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Isabel Laack

The (poetic) imagery of "flower and song" in Aztec religious expression: Correlating the semiotic modalities of language and pictorial writing

Yca ye ninapanao tlaocolxochicozcatlon nomac ōmanian elcicihuilizchimalxochitlon nic ehuaya in tlaocolcuicatl oo nicchalchiuhcozcahuicomana yectli yan cuicatl nicahuachxochilacatzoa y nochalchiuhuehueuh ilh. ytech nictlaxilotia in nocuicatzin in nicuicani ye niquincuilia in ilh chaneque o çaquantototl quetzaltzinitzcantototl teoquechol in on tla'toa quechol in quicecemeltia in tloq, etc.

Cantares Mexicanos, folio 5r[1]

[I dress myself in a sad-flower-necklace; in my hands lie my sighing-shield-flowers. I raise a sad song; I turquoise-necklace-offer up a good song. I pull a sprinkle of flowers from my turquoise huehuetl. I, the singer, hold up my dear song to the sky; I take it from the sky-inhabitants: the zacuan-bird, the quetzaltzinitzcan-bird, the divine quechol–the quechol who sings, who entertains the Ever-Present, (the Ever-near.)][2]

1 Introduction

The people currently known as the "Aztecs"[3] lived in Central Mexico from the 13th to the 16th centuries CE. By building on the rich cultural history of Mesoamerica, the Aztecs developed within only two centuries a flourishing civilization abundant with intellectual, religious, and aesthetic achievements. These achievements included a complex cosmovision (*Weltanschauung*) – that is, a complex

1 This transcription of the manuscript is taken from Bierhorst (1985: 146).
2 This translation is taken from Tomlinson (2007: 68).
3 The name "Aztecs" was initially coined by Alexander von Humboldt (Humboldt 1810) and was made widely popular by William H. Prescott (1843). Since then, the term has generally been used to refer to the (largely) Nahuatl-speaking ethnic groups that formed the "Aztec empire" in the last centuries before the Spanish conquest. In particular, the name refers to the Nahuas who lived in Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco, belonged to the ethnic subgroup of the Mexica, and controlled the "Aztec empire" both politically and militarily.

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view of the world and sense of reality – and elaborate semiotic systems to express cultural knowledge, among the latter an extensive and elegant oral tradition and a refined writing system. Judged from the surviving sources, the Nahuas had an inclination for imaginary thinking dense with symbols, metaphors, and sensory imagery. One of the most famous examples for this kind of Aztec poetic expression is the image of 'flower and song' (*in xochitl in cuicatl*). This image was prevalent in songs from the oral tradition that were alphabetically transcribed in the early colonial (ca. 1550–1580 CE) documents known as the *Cantares Mexicanos* (Bierhorst 1985) and the *Romances de los Señores de la Nueva España* (Bierhorst 2009). The language of this rather small corpus of songs is largely intractable for modern readers and uses very unfamiliar semiotic modes. Nevertheless, the image of 'flower and song' (*in xochitl in cuicatl*) has confidently been interpreted in modern scholarship as a metaphor standing for an indigenous philosophical approach, which favored poetic aestheticism as the best way to gain and express insights about the ultimate, transcendent layers of reality. Since there is little contextual information available helping us to interpret the songs, scholars trying to reach any understanding of them are left with few options other than referring to rather general interpretations of the Aztec cosmovision. Accordingly, interpretations might differ so widely that one wonders whether they are talking about the same material and cultural context. Scholars in search of tight philological analyses might quickly get dispirited with this discussion. Nevertheless, it would be a shame to disregard the material completely for that reason.

In this paper, I would like to present an alternative interpretation of the image of "flower and song," an interpretation that is based on recent scholarly reconstructions of central facets of the cosmovision and ontology of Aztec culture in the time immediately before the Spanish conquest. Necessarily, this will be a rather abstract discussion, as well as truncated due to the required brevity of this paper.[4] In terms of epistemology, my alternative interpretation does not claim to have any better access to Aztec affect, sense, and thought than those interpretations offered before. It is simply a new attempt to search for cross-cultural historical semiotic understanding, a thought experiment inspired by reflection on potential Eurocentrisms in the earlier interpretations.

My core argument is that "flower and song" was used by the Aztec singers not as a metaphor referring to transcendent layers of reality but as a metonymic, indexical reference to sensorily experienceable, immanent principles of reality as Aztec culture perceived them. As the two elements "flower" and "song" were

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4 Readers in search of a more detailed discussion are referred to my forthcoming book on the subject to be published in 2019 in the *Numen Book Series* (Brill).

considered as indexes of the same quality, the semiotic modalities of language and writing that deployed them were understood not as re-presentations but as direct presentations of the perceived principles of reality. Thus, the spoken and the written sign were ascribed the same ontological immediacy to reality. Based on this interpretation, to distinguish the ontological immediacy of speech from that of writing, or the poetic from the referential function of language, turns out to be an inappropriate division deriving from colonialism. Consequently, Aztec semiotic sense provides a fundamental challenge to dominant modern semiotic ideologies by resisting the dichotomy of rational versus poetic and performative discourse, as much as it resists the dominant modern dichotomy that sharply demarcates scientific from mythical, magical, or religious discourse. Readers open to an interpretational experiment of this kind are invited to follow me on the journey.

2 Introducing Aztec culture

The Aztec civilization rose quickly to political power and wide cultural influence in Mesoamerica, only to fall within just a couple of years through the Spanish conquest of Mexico. In the late 12th and early 13th centuries, Nahuatl-speaking groups had migrated from their semi-mythical home-place of *Aztlan* in the northern deserts into the Central Highlands and founded many small, increasingly competitive city-states. Among these were the twin-cities of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco, founded by the Mexica ethnic group around 1325 CE on a swampy island in the western part of Lake Texcoco in the Basin of Mexico, where Mexico City is now located.[5] Within the next century, the Mexica gained increasing influence in the valley of Mexico, based on their military prowess and strategic political skills. Allying with the two neighboring towns of Texcoco and Tlacopan, the Mexica established a strong new military confederacy in 1428 CE, the *excan tlatoloyan* or 'tribunal of three places' commonly called the "Triple Alliance" in English. Following many successful military campaigns within and beyond the valley of Mexico, the alliance soon rose to become a powerful hegemonic empire across large parts of Mesoamerica that controlled its subjects indirectly (Davies 1973: 62–85). The empire's main interest did not lie in political but in economic dominance, ensuring extensive tax or tribute payments and controlling an impressive market system (see Hassig 1985; Berdan and Smith 1996).

Within this socio-political context, the Mexica developed a rich culture, which combined their nomadic Chichimec legacy with traditions from the earlier Toltec

5 For the early history of the Aztec civilization, see Davies (1973: 3–85).

civilization. Thus, the new Aztec civilization was quintessentially Mesoamerican but had also acquired a characteristic, unique identity and a sense of mission as the People of the Sun (see Caso 1958). It was based on highly advanced political, economic, and educational systems and a complex social structure, which supported many intellectual professionals: scribes and historians; poets, orators, and interpreters of books; astronomers, astrologers and philosophers (Sahagún 1961). Its cosmovision was decidedly complex and diverse, placing its emphasis on aesthetic expression and pragmatic matters rather than on intellectual speculation. Believing themselves to be living in the unstable cosmos of the Fifth Sun, the Aztecs felt it their duty to constantly balance the dynamism of complementary forces in order to maintain the flow of cosmic energy. Humanity was nourished by the sun and the earth, and it needed to nourish the earth in return and to feed the sun to ensure its continuing movement (López Austin 2008b: 35). The Aztec cosmovision was heavily materialist, regarding human beings as part of the cosmos living in manifold interrelationships with the land, the skies, and their fellow inhabitants of the Fifth Sun, such as plants, animals, and the many deities dwelling in everything. In this way, what we would call "religion" was intertwined with every aspect of human life, including agriculture and diet, health and medicine, social structure and political motivations, historiography, and cultural identity. Many different forms of rituals formed an important part of everyday life, both on the level of small-scale personal rites and in form of the large-scale, public ritual performances held each month of the solar year (see, e.g., Quiñones Keber 2002).

The Aztec civilization knew many forms of cultural expression, among them was a very strong oral tradition. Elegant speech and rhetoric were taught in the *calmecac* and *telpochcalli* schools (see Calnek 1988), and the nobility were expected to show great virtuosity in the strongly formalized system of elegant speech (León-Portilla 1969: 27; Clendinnen 1991: 220; Lockhart 1993: 375). Classical Nahuatl was a complex language with refined linguistics and sophisticated rhetorical expression providing an extraordinarily rich reservoir of cultural and religious knowledge. It used many riddles and idioms and a high amount of metaphors and imagery. Some of the most beautiful formal speeches and prayers were recorded by Nahua intellectuals working with Fray Bernardino de Sahagún in the middle of the 16th century and survive in book six of Sahagún's *Florentine Codex* (Sahagún 1969). The alphabetical transcriptions of songs in the *Florentine Codex* and in the previously noted manuscripts *Cantares Mexicanos* and *Romances de los Señores de la Nueva España* are our main sources for the rich oral tradition of the Aztecs.

The Aztecs used many forms of visual communication including architecture, sculpture, jewelry, painting on linens, decoration of clothing and costumes, and feather working. They also used a complex writing system represented in the

application of polychrome paints on flat surfaces, most importantly in screenfold books made from indigenous paper called *amatl*. Judging by comments in colonial sources (e.g., Díaz del Castillo 2008: 169), complete libraries were filled with works of writing. *In tlilli in tlapalli* ‘the red and black [ink]’, the indigenous expression for “writing” and “book,” was regarded as the foundation of wisdom and cultural knowledge (Sahagún 1969: 258).[6] After the Spanish conquest, European literacy was introduced, including not only alphabetic writing but also a complete system of genres and forms of written expression. Following a phase of creative syncretism, such colonial systems gradually replaced indigenous semiotic modalities. Only a few manuscripts painted in the traditional style of the Central Highlands – called the “Postclassic International Style” (Boone and Smith 2003: 186–192) – have survived until the present day. Among them are tribute records and property plans, ethnic histories and genealogies, calendars and astronomical measurements, cosmologies, and handbooks for rituals and divination.[7]

In contrast to other Mesoamerican writing systems from earlier cultures or other regions (see Marcus 1992) – with Mayan writing the most famous among them – Aztec writing was not phonographic: rather than notating the sounds of language, it recorded visual imagery. Aztec pictorial writing was primarily based on the use of pictograms and ideograms. In brief, pictograms depicted material objects, such as a house or a stone, through iconic representations. Ideograms, on the other hand, visualized abstract concepts in a conventionalized form based on natural association or metonymy, either through the combination of several pictograms (a burning temple for “conquest,” or a shield and spears for “war”) or through conventionalized abstract signs (the concepts of “day” or “movement”) (Boone 2000: 33; see Figure 1). These individual or compound signs were painted on the flat surface of the pages of codices made from paper, or on *lienzos* (large sheets of cotton) and *tiras* (long, mostly rolled pieces of animal hide or paper). They were arranged in an intricate manner, forming a visual grammar, and depicting narrative syntax and complex concepts of time and history (Leibsohn 1994; Boone 2000; see Figure 2). The surviving traditional manuscripts can be grouped into different genres: cartographic representations for migration stories, time-line frames for annals, event-based structures

6 See also the powerful Mexica legend about the loss of all books and thus all cultural knowledge during the migration (Sahagún 1961: 189–191).

7 Some of the most elaborate and beautiful manuscripts are from the so-called *Borgia Group* painted in the Mixteca-Puebla region (e.g., the *Codex Borgia*, the *Codex Féjerváry-Mayer*, and the *Codex Vaticanus 3773 B*), from the *Mixtec Group* (e.g., the *Codex Vindobonensis*, and the *Codex Zouche-Nutall*), from the *Aztec Group* (e.g., the *Codex Borbonicus,* the *Tonalamatl Aubin,* and the *Codex Boturini*), and the early colonial *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2* (see Cline 1972–1975).

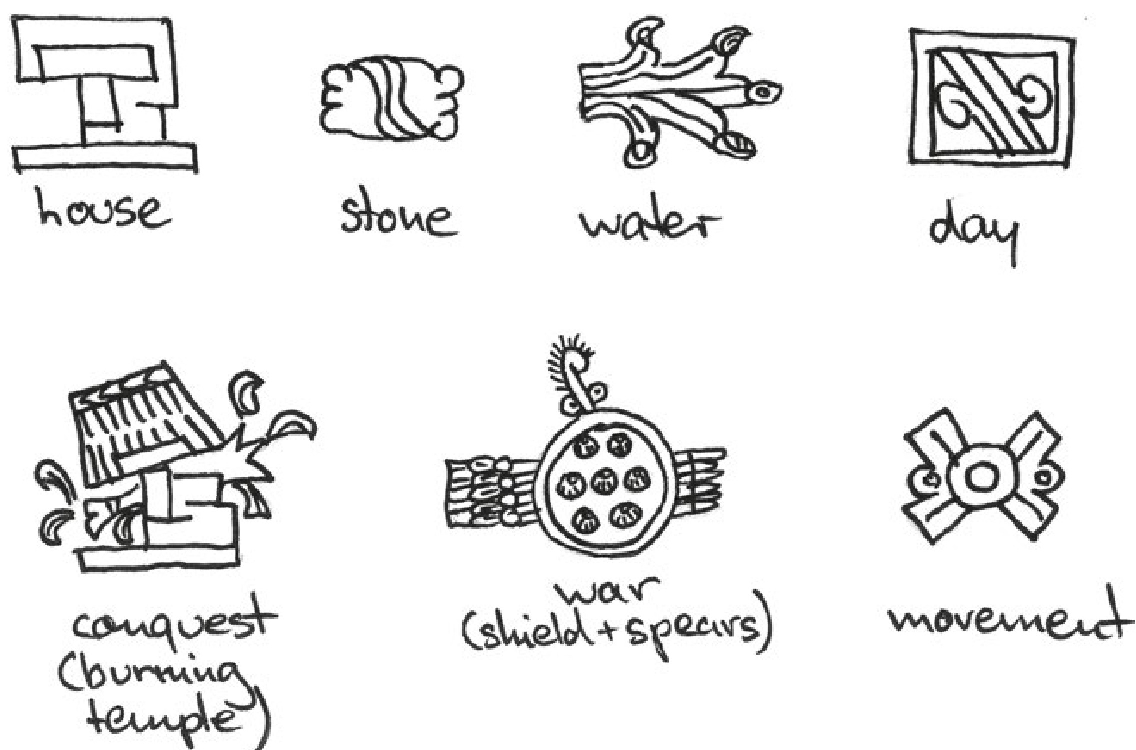

Figure 1: Basic Aztec signs.
Note: Drawings by Isabel Laack after Codices Mendoza and Borbonicus.

for individual biographies, and table-style almanacs for divinatory purposes (Boone 2000: 64–86; see Figure 3).

This pictorial style of writing constitutes a highly evolved and complex communication system working with visual imagery, space, and colors. As such, many paintings are similar not only to European painting and graphic arts but also to European tables and figures, or mathematical or musical notion. The divination codices, for example, depict graphically the relationships within the sacred calendar between the different variables of the cosmos and the deities. They also show the correspondences between "units and cycles of time and the meanings that adhere to them" (Boone 2007: 3). According to art historian Elizabeth H. Boone (2007: 68), the structure of different sections of the divination almanacs is similar to graphics used in modern chemistry, logic, and statistical analysis: some are organized in sequential lists, others in tables constituted of multiplied and layered lists, and still others in diagrams formed in a particular shape (e.g., the shape of a deerskin; see Figure 4). Accordingly, Boone describes these almanacs as "equivalent to our books of philosophy, theoretical physics, astronomy, and astrology" (2007: 3). Like the notational systems of the modern European sciences, the almanacs simplified, abstracted, marked, labelled, and schematized the observed complex

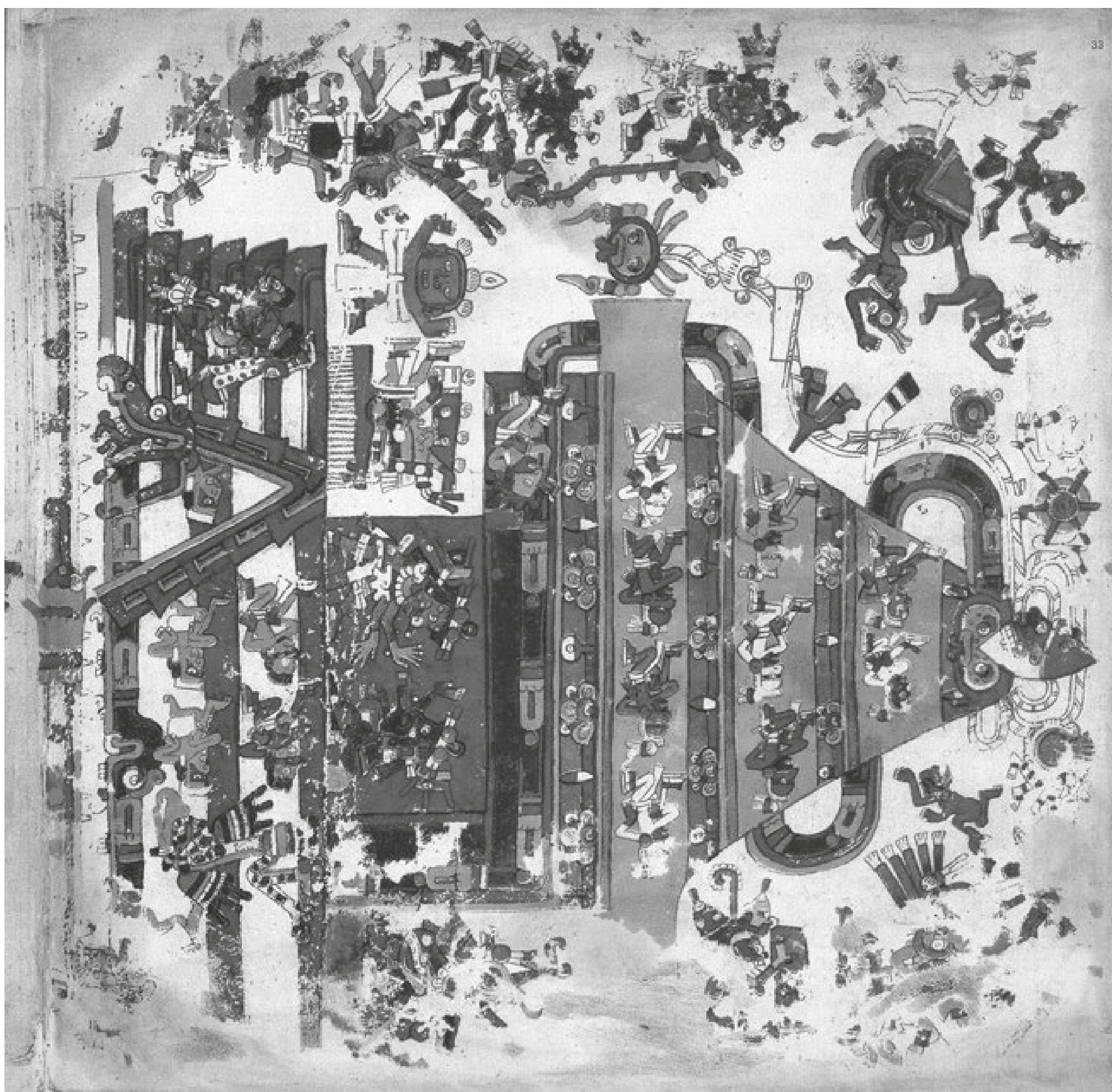

Figure 2: Codex Borgia, folio 33.
Note: 1898 Loubat facsimile edition. Digital reproduction provided by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Thomas J. Watson Library, New York City.

phenomena of nature. Several pictorial strategies were employed to depict this knowledge about the cosmos in lucid structures (Boone 2007: 238). In complex tables, “a great quantity of precise information” was presented “in a structure that facilitates ready inspection of individual data and quick comparison between potentially related phenomena.” This was a very efficient system of recording knowledge, which captured diverse nuances of cosmic relationships “impossible to render in words and sentences” (Boone 2007: 75). As such, the divination codices depicted the complex confluence of divine forces in form of a cognitive map of time, tide, place, and direction, which helped the diviner to navigate these currents and to guide proper living (Maffie 2014: 427).

Figure 3: Divination Almanac, Codex Borgia, folio 6.
Note: 1898 Loubat facsimile edition. Digital reproduction provided by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Thomas J. Watson Library, New York City.

3 The imagery of "flower and song" in the Aztec oral tradition

The two early colonial manuscripts, *Cantares Mexicanos* and *Romances de los Señores de la Nueva España*, are alphabetical transcriptions in Latin script of about 120 Nahuatl songs. Although the transcriptions lack information about the musical and performative aspects of the songs, they nevertheless tell us many things about the linguistic dimensions of the Nahuatl oral tradition.

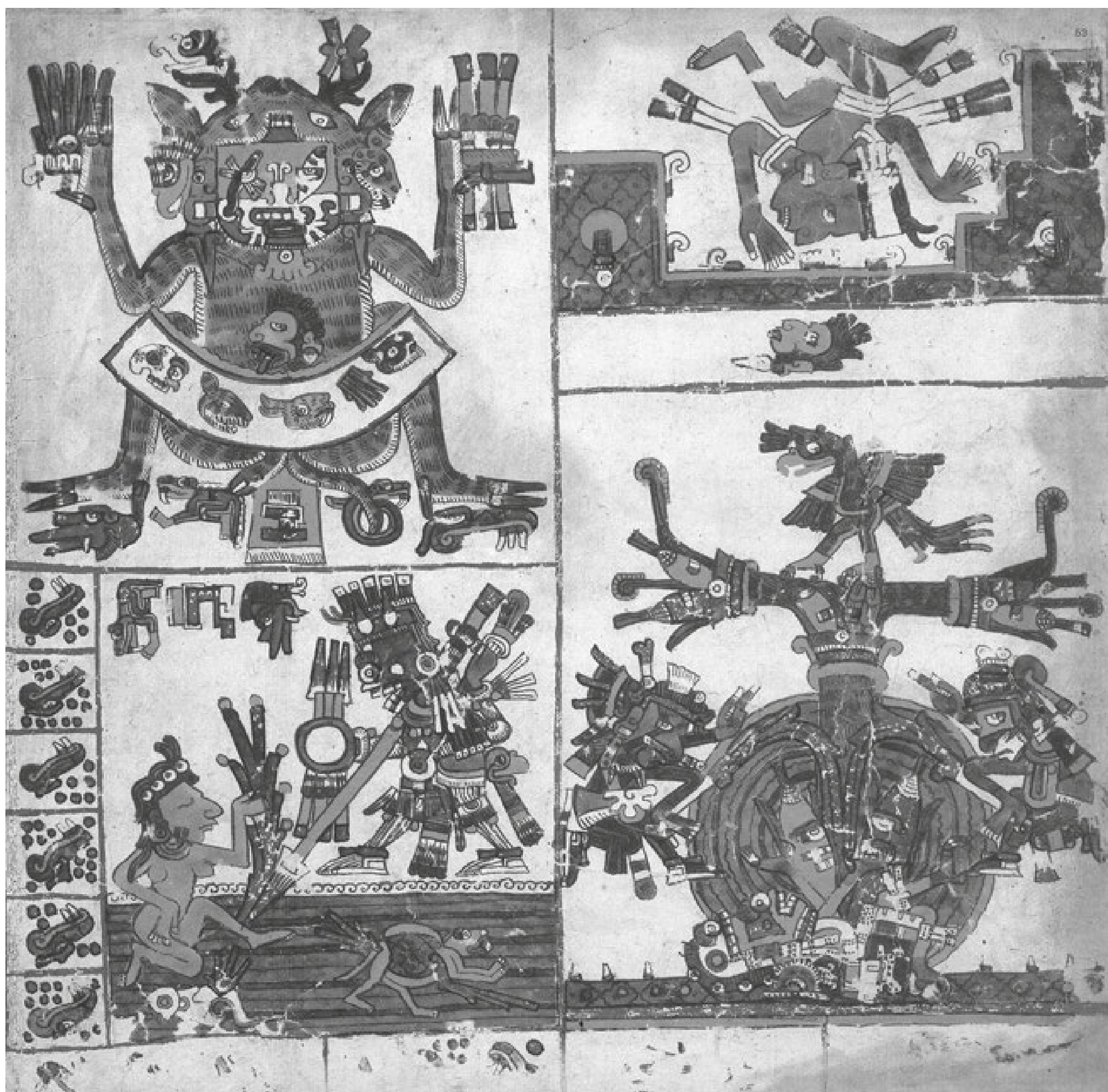

Figure 4: Deerskin Almanac, Codex Borgia, folio 53.
Note: 1898 Loubat facsimile edition. Digital reproduction provided by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Thomas J. Watson Library, New York City.

The original versions of the surviving copies of the two manuscripts stem from late 16th-century Central Mexico, with the *Cantares Mexicanos* compiled loosely and the *Romances* organized in a European-style anthology. The Nahuatl songs in the manuscripts were not only collected some decades after the conquest but also contain many references to post-conquest dates and Christian ideas. Whether they nevertheless present an “authentic” pre-Hispanic oral tradition that survived unchanged apart from some interpolations (León-Portilla 1992a and 2011: 196–208) or whether they are expressions of truly post-conquest sentiments within a nativist revitalization movement (Bierhorst 1985: 3–5), has been hotly debated in scholarship. Regardless of these different scholarly viewpoints, the

post-colonial origin of the songs and some of their contents is beyond dispute, while fundamental characteristics in both style and subject clearly stem from the pre-Hispanic tradition (Lockhart 1993: 398–399; Gruzinski 2002: 150–179).

Reconstructing the songs' performative context from several sources permits the inference that they were most probably sung and danced as parts of larger rituals and ceremonies in both public and private settings. They were performed with drum and other musical accompaniments and embedded in multi-media performances. During these performances, the ritual participants also read manuscripts and sheets painted in the traditional writing style and – in their nature as material objects – handled them ritually (Bierhorst 1985: 72–80, 129; Bierhorst 2009: 44–45; Tomlinson 2007: 57–61, 87–90; Lee 2008: 136–142). The transcribed song texts contain many non-translatable syllables and vocables. For example the *yehuaya* and *aya* in the following lines:

> *Aquin nehua nipapatlantinemi yehuaya notlatlalia nixochincuicã cuicapapalotl aya*[8]
>
> [Who am I? I am soaring about, yehuaya! I compose; I flower-sing. It is a song-butterfly, aya.][9]

These vocables were most probably signs standing in a "liminal position between non-linguistic cry and semi-semantic word" and not only provided a "special rhythmic or melodic emphasis" but also had "exclamatory impact" and "substantial affective weight" (Tomlinson 2007: 84–85). In these vocables, the song itself is materialized: "The performer of the *cantares*, who so often sang a song about his song, could also sing the song sung about" (Tomlinson 2007: 87). According to Gary Tomlinson's analysis, the vocables point towards an indigenous language theory that regards sound as the (re)presentation of auditory layers of the essential principles of reality.

Regarding their format, the songs are divided in stanzas, strophes, and refrains, and show many pairings of verses (Tomlinson 2007: 54–61). Independent, self-contained, non-metrical verses of varied length are symmetrically arranged to form a coherent whole. There is generally no narrative element, nor any development of verses building toward a logical conclusion (Lockhart 1993: 394–396). Rather, verses are usually arranged around a center in terms of theme, feeling, or character: "The individual strophes often seem, indeed, to orbit around the theme or set of themes of the song they make up rather than pursuing a progressive elaboration, narrative or lyrical, of the topics at hand" (Tomlinson 2007: 61). Nahuatl linguist James Lockhart

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8 *Cantares Mexicanos*, folio 11v. This transcription of the manuscript is taken from Bierhorst (1985: 166).

9 This translation is taken from Tomlinson (2007: 69).

characterized this type of structural organization as a "cellular-modular organization" (1993: 439), which, according to his analyses, was present not only in the language, but also in other parts of Nahua culture (Lockhart 1993: 419, see also 294–296, 437–441). This agglutinative, "conceptual parataxis" of Nahuatl at the level of its larger structural organization also manifests at the level of individual words and sentences; most characteristically in the use of a phenomenon called "hypertrophism" (Bierhorst 2009: 11), which forms many different ideas (and "words" in the European sense) into complex compounds. These compounds often combine subjects or objects with actions and colors and materials. In the example given above:

nicchalchiuhcozcahuicomana 'I turquoise-necklace-offer up' (Tomlinson 2007: 68)

tlaocolxochicozcatlon 'a sad-flower-necklace' (Tomlinson 2007: 68).

Other striking examples:

chachalchiuhquetzalitztonameyo 'the green-season-flower-songs turquoise-jade-shine' (Tomlinson 2007: 75)

mochipahualizichpochaçucenaxochicelticayotzin 'your pure and maidenly lily-flower freshness' [a salutation to Mary] (Bierhorst 2009: 11)

The language of the songs of the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances* is generally very dense in metaphors, symbolism, and imagery, with a certain set of stock images of flowers, songs, birds, and precious materials recurring "constantly through the corpus, mixed and varied in kaleidoscopic fashion" (Lockhart 1993: 394). The songs show also a strong incantational style with a high frequency of verbs referring to activities of spreading, descending, and summoning, in which "figures of authority," i.e., historical kings and military leaders, are called upon (Bierhorst 2009: 25–27, 44–45). The language of the songs is very similar to the *nahuallatolli* genre as it was recorded in the 17th century by Ruiz de Alarcón (1984) and Jacinto de la Serna (1953). The *nahuallatolli* was the strongly ritualized language of the shamans, diviners, and healers, and was used in ritual invocations (see López Austin 1967). It was "the language of the hidden," which addressed the hidden, yet very real and material nature of existing entities that was sheltered from everyday perception (López Austin 1988: 346). In its obscureness and rich complexity, this language was thought to reveal better than everyday language the essential quality of the entity addressed, and to be able to manipulate these forces (Gruzinski 1993: 158–161; Boone 2007: 4). The *nahuallatolli* is sometimes called a language of "magic" because of its strong formulaic character, invocational power, and

manipulative intention. However, this European category is more misleading than helpful for understanding this phenomenon of Nahua culture. The *nahuallatolli* was believed to address directly the essential nature of things with the shamans being able to "work" on this "invisible substance" using their own "invisible and well-developed animistic bodies" (López Austin 1993: 153).

Nowadays, texts in the *nahuallatolli* remain almost untranslatable. The language used in the *Cantares Mexicanos* and in the *Romances* is similarly difficult to understand for non-native readers/listeners, since its rich imagery evokes a cultural habitus and an experience of life and of the world that is far from our reach (Lockhart 1993: 374–375; Rabasa 2011: 184). Some of the images, however, draw on cross-culturally understandable experiences and might give us an impression of how the imagery worked. The image of the (very beautiful) plumage of the Quetzal bird, for example, was used to refer to the concept of beauty; a necklace of precious stones was used for lineage and descent; and eagles and ocelots were images for brave warriors (León-Portilla 1980: 39). Many of these images come in pairs like "flower and song," but there were also quartets, quadruplets, and "necklaces of multiple images, all hovering luminously about the neck of a concept or thing" (Gingerich 1987: 97).

Regarding content, the main themes of ethnic pride, battle, martial glory, friendship, the refinements of nobility, and the divine were expressed with a lyricism of flowers, butterflies, birds, singing, music, and precious stones, and with many references to the ephemerality of everything that exists (Tomlinson 2007: 62–63). In some of the songs, the nature of music and song is explicitly reflected upon,[10] most prominently in the first four songs of the *Cantares Mexicanos*. Roughly sketched, "flower and song" or flower-songs (*in xochitl in cuicatl*) are created by the deities for human enjoyment as a compensation for the nourishment that humans provide to the deities through their death by war or sacrifice. Poets travel between the skies and bring the flowers down onto the earth, where they create a temporal flower land (*Xochitlalpan*). In this land, the flowers are sung as songs and soothe the sadness of Nahua nobles while these reflect on the deaths of their comrades and their own future sacrifice (Lee 2008: 164–167, 172):

> *Nocontimaloaya nocontlamachtiao xochiteyolquima cuicatlā poyomapoctli ic ye auian ye noyollo, nihualyolcuecuechahuaya nic ihnecuia ahuiacaxocomiqui in noyolia nic yhnecuia yectli ya xochitla netlamachtiloyan xochiyeihuinti noyolia.*

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10 See, regarding the issue of this form of linguistic reflexivity, Aurélie Névot's chapter in this volume.

> [I exalt him, rejoice him with heart-pleasing flowers in this place of song. With narcotic fumes my heart is pleasured. I soften my heart, inhaling them. My soul grows dizzy with the fragrance, inhaling good flowers in this place of enjoyment. My soul is drunk with flowers.] (Bierhorst 1985: 140–141)

The imagery of “flower and song” (*in xochitl in cuicatl*) used so prevalently in many of the songs was interpreted by Garibay and his student Miguel León-Portilla as a root metaphor of Aztec culture, as a fundamental *difrasismo*[11] referring to the concept of “poetry.” In León-Portilla’s view (e.g., 1980: 44), the songs express a highly philosophical and spiritual sensitivity about the ephemerality of earthly life. Facing the evanescent nature of all things beautiful on earth, the minds of the melancholic poet-kings who wrote the songs are soothed exactly by this beauty of the flowers, called down with songs from the heavens, and by the grace of friendship among comrades. This beauty and grace can soothe them because it metaphorically speaks of the existence of an ultimate and everlasting realm. According to León-Portilla, the songs reflect on these philosophical issues and express a type of poetical aestheticism; that is, an epistemology of *in xochitl in cuicatl*, in which only poetry might truly capture and express this transcendent nature of reality.

Nahuatl specialist John Bierhorst, however, fundamentally challenged this interpretation of the imagery of “flower and song.” In his view, it casts “a glow of humanism over Mexico’s ancient past” (Bierhorst 2009: viii) and takes “the songs to be poetic ruminations of old kings stationed in flowery gardens – like shepherds stepped out of the *Eclogues* interlarded with firsthand reportage from pre-Cortésian battlefields” (Bierhorst 2009: vii). Bierhorst understood the songs as expressions of a post-conquest revitalization movement, in which the spirits of dead heroic ancestors are sung down from their dwelling places in the skies. The flowers and songs summoned from heaven to earth in many of the songs are only metaphors for the ghost spirits of the ancestors raining and whirling down, literally summoned down on earth through the performance (Bierhorst 1985: 3–5, 22–23). As part of complex musical and danced performances, the songs were thus actually a fully blown “ghost-song ritual” (Bierhorst 1985: 16–34). Most probably, Bierhorst was inspired for this interpretation by the 19th-century indigenous Ghost Dance movement in the North American Great Plains, with mock-battles remembering glorious past victories.

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11 The term *difrasismo* (roughly translated in English as “two-phrases-device”) was coined by the Nahuatl linguist Angel M. Garibay Kintana to refer to the very common stylistic device of paired images in Nahuatl. In his view, the two combined phrases metaphorically stood for a new, third meaning (1940: 112).

4 Visual imagery in Aztec pictorial writing

Aztec pictorial writing recorded visual imagery rather than the sounds of language; and the imagery used in spoken Nahuatl is directly visible in the pictorial texts. For example, the *difrasismo* 'water and mountain' (for *altepetl* or 'settlement/town') was depicted through the (stylized) visual appearance of water and a mountain (see Figure 5). The imagery used for the concept of "authority" was a ruler sitting on a mat. This image could not only be used as a figure of speech or a shorthand visual sign but could also be applied to express more complex thoughts, actions, or happenings. In an image painted in Sahagún's *Florentine Codex*, for example, the mat underneath a sitting ruler is woven from snakes disentangling and going off into different directions (see Figure 6). According

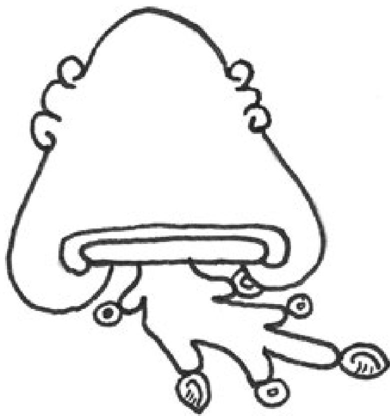

Figure 5: Altepetl, 'settlement/town'.
Note: Drawing by Isabel Laack after Codex Boturini.

Figure 6: Ruler sitting on serpent mat.
Note: Drawing by Isabel Laack after Sahagún 1979: 3, book 11, folio 84r.

to Emily Umberger’s analysis, the image probably shows a ruler losing control of his subjects, with the individual serpents representing “the different strands of society that only a powerful ruler could coordinate” (Umberger 2007: 16). Similarly, imagery from important myths was used in historical narratives to express certain key concepts as they appeared in the myths; for example, the story of Huiztilopochtli and Coyolxauhqui provided imagery denoting political and social success and failure (Umberger 2007: 14). In this way, the imagery of “flower and song” is also used in the pictorial writings – though not as prominently as suggested by León-Portilla, who interpreted *in xochitl in cuicatl* as a poetic aestheticism and the one fundamental Aztec philosophical approach.

One of the most beautiful examples of the pictorial image “flower and song” is found on the second (surviving) page of the *Codex Borbonicus* (Anders et al. 1991), an early divination almanac from the Aztec tradition painted in traditional style (see Figure 7). Here, two human figures with animal features are depicted, most probably ritual participants incorporating deities. They are shown in a performative context surrounded by ritual implements and playing musical instruments such as the drum. From their mouths issue both simple speaking scrolls and elaborate ornate volutes that combine the pictorial signs for “flower” and “song.” Most probably, this image presents a situation of performative singing as reflected upon in the songs of the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances*. As such, the concept of performative singing and “flower and song” is visually depicted in the pictorial writing system. In contrast to most forms of (modern and print) phonographic writing, the actual visual appearance of the signs and their spatial arrangement, as much as the particular combination of forms and colors, are highly relevant for the meaning of the respective image (Gruzinski 1993: 13; Leibsohn 2009: 7). Thus, the efficacy of each text depended not only on the “accuracy in recording concepts and facts,” but also “its poetics, balance, and graphic execution” (Boone 2011: 197).

5 “Flower and song” as depictions of immanent reality

In the following section, I present an interpretation of the Nahuatl imagery of “flower and song” as used in the two semiotic modalities of language and writing that fundamentally differs from both León-Portilla’s and Bierhorst’s interpretations. In my view, this image does not refer to the summoned ghosts of heroic ancestors nor is it a metaphor for the idea of poetics as a form of philosophical aestheticism. Instead, I interpret it as an expression of an implicit cosmovision

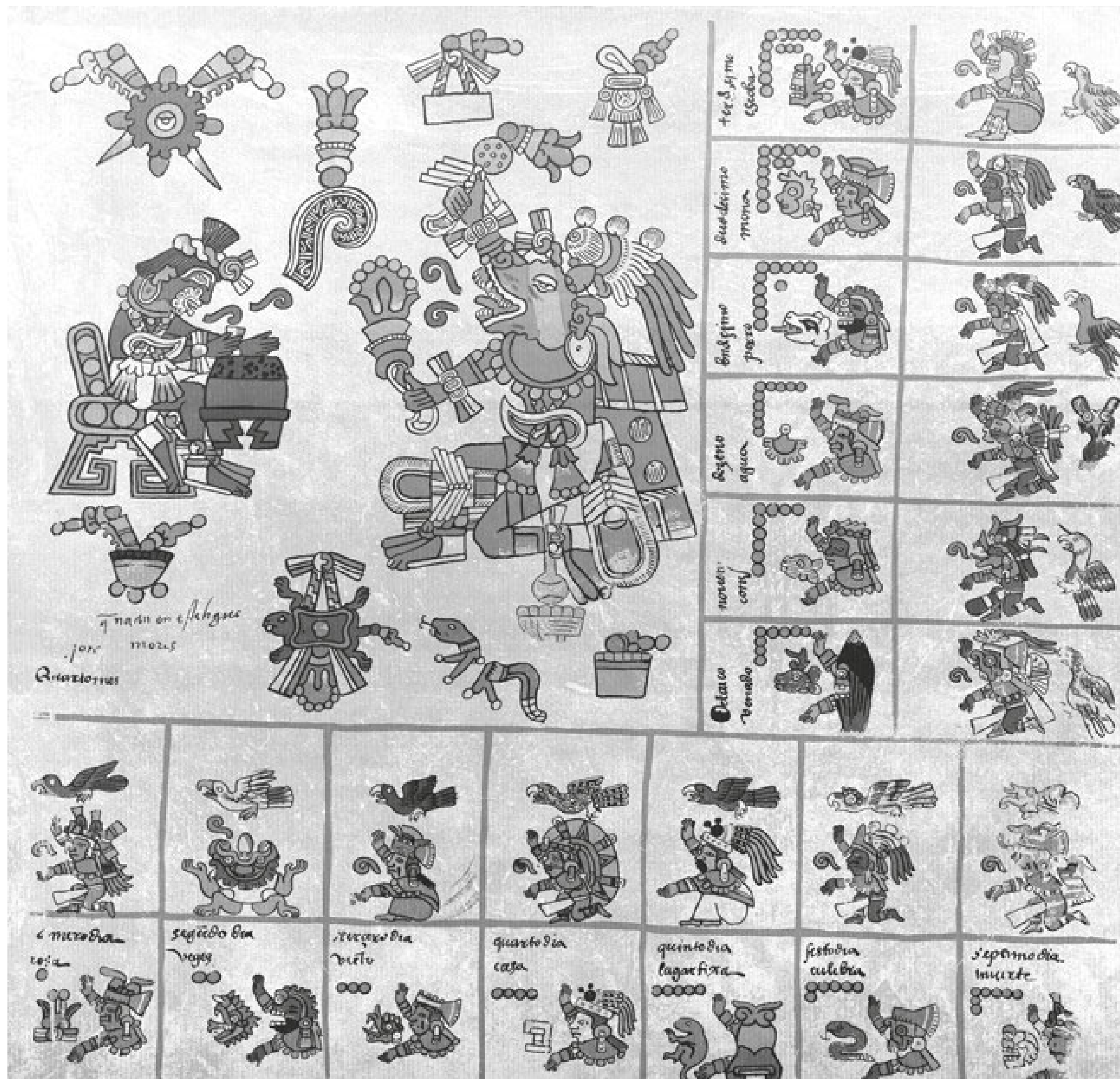

Figure 7: Codex Borbonicus, folio 2.
Note: 1899 Hamy facsimile edition. Digital reproduction by Isabel Laack.

and epistemology working not as a metaphor but as a metonymy or, more correctly, as an index. As such, the combination of "flowers" and "songs" points toward the Aztec idea that the many sensorily experienceable layers of reality were deeply interconnected and were manifestations of particular divine forces understood as the underlying principles of reality.

One of the greatest dangers in interpreting the meaning of "flower and song" is to bring in European horticultural associations, for instance by imagining settings of pastoral idyll and projecting European images of floral beauty (see Bierhorst 2009: 53–58). Botanical images and garden symbolism were important in Aztec and other Mesoamerican cultures, yet they worked differently than in Europe. Aztec culture pursued a defined "cult of brilliance" focused on sparkling

light and blossoming, fragrant flowers. The image of the garden most fully expressed this love for things of extraordinary, blooming, flaming, brilliantly shining, and radiating beauty, and stood as an image for intensified reality; it expressed, that is,

> a transformational aspect of the here and now, a sacred aspect of reality that one called into being by manipulating this garden imagery in ritual contexts, particularly through song. In this symbolic garden, one came into direct contact with the creative, life-giving forces of the universe and with the timeless world of deities and ancestors. The garden is a shimmering place filled with divine fire; the light of the sun reflects from the petals of flowers and the iridescent feathers of birds; human beings – the souls of the dead or the ritually transformed living – are themselves flowers, birds, and shimmering gems. One's individual identity dissolves as one becomes part of the sacred ecosystem. This garden is not a place of reward for the righteous, existing on some transcendent plane of reality separate from the material world. It is a metaphor for life on earth, a metaphor that ritual transforms into reality by asserting that, in fact, this is the way the world is. (Burkhart 1992: 89)

Within this imagery, both flowers and songs were regarded as the "ultimate aesthetic achievement" of their respective realms (i.e., plant life and the use of language) (Knab 1986: 46) and were ontologically deeply interrelated, expressing the same principle of reality for different realms, according to indigenous understanding. In my reading, they were not, as Burkhart stated, understood as a *metaphor* for any transcendent, ultimate and imperishable spiritual world; rather, they were regarded as essentially immanent elements of the cosmos characterized by blossoming and withering, by earthly ephemerality. As such, the garden was considered metonymically as the quintessential expression of material reality and earthly life characterized by the continuing cycle of life and death, into which the Aztecs hoped to dissolve themselves. Let me explain in more detail how I reached this interpretation.

Jacinto de la Serna recorded a Nahuatl term that he translated as "metaphor": *nahualtocaitl*, a 'disguised, hidden name' (see Heyden 1986: 35). This term refers to the *nahuallatolli*, the language of the *nahualli*-shamans, and to the idea that language might reveal the inner quality of an entity. Based on analyses by Alfredo López Austin (1967, 1993: 153) and Serge Gruzinski (1993: 158–161), I think it is safe to say that the *nahuallatolli* was most probably regarded as a natural language with a strong "connection" between the linguistic signs and "that which they signify" and a "special relationship of fitness to their referents" based on iconicity (Yelle 2013: 61). In Tomlinson's view, the Aztecs regarded the signifier as closely connected with the signified, in a "metonymic circle connecting words to song, song to world, and world to words" (2007: 78, also 27). The act of singing was seen in unity with material things (Tomlinson 2007: 64), and the

pictorial flowery song volutes manifested this "integrated, materialized indigenous world" (Tomlinson 1996: 275). While credit must be given to Tomlinson for revealing the Aztec belief in the naturalness of linguistic signs, I attempt to go much further with my analysis of Aztec ontology based on an interpretation of the fundamental ontological structure of the cosmos of the Fifth Sun. For this, I first need to refine our understanding of the use of "flower and song" as natural indexes.

This idea stands in stark contrast to common European understandings of metaphor, which have been applied to the Nahuatl *difrasismo*, for example by Garibay. According to these understandings, a metaphor does not express literal truths about the world and is thus generally not used in science, mathematics, or philosophy, but only in rhetoric and poetics. A metaphor merely compares the thing it designates with something else from a different domain that shows similar (but not identical) features; it projects one experiential domain onto a different one (see Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 119–122; Barcelona 2003: 3–4; Lakoff and Johnson 2011: 13, 179). In a metonym, by contrast, the thing it designates stands in a direct physical or causal relationship with the entity it names, as when a part of an entity is used to designate the whole (Lakoff and Johnson 2011: 47–51, 73).[12] The imagery of "flower and song" did not function as a metaphor for a third concept (the ultimate, transcendent layer of reality), comparing transcendency with flowers and songs because all share the feature of immateriality and thus are similar to one another. Rather, the relationship between flowers and songs was considered metonymical and based on contiguity; that is, flowers and songs were regarded as having a direct physical relationship because they shared the same essential quality. Thus, the Aztec imagery of "flower and song" was used not just as a rhetorical device (like a metaphor), but "flowers" and "songs" were both understood as natural indexes of the same essential quality. In terms of Peircean semiotics,[13] both flowers and songs were believed to be related by spatio-temporal contiguity. This relationship, rather than being a symbolic one based on similarity, was regarded as an existential, natural one, like smoke being a natural index of fire or like the turning weathervane being a natural index of wind.

This interpretation of Nahuatl imagery rests on a particular reconstruction of their general sense of reality and cosmovision.[14] The Aztecs believed themselves

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12 The latter is usually considered a synecdoche.

13 I follow Robert A. Yelle's (2013: 28–29) reading of Peirce's semiotics.

14 This reconstruction abstracts from and generalizes the dominant cosmovision of the Nahua elite living in and around Tenochtitlan at the eve of the Spanish conquest in the early 16th century. Judged by the diversity of the material present even in the few surviving sources, the cosmovision

to be living in the cosmic era of the Fifth Sun, which was characterized by the constant movement of complementary forces through time and space (López Austin 1988: 52–68; see also López Austin 2008a: 43–44). Everything existing in the cosmos was influenced by this motion, including human beings in their physical materialities, personalities, emotional experiences, and concrete behaviors (López Austin 1988: 181–236; Martínez González 2011: 27–30). According to the interpretation of the leading Mesoamericanist, Alfredo López Austin (1988: 383), these forces were considered to be the fundamental principles of reality, both on a level graspable by human physical senses and on a level going beyond human sensory understanding. Appearing in complementary pairs that constantly counterbalance one another, these forces were also personified as deities within an impressively large and intricate pantheon. The many deities with their distinctive personalities were understood as the embodiments of particular forces and qualities as experienced by the Aztecs. As such, these deities presented, for example, the forces of elements such as rain, water, and the sun, the forces of life-spending and death-bringing energies, and the forces of human behavior patterns such as war or even individual emotions (see Nicholson 1971: 408–431). These divine qualities manifested in the many different layers and realms of reality: in the cardinal directions and natural elements; in the forms, materials, and consistencies of material objects; in distinct plant and animal species; in human characters and fates; and in anthropomorphic divinities. Every quality that could be perceived on one layer of reality (e.g., in the natural world) had its equivalent on another level of this same reality (e.g., in the human world); they were related through the *nahualli* or co-essence of qualities (see Monaghan 1998; Martínez González 2011).

Following this general sense of reality, the quality that characterized flowers in their radiating beauty also characterized the human aesthetic achievement of songs. Flowers and songs were regarded as manifestations of the same underlying principle of reality and thus as contiguous. Correspondingly, the sounds of language as much as the images of pictorial writing were regarded as natural indexes of the respective principle of reality, as direct depictions and expressions of respectively the sonic or the visual layer of reality. Rather than being arbitrary, secondary re-presentations of mental categories that merely mirror reality, language and writing were considered as presentations, as direct depictions of this reality. That is, they were not secondary depictions of reality, as re-presentations

differed across localities, social identities, and professions, and most probably even between individuals. See the discussion of this issue in my forthcoming book (Laack 2019), in the chapter titled “Living in Religious Diversity.”

are, in which the signified (the presented) and the signifier (the representation) are separate from each other, but primary depictions of reality, in which the signified (the presented) and the signifier (the presentation) are considered as identical to each other.[15]

6 Expressing sensory knowledge in Aztec semiotic modalities

The Aztecs based this semiotic ideology on their culturally mediated, experiential, sensory knowledge about reality, which they expressed using strong sensory imagery. Aztec semiotic modalities of linguistic expression and pictorial writing transcended (or refused) not only the dichotomy of alphabetical versus pictorial writing but also the dichotomies of poetic versus rational discourse and religious versus scientific discourse. With respect to Aztec culture, it is extremely difficult to apply and distinguish the European categories of religion and science. A primary *definiens* for "religion" in substantialist approaches in the study of religion(s) has been a reference to transcendence or to the supernatural (famously criticized by Fitzgerald 2000) in contrast to the sciences, which refer to the natural world. The Aztecs, however, did not distinguish between these two layers of reality and had no concept of ontological transcendence. Rather, their ontology appears to have been fundamentally immanent and monistic.

In the surviving Aztec sources, there is no convincing indication that points toward the idea of a constitutional transcendence of the divine. The concept of the divine is present in the Nahuatl term *teotl* and manifested in many different personae usually called "deities" since the first Franciscan missionaries like Bernardino de Sahagún (1997) did so. *Teotl* is best described as a kind of force, energy, or power (see Hvidtfeldt 1958; Klor de Alva 1980: 68, 77–83; Gruzinski 1989: 22), which circulates through the cosmos and manifests in natural cycles. This was a constitutionally monistic concept referring to a "continually dynamic, vivifying, self-generating and self-regenerating sacred power, force, or energy [...] identical to reality per se and hence identical to everything that exists" (Maffie 2014: 21–22). This force was metaphysically homogeneous and non-hierarchical,

15 In this interpretation of "representation" and "depiction," I follow José Rabasa's adaption of Wittgenstein's differentiation between *Abbildung* 'depiction' and *Darstellung* 'representation' (from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*) (Rabasa 2011: 37–41). According to Rabasa, the two concepts refer to two different kinds to present reality, one on a primary and the other on a secondary level.

with no divide between spiritual and material things (Maffie 2014: 22). The forces moving through the cosmos were not constitutionally separate from materiality (see also Maffie 2014: 47–62); rather, forces and materiality were simply different forms or faces of the same substance. Accordingly, the "deities" were perceived as highly immanent, as a "fully materialized sacral reality, a divine presence immanent in worldly things ranging from maize to all the special substances linked to song in the *cantares*" (Tomlinson 2007: 80). The Aztec divine did "not exist apart from or independently of the cosmos" but was "fully *copresent* and *coextensional* with the cosmos. [...] Teotl does not exist outside of space and time. It is as concrete and immediate as the water we drink, the air we breathe, and food we eat. Teotl is neither abstract nor transcendent" (Maffie 2014: 29, italics in the original).

Consequently, Aztec cultural knowledge about reality does not fit into the modern European categories that differentiate between scientific discourse, which expresses knowledge about the natural, immanent world, and religious discourse, which expresses knowledge about the supernatural, transcendent world. Neither did the Aztecs differentiate among methods for gaining knowledge about reality. Judging from the sources, they exerted considerable effort to understand and manipulate the underlying principles of reality – comprising both "natural laws" and the reasons for contingencies and chance happenings – in order to improve human life and to counteract diseases, starvation, social conflict, and other miseries. For this, they used ordinary human senses; Aztec culture had acquired ample knowledge about the world through close, long-term observations of nature. Additionally they attempted to expand this knowledge with the insights of religious and shamanic visions, which used senses beyond everyday waking consciousness and revealed the normally imperceptible realms of reality and the forces running through the cosmos. Thus, they applied and combined both "empirical" and "religious" methods, if we want to put it in European terms. The result was a rich cultural discourse about what the Aztecs believed were the underlying principles of (immanent) reality.

The most important feature of this reality was the close interrelationship of its different layers as apparent in the indigenous concept of *nahualli*. Although Nahua ontology was fundamentally monist, and maintained that everything that existed shared the same essential nature, the forces and energies circulating through the cosmos nevertheless realized themselves differently in the many varying qualities of things, in their distinct surfaces, forms, appearances, and – for animated beings – also in their behavior and their personalities. For human beings, these forces could be experienced through the senses as sounds, colors and light, smells and odors, different tastes and touches. The same quality could

thus manifest on different layers of reality, so that “flowers” were expressions of the same quality as “songs.” The Aztecs expressed their cultural knowledge about these interrelationships in their semiotic systems. For this, they particularly preferred the use of sensory imagery, in both language and writing. Thus, these semiotic systems very closely conformed to the culturally mediated sensory knowledge about the Aztec cosmos and were even regarded as direct depictions of this reality rather than re-presentations, as natural indexes rather than arbitrary symbols. The color used to paint a flower and the sound used to utter the term *xochitl* ‘flower’ were regarded as aspects of the visual and auditory layers of reality, in which the forces moving through the cosmos were understood to materialize in a way that is experienceable with the human senses. The image of the “flower” used pictorially or linguistically evoked a whole range of sensory experiences and thus activated the comprehensive knowledge about reality in the listener or reader by including all aspects of human cognition and of bodily, sensory, and emotional experience.

From the Aztec perspective, the differentiation between poetic and rational discourse, and the polemic assertion that only the latter is capable of expressing the truth about reality, do not play any important role. Aztecs used both language and pictorial writing to express their comprehensive cultural knowledge about reality and to make sense of this reality. They made meaning of their experiences with the help of abstract reasoning and cognitive rationality as much as with embodied cognition, body knowledge, sensory experiences, intuitive understandings, atmospheres, and emotion. Aztec linguistic and pictorial imagery could be understood as very effective forms of expressing the “embodied metaphors” (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 128) with which people regardless of their culture make sense of the world, by relying on sensorimotor activities and experiences to produce “[m]ental images, image schemas, metaphors, metonymies, concepts, and inference patterns” (Johnson 1999: 82). In Aztec linguistic and pictorial imagery, these embodied concepts are used to comprehensively express the “felt qualities” of reality to “construct a rich, moving experience” in the act of expression itself (Johnson 2007: 221). As such, the Aztec listeners and readers did not exclusively “*think* about what is transpiring” so much as they did “*feel* and *experience* the qualitative whole that pervades and unifies the entire scene” (Johnson 2007: 224; italics in the original). In Aztec imagery, the “images, patterns, qualities, colors, and perceptual rhythms [...] are the principal bearers of meaning” (Johnson 2007: 234). In this respect, Aztec writing and reading includes aspects of understanding that modern European cultures typically allocate to separate categories of knowledge and forms of expression.

7 Against downgrading Aztec semiotic systems in evolutionary scales

When the Spaniards conquered Mexico in the first half of the 16th century, they brought the Aztec civilization to an end. The people and the lands were brutally exploited, and indigenous culture was violently suppressed. Within the first century of colonization, approximately ninety percent of the native population died as a result of military conflicts, the excesses of slavery, and devastating epidemics (see Stannard 1992; Lockhart 1993).

The Europeans, on the other hand, confronted with the existence of newly encountered peoples, made sense of their experiences by fitting them into their cultural frames of history and society. In close conjunction with the colonization and exploitation of the Americas, the American peoples were most often located somewhere on a level inferior to the Europeans. Particularly from the 18th century onwards, American civilizations were sorted into a historical timeline that represented the evolution of humanity through a “denial of coevalness” (Mignolo 2010: xi), meaning that the cultures of some presently living groups were depicted as anachronistic survivals from a distant past. This argumentation used several cultural aspects as markers for the degree of humanness and the evolutionary stage of the civilization: religion, the arts, the organization of society, and language as well as alphabetical writing and historiography in the European sense. In many cases, the particular cultural aspects used as markers were associated with “mental operations such as reasoning, memory, and the imagination” (Farago 1995: 6). One of the basic issues for the Europeans in this context was the question: Do the indigenous people possess rationality and intelligence?

The general devaluation of indigenous culture was voiced already by some early *conquistadores* and chroniclers in the 16th century (see Mignolo 2010: xi, 44, 133–134). The intellectual imperialism regarding forms of representation has continued well into the 20th century, with famous European writing theories (e.g., Gelb 1963; DeFrancis 1989; see also Ong 1967; Ong 1982; Goody 1986; Goody 1987) defining “real” and “full” writing as logographic and alphabetical, while largely ignoring indigenous American forms of recording knowledge. Similarly, many descriptions of Aztec culture present it as a primarily oral tradition, in which written/painted texts served only as mnemonic devices to stimulate the recitation of memorized cultural knowledge (León-Portilla 1992b: 70–71; León-Portilla 1992a: 317–319). Literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov presented one of the latest variants of this “epistemic violence” (Spivak 1988: 281) in his influential *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (1984). In this publication, he combined writing theories with ideas from the orality–literacy debate and with a

modernity theory that contrasts religious superstition with political rationality. His main argument explained the surprising victory of the few Spanish *conquistadores* against the impressive Aztec empire by referring to the superior semiotic system of the Spanish. According to Todorov, the Aztecs failed to defeat the Spanish because they acted based on a (pre-modern) ritualistic and inflexible oral tradition and were driven by religious superstitions and fatalism. The Aztec king Montecuhzoma II, constrained by this ritualized and overly fixed tradition, was unable to develop a successful strategy for how to deal with the arrival of the Spaniards, an event that was "absolutely unpredictable [...], surprising and unique" for the Mesoamerican experience (Todorov 1984: 84, see also 74–77, 81–84). He merely turned fatalistically to the stars in search for omens predicting the outcome of the political conflict with the Spaniards. Hernando Cortés, by contrast, (supposedly) used a praxeological approach to deal with the difficult political situation in the new lands. Because his consciousness had been shaped by a literate society, he was able to improvise and to act politically, strategically, and rationally, according to Todorov.

One of the cornerstones of Todorov's interpretation is the idea, derived from the orality–literacy debate, that people living in primarily oral societies show a different mentality and way of thinking from those in literate societies (Todorov 1984: 80). Within this theoretical frame, literate cultures using alphabetical writing are generally perceived as superior, because (supposedly) only alphabetical writing encourages sequential intellectual analysis, reflexivity, and rationality (Havelock 1982; Ong 1982). Todorov accordingly denied the Nahuas the capacity for strategic, rational thinking and acting. He asserted a clear correlation between the non-existence of (alphabetical, "true") writing in a society and superstition, ritualism, and historical fatalism; conversely, he presumed a correlation between logographic writing and the mental capacity for improvisation, rational thinking, and strategic action (see Todorov 1984: 252).[16]

In the judgment that Aztec civilization was inferior to European cultures, the linguistic rhetoric of the Aztecs also played a role, albeit a lesser one than that of their non-alphabetical writing system. After the destruction of Aztec intellectual culture in the first decades of colonization, knowledge of

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16 By now, many Mesoamericanists have proven Todorov's interpretation of the conquest wrong and debunked it as a European projection of the orality-literacy theory that contradicts all indigenous perspectives on the conquest and all our knowledge about Aztec culture. For example, the depiction of Montecuhzoma II as unable to cope with the political situation while searching for omens was painted by a later generation of Natives some decades after the conquest trying to explain the inexplicable defeat of the mighty "Aztec" empire (see Lockhart 1994; Restall 2003).

the elaborate rhetorical registers in Nahuatl was increasingly lost among the indigenous people in the course of time. Europeans, on the other side, typically have had great difficulties in understanding classical Nahuatl with its rich, poetic, elegant, eloquent, and often formulaic diction, because of its flexible and complex linguistic structure and the many subtleties that are so different from European forms of expression. This difficulty was noted already by the first Spaniards in Mexico (Gingerich 1992: 357). After the first century of colonization, the interest of Europeans in this indigenous language continuously dwindled, until in the 19th century, knowledge of Nahuatl was minimal and it was simply devalued as a primitive language (Swann 1992: xiii-xiv). In the end, the ubiquitous use of a rich sensory imagery in Nahuatl texts, which mostly escapes European understanding, was regarded as a sign of an inferior developmental stage of linguistic expression.

The modern devaluation of Nahua thinking stands in a European tradition of theories of language that dismisses metaphors and imagery as emotional, irrational, and misleading. This tradition also supposes that only rational linguistic thought operates with logical propositions and is able to express objective truth about the rational structures of reality (see Johnson 1990 [1987]: x; Johnson 1999: 83–84; Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 98–102; Lakoff and Johnson 2011: 217–218). The European linguistic disenchantment fostered by Protestant literalism adopted this tradition and sharply criticized the performative and supposedly magical functions of language in rituals. The later European discourse of secular modernity even established the “ostensibly rational discourse of science and law [...] in opposition to poetry, rhetoric, and myth” (Yelle 2013: 4). Against this philosophical background, the linguistic obscurity (for European readers) of many Nahuatl texts and their strong “poetic” flavor using a large amount of imagery has been interpreted in the last two centuries as the expression of a pre-rational perspective on the world. Accordingly, the “Aztec civilization” has been judged as presenting a pre-literate, pre-rational stage of human development out of which Europe had long evolved (see Gingerich 1987: 101).

Thus, it was left to the Nahuatl scholars Garibay and León-Portilla to argue vehemently for the acknowledgement of Nahua “poetic” expression as an intellectually highly advanced philosophical discourse. They did so by implicitly referring to an alternative tradition within the European philosophy of language, in which poetry, including metaphor, was generally valued as enhancing knowledge about reality (see Lakoff and Johnson 2011: 218). In this way, Garibay and León-Portilla re-evaluated the rich imagery of Nahuatl positively by seeing it from a Western aesthetic perspective as lying at the heart of poetic beauty (see Tomlinson 1996: 23–24) and by declaring it as the expression of a highly advanced philosophy of poetic aestheticism.

There is the danger of taking my alternative interpretation of the Aztec imagery of “flower and song” as the starting point for a relapse into evolutionary thinking. I emphasized that the Aztec cosmovision subscribed to a natural, indexical connection among signifier and signified, in which language and writing stand in a natural, existential relationship to reality. This interpretation might be taken to imply that Aztec civilization represented a typical case of a ritualistic, pre-modern worldview, or even of “magic” as described by Edward B. Tylor and James G. Frazer. If we were to adopt Tylor’s and Frazer’s devaluation of magical thinking as a “mistaken application of the laws of association of ideas” (Yelle 2013: 27), we must surely see Aztec culture as an example of an inferior stage of human intellectual development. I would argue, however, that such a differentiation between rational and poetic language, combined with the evolutionary idea that a rational, scientific modernity has displaced earlier forms of pre-rational, ritualistic, magical cosmovision, is a stark example of epistemic violence, a projection of European historical developments and conceptual categories onto non-European cultures. In my view, the Aztec example thoroughly transcends these categories and ideas of the evolution of civilizations from pre-modern to modern stages, which are anachronistic and inaccurate as applied to the Aztecs.

8 Conclusion

In this paper, I argued for an alternative interpretation of the imagery of “flower and song,” which was used frequently in the semiotic systems of linguistic expression and pictorial writing within the pre-Hispanic culture of the Aztecs in Central Mexico. The most famous interpretation thus far has been presented by León-Portilla, who regarded “flower and song” as a metaphor standing for an indigenous philosophical approach that favored poetic aestheticism as the best way to express insights about the ultimate, transcendent layers of reality. In contrast, I understand the image as an expression of Aztec comprehensive cultural knowledge about immanent principles of reality, as they sensorily experienced them within the frame of their culture. The rich imagery used in the two semiotic modalities of language and writing, understood as a natural index of this reality rather than as a metaphoric representation of it, refers to a form of cultural knowledge that combines abstract reasoning and cognitive rationality with embodied cognition, body knowledge, sensory experiences, intuitive understandings, atmospheres, and emotion. Thus, the imagery effectively activates a large range of human experience of reality. In the Aztec view, the imagery

directly participated in this reality, because they regarded the linguistic and written signs as direct depictions of the auditory, visual, and experiential layers of reality. This semiotic theory and the very nature of Aztec pictorial writing as a non-logographic writing system point towards the limits of language for expressing cultural knowledge. The frequent use of imagery both in the Aztec oral tradition and in their form of recorded communication shows that the Aztecs did not reduce their experiential knowledge about reality to an abstract system of language alone but included other modes of expression to effectively communicate this comprehensive cultural knowledge.

With this interpretation, I challenge the historical downgrading of Aztec semiotic systems by Europeans based on their lack of alphabetical writing and the supposed lack of (modern) rational discourse by arguing that they indeed had comprehensive knowledge about the reality they lived in and expressed it in sophisticated ways based on a deliberate semiotic theory. Furthermore, I argue that this semiotic theory escapes the European differentiation between rational and poetic language as much as the differentiation between scientific and religious discourse. Apart from the Aztecs, many cultures of the world have emphasized other modes of sign relations than the ones of modern European semiotics, with its secular bias against symbolism and poetic performance, and its conviction in the arbitrariness of signs. Furthermore, many traditions claim to have special access to (a special) reality, while the ideas about the nature of (this) reality and the modes of accessing it differ considerably (see Yelle 2013: 5). The discussed European scholarly (d)evaluations of Aztec pictorial writing and linguistic expression and similar (d)evaluations of other cultures and their semiotic traditions should be recognized as cases of projecting polemics from the European history of religions onto cultural fields that are foreign to these considerations.

From my epistemological point of view, it is not the task of academic research to judge the respective, often incompatible truth claims of the semiotic traditions of other cultures, nor their experiences of reality. Thus, while the Aztecs would argue that there is a natural relationship between flowers and songs, and modern natural sciences would argue that both categories are, in fact, not causally or physically related but merely superficially similar, I would accept, for the context of academic research, neither truth claim. My intent, rather, is to describe and understand the Aztec sense of reality as earnestly as that of modern science(s). Accordingly, it is neither my intent to say that Aztec semiotic modes access reality better than those of secular European science nor that the Aztecs were more deeply in touch with reality. This would be a case of reverse colonialism and Othering, which projects romantic ideals onto the Noble Savage construed in opposition to Europeans. Rather, I wish to understand from an attitude of dialogue how the Aztecs understood reality and positioned themselves in it. Thus, when analyzing

the dominant academic interpretation of the Aztec imagery of "flower and song," I found deep biases conditioned by European intellectual presuppositions, which I have endeavored to overcome. However, I am very much aware that my alternative interpretation most surely contains further misunderstandings, since the study of cultures is always a subjective affair. It is all the more so in the case of the discussed corpus of songs, because there is so little contextual information available to help modern readers reach a better interpretation. Nevertheless, critically reflecting on our intellectual parameters in dealing with different cultures will help us to refine our academic theories and to better understand the diversity in which humanity experiences reality and tries to make sense of it.

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