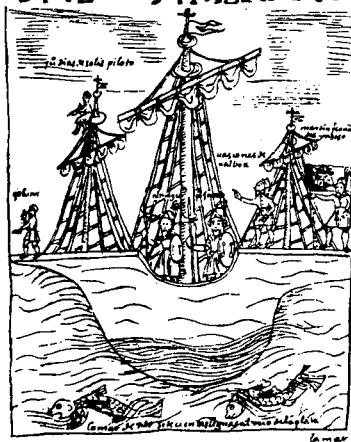


Miguel León-Portilla

Mesoamerica 1492, and on the Eve
of 1992

DISCOVERING THE AMERICAS



1992 LECTURE SERIES

Working Papers

No. 1

Department of Spanish and Portuguese

University of Maryland

College Park

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Miguel León-Portilla (Mexico, 1926) is Director of the Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, and Editor of *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* (1959-). A selection of his most renowned works includes: *Siete ensayos sobre cultura Náhuatl* (UNAM, 1958), *Visión de los vencidos* (UNAM, 1959), *Los antiguos mexicanos a través de sus crónicas y cantares* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1961), *Literaturas precolombinas de México* (Porrúa, 1964), *Trece poetas del mundo azteca* (UNAM, 1967), *Tiempo y realidad en el pensamiento maya* (UNAM, 1968), *Literatura del México antiguo. Los textos en lengua náhuatl* (Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1978), *Toltecáyotl. Aspectos de la cultura náhuatl* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1980), *El Templo Mayor* (in collaboration with Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, Bancomer, 1981), *Hernán Cortés y la Mar del Sur* (Instituto de Cooperación Iberoamericana, 1985). He has also coordinated *Historia de México*, a 13 volume work prepared by more than 60 professional historians and anthropologists (Salvat, 1974).

English versions of his works include: *Aztec Thought and Culture; A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), *The Broken Spears; The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico* (Beacon Press, 1962), *Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), *Time and Reality in the Thought of the Maya* (Beacon Press, 1973), and *Native Mesoamerican Spirituality* (Paulist Press, 1980)

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Set apart were the two worlds. They were not separated as the stars by celestial space, but by the immense divine waters. They existed in one and the same planet, the Earth. Different peoples and cultures flourished in them. Different were their images of the universe, their food and beliefs, the gods they worshiped, and their ways of life. No true universal history could exist since the inhabitants of the two worlds had no knowledge of each other. So it was on earth for thousands of years until rather recently, not yet twenty five scores of years.

It was precisely during a count of twenty years, one called by the Mayas of Yucatan **4-Ahau Katun** (4-Lord-Twenty-Years) that, according to the prophecies of the ancient texts:

The **Katun** [the twenty year-period of time] is established [rules] at Chichen Itza... The quetzal bird shall come, the green bird shall come. Kukulcan [Quetzalcoatl] shall come. Blood vomit shall come. Kukulcan shall come with them for the second time. It is the word of God. The Itza shall come.¹

Today we know that the period of the **4-Ahau Katun** corresponded, according to the Christian calendar, to the score of years from 1477 to 1497. But the Christians, and those they called pagans in Africa and Asia, ignored all about the green bird, the Kukulcan-Quetzalcoatl that had to arrive for the second time to the land of the Itza in Yucatan, when blood vomit was to stain the face of the land.

And it was in a year **13-Tecpatl** (13-Flint), according to the count of the Nahuatl peoples of central Mexico, when the supreme ruler of the Mexicas, lord Ahuitzotl, had reached a climax of grandeur and power. Only five years before, in **8-Acatl** (8-Reed), he had consecrated the most sumptuous temple ever seen in the Cemanahuac, the "lands-surrounded-by-the-waters", i.e., in their world. It was the Main Temple whose remains modern Mexicans have recently unearthed. It happened during 1978-1983, when the diggings were directed, curiously enough, by an archaeologist whose family

¹ *The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, edited and translated by Ralph L. Roys, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1967, p. 161.

name is Moctezuma.² Dates come and go, and in less than twenty five *katuns* or score of years, the Main Temple could again be seen by millions of people.

13-Flint was an ominous year. Several extant Mexica codices, those known today as *Telleriano-Remensis*, *Mexicanus*, as well as the *Annals of Cuauhtitlan*, and other indigenous sources, tell us that in 13-Flint, *ipan in cualoc in Tonatiuh*, "the Sun was devoured," which means that there was an eclipse³. And not only this, the chronicler Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin who, after studying the extant pre-Hispanic books, wrote his *Relations* at the turn of the sixteenth century, added that in 13-Flint:

Nican ipan in cocollin, cualoc Tonatiuh... Here, there was disease, the Sun was devoured, there was hunger... A mountain, between the volcanoes Iztaccihuatl and Popocatepetl, split. Water sprang from the interior of it, and many ferocious beasts devoured the children...⁴

These ominous happenings took place in that year 13-Flint. The same chronicler, Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, living in the 16th Century and trained by the Franciscan friars at the famous College of the Holy Cross of Tlatelolco, gives us the corresponding date in the Christian calendar, and also correlates what was happening at the same time in the two worlds that were still ignorant of each other. Chimalpahin's words, translated from the Nahuatl, convey his own version of the story:

And also in that year 13-Flint, 1492, the war came to an end in Granada. Then the powerful lords don Fernando and doña Isabella, kings of Spain, gave don Christopher Columbus three Castilian ships, battleships, and six groups of twenty Spaniards to sail with him, men who were paid, and everything that was needed in the ships...

² The full name of this distinguished archaeologist is Eduardo Matos Moctezuma.

³ *Annals of Cuauhtitlan*, manuscript in Nahuatl, preserved at the Library of the National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City. "Ancient Collection", 273-274, folio 58.

⁴ Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Third Relation*, preserved at the National Library, Paris, Mexican Ms. No. 74, folio 108 rectum.

And they went to sail, to board their ships, there at the port that is named Palos de Moguel [Moguer] on a Friday, August 3, of the above referred year...⁵

The Nahua chronicler, in whose face and heart the conflicting forces of two cultural worlds were throbbing, goes on to provide a full account of the arrival of Columbus and the first Europeans from the Nahuatl perspective. This should not be surprising. For hundreds of years, the ancient Mexicans -the Mesoamericans- had the custom of recording in their inscriptions on stone and in their books of *amate* paper or deer-skin events which were particularly meaningful to them. The following quotation is part of the story of Christopher Columbus as told by Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin:

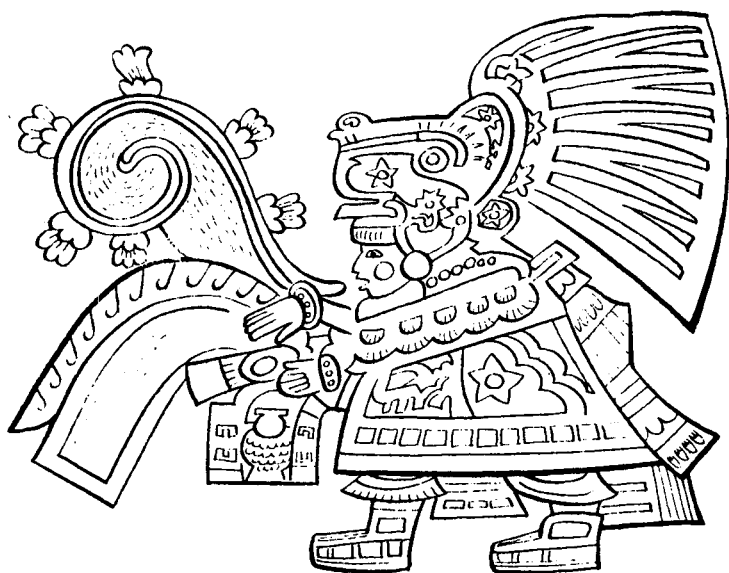
... and then they reached a land whose name is La Gomera [one of the Canary Islands], and from there, which was a place known to all, they crossed a very large span of water; thus they went toward the direction where the Sun sets. They navigated for a long time, very far, much they suffered, nothing appeared, as if with no direction, thus they fared through the great divine waters.

And on a Friday, October 12, of the year 1492, two men who were watching, saw land. It was at dawn when land became visible to them. All of the men rejoiced, their hearts felt relieved. Then, still early in the day, they headed with their ships toward the shore of that land. There they disembarked, in an island named Guanahani...⁶

This happened on an Aztec year 13-Flint, during a 4-Ahau Katun according to the Maya count. Both the Nahuas and the Mayas and many other Mesoamericans experienced in a few years the consequences of that landing which had occurred "when the sun was devoured," the mountain split, the beasts devoured the children, famine and blood vomit infested Cemanahuac, their world.

⁵ *Ibid.*, folio 109 rectum.

⁶ *Ibid.*, folio 109, versum.



Teotihuacan priest with the song's flowery volute. Mural painting from Tepantitlan, Teotihuacan, ca. fifth century. By 1492, Mesoamerica already had a centuries long cultural legacy.

There Was a Most Powerful Kingdom

Lord Ahuitzotl ruled in Mexico from 1486 to 1502. The ancient books record his main achievements. He rebuilt and consecrated the Main Temple. He constructed a new aqueduct to bring more fresh water to the Aztec metropolis. He was responsible for the embellishment of the city, the enrichment of its inhabitants (especially those of lineage), and for the commerce and expansion of the Aztec domains. Ahuitzotl himself led numerous campaigns against distant peoples.

At the end of his reign the Mexica domains included all the Nahuatl chiefdoms in the Central Plateau -with the exception of Tlaxcala- most of the Mixtec and Zapotec regions of Oaxaca, parts of Chiapas, Ayotla and Mazatlan in present day Guatemala, as well as parts of the Huastec and Totonac territories on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico.

In the southeast, the Maya chiefdoms, having agreed to trade with the Mexica merchants, managed to preserve their political independence and, as much as possible, their ancient grandeur. On the other hand, penetration in the north was very difficult. The Chichimec bands of hunters and gatherers resisted any action that might have affected their way of life.

The Mexicas knew about their neighbors and about their own cultural past. They apparently enjoyed describing themselves as a people which had lived like the Chichimecs. In remote years, when they first settled in the Valley of Mexico, no one appreciated them. But they convinced themselves, and also many of their neighbors, that they were a nation chosen by Huitzilopochtli, their supreme god. He had brought them from the north to a predestined land. He had freed them from the hands of their enemies and had counseled them.

Following their god's advice, they had established contact with people of Toltec lineage. Matrimonial links with them gave origin to an Aztec nobility. From then on, the Mexica rulers were at the same time Chichimec and Toltec, at once descendants of nomads and of builders of ancient towns like Tollan, Cholollan, and even of the city of the gods, the metropolis of Teotihuacan. Thus, in their books, the Mexicas portray themselves revering and enriching the social, religious, and economic forms of organization created by the high priest of the Toltecs, the sage lord Quetzalcoatl.

From him, the Toltecs, those great artists and builders of magnificent towns, received the quintessence of their religious beliefs and practices -the authority and wisdom that gives roots and meaning to man's existence on earth. And from the Toltecs, the Mexicas (and

many other peoples like the Mixtecs of Oaxaca and some who lived as faraway as the Quiché of Guatemala) inherited political legitimacy, priestly wisdom, artistic inspiration, norms of life, the calendar and writing, metallurgy, and knowledge to best exploit the resources of the land.

To be in possession of the **Toltecayotl**, the essence and sum of what is good and admirable, was an incentive to action, as well as a call to be creative, religious and well ordered. This was very much needed because survival on earth was difficult. Man's destiny is to exert himself unremittingly. In accordance with the wisdom of the Toltecs, the maintenance of the flow of life has to be man's main concern for it has also been the god's primeval care.

Maintaining the Flow of Life

The universe in which all Mesoamericans have lived is indeed replete with sacred connotations. The world has been established and re-established several times. The ancient texts, inherited from the Toltecs, speak of four "Suns" or ages that have existed and vanished by the will of the gods. The present age, the fifth, is that of *movement*. The gods have re-established sun, moon, earth and man. They did it first in primeval Teotihuacan. By their own sacrifice, they had "deserved" this fifth age.⁷

Tlamacehua is a Nahuatl word that means "to deserve something," and also "to do penance," "to practice sacrifice." In the old books it is said that the gods had to do **tlamacehua** to restore sun, moon, earth and man. They did it for four days and, at the end, two gods cast themselves into an enormous fire, the **teotexcalli**, "divine hearth." Their bodies cracked noisily. Self-sacrifice gave them what they wanted. Sun and moon were restored. Later the earth was also restored. As for human beings, the god Quetzalcoatl, "Feathered-Serpent" and "Precious-Twin," from whom the Toltec priest Quetzalcoatl had derived his name, was asked by the other gods to restore man.

Quetzalcoatl the god descended to the **Mictlan**, the "Place of the Dead," in search of the precious bones of men who had existed in previous ages. After overcoming several obstacles, he took the

⁷ *Florentine Codex* (Código Florentino), Manuscript 218-210, 3 volumes, of the Palatine Collection, Medicean-Laurentian Library, Florence, Facsimile reproduction by the National Archives, Mexico, 1979, volume II, book 7, chapter II.

precious bones to **Tamoanchan**, the place of origin, the abode of the supreme Dual God. **Quetzalcoatl** himself and **Cihuacoatl**, the "Feminine-Twin" or "Female-Serpent," are no other than **Ometeotl**, the "Dual God". **Ometeotl** is invoked with many different names (He-She, Our Father, Our Mother) according to his-her attributes, presence and forms of action.

Cihuacoatl, the "Female-Twin", residing in **Tamoanchan**, the place of origin, received the precious bones and put them in a vessel to grind them. **Quetzalcoatl**, Our Father, had to transmit life to the precious bones. He bled his virile member upon them. **Quetzalcoatl**, **Cihuacoatl**, and the other gods, his-her children, all of them divine manifestations of the supreme **Ometeotl**, Dual God (in pairs) **tlamacehua**, did penance to deserve a new humankind. The old sacred texts say that because "the gods did penance, 'deservedness' for us "(**topan otlamaceuhqueh**), we are **macehualtin**, "the deserved by the gods' sacrifice"⁸.

The key concept of **tlamacehua** denotes the primary and essential relation human beings have with the realm of the divine. Man was deserved by blood because the gods needed man. And man has to repay for it. He has to perform **tlamacehualiztli**, "penance, the act of deserving through sacrifice", including the bloody sacrifice of human beings. By performing it, man reenacts the primeval action, giving back what is owed, and also restoring life. Thus, only sacrifice can maintain the flow of life on earth, in the heavens, and in the shadows of the underworld. The supreme Dual God, addressed also as **Tloqueh Nahuaqueh**, "The One Near, the One Close," causes us to deserve things on the earth:

He causes us to merit, to deserve (**quitemacehualtia**), virility, the eagle 'warriorhood', the tiger 'warriorhood'. There he takes, he recognizes as His friend the one who addresses Him well... In his hands He places the eagle vessel, the eagle tube, the instruments for the sacrifice. And this **macehualli** [man, deserved one] now becomes father and mother of the Sun [sustained through sacrifice]. He provides drink, he makes offerings to the ones above us, and in the Region of the Dead...⁹

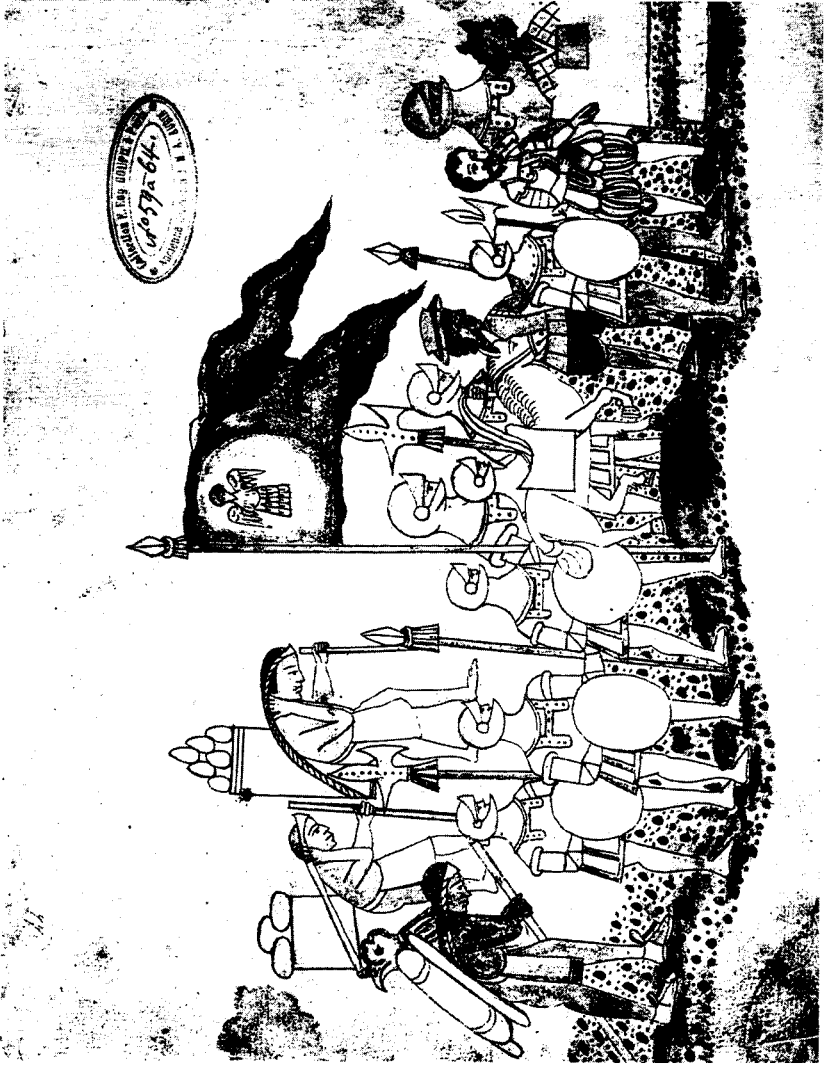
⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Florentine Codex*, volume II, book VI, chapter XVII.

In this manner the flow of life is maintained on earth, in the heavens, and in the underworld. Thus our sacred universe exists in this fifth cosmic age, the one of the Sun of Movement.

Man, as well as society, when performing any kind of action, will do it as a part of their **i-macehual**, "that which has to be deserved by them". To be born, to enter school, to marry, to have children, to gain possession of a land, to cultivate it, to obtain water and food, to win a war, elect the adequate ruler, and above all to approach and appease the gods, everything, had to be deserved.

All men are **macehualtin**, "the deserved by the god's sacrifice". Thus, in Nahuatl and, as a linguistic loan, in other Mesoamerican languages, **macehualli** is a synonym for man. It is true that with the passing of time, a differentiation was introduced between **macehualtin**, "human beings" (understood as common people), and **pipiltin**, "those of lineage", members of a nobility, the ruling class. But this did not alter the idea that all men and women, whether of lineage or commoners, are essentially **macehualtin**, "deserved by the gods' penance". In fact, were it not for the heritage of Toltec culture, one would wonder how it happened that some of "the deserved ones," claiming a lineage of nobility, were recognized as such by the people. This kind of social stratification, perhaps seemed natural given the dual character of the gods' sacred universe.



Indian view of the Spanish conquerors on their way to Mexico-Tenochtitlan. Codex Azcatitlan, ill. 23, Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris.

Always More Divine than Humane

It was due mainly to Tlacaelel, that sagacious adviser to several Mexica supreme rulers, that the Aztec nation reached a situation of great military power, economic expansion and notable cultural advancement. He played an extremely important role in freeing the Mexicas from their ancient dominators, the Tecpanecs of Azcapotzalco. Years later, he counseled such famous Mexica high rulers as Itzcoatl (1427-1439), Motecuhzoma the First (1440-1468) and, until his own death, Axayacatl (1469-1481), a brother of king Ahuizotl.

Tlacaelel who had won so much for his nation, was above all a very religious man, though his concern with the realm of the divine differs, for instance, from that of lord Nezahualcoyotl (1402-1472), the high ruler of Tezcoco. While the latter, as a poet and sage, at times composed songs with an almost mystical tone in praise of the Dual God, the Giver of Life, Tlacaelel, with his feet closer to the earth, combined his religious fervor with the ideals of Mexica expansionism.

Numerous texts of pre-Hispanic tradition suggest that these two distinct attitudes coexisted in the realm of Nahuatl society during the fifty years prior to the Spanish arrival. There were groups of wise men which followed Nezahualcoyotl's trend of thought. Others, warriors of high rank, and dignitaries of the priesthood, were openly inclined toward Tlacaelel's attitude. For the latter, the most important thing was to foster the cult of their patron deity, the divine warrior Huitzilopochtli. The Mexica god *par excellence* had guided them and had led them to greatness in Mesoamerica.

In the Main Temple of Tenochtitlan, which had been increasingly enlarged and enriched by the various high rulers who followed Tlacaelel's advice, a new representation of the supreme duality was worshipped. On top of the twin pyramids were the images of Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc, the Rain God.

Huitzilopochtli is the Mexica interpretation of Tezcatlipoca, "The Smoking Mirror," a double, and later on a fourfold manifestation (present in the four quadrants of the world), of the supreme *Ometeotl*, the Dual God. Huitzilopochtli was, in sum, the warriors' own conception of Toltec Tezcatlipoca, and, ultimately, of the primeval *Ometeotl*. The co-presence of Tlaloc implied the Mexica recognition of an ancient and universal Mesoamerican belief. Tlaloc for the Nahuas, *Chac* for the Mayas, *Tajin* for the Totonacs, *Cocijo* for the Zapotecs, *Savi* for the Mixtecs, and so on among others, was a most revered god, the provider of the vital liquid without which

tonacayotl, maize and all that is our sustenance, cannot germinate. By placing Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc side by side on their Main Temple, the Mexicas had indeed succeeded in combining their own ideals of expansion and greatness with a universally accepted belief in a god without whom life on earth was impossible.

Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc, the preferred Mexica version of the supreme Duality, appear accompanied, in the Main Temple and elsewhere, by a large number of other couples of gods, most of them also revered by other Mesoamericans. The Mother Goddess, disguised in a variety of forms, always occupies a place of privilege. She is Teteuinnan, "Mother of the Gods," Cihltli, "The Grand Mother"; Coatlicue, "She of the Skirt of Snakes," Xochiquetzal, "Flower of Quetzal Feathers," and Tonantzin, "Our Mother". There is a noticeable androgynous character in many gods. Tlaltecuhltli is "Lord and Lady of the Earth," Cinteotl, "He-She God of Maize," Macuilxochitl, "Five Flower," God-Goddess of music and the other arts. Deities acting by pairs are Mictlantecuhtli and Mictlancihuatl, "Lord-Lady of the Region of the Dead," Tonacatecuhtli-Tonacacihuatl, "Lord-Lady of Our sustenance," and, above all, Ometecuhtli-Omecihuatl, "Lord-Lady of Duality".

Their images are still visible in ancient stone sculptures and in *amate* paper or deerskin books. This is the case in the three extant Maya books, in several others painted by the Mixtecs, and in a few more attributable to Nahuatl speaking pre-Hispanic tlauhcuiloqueh, scribe-painters. The Mesoamerican universe of the divine not only permeated temples and books, but it also coexisted with man himself; it was both present and active at different stages of life and history.

Man's spacial and temporal scenery is an immense stage on which the divine countenances and cosmic forces orient themselves when they come and go in an unbroken order. Time and, with it, the earth and everything that is, has been established and re-established by the "One-Who-Makes-the-Day," Tonatiuh among the Mexicas (identified by them with Huitzilopochtli), and the "Sun-Day-Time-God," K'in of the Mayas. Past ages, the "suns" which have existed and reached their end, are the great cosmic days. Our own age, the age of the Ollin Tonatiuh, "Sun of Movement," is also composed of many different cycles of time.

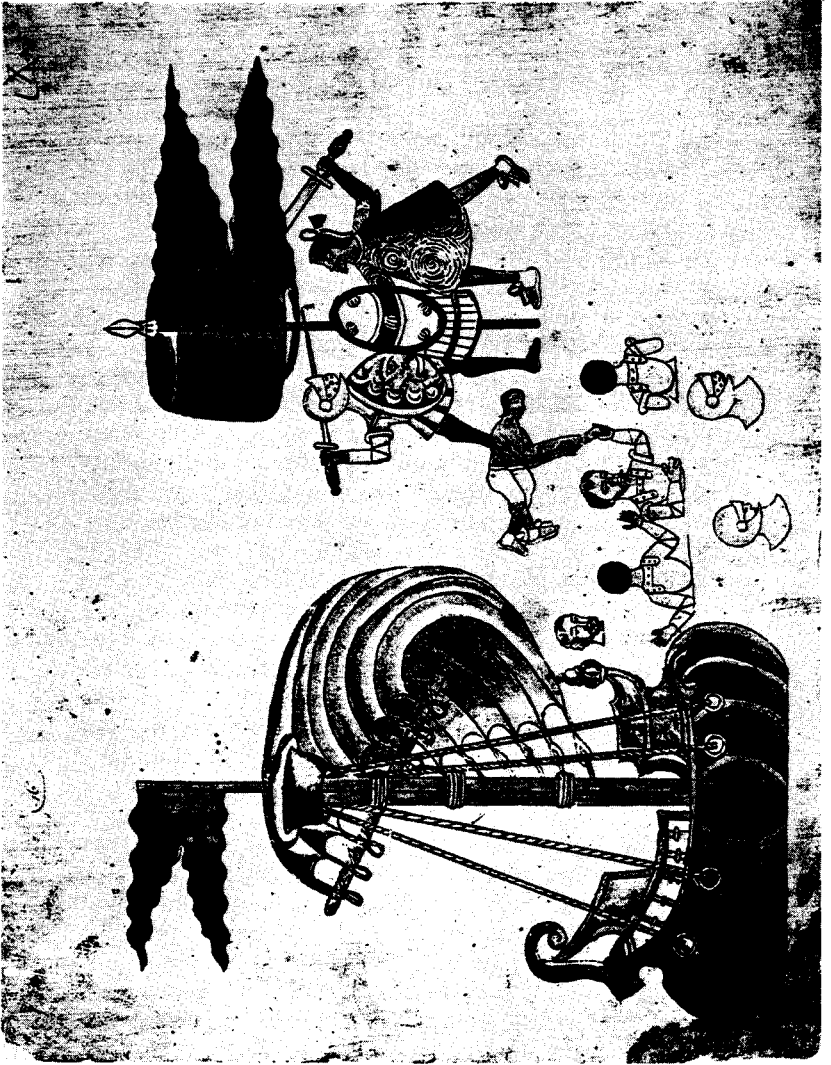
There are nine hours in a day and as many in a night; the days and their groups of 13, 20, 260 and 360, plus the ominous five at the end of the year. Each day also has a special position according to the count of 260 days, to the 18 groups of 20 days in the solar year, and within the fourfold distribution of 52 years in groups of 13 wherein

each year is oriented in an unbroken sequence to the East, North, West, and South. These and several other divisions of time are the spans in which the gods, in accordance with their various attributes, bring with them diverse forms of "burdens," i.e., the **tonalli**, good and bad destinies, that tint and permeate all reality.

Since a remote time, priests from different Mesoamerican nations possessed a complex system of knowledge to anticipate, propitiate and placate the gods, bearers of the destinies in the counts of the days, years, and cycles of years. Such system, still alive among some present-day natives in isolated areas of Mesoamerica, is the **tonalpohualli**, "Divinatory' count of the days" (tzolkin of the Mayas, **pije** of the Zapotec...).

Consulting the **tonalamatl**, books in which the "Divinatory count of the days" is structured in various forms, one can discover precisely when and where a specific **tlamacehualiztli**, "act of deserving", has to be performed. Fear and anxiety often accompanied the consultations which led to the reading and interpreting of the divinatory books of the days. One could recall the collapses of previous ages, the always threatened nature of the present world and of personal being. But to the Mesoamericans, that knowledge of the gods' temporal arrivals with their burdens of destinies provided a sort of semantically rich frame of reference endowed with a precision of mathematical rigor. Thanks to the **tonalpohualli**, "divinatory count of the days," man has access to a normative wisdom to keep alive, to deserve his relationship to those who have deserved him.

Everything has to be understood and accomplished from the perspective of the intrinsic meaning of the gods' presence, the bearers of the destinies. The solar calendar and the astrological count of 260 days, variously represented in books or codices, are the sources from which one can derive the norms and the most adequate advice in specific circumstances that cover events from birth to death: they tell when and how to celebrate the feasts with their rites and sacrifices; to perform the unbroken sequence of **tlamacehualiztli**, "acts of deserving"; to carry out any economic enterprise in agriculture, industry and commerce; to act in the best manner within the prevailing social and political structures. The Mesoamerican conception of time thus becomes the channel through which the divine enters and permeates the universe of man.



Scene from the attack on Tenochtitlan using the brigantines built by Cortés. Codex Azcatitlan, ill. 25, Biliotheque Nationale, Paris.

The Duality of Mesoamerican Society

When on a certain day, chosen carefully after prolonged consultations with the **tonalpouhqueh** (the priests who declare the destinies of the days), a new high ruler was installed, elderly dignitaries pronounced several speeches which were attentively listened to by the people. After wishing the new ruler a long and illustrious life, the speaker expressed ideas which touch upon the predestined condition of those born to govern, and the very different position occupied by commoners, those called "the tail, the wing":

O lord -says an elderly dignitary to the new ruler- o you who govern, o our lord, your people here take, grasp, rejoice, are happy with little; those who are the tail, the wing, receive something from your word, your speech that come forth, sparks forth, that which Our Lord God, placed within you... And here are also those of lineage, the descendants of the nobility, precious green stones, precious bracelets, children of the one who is our lineage, Quetzalcoatl [the Toltec wise priest and high ruler]; they take and receive your word. Thus they were born, came to life; their merit, that which is their deserving is the chair, the mat, the government. So they came to life, they were born, when in the beginning it was determined, ordained [in a primeval divinatory count of days] that they would be lords, that they would be rulers.¹⁰

To be of lineage meant to have a Toltec ancestry, a direct link to Quetzalcoatl. From among the select group of those of lineage, the **pipiltin**, the high ruler, was chosen. **Tlazo-pipiltin**, "precious nobles," were the descendants of those who had been supreme rulers. All those of lineage were conscious of their rank and privilege. Many important positions were open only to them in the political, economic and religious organization of the Mexica nation. The children of the **pipiltin** received a special education at the **calmecac**, centers of high learning. There, they were taught elegant forms of speech, the calendars, the annals, chants and sacred hymns, religious doctrines, astronomy, legal precepts and the art of government. At home, the parents of lineage also inculcated a deep sense of dignity in their children:

¹⁰ *Florentine Codex*, volume II, chapter XVI.

Who are you? You are of noble lineage... You are a precious one... Note that neither the vain nor the dissolute, as it is said, the shameless, has ever become a ruler.¹¹

Not only the male children of lineage received a special education, mothers also admonished girls on how to behave:

Behold the word; heed and guard it... On the earth we live, we travel along a mountain peak. Over here there is an abyss. If you go over here or if you go over there, you will fall.

Only in the middle does one go, does one live... I especially tell you that you are a woman of lineage... Do not do anything that may cause embarrassment to our lords, the rulers... Do not be a commoner, not an ordinary *macehualli* [a deserved commoner]...

If you dishonor our lords... you will cast dust, refuse upon their memory, upon the red and black inks of the books where their memory is... You will disgrace them...¹²

Descendants from families with lineage could become chiefs and captains in the army, high priests, or an assistant to the supreme ruler, such as Tlacaelel, in the rank of *Cihuacoatl*, "Feminine Serpent," the Mother Goddess, in an earthly imitation of the Dual God. People of lineage possessed allocated lands, the *pillalli*, "lands of the *pipiltin*", which were worked by the commoners that served them.

The situation of the commoners was different. They formed units known as *calpulli*, "an ensemble of houses." The *calpullis* were socioeconomic units typical of Mesoamerica. Originally, the members of a *calpulli* were linked by kinship. Such units were in the main endogamous. Some were established as parts of large towns, as in Mexico-Tenochtitlan; others integrated smaller settlements, scattered villages of those who worked the land.

The Mexicas controlled many of these entities, *calpullis*, which were part of chiefdoms that were tributary to them. At times, some

¹¹ *Ibid.*, volume II, book VI, chapter XVII.

¹² *Ibid.*, volume II, book VI, chapter VIII.

calpullis were "entrusted" to a Mexica administrator who was in charge of exacting a tribute and personal services from them.

Land was possessed communally by the members of the **calpullis**. Some of them had no land at all; their members had to hire themselves out to work for others. In difficult times, as during famines, epidemics or wars, some commoners had to sell themselves or their children. This was their **tonalli**, destiny; what they had deserved. As slaves they were bought, but for a limited time. Nevertheless their fate could be very risky. They were in peril of being chosen for human sacrifice since the lords could offer them to the gods to practice **tlamacehualiztli**.

The commoners served in the armies. Chiefdoms subject to the Mexicas had to provide men for their frequent wars. The fate of soldiers was uncertain. If they fell in enemy hands, they could become sacrificial victims, the supreme form of **tlamacehualiztli**.

Merchants and artisans were part of the commoners, but especially the former had acquired great socio-economic importance. They possessed their own legal and economic codes and rights to perform various functions, including their own religious rites. The merchants organized various forms of commercial exchange and often acted as ambassadors, emissaries, and spies. On the eve of the Spanish arrival, merchants and, to a lesser degree, artisans -goldsmiths and silversmiths, feather workers, sculptors, scribes, painters and others- played such a significant role in the social structure, both because of their wealth and the functions they performed, that they exerted an extremely important influence on public life.

From the moment the Mexica nation began to consolidate its power and to enlarge its domains by conquest, the solemnity of the feasts and religious ceremonies, and the desires of those of lineage for greater prestige, created new necessities. Merchants and artisans satisfied these and other demands. Members of some **calpullis** formed guilds which were established in strategic places. Markets and commercial routes acquired a special character of their own. The two most important of the merchants' routes were those from Tlatelolco, in the northern sector of the Mexica metropolis, to Xicalanco, a port close to the Lagoon of Terminos in present day Campeche, and the one that led to the Pacific coast in the rich Xoconusco zone in Chiapas, extending at times to nearby Guatemala. Among the several extant testimonies about these commercial enterprises the following is an eloquent account:

When they began their trips, the merchants who go to the coasts, they divided up there in Tochtepec [Oaxaca], half went toward the coast of Ayotla [in the Pacific, near the present border of Chiapas-Guatemala], the other half headed to the coast of Xicalanco...

Those who entered Xicalanco carried merchandise of King Ahuitzotl to trade..., mantles for the nobles, fine skirts, embroidered or fringed..., golden bands for the forehead, intricate necklaces of gold... made by the silversmiths of Mexico. For the people, in general, what they needed was obsidian earplugs, earplugs of cheap metal, obsidian razors, needles, rabbit skin, drugs and medicines...

When the merchants had returned from the coast of Xicalanco they brought back huge pieces of jade, round, very green..., turquoise shields, tortoise shells, parrot feathers, and feathers of the black sea bird, red tiger skins...¹³

One must add cultural dissemination in Mesoamerica to the economic significance of the merchants' activities. Thanks to the merchants, cultural elements related to religion, social and political organization, art and world-view, spread from one region to another, from the central highlands to Yucatan, Oaxaca, Chiapas and Guatemala. One extraordinary example is provided by a pre-Columbian book, the so-called *Codex Fejérvary-Mayer*. This manuscript, preserved at the Free Museum in Liverpool, is a *tonalamatl*, a divinatory book of the days, especially designed for a group of merchants. It contains cultural elements derived from several Mesoamerican subareas; for instance, the first page depicts an image of the universe that has a clear correspondence with one included in the Maya codex preserved in Madrid. Other visible cultural elements in this book, which belonged to Nahuatl speaking merchants, suggest influence from the Mixtecs of Oaxaca.¹⁴

¹³ *Madrid Codex*, Testimonies of the Indian informers of friar Bernardino de Sahagún, published in facsimile form by Francisco del Paso y Troncoso, Madrid, 1907, folio 31 rectum.

¹⁴ See: *Tonalamatl de los Pochuecas* (Tonalamatl of the Merchants, *Codex Fejérvary-Mayer*), edited with commentary by Miguel León-Portilla, México, 1986.

Last Years of 'Uninvaded Mesoamerica'

In 10-Rabbit (1502) Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin, son of Axayacatl and nephew of Ahuizotl, was installed as high ruler in Mexico-Tenochtitlan. Numerous chiefdoms inhabited by peoples of different languages, like the Totonacs and Huastecs in the present day states of Puebla and Veracruz, the Mixtecs and Zapotecs in Oaxaca, the Tlapanecs in Guerrero, and many others, were in various forms subservient to the Mexicas. Conquests and the far-flung enterprises of the merchants were responsible for the growing prosperity of what has been called the Mexica "empire".

By 1519 the Mexicas ruled over several million people in Mesoamerica. Only the Tlaxcalans and the Tarascans of Michoacan remained independent. The Mexicas preferred to maintain an almost perpetual state of war -the "flowery wars"- with Tlaxcala since they considered it a nearby source of victims for their sacrifices. The case of the Tarascans was different; they had successfully resisted Mexica penetration, and at least once even defeated them.

Although trading with the Mexicas, the Mayas of Yucatan and Guatemala had also managed to preserve their independence. Some Maya chiefdoms, like those of Mayapan, Tulum, Uxmal and others in Yucatan, and those of the Quiche and Cakchiquel in Guatemala, showed some signs of prosperity.

Mexico-Tenochtitlan was built on a small island in the lakes, in what today is a drained basin almost seven thousand feet above sea level. The Mexica metropolis had become the home of a large population, some say of at least one quarter of a million. When in 1519 Hernán Cortés and his soldiers contemplated its temples and palaces, the great market place, the causeways that linked the city with the mainland, the canals and well planned streets, the botanical and zoological gardens, they thought those wonders to be a dream. As the chronicler Bernal Díaz put it:

Some of the soldiers among us who had been in many parts of the world, in Constantinople, and all over Italy and Rome, said that so large a market place and so full of people, and so well regulated and arranged, they had never beheld before.¹⁵

¹⁵ Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la Conquista de México*, 2 vols., México, Editorial Porrúa, 1955. v. I, pp. 280-81.

The city was indeed a gem. In it lived thousands of commoners, those of lineage, and many foreigners, artists, dignitaries, ambassadors, merchants, and slaves. The priests and sages composed hymns and poems, and they were in charge of the annals, the calendars, and of making astronomical observations. One Mexica of noble lineage, Tochiuhuitzin Coyolchiuhqui, a composer of songs who lived during the second half of the fifteenth century, forged the following poem, a testimony of his concern with discovering the meaning of life and also of the universal inclination to equate man's existence on earth with a dream:

So it was said by Tochiuhuitzin,
 so it was said by Coyolchiuhqui:
 It is not true, it is not true,
 that we come to live on earth,
 we come only to sleep, only to dream.
 Our body is a flower.
 As grass becomes green in the springtime,
 So our hearts will open,
 and give forth buds,
 and then they wither.
 So did Tochiuhuitzin say.¹⁶

Many Mexica chants and poems have come down to us side by side with compositions by other Nahuatl poets, among them some Tezcocans and Tlaxcalans. They integrate a rich pre-Hispanic literary *corpus*.

Moteczuhzoma Xocoyotzin could indeed be proud. His empire stretched from the Gulf Coast to the Pacific Ocean, and from central Mexico to the limits of Guatemala. At the height of his power he wanted to thank the gods and, above all, Huitzilopochtli, for his protection and unlimited gifts. Thus he decided to enlarge the Main Temple once more, and to enrich it with gold ornaments and pearls. To accomplish this task in the best possible manner he consulted with the sage Tzompatecutli of nearby Cuitlahuac. When the Mexica ruler told him what he had in mind, Tzompantecutli offered the following unexpected reply:

¹⁶ *Ms. Mexican Songs*, National Library of Mexico, folio 14 *versum*.

O lord, high ruler, it should not be like this. You ought to learn that you are contributing to the ruin of your people... You have to know that not the god we worship at the present time but another will soon arrive...¹⁷

The annals in which Motecuhzoma's consultation and Tzompantecuhli's answer are recorded, add that the Mexica ruler, deeply infuriated, condemned Tzompantecuhli and all his family to death.

In the meantime rumors filtered from the Gulf Coast about the arrival there of some strange beings, bearded men who came from beyond the divine waters. Today we know that in 13-Flint (1492), the Spaniards led by Columbus made their first landing in a not too distant island of the Bahamas, from which they entered the Caribbean sea. And today it is also well known that within the 2-Ahau Katun, which corresponded to the years from 1498 to 1518, other Spaniards, due to a shipwreck, made their entrance in Yucatan. Their accidental landing actually took place in 1511.¹⁸

Motecuhzoma was highly disturbed by those rumors. If we lend credit to several indigenous accounts, his heart became even more distressed when strange events, taken for very bad omens, began to occur. On the year 12-House (1517) there appeared "a fiery signal" in the sky: "it seemed to bleed fire... like a wound in the sky... it shone in the very heart of the heavens..."¹⁹

Some time later "the temple of Huitzilopochtli burst into flames... It is thought that no one set it afire, that it burned down of its own accord..."²⁰ Then the temple of the Lord of Fire, Xiuhtecuhli, was damaged by a lightning-bolt. Another fire "streamed through the sky while the sun was still shining..."²¹ Indigenous accounts add that there

¹⁷ *Annals of Cuauhtlan*, (included in the collection known as "Annals of Mexico and her Environs"), folio 62.

¹⁸ Most of the shipwrecked Spaniards who engaged in combat with the Mayas lost their lives; only Gonzalo Guerrero and Jerónimo de Aguilar survived. Guerrero became an "Indian" chief; Aguilar, rescued by Cortés, helped him as interpreter from Spanish to Maya.

¹⁹ *Florentine Codex*, v. I, book I, chapter I.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

was an outcry and confusion in Mexico-Tenochtitlan. People were amazed and frightened, and asked themselves about the meaning of these signs. A very old omen, still alive in modern Mexico, made itself present. "The people heard a weeping woman night after night. She passed by in the middle of the night, wailing and crying out..." The words one could hear are these: "My children, we must flee far away... My children, where shall I take you?"²²

If we trust these accounts, there were other omens. Motecuhzoma himself was personally affected by one singularly strange, bad omen. Men who fish the lakes caught a bird the color of ashes; it resembled a crane. The bird was brought to Motecuhzoma. Perhaps the reason for its negative impact was that the bird wore a sort of mirror on the crown of its head...

The night sky could be seen in the mirror. The hour was noon but stars and the *mamalhuaztli* could be seen [three stars in the constellation of Taurus, highly revered by the Mexicas]. Motecuhzoma took it as a great and bad omen...

And when he looked at the mirror again he saw people coming forward in great haste. They made war... and rode on the backs of animals resembling deer.

Motecuhzoma called for his magicians and wise men and asked them: Can you explain what I have seen...? But when they looked into the mirror to answer him, all had vanished, and they saw nothing.²³

A short time later, a poor man from among the many without a known lineage arrived from the Gulf Coast. He brought the first word about the appearance of "towers or small mountains floating in the midst of the sea, and moving here and there..." Another man, an emissary of Motecuhzoma to the Gulf Coast, returned and said that those "floating mountains" bore a strange people, "of very light skin... They all have long beards, and their hair comes only to their ears."²⁴

The encounter of two worlds, which Christopher Columbus, without knowing it, had initiated when in year 13-Flint, 1492, he

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ This is a testimony included in the work of the Mexica chronicler Hernando Alvarado Tezozomoc, *Crónica Mexicana*, México, Editorial Leyenda, 1944, p. 518.

disembarked in Guanahani island, now, in a year 1-Reed, 1519, was about to have broader consequences. The encounter was already an irreversible reality. It had been initially an unexpected face to face meeting, a meeting set in amazement, and then in opposition, and in a conflict which was to lead to outright war. As a process which has been moving forward through the centuries and up to the present, the encounter of two worlds soon reached a first culmination on a day 1-Serpent of a year 3-House, which corresponded to August 13, 1521. Then "our cries of grief rose up and our tears rained down, for Mexico-Tenochtitlan and the Mexica nation were lost."²⁵ Words dramatic indeed are preserved which bring to us the consternation of the vanquished Mexicas and later of the vanquished Mayans and of many others. Just seven years after the great humiliation suffered by their defeat, a Mexica composer of songs pronounced the following lamentation that rivals the threnoi, "words of tears", of the Jewish prophets who anticipated Jerusalem's destruction. For the Mexica, it is not an event projected to the future, but his own excruciating experience, and that of his nation's ruin, that forces him to speak and cry:

All these misfortunes befell us.
 We saw them and wondered at them;
 We suffered this unhappy destiny.

Broken spears lie in the roads;
 we have torn our hair in our grief.
 The houses are roofless now
 and their walls are red with blood.

Worms are swarming in the streets and plazas,
 and the walls are splattered with gore.
 The water has turned red, as dyed,
 and when we drink it,
 it has the taste of brine.

We have pounded our hands in despair
 against the adobe walls,
 and our inheritance is a net made of holes,
 with our shields we resisted,

²⁵ *Ms. of Mexican Songs*, folio 7 rectum.

but save us they could not...²⁶

How was it that Mesoamerica, and in particular the powerful Mexica nation, were lost? Was it that they had deserved the worst of the destinies? Or had the supreme Giver of Life become tired and let his people be crushed to the ground and lie in ruins?

A Gamut of Perspectives

We are on the eve of 1992. The Quincentenary which some people want to celebrate, others to mourn, and all inevitably will recall, is close at hand. Such a conflictive recalling can be, and actually is being perceived, from diverging perspectives. Here we shall focus upon what remains of Mesoamerica both as a cultural entity and as an ensemble of peoples. The current situation can be seen as one of the several consequences that derive from the process of encounter which began in that year 13-Flint, 1492, and which less than thirty years later, in 1-Reed, 1519, directly affected the peoples of what today is Mexico and her Central American neighbors.

But to better introduce our subject, we will first review the most frequently assumed views *vis-à-vis* the encounter-invasion of the New World and its current consequences. Some people in Spain, Mexico, and elsewhere, still insist on viewing the past which began in 1492 as a process of discovery in which conquests could not be avoided. With an uncontaminated Eurocentric perspective, as if one could erase the existence of high cultures and civilizations in Mesoamerica and the Andean regions, as well as the presence of many other hundreds of scattered groups, they want to celebrate the implantation of European culture, with its institutions, religion, and language -Spanish in the case of Mexico and a large part of the New World. For those who view things in this manner, besides celebrating the quincentenary of the discovery and the beginning of the implantation of European culture in the Americas, one has to take advantage of the occasion to foster and to consummate such a process. The remaining Indian groups, considered culturally retarded from the Eurocentric perspective, have to enter into the social mainstream.

Some representatives of the Catholic church and some Protestant denominations hold a parallel attitude. Their view considers the

²⁶ *Annals of the Mexican Nation*, Mexican Ms., No. 22, National Library, Paris, folio 34.

quintcentenary as worthy of celebration for it recalls the providential entrance of the Christian faith in the New World and the suppression of primitive cults which in some cases were bloody rites and diabolical idolatries. Those viewing things in this manner also desire to profit from the occasion by attempting to achieve the complete redemption of the surviving non-Christian Indians.

Radically different or, better still, in open opposition to these views, is the perspective adopted by some groups of Amerindians in Mexico and in other parts of the Americas. Their perspectives are shared, in a gamut of different nuances, by not a few anthropologists and other social scientists. The "Amerindian Perspective" concentrates on the tragic impacts of what the Europeans call "the conquest" and the natives view as an invasion. Violence, destruction, imposition of beliefs and practices, servitude, and often genocide and annihilation, were the gifts the Europeans brought to the peoples of Mesoamerica and, in general, of the New World. These same people, who thus focus on the events which began to evolve in a year 13-Flint, 1492, proclaim a double purpose for the occasion. On the one hand, they prepare themselves to utter in 1992 the most radical condemnation of the European invasion; on the other, they take steps to strengthen their own cultural identities, resisting the attempts to be engulfed either by the European or Mestizo cultures, and by the modern proselytizer of the various Christian faiths.

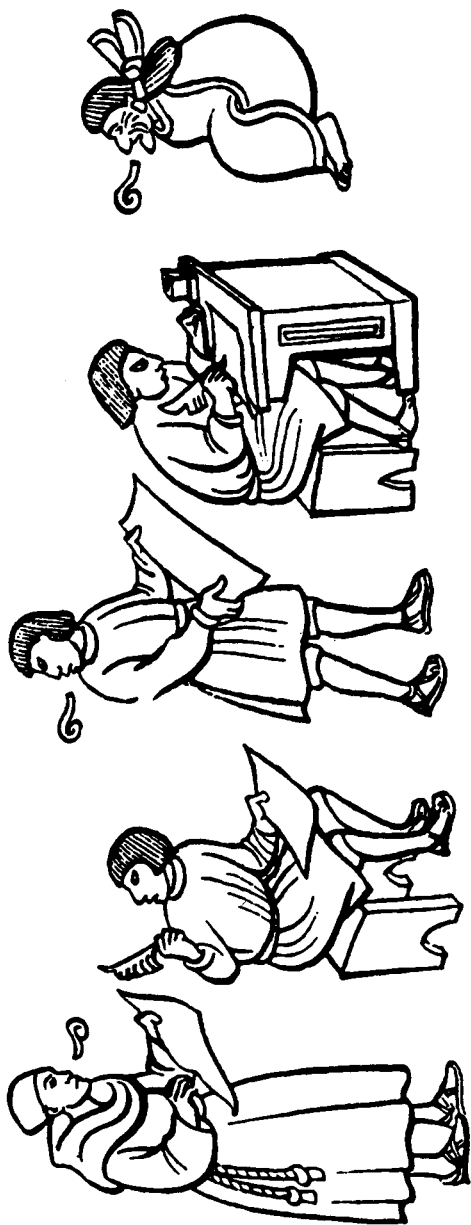
The gamut of perspectives is, indeed, ample. Brief mention can be made of the Italians who, above all, seem interested in exalting the person and deeds of Christopher Columbus. A similar perspective can be attributed, if only due to its nomenclature, to the U.S.A. official entity created with an eye toward 1992: "Christopher Columbus Quintcentenary Jubilee Commission".

Peoples and nations which at first sight would seem to be unrelated to the encounter, invasion-conquest, which set in almost five hundred years ago, include those of Africa, Israel and Japan. To the Africans, the "discovery" and European colonization of the New World means the expansion of slavery to a scale unknown until then. From their perspective, one of the most repugnant chapters in mankind's history opened in 1492. In the case of Israel, one cannot avoid remembering that in that same year of 1492 the expulsion from Spain of at least two hundred thousand Jews took place. A striking coincidence, were it not done on purpose, is the fact that Columbus set sail from Spain exactly on the day following the last day allowed for Jewish permanence on Spanish territory.

Finally, to the Japanese, the commemoration of 1492 has a special meaning. It was Cipango (Japan) the island Columbus wanted to reach as the gateway to Asia, India, and the Spice Islands. European cartography shows how the delineation of Cipango, never "discovered" by Columbus, had to be drawn from one place to another, each time more to the west in the vast span of an ocean unsuspected by the Europeans. For the Japanese, this leads to a deeper consciousness of the vast potentialities open to them in the great Pacific basin. In addition to what they have already achieved through their trade with the many countries that face that ocean, they ponder -almost five hundred years after Columbus's sailing in search of Cipango- new enterprises and new world relations.

The perspectives from which to contemplate 1492 on the eve of 1992 are many indeed. This is a conflictive theme but also an excellent occasion for mankind to reflect about itself when only five hundred years have passed since the peoples of the earth's two hemispheres began to know each other.

In returning to the specific case of indigenous Mesoamerica, a first step will be to attend, as I have said before, to the present situation of what remains of it as a cultural entity and as the ensemble of Amerindian peoples. These are the communities that have managed to survive and influence others, notwithstanding the adverse consequential realities of the process which began to affect them since 1-Reed, 1519.



Transmission of ancient Indian knowledge in Tlatelolco. Fray Bernardino de Sahagún is at far left. Engraving by Alberto Beltrán.

"Forever, There Will Be Many Indians In These Lands"

It was Bernardino de Sahagún, the renowned Franciscan "father of cultural anthropology in the New World", who in 1576 made this statement. He had already devoted over forty years of his long and very active existence to work among Nahuatl groups in central Mexico searching for primary testimonies to understand their ancient culture from within. On the basis of the texts in Nahuatl and ancient indigenous paintings and glyphs he assembled, he prepared his *magnum opus*, the *General History of New Spain*.²⁷ In it he included, at times in condensed form, and sometimes with commentaries, most of his testimonies in Nahuatl, together with a Spanish version. It is precisely in one of Sahagún's commentaries, which reflects on the difficulties experienced by the friars to convert the Indians, the forms of resistance adopted by the natives, and the calamities which had afflicted them -the conquest, servitude and epidemics which decimated them-, that he ponders about the future fate of the Indians.

Ambivalent at first, he writes:

It seems to me that only for a little time the Catholic faith will remain here, as the natives become less every day... Since this land was discovered, there have been three very great and universal pestilences besides others not so great nor universal. The first took place in 1520 when the Spaniards were entering..., it was smallpox and innumerable people died... Then, in the year 1545, there was another very great and universal pestilence, and in this New Spain most of the people died. I was living in the city of Mexico... and I buried more than ten thousand corpses and at the end the pestilence affected me, and I was on the verge of dying...

And now, in this year 1576, in August, a new, great and universal pestilence began and it has continued during the last three months and many people died, and die, and every day more die...²⁸

²⁷ Bernardino de Sahagún's, *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España*, in its original Nahuatl text and condensed Spanish version integrates the already quoted *Florentine Codex*. See also the above mentioned edition of the Spanish text prepared by Angel María Garibay: Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia General*...

²⁸ Sahagún, *Historia general*..., volume III, book XI, Appendix, pp. 355-56.

In addition to widespread disease, Sahagún mentions "a prophecy" he has heard -almost certainly the pessimistic predictions of friar Domingo de Betanzos- about the total destruction of the Indians. According to it, says Sahagún, "before sixty years after the Indians were conquered [will pass], no one of them will survive." And he adds, "and although I do not give credit to this prophecy, things that happen and those which have happened appear to contribute to make it true."²⁹ Sahagún nevertheless protracts his hesitations and comments:

But it is not to be believed that this people come to an end in such brief time as the prophecy declares, because if it were so, the earth would remain empty, as here the Spaniards are few, and even they could come to an end, and this land would become the home of ferocious beasts and wild trees, and thus it would be uninhabitable to man.³⁰

Then, as if prompted by that last consideration, fray Bernardino gains confidence and pronounces his final verdict:

That which appears indeed to me more firm is that the present pestilence will cease and there will remain many people here until the Spaniards will multiply and populate the land, so that when a generation will disappear, another will replenish this land, which is that of the Spaniards. And I keep for myself that, forever, there will be many Indians in these lands.³¹

Sahagún was right. The ten million or more inhabitants of ancient Mesoamerican origin who live in Mexico, and the five or more million in the Central American countries, demonstrate the truth of his assertion. By widening his scope we can add that his statement is also valid for the rest of the New World. In it, there are today over forty million Indians. Far from receding, their number keeps increasing: forever there will be many Indians in these lands.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 360.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 360-61.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 361.

Indians in Modern Mexico

Disturbing and bearers of violence, the consequential realities of the encounter-invasion have conditioned the existence of the Mesoamerican communities. Decimated, it has taken them centuries to reverse the process; they believe they can recover.

Nepantlism, "to be caught in the middle", has also plagued them. A narrative of fray Diego Durán, who around 1560 reprimanded an Indian for what he considered their misbehavior, appears paradigmatic in this respect:

In particular I asked the Indian why he had gone about begging, spending bad nights, and worse days, and why, after having gathered so much money with such trouble, he offered a fiesta, invited the entire town, and spent everything. Thus I reprehended him for the foolish thing he had done...

The response that the Indian gave to the friar discloses precisely the risks that may arise whenever an identity crisis is produced.

He answered: Father do not be astonished; we are still **nepantla**.

Although I understood what that metaphorical word means, that is to say, "in the middle," I insisted that he tell me which "in the middle" he referred to.

The native told me that, since the people were not yet well rooted in the Faith, I should not marvel at the fact that they were neither fish nor fowl; they were governed by neither one religion or the other.³²

Decimated and caught in the middle, the priests and sages who in the past were their guides, were now silenced. Everyday more and more, the Indians experienced yet another consequence of the encounter-invasion. Foreseeing its risks, several Franciscan friars tried to remove the Indians from contact with the Spanish settlers. But in a state of servitude, this was an utopia. With the exception of some Indians of the ancient nobility, the vast majority of the native population labored in the *encomiendas*, tilling the land, extracting minerals, or working at various kinds of domestic services. Indians,

³² Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e Islas de Tierra Firme*, 2 vols., México, 1867-1880, volume I, p. 268.

Spaniards, and Blacks brought as slaves, lived side by side. Inevitably, reciprocal influences began to make themselves felt. And one thing took place which was far more significant than any cultural exchange. To enunciate it, one sentence will suffice: Indians, Spaniards and Blacks began to give birth to a new kind of people, the Mestizos. Their importance was, at first, minimized; described as "the castes" within a complex system of classification, with the passing of the centuries the Mestizos have both culturally and ethnically determined the character of the Mexican nation.

It would be false to pretend that mixing among the Spanish and the natives generally occurred on a basis of equality. Often the Mestizo was born of a seduced and subsequently abandoned Indian mother. Nonetheless, it must be accepted that the absence of racial prejudice on the part of the Spaniards favored both illegitimate and Church-sanctioned unions. In fact, on the eve of Mexico's independence, there were about three million Mestizos. Spaniards and their descendants, the *Criollos*, numbered less than one million. The Indians had been drastically reduced to about two million.

The ethnic composition of the population of Mexico at the dawn of the nineteenth century had changed completely in comparison to that of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica. As a result of the encounter-invasion, the Indians were not only subject to foreign rule, but also coexisted in a debased situation with ethnically different groups, one of which was larger than they were.

The passage of time has increased the existing ethnic imbalance. Sahagún's assertion keeps being true, "there are many Indians in these lands" -about ten million of them- but, leaving aside several some hundred thousand of predominantly European descent, the vast majority of the Mexican population, at least eighty percent of it, is ethnically and culturally Mestizo. To the Indians, the Mestizos have become the dominant society, those with whom they have to coexist. Since the Indians' ancestral forms of life are endangered, their greater peril is no longer being engulfed by the force of Spanish rule, with its religion, language and culture, but by the predominant Mestizo majority that controls the destinies of the country.

Indian Societies in a Mestizo Country

Two main cultural heritages are alive, and often in conflict, within the Mestizo majority. Apart from the antagonisms, which often occur between the two heritages -Spanish and Mesoamerican- the fact is

that above all in the mixing the ethnic and cultural Indian component has been an essential co-founder of the new nation. Upon comparing the attitudes of Anglo-Americans and of Mexican Mestizos *vis-à-vis* Indians, substantial differences will surface. Indians look strange to the Anglos. With the exception, perhaps, of North American ethnologists, all other Anglos know very little or have fanciful ideas about the Indians. The Anglo most often feels that the Indian presence is a sort of strange curiosity and, at best, a colorful remnant of rather primitive peoples. For good or for evil, the Indian is to the Anglo, in every respect, a person apart.

To the Mexican Mestizo, although at times he may develop a minimizing attitude toward the Indians, and even use the word "Indian" as an insult, the descendants of the ancient Mesoamericans are by no means strange. The Mestizo has close relations, both good and bad, with the Indians. In the culture of the Mexican Mestizo there are many elements that are of indigenous origin. This is true concerning culinary habits: for instance, Mexican cooking includes many dishes that are unthinkable without Indian food; the Mexican Spanish language of the Mestizo majority, besides having incorporated hundreds of Indian (mainly Nahuatl) words, often has intonations which denote the native languages' influence. Above all are the communitarian sense, courtesy, calm forms of acting, circumlocutory expression and frequently a deep religiosity that the Mestizo has also inherited from his indigenous ancestors. A very significant element is the preferred cult of Christ in images that pair a tied and whipped or crucified Jesus with "Our Mother," the Virgin of Guadalupe. The Mestizo's veneration preferably addressed to Him, the Lord, Our Father, and Her, the Virgin, Our Mother, reminds us of the ancestral worship to the Supreme God of Duality, **Totahtzin**, Our Lord and Father and **Tonantzin**, Our Lady and Mother.

To the Mestizo majority, and also to the Indians, there is another extremely important presence of the ancient Mesoamerican heritage. That presence is visible and tangible in the more than twelve thousand sites where monuments and other vestiges of pre-Hispanic origin exist till now. Masterpieces of art, relics of the forefathers, and even sacred sites, are to the Mestizo and the Indian the realities others may label "archaeological vestiges." Those remains, as well as the thousands of objects preserved in the museums, are treasured as a most precious legacy. One may recall, in this context, the indignation and utter sorrow many Mexicans experienced over a recent robbery of several Mesoamerican sculptures and vessels from the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico city. Different was

the vivid reaction, the admiration, not to say fervor, with which millions of Mexican Mestizos and Indians watched with anticipation the diggings at the site of the main Mexica Temple in the heart of their metropolis. There is no doubt that in their consciousness, the indigenous legacy -monuments and other objects, the literary texts and traditions- is a treasure, a source of inspiration and trust.

All this being true, it would be false to assume that the majority of Mexican Mestizos admire the contemporary Indians or have a particular affection for them. Ordinary Mestizos think the Indians have to change their ways of life; they consider the Indian communities a burden to the country and, consequently, they believe that the Indians must be integrated into the national culture. One often hears, "the Indians speak primitive dialects; they are very lazy; you cannot count on them; they have been one of the big causes of Mexico's retarded development."

Since the triumph of the 1910 Revolution, the various governments have adopted a different attitude, at least in public. Mexican nationalism looked to the Indian heritage for its deepest roots. Although indigenist postures were officially adopted, they were seldom accompanied by action siding with the Indian groups or willing to foster their own cultures, languages and identities. It is most perplexing that only a few effective steps have been taken to put an end to the abuses which for centuries have been inflicted on the Indians. For many years Mexico's official philosophy concerning the so-called "Indian problem" was that of "incorporating the natives into the national culture." In this way, and without being aware of it, the dominant Mestizo society was imitating the practices of the former colonial rulers.

Later, a different approach was devised whose purpose was to work for the "integration" of the Indian communities into the socioeconomic life of the country. This was the purpose of the National Indian Institute. "Coordinating Indian Centers" began to operate in several regions of Mexico. Taking advantage of anthropological research, their aim was to plan and to initiate programs of "induced acculturation" which would foster changes considered desirable. Thus, work was carried out to introduce modern techniques in agriculture, stock-raising, and poultry farms; to improve health conditions; to establish bilingual schools; to build roads and, in a word, to attend to the most urgent and basic needs of the community. In the "Coordinating Indian Centers" some natives are specially trained to act as "cultural promoters", to serve as a bridge between the community and the outsiders who plan the process of

"induced acculturation." The crucial issue that must be faced specifically has to do with the planning of the "induced acculturation" projects. Such projects, sometimes without the knowledge of the Indian community, have been conceived to achieve some form of economic development, and this has been done without taking into account how it might adversely affect the cultural values and even disrupt the traditional structures of Indian societies. "Induced acculturation" permanently runs the risk of being no more than a disguised form of a patronizing posture.

Many evils have befallen the Indians during centuries of domination and exploitation, both under Spanish rule and under independent Mexico. Among them are that the native communities have been confined to impoverished and often waterless lands; they have been deprived of the most elementary public services, and have suffered the imposition of non-operating and alien socio-political structures that have often paved the way for individuals and institutions to take measures that have damaged the Indians' interests. These and other injuries to the natives' being and morale have at times resulted in a lack of trust in their own capabilities, shame in the use of their own language, and even a reluctance to fight for their own rights.

Mesoamerican Endurance Today

Endurance as an ability to persist and continue, but also as a capability to bear hardships and suffering, the consequences of a protracted state of submission and exploitation, has been a most definite attribute of Mesoamerica's indigenous population. Though inevitably subject to many cultural changes, they have managed as living entities to persevere and to continue to function. Centuries under Spanish rule and independent Mexico have deeply affected and, in some instances transformed, the realities of ancestral Mesoamerica. One has to recognize that the impact of the encounter of the two worlds has not meant a mere accident in the being of Mexico. It has affected even the landscape and the ecology of the area.

New forms of exploitation of the natural resources were introduced by those who arrived from beyond the immense waters. They also brought with them plants and animals previously unknown in Mesoamerica. New forms of urban life, with alien sociopolitical, economic, and religious structures, were superimposed on ancient

centers. Spanish took the place of Nahuatl as a new *lingua franca*, and great convents and magnificent churches replaced the indigenous temples and pyramids.

The implantation of Spanish culture in Mesoamerica, particularly in the large urban centers, was the result of a deep process of penetration that gave new shape to the cultural physiognomy of the country. For the Criollos and Mestizos -the latter every day more numerous- Spanish culture became part of their heritage and being. And even for the Indians it meant transformations that often dispossessed them of part of their own culture. First subjected to Spanish rule, and later living as minority groups in an independent nation where the majority of the population was already embedded in that double Mesoamerican-Spanish matrix, the Indians began to appear as destitute foreigners in their own country.

With time, their cultural identity, ancestral values, language, and sense of orientation were often on the verge of extinction. Large numbers of indigenous people actually succumbed as a result of the prolonged cultural impact from the outside. Many vanished; others entered, through 'mestizaje', into the nation's mainstream. In some places they are called "ladinos" or "coyotes" by the Indians. Those absorbed by the culturally Mestizo majority most often manage to survive in the slums of the large towns. They and their children again return to a situation of **nepantlism**, of being "caught in the middle."

Nonetheless it is noteworthy that, in spite of so many aggressions, including those most subtly disguised at times as "projects of induced acculturation," there are many Indian groups who have preserved the core of their identities and cultural values. Through the centuries, adversities have accumulated upon them and greatly damaged them, but they have not put an end to these Indian nations. There are still many communities in which the essential attributes of Mesoamerican culture are alive. The transmission of the Ancient Word has not been cut off. With it, the ancestral wisdom, world view and moral principles, are conveyed to the new generations. The Indian knows about his people's origins, about the experiences of the past, and of the sufferings and remote moments of glory. He has not interrupted his dialogue with the sacred universe in which he lives. Mountains, forests, caves, rivers, and 'waterholes', continue to be sacred to him. Mesoamerican societies live in a time and space full of meaning. Instances are offered by the Yaqui, Mayo, Tarahumara, Tepehuan, Cora, Huichol and by others living in northern Mexico. And also by many Mesoamerican Nahuatl speakers, and Otomies of Central Mexico; Mixtecs, Zapotecs, Mazatecs, Mixes, Triques, and others of

Oaxaca, as well as by several groups of the Mayan family, like the Tzotzil and Tzeltal of Chiapas, and the Maya of the Yucatan peninsula. All of them, in different ways, preserve social structures which belong to their own cultural heritage. Their settlement patterns with a ceremonial center; their relationship systems based on kinship and on spiritual and ritual links; their communal possession of the land and communal forms of work and assistance; their cargo systems; their sense of hierarchy and symbols of authority; their conceptions of the origins of political power; their decision-making by unanimous consent, these and other elements and traits, so closely related to their social structure, are a testimony of the vitality of their Mesoamerican roots.

An annual ceremonial calendar, rich in feasts with complex rituals, songs, and dances in which the whole community participates, is also a living perpetuation of the *tlamacehualiztli*, the "act of deserving," through which man, nature and the deity communicate. Although it is true that elements of Spanish culture and Christianity have often filtered into what is Mesoamerican, they have been reinterpreted and digested in terms of the native heritage.

More than fifty Mesoamerican languages still resound in Mexico and the Central American countries. They are the means to communicate all that has to be expressed in the life cycle, from birth to death, in subsistence activities, agriculture, arts and crafts, markets and commerce, as well as in the sphere of the spiritual concerns.

Almost five hundred years since the beginning of the encounter that brought in aggression, death and servitude, and also an alien cultural universe, Mesoamerica -represented by perhaps over fifteen million people- remains alive. To many outsiders this may sound inexplicable; some may label it "a phenomenon of resistance to cultural change." The fact is that, in spite of whatever has been adverse to the Indians along this five-century process of encounter, many Mesoamerican nations have had the vital force to preserve their roots and their identities.

Moreover, movements are emerging today among some groups that reaffirm and foster their own identities and values. This is happening among the Yaquis and Mayos of Sonora, Coras and Huichols of Nayarit, Mixtecs, Zapotecs and Mixes of Oaxaca, Tzotzils and Tzeltals of Chiapas, Mayas of the Yucatan peninsula, and several other groups. In particular, Nahuatl speaking communities in the Huastecs, Puebla, Guerrero and in the southern part of the Federal District, have started movements of their own to strengthen their

ethnicity, to defend their language, and to make themselves felt in a country which, they claim, has to be pluricultural and plurilingual.

Zapotecs of Tehuantepec in Oaxaca, and Nahuatl speakers in various other places are taking the lead. The following is an English version of a Nahuatl declaration by a native leader, Joel Martínez Hernández from Chicontepec, Veracruz, which was read at a gathering of his people.

Some non-Indians say
 we Nahuatl-speaking people will disappear,
 we Nahuatl-people will vanish,
 that our language no more will be heard,
 our language no more will be used.
 Non-Indians rejoice with this,
 non-Indians are looking for this.
 Why is it so,
 that they are looking for our destruction?

It is not necessary to think very much,
 for hundred years have taught us
 what the non-Indian wants.
 The non-Indians covets our lands,
 he wants to have our forests,
 he is looking for our rivers;
 he wants to take advantage
 of our work.
 The non-Indian wants
 to take us into the large towns...
 so that we become his servants.

That is why he wants us
 to abandon our communal lands
 our own forms of work...
 our own language.
 Where is our home?
 How many are we?
 We, the Nahuatl-speaking people,
 we are not just in one place,
 we exist here and there,
 we have our homes
 in sixteen different Mexican states...
 We, the Nahuatl speaking people,

still live and move around
everywhere in Mexico...
Now we can say
that even if the non-Indians
may want us to vanish again,
we the Nahuatl-speaking people
we will not disappear,
we will speak our language,
we will preserve our own ways of existence.³³

It is as if after centuries of passive endurance, Mesoamerican man and society have realized they can liberate their own repressed yearning and set in motion actions to be on their feet again. Some may say this will be a passing gesture; others will describe it as something thrust upon them from the outside, that radicals, political parties, perhaps unrealistic social scientists, are pretending, too late, a revival of the ethnic groups.

It may be a sign of the times. Not only in Mesoamerica but in many parts of the New and Ancient Worlds minorities, those peoples whose cultures and identities have been repressed and endangered for centuries, are reacting, rising up again, making themselves heard. It is a big challenge. The people of the "endangered cultures" will have to cope with the new technologies of this "age of movement" and with the uninterrupted flow of innovations. They will have to learn once more how to adapt and survive.

Voices of indigenous Mesoamerica resound on the eve of 1992. Almost five hundred years from the moment in which the encounter set in as a confrontation of peoples and cultures, those who remain, the ones who have endured, reaffirm themselves and their ancestral values and their languages. Mesoamericans, descendants of those who created the high cultures in this continent, are making it possible. After centuries of oppression, the words of Bernardino de Sahagún continue to be true: "forever there will be Indians in these lands."

³³ Joel Martínez Hernández's declaration is included in M. León-Portilla, "The Nahuatl Renaissance," *The Mexican Forum*, Institute of Latin American Studies, Austin, The University of Texas, vol. 5, No. 1, January, 1985, pp. 23-4.

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