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Precious Greenstone

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MESOAMERICAN STUDIES

IN HONOR OF DORIS HEYDEN

Edited by Eloise Quiñones Keber

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Labyrinthos will appreciate comments on this publication. The publisher will also welcome for consideration manuscripts of English translations of other archival materials on precolumbian and colonial life in the New World.

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A TRIBUTE TO DORIS HEYDEN

Alfredo López Austin

Before anything else, I want to give my thanks to those who asked me to participate in this well deserved homage to Doris Heyden. The invitation allows me to express my lifelong admiration—and weakness—for intelligent women. In order to explain this admiration I would have to go back as far as my childhood and enter the realm of autobiography, and that would not do. First, because of the nostalgia I feel for those times too long past, and secondly, because of the justified lack of interest that would create in the audience. It all remains, thus, as a confession that justifies an explanatory start.

I have to draw a line because, when I want to talk about Doris Heyden, I encounter a whole range of persons, the foremost of whom are the friend, the colleague, the teacher, the scholar, the intelligent woman, and one who has fought all her life to transform her aspirations into reality. Like some of you here today I have known several personal profiles of Doris through the years, but I chose to speak about her intelligence today, and that brings me to the evaluation of her capabilities as an investigator, to her patient and constant work in reconstructing the symbolic values of Mesoamerica.

However, it would be unjust to limit Doris Heyden's interest to the field of symbolic expression. Her views are much larger than this. She tries to penetrate the feeling of encounter Mesoamerican societies must have had with their natural environment. She sees in these societies a historical unity based on common traditions. She tries to discover in which way they integrated animals, plants, meteors, heavenly bodies, and geographic accidents into an intellectual whole that made sense to them and gave them a feeling of coherence. For Mesoamericans no creature was free from the universal logical order, and Doris Heyden tries to penetrate that logic. The Mesoamerican symbol, as an expression of the universal logical order, is the means through which Doris tries to understand.

As members of an agricultural society, Mesoamericans used to privilege vegetative cycles as archetypes of the cosmic movements and gave representative values to the flora through which all aspects of life were filtered. For that reason Doris pursues the symbolism of the flower, studying the representation of the world in its transit to another space-time by way of the psychotropic, in Cortés' talks, in the sky, and in the jaguar's spots—in a word, in every corner of the cosmos where the expression of preciousness would be needed.

But there is, in Doris' studies, another symbol that competes with the archetypes of the vegetal world and of the flower. Or, maybe, rather than compete with it, it includes and explains it. This is the mother image, as the representation of the universal cycle in which everything must be born and must die. And Doris Heyden looks for the symbolic matrices in the netherworld and in the caves. She finds that the mother image encapsulates the future of what is most precious for humanity, since in the womb, in the cave, or in the world of the dead the seeds of corn, of the Sun, and of humans, decay in order to regenerate and germinate. The cycles are all contained within the mother's womb. Birth and death thus transform themselves into stages of eternity. Love and terror unite to create the sacred. The cave, the womb, and the Mother Goddess are the symbolic complex that is expressed through the image, the word, and the rite.

Doris Heyden searches the image, the word, or the rite, for the keys to Mesoamerican conceptions. She does not confine herself to a single expression, since she knows that in historical investigation the right answer to each question resides in the union of the various pieces of the puzzle. She goes back to the documentary sources, in which studies she has demonstrated her knowledge, as when she was preparing a major edition of the works of Diego Durán. When Sahagún's Spanish text seems insufficient to her, she goes back to the Nahuatl

Nahuatl original in order to understand the references that Post-Classic people made to the old Classic city of Teotihuacan. She goes to the images in the manuscripts, in the murals, in the sculptures, in the engraved stones, in ceramics, and in the shale plates. She goes to the interpretation of the rituals that one can perceive in archaeological remains, to the documentary registers, or to the ethnographical descriptions. She thus gathers the various sources in order to build her frame of comprehension.

In her work Doris Heyden gives back to myth, belief, and religious practices their enduring value. Going against the tide, in an age when the fad is to interpret Mesoamerican reality from a super-specialized point of view only useful to analyze one single form of expression, Doris Heyden gathers information from the most varied sources and works with techniques from various fields. Also against the tide, while interpretation tends to be limited to a closed spatial temporal context, Doris recognizes the historical character of a unifying tradition in Mesoamerican cultures.

According to Doris, if the cave that lies under the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan reminds one, with its foliated plan, of the colonial representations of Chicomoztoc, one must start from the hypothesis that there exists a common Mesoamerican nucleus of beliefs and representations that then explains the similarity. If the cave of Teotihuacan preserves the vestiges of a ritual, one must suppose that its interpretation will be enlightened by the data coming from the colonial processes of Yanhuítlán or the ritual models followed even at the beginning of this twentieth century by the grain growers of San Francisco Mazapan in the caves of the rain.

If one suspects that under the Pyramid of the Sun there may have been divinatory practices, one may look for a parallel with the image of the sacred cave of Chalcatzingo, according to the interpretations given by other researchers of the ensemble of gigantic commalike signs appearing in the reliefs of that Morelos site. Her resources are many, but it does not mean that her interpretations are naïve or mechanical. They start from the recognition of a religious tradition that lasted for millennia, changing, undoubtedly, in many superficial aspects, but all the while preserving a profound sense of unity, as any vigorous tradition does.

Doris Heyden knows the arguments that go against Mesoamerican comparative studies. She respectfully evaluates Kubler's postulates, based on Panofsky's studies of the Mediterranean, and she contradicts them with well-balanced and solid arguments, saying,

In Mesoamerica there existed, over thousands of years, a cultural unity, without any major external changes, differing from Europe, and especially in the Mediterranean region, where great movements of varied peoples, dating back to the most ancient times, introduced new ideas and new symbols.

And she adds:

There is no doubt that the non-discriminating use of data from the sixteenth century or modern ethnography in order to reinterpret the most ancient cultures can be very dangerous; however, I repeat that in Mesoamerica cultural continuity is clearly evidenced in some customs and ideas of present-day indigenous people, which are similar to those of centuries past.

In Mesoamerica, there exist ideas and myths that have been kept alive for many centuries through oral tradition. For example, one can hear today, among some indigenous groups, myths that are almost identical in their content to those that Sahagún's informants were communicating in the sixteenth century. If these myths have been kept alive over 500 years, from the conquest until now, it is reasonable to assume that Tenochtitlan's traditions may have been similar to those of other peoples that may have existed half a millennium before.

Doris' argument is congruent with her interpretative hypotheses. Her travel through the Mesoamerican environment is that of a scholar in Christian religion looking for the meaning of the cross, the crown of thorns, the fish, the pelican, or the lamb, throughout the centuries of the present era.

At the present time, when neoliberal ideology has designed the points of reference, looking at scientific research through the lenses of marketing, there are still those of us who offer some resistance. Some of us, who may be called "dinosaurs," still think of the value of a scientific community that reaches its highest levels through collaboration. Doris Heyden and I are colleagues, we are friends, we work on the same themes, and usually we coincide in our interpretations, even if, infrequently, we do not agree.

Whenever she does not like my ideas she does not respect me less for that, nor do I stop esteeming her when she speaks in a mode that I would not have used. We both know the rules of the scientific game played the old-fashioned way, the game that gives its full meaning to dialectics within an enterprise that derives much from collective work. We are not competitors; we are colleagues going about our playful profession. Actually, our work cannot be conceived in the isolation of a cubicle. For this work we need dialogue, polemics, and criticism. And also advice, help, and support from whoever has walked this way before—or better—whether it is the communication of a scarce reference, the loan of a book, and—why not?—the shared joys, the familiar environment, or the relationship of a colleague who becomes an intimate friend.

When all of this comes from a relationship of many years with an intelligent woman—like Doris Heyden—I find myself very happy indeed, thanks to the memories of my very far-away childhood and to my eternal weakness for intelligent women.

First presented during the homage to Doris Heyden, November 9, 1995, at the Museum of the Templo Mayor, Mexico City. Translation by Michel Besson.