out by the author: “the simple idea to reconstruct the Huichol view of the world is problematic. Neither should cosmology be understood as a system of concepts about nature. Important aspects of the cosmos are made during ritual, so creation is an ongoing event that is not separable from ritual action.” In the study of *wixarika* worldview, one could start from a geographical contrast between “above” and “below,” between the *semidesert* in the east called Wirikuta and the fertile coast plains in the west. However, this elaborate system of analogies exhibits important asymmetries. By taking into account the analysis of relations and practices, Neurath seeks to demonstrate how important parts of the cosmos are not considered a natural given, but a product of ritual action. These parts are always unstable, and their existence ephemeral. Ritual action does not only create, it also destroys.

In sum, throughout its chapters this volume seeks to encourage colleagues and students to approach the subject of the Mesoamerican cosmos through new analytical, empirical, and methodological perspectives, so as to make the most of data from images, written texts, archaeological objects, and oral traditions that can provide information on these intriguing otherworldly spaces commonly identified as the three realms of the world.

NOTES

1. A concept that seems to be very useful to explain this dynamic is a type of arrangement identified by James Lockhart (1992) as cellular or modular organization. It implies an orderly, symmetrical, numerical succession of parts forming larger units.

2. See the examples of the cosmological configuration described by Tim Knab (1991, 2004) and Pedro Pitarch (1996) in their fieldwork in Nahua and Maya communities. A similar dynamic can be found in colonial descriptions such as the *Popol Wuj*.

3. Eduard Seler was influenced by the mythical-astronomical ideas of the “lunar school of mythological interpretation” led by another famous, contemporary German scholar, Ernst Siecke (Nicholson 1990).

4. For early forays into the discussion of religious syncretism in Mesoamerica, see Madsen (1960) and Thompson (1960).

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