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America

**Anthropology  
of the Sacred**

Edited by  
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## 2

# Indigenous Mythology from Present-day Mexico

*Alfredo López Austin*

### Indians of Today, Indians of Yesterday

To speak about contemporary Mexican Indians is to discuss nearly five centuries of colonial domination. In 1521 the city of Mexico-Tenochtitlán<sup>1</sup> fell before the arms of the Spanish. Immediately thereafter, the Spanish expanded their conquest of the indigenous tribes who occupied the territory that today belongs to Mexico. The political and economic subjugation was accompanied by cultural conquest in the broadest sense of the word. The progressive advance of the Europeans imposed a colonial regime that employed evangelization as one of its most important ideological pillars, under which the Indians suffered not only spoliation and subjugation but also the marginalization of their worldview, which was interpreted by their conquerors as an absurd and archaic notion. The natives soon fell into poverty and became a minority of strangers on their own lands. They recognized the need to establish some correlation between the two traditions that their new reality forced them to now live simultaneously. But the great differences and frequent antagonism between the two traditions greatly hindered the integration process because the natives lacked the necessary knowledge to comprehend the culture of their conquerors and could not rely on the institutional backing of their forefathers, which, being of a hopelessly lost world, had suddenly become largely obsolete.

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<sup>1</sup>Capital of Mexica—the most powerful Mesoamerican people at the time. Although this is not entirely correct, these people are also known as Aztec. Linguistically, they belonged to the Nahua.

From the time the Spanish colony was established for the subsequent three centuries of its prevalence, the destinies of the indigenous populations were quite varied. Many tribes were incorporated into the dominant society under disadvantaged conditions which began the strong mestization that characterizes present-day Mexico and contributed to the laggard gestation of the so-called national culture. Others, especially the hunters and gathers of the north, were exterminated, and still others maintained their marginality and formed belief systems that responded to their dependent situation. The latter, who, isolated even from each other, were dominated by the Spanish in unequal forms and methods, interpreted the teachings of the evangelizers and the cultural heritage of their ancestors to restructure their cosmos, create new institutions, and continue their allegiance to those gods on whom their lives, health, and harvests depended.

Spanish political domination ended in 1821; however, the enormous transformation of the independent country did not produce the awaited improvements for the Indians. Marginalization persisted on all levels. Even in the present century, despite the official posturing that has maintained a nationalistic position, proud of its pre-Hispanic cultural roots and the mixed ancestry of the majority of Mexicans, the Indians must continue the struggle to defend their most elemental rights. Because of a large mestizo population, it is difficult to estimate the total number of Indians. According to linguistic criteria and the official census figures of 1990, the country has 5,282,347 individuals over the age of five who speak Indian languages, to which are added 1,129,625 individuals under the age of five who belong to homes whose head of family speaks an indigenous language. The above gives a total of 6,411,972. Indigenous organizations, however, do not accept this figure and maintain that their population is greater. It is also difficult to identify the actual number of indigenous languages spoken today because of variations in linguistic criteria. Officially, there are a total of fifty-nine indigenous languages currently being spoken in Mexico.

Colonial Indian religions comprised two currents: the pre-Hispanic and the Christian. The pre-Hispanic had three components in differing proportions: the Aridamerican, the Mesoamerican, and the Oasisamerican. The first includes those groups that inhabited the arid northern lands that were unfit for cultivation. They were dispersed societies of which we have little information because their

dependence on hunting and gathering and their bellicose nature led to their reduction into sedentary communities, assimilation, or extinction under the advance of the Spanish. There are very few Aridamerican communities subsisting in Mexico today. Among them are the Seris of Sonora and a few small groups in Baja California.

The Mesoamerican tradition has a more complex history. It dates back to 2500 B.C.E.—a time when nomadic groups changed their subsistence activities to depend predominantly on the consumption of cultigens which obliged them to adopt a sedentary lifestyle. This significant change in lifestyle extended to the fertile lands and involved distinct ethnic groups and languages. The exchange of goods between villagers kept them in permanent communication. As a result of intensive interactions, the maize agriculturists shared a history and common cultural elements. In spite of the profound social transformations that occurred during the four-thousand-year history of Mesoamerica and the enormous differences among particular traditions, the common cultural nucleus remained incredibly resistant. The Olmec of the preclassical period,<sup>2</sup> the Teotihuacán, Zapotec, and Maya of the classical,<sup>3</sup> and the Toltec, Mexica, Tarasco, Huastec, Totonaco, Mixtec, Zapotec, and Maya of the postclassical<sup>4</sup> are only some of the distinguished examples in the complex of tribes that shared this common history. Today their descendants form the greater part of the ethnic groups in Mexico.

Sedentary societies appeared in northwestern Mexico and the southwestern United States around 500 B.C.E. With great effort and advanced techniques they cultivated maize and developed a complex culture in an agriculturally unfavorable, arid territory. These people have been generically classified as Oasisamericans. Since 500 C.E., Oasisamerica has maintained a considerable commerce with Mesoamerica. We estimate that the more important centers of one of these traditions, the Hohokam, disappeared around 1450, leaving

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<sup>2</sup> The preclassical—the period of the villages and regional centers—is dated between 2500 B.C.E. and 200 C.E. The Olmec lived in the territory near the Gulf of Mexico between 1200 and 400 B.C.E.

<sup>3</sup> The classical—the period of the great cities—begins in 200 C.E. and ends in the beginning of the tenth century. The Zapotec and Maya traditions, which experienced great development during the classic period, are still present today.

<sup>4</sup> The postclassical—the militaristic period—concludes in the sixteenth century with the Spanish conquest and the establishing of the colony.

the Pápago as their Mexican descendants. Another Oasisamerican tradition, the Mogollón, had Paquimé as one of its first-ranked centers located in the state of Chihuahua. Apparently, this center fell in the fourteenth or fifteenth century. It is not known whether its inhabitants emigrated to the north, but it is believed that the possible Mexican descendants of the Mogollón tradition may be the Tarahumara, Ópata, and the Cahita (Yaqui and Mayo).

## **The Inheritance from Ancient Thought**

Mythology is an area of indigenous social production that most clearly shows the persistence of nuclear elements from ancient religion. Unfortunately, the historic study of the Mexican myths has been difficult because of a great gap in the available data. Following a vigorous initial interest in the ritual beliefs and customs of the conquered, studies of this nature declined notably and were only renewed toward the end of the last century. With the exception of a few important accounts from the intermediate period, we have accounts from the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth. On the other hand, there are the records of the last hundred years. Therefore, reconstruction of the ties between both extremes of the tradition must be made with limited information and many conjectures.

Nevertheless, the relationship between ancient and present myths is so evident that the comparison between the past and the present is highly enlightening. If we begin in the present, the variety of myths is great because the ethnographic records provide numerous elements that facilitate the understanding of the ancient documents. If we commence with the past, we will understand the narratives of our time in a cosmological context that was valid for millennia. This context, although impoverished during the colonial period, still provides some clarity to the religious beliefs and narratives.

### ***The Persistence of the Narrative***

Some of today's narratives appear to be modern versions of those that were recorded in the sixteenth century, which demonstrates the vigor of the oral tradition. A good example is the origin myth of maize as recounted by the present-day Chole of Chiapas. They tell of

the god in heaven Ch'ujtiat, who informed humans of a food called maize and instructed them to search for it inside a mountain. The humans asked the woodpecker to help them locate the hidden maize. The bird struck at the rocks with its beak and discovered, by the sound, which of them contained the treasure. But its beak was not hard enough to break the rock. So the god of the heavens created White Lightning and sent him to break the rock. However, the rock only cracked under the impact of White Lightning, and the humans could do no more than spy the maize through the crevice. The humans then spoke with the black ant, whose body was so narrow that it could pass through the opening. But the insect, for being so small, could not carry the grain. So the men requested the help of the red ant. This one did have the strength to extract the maize. But it only brought out the grain, leaving the "heart" behind. The humans now knew maize. However, as they did not have the heart, they could not cultivate it in their fields. So Ch'ujtiat made Red Lightning and thrust him against the rock. But the impact of Red Lightning only served to widen the crack a bit more, not enough to allow the maize to be extracted. So the humans asked the help of the mouse. This one did fit through the crack. It managed to retrieve the maize, but it ate the grain that contained the heart. Again humans possessed maize without being able to cultivate it. Ch'ujtiat felt that humans had suffered enough and created Green Lightning. This one was able to break apart the rock, and from the opening poured the black maize, which was scorched by the lightning, followed by the red, the yellow, and finally the white. The latter, having been at the bottom, was not burned. These grains were viable seeds. Even though they had been burned, their heart remained intact because Green Lightning is the lightning of life.<sup>5</sup>

Now let us compare this myth from southeastern Mexico with the one recorded on the Central Altiplano during the early colonial period. The ancestral Nahuatl said that, after having created humans, the gods contemplated the food with which humans might nourish themselves. As the gods searched for a diet, Red Ant entered the Field of Sustenance and removed a grain of maize. The god Quetzalcóatl spied the ant and asked it where it had found the grain. At first the ant refused to reveal its secret. But later it pointed out the place.

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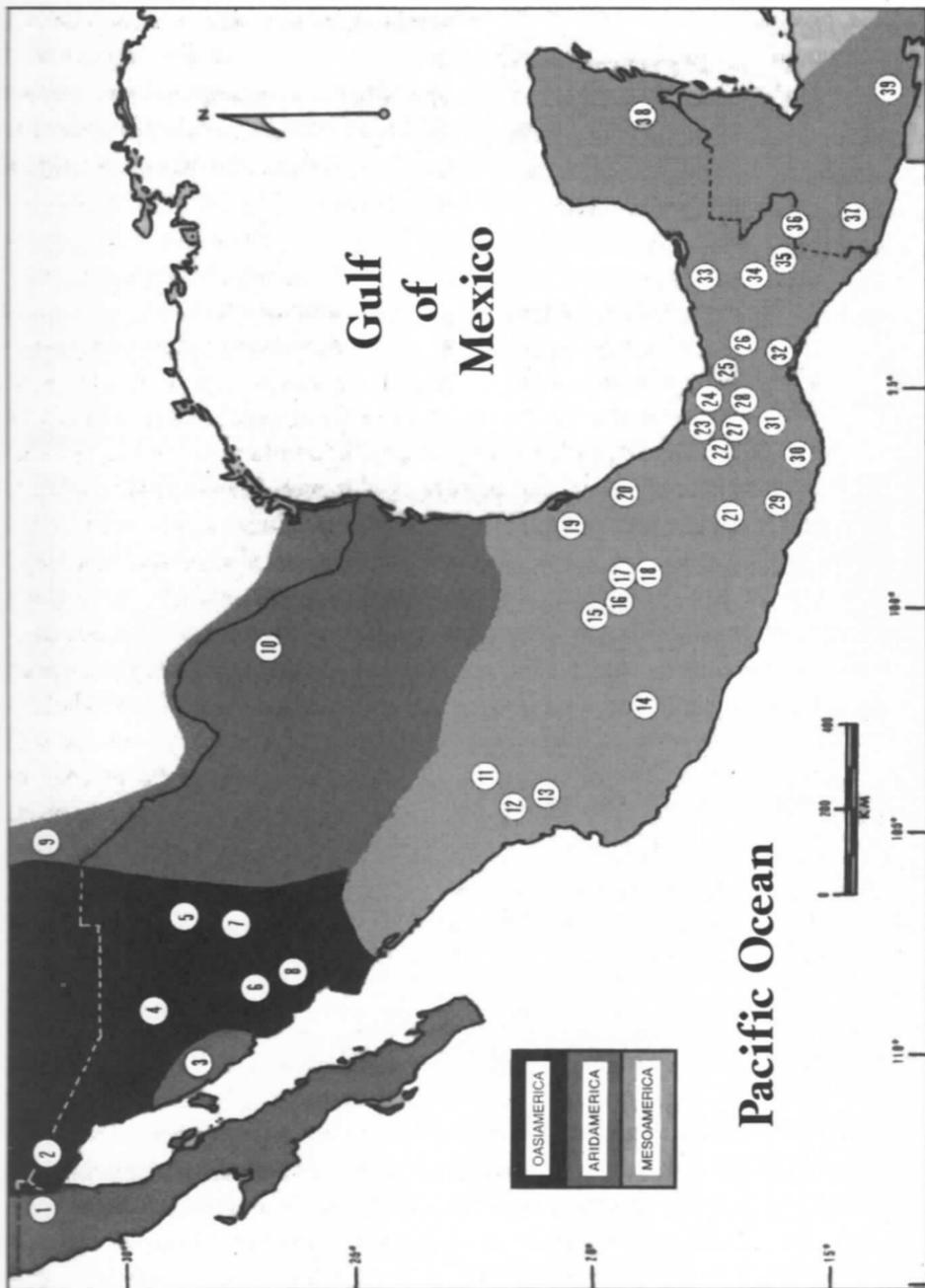
<sup>5</sup> Morales Bermúdez 1984, 94-99.

### Some of the Current Indigenous Groups

<i>Alphabetical Order</i>		<i>Numerical Order</i>	
Apache	9	Cucapá	1
Chantin	30	Pápago	2
Chinantec	27	Seris	3
Chole	33	Ópata	4
Chuje	35	Yaqui	6
Cora	12	Tarahumara	7
Cucapá	1	Mayo	8
Huastec	19	Apache	9
Huave	32	Kickapú	10
Huichole	13	Nahua of the Sierra Madre Occidental	11
Ixil	36	Cora	12
Kickapú	10	Huichole	13
Maya	38	Tarasco	14
Mayo	8	Otomie	15
Mazatec	22	Nahua from Central Mexico	18
Mixe-popoluca	28	Huastec	19
Mixtec	21	Totonaco	20
Nahua from Central Mexico	18	Mixtec	21
Nahua from Veracruz	23	Mazatec	22
Nahua of the Sierra Madre Occidental	11	Nahua from Veracruz	23
Ópata	4	Popoluca	25
Otomie	15	Zoque	26
Pápago	2	Chinantec	27
Pipile	39	Mixe-popoluca	28
Popoluca	25	Trique	29
Quiché	37	Chantin	30
Seris	3	Zapotec	31
Tarahumara	7	Huave	32
Tarasco	14	Chole	33
Totonaco	20	Tzotzil	34
Trique	29	Chuje	35
Tzotzil	34	Ixil	36
Yaqui	6	Quiché	37
Zapotec	31	Maya	38
Zoque	26	Pipile	39

### A Few of the Now Extinct Groups

<i>Alphabetical Order</i>		<i>Numerical Order</i>	
Hohokam	2	Hohokam	2
Mexica	18	Mogollón	5
Mogollón	5	Toltec	16
Olmec	24	Teotihuacan	17
Teotihuacan	17	Mexica	18
Toltec	16	Olmec	24



Quetzalcóatl transformed into Black Ant and accompanied Red Ant in order to extract the grain. The god took the maize to the Place of Creation, where the gods tasted the maize and found it to be good. Quetzalcóatl bound the Field of Sustenance with rope to carry it away on his back. But he could not lift it. The gods Oxomoco and Cipactónal also tried their luck but came to the conclusion that only Nanáhuatl would be capable of carrying off the field. The gods of rain prepared themselves—the blue, white, yellow, and red gods. Nanáhuatl beat the field with a stick until it broke apart. From it there came the white, black, yellow, and red maize, the bean, the amaranth, and the *chía*. The gods of rain lorded themselves over all these foods.<sup>6</sup>

In other cases, this myth could vary from those found in the ancient documents, but it does reproduce some of the more attractive adventures. George M. Foster, who studied the Popoluca traditions in the state of Veracruz in 1940 and 1941, notes that the episodes in the maize origin myth are very similar to those of the ancient mythology in the *Popol vuh*.<sup>7</sup> Foster was correct. The adventures of the Quiché myths are very similar despite the fact that they do not narrate the origin of maize, but rather that of Sun and Moon.

### ***The Persistence of Actors***

Continuity can be perceived also among the actors on diverse levels. This is most evident when the gods conserve even their names, as in the case of the goddess Tonantzin in the Western Sierra Madre<sup>8</sup> or in that of Nanahuatzín in the region of the Gulf of Mexico.<sup>9</sup> But even without the name, the twin actors of the astral gods frequently refer to the brothers Hunahpú and Ixbalanqué in the ancient Quiché myths.

The substitution of figures from the religion of the conquerors for ancient actors does not necessarily imply a significant variation in their mythic performance. The Jews or the devils that now frequently appear in the narrations and rituals occupy the place of the stellar or

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<sup>6</sup> *Leyenda de los soles*, 121.

<sup>7</sup> Foster 1945, 194.

<sup>8</sup> Preuss 1982, 173, 227, etc.

<sup>9</sup> Díaz Hernández 1945, 64.

aquatic gods. Similarly, Jesus Christ is often substituted for the solar god; the Virgin for the earth goddess, and the devil for the master of the animals and owner of the subterranean riches. This is why, among distinct indigenous groups, the figure of Jesus Christ appears with actors that seem very strange to those unaware of the mythical solar antecedents of Mesoamerica. This also explains why among the Tzotzil and the Mixe-popoluca, Christ is cross-eyed, with acne, pustules, and abscesses, bad body odor, or even covered with flies.<sup>10</sup> In the pre-Hispanic myths the actor who transforms into Sun frequently appears as an individual covered with pustules. Ancient Maya iconography also describes Sun as being cross-eyed.

### ***The Persistence of Mythical Context***

A third area that can show the continuity of the Mesoamerican religious tradition is that of mythical context. Below I will describe the peculiarities of the moment of creation. Here I have transcribed a Chole description of a time in which the world had still not witnessed the transformations resulting from the adventures of the gods:

Before . . . Before, but long before, there was nothing—nothing at all. The world did not have heart. Neither did the coffee, the cedar, nor any other tree. There was nothing. Not even the monkey, nor the *tepesquintle*.<sup>11</sup> Not one animal lived—the *lucum*,<sup>12</sup> the *tacuat*,<sup>13</sup> the birds. No one had a nest, hideout, nor cave. There was no earth, no sky, or water. Only a void. Everything was a void, dark, dark . . . darkness. Black! But Ch'ujtiat was there. He who made himself, he who always lived and will be forever. He of great heart, he of great power. The master of the sky.<sup>14</sup>

This text can be compared with the passage from the *Popol vuh*:

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<sup>10</sup> Holland 1963, 264, 283; *Seis versiones del Diluvio*, 37; and Münch Galindo 1983, 160–62. It is also recorded in Guatemala, among the Ixile; see Colby and Colby 1983, 167.

<sup>11</sup> A large rodent with long feet, reddish fur with beautiful white spots, and delicious meat (*Cuniculus paca*).

<sup>12</sup> Generic name for snakes.

<sup>13</sup> *Tlacuache* or *zarigüeya*. A marsupial of distinct species among which is *Didelphis marsupialis*.

<sup>14</sup> Morales Bermúdez 1984, 67.

This account reveals that everything was motionless. All was calm, in silence; everything immobile, quiet, and the skies were empty.

This is the first account, the first narration. There was still not a single man, nor animal; birds, fish, crabs, trees, stones, caves, cliffs, herbs nor forests. Only the sky existed.

One could not see the face of the earth. There were only the calm sea and the all-covering sky.

There was nothing to make a sound. Nothing moved nor stirred. Nor was there a sound in the sky.

Nothing was standing; only the calm water, the calm sea, alone and still. There was no life.

There was only immobility and silence in the darkness, in the night. Only the Creator, the Former, Tepeu, (the Gucumatz)—the progenitors—were in the water surrounded by light. They were hidden under green and blue feathers. That is why they call them Gucumatz.<sup>15</sup>

A similar pattern appears in descriptions of mythical places such as the World of the Dead, to which actors of myths, stories, and legends frequently journey. Ancient and modern narratives alike mention opposing attitudes toward food. That which is considered food in the “celestial” world is held as disgusting on earth. On the different levels, the trials of travelers, the rivers, and the sources of the cold world of the dead conserve their old characteristics in the imagination of the modern-day believers. An example is the terrible freezing wind that, according to the pre-Hispanic Nahua, blew in the underworld. According to the descriptions, Mictlan was a dark place, full of spiny plants, where the wind beat on the souls as if with knives of obsidian. Today the Cora say that, in this place, the winds are very strong; blowing dirt and spines that can injure the eyes of travelers.<sup>16</sup>

### ***The Persistence of Mythic Premises***

In an earlier work I referred to “theme” as that which assumes the object of expression. In the communicative context, it is considered the presentation of a thought, the manifestation of a feeling, or a communication of a speaker to alter the thought or the feeling of the

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<sup>15</sup> *Popol vuh*, 23.

<sup>16</sup> Jiménez Suárez 1994, 18.

listener(s). In the same work I also defined the “pneumonic themes” of the myth as those that refer to the cosmic laws underlying mythical narratives.<sup>17</sup> It is noteworthy that even today the ancient mythical and pneumonological themes have been preserved.

The above manifests the character of indigenous religions. They are not mere groups of disarticulated elements, but complexes of beliefs and customs with which to understand the cosmos and the movements therein. Beliefs and customs are interrelated through the congruence of a system that has as its foundation the concept of a universal norm that includes all that exists—be it natural or social, mundane or divine. Consequently, we can understand the reflections of authors such as William L. Merrill, who confronts indigenous thought: “When I began to analyze the material I discovered, as do most anthropologists, what first appeared as variations in the initial stages of the investigation resulted to be fragments of a larger and essentially coherent system.”<sup>18</sup>

The mythical belief comprises a global taxonomy. Robert M. Zingg, while studying Huichole myths, emphasized the great cultural importance of the opposition of two complementary principles: the aquatic world of the goddesses governed by Nacawé (the goddess of rain) and the igneous world of Tatewarí (Our Grandfather the Fire) and Tayaupá (Our Father the Sun).<sup>19</sup> In principle, there is a great opposition between the rainy season and the dry season, which divide the year into two almost equal parts. But in a deeper sense, the confrontation of the two sides refers to a dual relationship of all that exists.

Today this duality is expressed as the pair God/devil. In fact, according to the Popoloca and the Nahua from the isthmus of Veracruz, God and the devil are brothers.<sup>20</sup> This same concept explains the comments recorded by Carlos Navarrete from the central lowlands of Chiapas: “There are saints aligned with God and saints aligned with the Devil. . . . It is not certain whether they (God and the Devil) are enemies. On the contrary, they carry on well together and stage the conflict before us so that, what is written, is carried

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<sup>17</sup> López Austin 1990, 342–45 (in the English version, 1993, 247–50).

<sup>18</sup> Merrill 1992, 36.

<sup>19</sup> Zingg 1982, *passim*.

<sup>20</sup> Münch Galindo 1983, 161.

out."<sup>21</sup> The Nahuatl of central Mexico say that this was a law that pre-dates God. Obligated to obey, God created his complement, the devil.<sup>22</sup> They are two opposing sides. Consequently, the feminine is separated from the masculine, the darkness from the light, the low from the high, the cold from the hot, the lesser from the greater, the terrestrial-bound animals from the birds, death from life, and so on. Over the entire Mexican territory the myths constantly refer to these two interacting sides. Beyond this region, to the north, the Apache Chiricahua interpret the alliance of the birds with light and day, while the terrestrial animals are associated with night and darkness. In El Salvador to the south, the Pipile associate birds with the sky, light, and feathers, while terrestrial animals are affiliated with the underworld, bones, and darkness.

The "division of opposites" law is completed by the inverted pre-eminence which is repeatedly expressed in Mesoamerican myths. It was the basis for the alternating of opposite and complementary forces of the cosmos in a strong cyclic perception of the passing of time. Light and darkness, periods of waters and periods of drought, or the course of time in its most ample aspect, were—in ancient thought—ludicrous games of the gods that transformed the world into a battlefield. One of the clearest examples is found in the Náhuatl myth describing the origin of the sun in Teotihuacán. Tecuciztécatl, a wealthy god, is commissioned by the other gods to transform himself into the sun. But, just in case, they also named a second actor as an alternate. The alternate was Nanahuatzin, a poor and ill god, whose body was covered with pustules. Tecuciztécatl was to be the first to lunge upon a bonfire. But fear stopped him four times. Nanahuatzin, however, did so on his first attempt. Embarrassed, Tecuciztécatl also threw himself among the flames. The difference in the order (and valor) transformed the poor god, sick and despised, into Sun, and the rich and honorable god into Moon.

After studying the present-day solar myth of the Tzotzil, Gary H. Gossen was the first investigator to recognize the law of the reversal of the preeminence. He showed how the mother, superior to the son, became his servant when he transformed into the sun and she became the moon.<sup>23</sup> The beginning is now clear in many myths.

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<sup>21</sup> Navarrete 1968, 61–62.

<sup>22</sup> Madsen 1955, 124–25.

<sup>23</sup> Gossen 1979, 60, 63–64.

Among them is the myth told by the Nahuatl of the Sierra Madre Occidental concerning the older brother and the younger brother. The older brother loses rank and becomes the evening star, while his younger brother becomes morning star.<sup>24</sup> The modern Mazatec emphatically agree: "Before the Moon was the older brother, but the Sun took the light and became greater."<sup>25</sup>

### ***The Persistence of Mythical Themes***

It is interesting to show how indigenous societies maintained many of the thematic threads in their myths in the face of evangelization and how there is a notable likeness among the modern indigenous myths in spite of differences in ethnic background, linguistic affiliation, and development under the colonial regime. The attention of narrators is focused on the sun and the moon, the discovery of maize, and the acquisition of fire, and so on. Among the surviving myths, two are distinguished and often told in succession to form a unit: the first is the account of a man who saved himself from the flood inside of a hollowed tree trunk; the second is an origin myth of humanity which began with the union of this particular man and a bitch that accompanied him inside of the trunk. I will refer to both below.

## **The Diverse Types of Myths**

Among the indigenous traditions of Mexico exists a notable similarity in form and content among the accounts explaining the creation of beings of this world in original times. This likeness makes it prudent to group the accounts and beliefs that sustain them under the common denomination of *myths*. The term is limited to that area which refers to the divine processes through which, in another time-space, the gestation of individual beings, the classes, and the processes of the world inhabited by humans took place.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Preuss 1982, 75-81.

<sup>25</sup> Portal 1986, 56.

<sup>26</sup> For more about my definition of the myth of Mesoamerican tradition, see López Austin 1990, 481-82 (English 1993, 354).

Despite the likeness between the accounts, not all narrate the appearance of life on the world in the same manner. Classifying the myths according to the methods of creation used by the gods could help to provide a general idea concerning this subject. I do not pretend to offer an exhaustive classification. Rather I will present only a condensed guide.

### ***Creation from the Capture of the Divine Matter***

The creation process that rests on the most profound mythic conception is, without doubt, the one that shows how the gods remained enclosed in heavy matter. According to this concept, all that exists in the world is composed of two types of substances: one is heavy and perceptible; the other is subtle and imperceptible. The second is a vital force. It is a spirit capable of giving to each earthly being its essential characteristics. Each type of being has its own spirit. For example, according to the Tarahumara, the spirit of fish permits them to live under water but impedes them from breathing beyond this medium.<sup>27</sup> This spirit is given the name "heart." In ancient times they spoke of the "heart of the sky," the "heart of the sea," the "heart of the earth"—always referring to the subtle part, the divine, that gave power and peculiarity to the being. To cite only one case, the modern Chatin believe that in the bell tower resides the "heart" of the village; it is their center, the most sacred place.<sup>28</sup>

The invisible substance is divine, but how did it penetrate the beings of the world? The myths refer to a time when all was in a state of darkness because the sun and the moon did not yet exist. Within the darkness lived beings that in the accounts appear as gods, humans, or animals. A characteristic of all was the capacity of speech. This happened "many years ago, but many years ago"—say the Cora—"when the animals understood each other."<sup>29</sup> In a strict sense, these entities were the divine seeds of mundane beings. Still lacking their definite attributes, they debated in the "formation adventures." For example, in the beginning the deer did not have horns. It robbed them from the rabbit. Because of his crime, both animals acquired

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<sup>27</sup> Merrill 1992, 142.

<sup>28</sup> Durand 1986, 115, 178.

<sup>29</sup> Jiménez Suárez et al. 1994, 20.

their final attributes. The deer remained with the horns and the rabbit without them.<sup>30</sup>

There came a time when all forms became fixed. The adventures suddenly end with the first rising of the sun, with the primeval aurora. The world crystallized. The rays of light hardened all the formerly malleable beings, who lost forever the use of their human voices.

In the ancient myths Sun initiates his rule over the world with a cruel mandate. He condemns all gods to death. The sacrifice was necessary in order that the new lord might reconnoiter the firmament. The concept of the massacre persists today. It is said that the mythic beings transformed into animals or stones (in some cases they took the forms of the ancient gods), or they hid beneath the earth, inside the mountains or beneath the waters. The Tzotzil say that these original beings, the "fathers-mothers," were eliminated because they did not honor the gods. This occurred while the world was beginning. St. Vincent and St. Casper blew the whistle and beat the drum. The two saints told the fathers-mothers: "Here we are providing your feast because you are to die." The souls of all were collected and, after a strong thunder, the "fathers-mothers" transformed into animals.<sup>31</sup> In other cases the myths mention a generalized violence, borne from fights between the animals, or simply the slaughter of the mythical characters at the moment in which their characteristics are crystallized. According to the Chuje: "In these times many animals, tapirs, deer, goats were killed and animals fooled one another. That is why many animal skins were collected. God gave the animals their qualities."<sup>32</sup> The same myth, but in the version told by the Chuje of Guatemala, opens with an episode that does not appear to have anything to do with the account: "It was a god who sent the rabbit to kill all of the animals, because if he did so, he would bestow power on him."<sup>33</sup>

The above should be interpreted as the transformation of the original divine essences of the imperceptible substances of things. The beings in the myth were trapped by the other substance, that of death—the heavy substance. There they find themselves confined,

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<sup>30</sup> Schumann G. 1993.

<sup>31</sup> Arias 1990, 19-21.

<sup>32</sup> Schumann G. 1993.

<sup>33</sup> Buenrostro 1993.

giving their particular attributes to each being. With the divine substance within them, the types were fixed at the beginning of creation. When an individual dies, his "heart" leaves to become part of a new being of the same type. That is how the types persist beyond the destruction of the individual.

To these myths belong those narratives that tell of how, during primordial times, the beings of today were formed from the bodies of some gods. For example, the ancient Nahua relate that from the dead body of the god Cintéotl were born distinct food plants important for humans.

### ***Creation from the Mixing of the Divine Substance***

The gods are many and very different from each other. The light substance that constitutes the "heart" of beings is not homogeneous. If it were, there would be no types because all would have the same characteristics. Since the great dual opposition, distinct proportions of the dark and the light, of the humid and dry, of the below and the high are integrated in all beings. These groupings belong to that sector of the cosmos which corresponds to their predominant element.

To Madsen we owe the pioneering studies with respect to the indigenous taxonomy since the discovery of the opposition of pairs. He demonstrated how the Nahua of central Mexico employed the pair cold/hot to classify the components of the cosmos and deduce from the attributed qualities the manner in which humans should behave before that which exists.<sup>34</sup> It obviously refers to the cold or hot nature of things and not temperature. The Maya of Quintana Roo speak of "charges," using the word *cuch*, which has a sense of destiny. Accordingly, they call *ziz u cuch* that which has a cold quality and *chocó cuch* that which has a hot quality.<sup>35</sup>

In practically all human activities—in nature and in society—one must account for the nature of things in order for the action to be effective. The practical utility of the taxonomy derived from the great division established at the time of the myth is notably expressed in food and medicine. Among the foods is sought the equilibrium between hot and cold. Medicine divides disease among those that

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<sup>34</sup> Madsen 1955; 1960.

<sup>35</sup> Villa Rojas 1978, 307.

FIRST PERIOD DIVINE LEISURE	SECOND PERIOD MYTHICAL ADVENTURES	TIME LIMIT MOMENT OF CREATION	THIRD PERIOD WORLD OF CREATURES	
<p>The divine exists without creating</p>	<p>The gods (germinal and playable beings) divide the cosmos and invent the elements of their mechanism;</p> <p>combine substances to form new beings</p> <p>and fight among themselves to acquire the characteristics that will be definitive in the time/space of the creatures.</p>	<p>The sun rises for the first time, consolidating the cosmic mechanism,</p> <p>killing the germinal beings, that is, crystallizing their forms, enclosing them in the heavy matter and the mortal (in other words, converting them into the "hearts" or essences of the mortal creatures)</p>	<p>The Sun is the governor of the world of creatures. The gods wander this world along the routes of the cosmic mechanism.</p> <p>The creatures have heterogeneous divine material, which explains their diversity. This material gives specific characteristics to the types.</p> <p>The characteristics do not vary nor do they end, in spite of the death of the individuals, because they pass from generation to generation</p>	<p>MYTHS OF THE INSTALLATION OF THE COSMIC MECHANISM</p> <p>MYTHS OF THE MIXING OF THE DIVINE SUBSTANCE</p> <p>MYTHS OF THE CAPTURE OF THE DIVINE SUBSTANCE</p> <p>EXTRACTION MYTHS</p>
<p>or sending them to the underworld, where they will be stored as "hearts" or powers that pass a time in their subterranean enclosure and another time on the earth, in the world of the creatures.</p>			<p>through the recycling of the powers and "hearts" that emerge from the underworld.</p>	

originate from the land of the dead (cold) and those that descend from the heavens (hot). In each case it prescribes remedies of opposite natures. Therefore it should not be surprising that the myths refer to the subject of the original combining of substances, which they resolve with the adequate divine adventures. It is here where we find the hierogamy.

### ***Creation from the Installation of the World Mechanism***

According to the great conceptual framework of the myth, many gods were trapped inside the world, surrounded by the heavy matter of death, from where they give rise to those beings of the time-space of humans. However, heaven and the underworld continue to be inhabited by gods. They visit the world of humans, penetrating it periodically to transform all that exists. The ancient Mesoamerican cosmovision gave enormous importance to these arrivals and paid special attention to the order of the divine powers that made their journey in the form of time. For example, every day a god was formed through the combination of two other gods. This is how the joining of the gods Ik (wind) and Hun (one) produced the day god of the calendar (Hun-ik). According to the rigid geometry of the cosmos, this god as well as the other twelve gods named Ik, supposedly arrived on earth via the north tree. The geometry, in synthetic form, was based in the composition of three great levels (the sky, the world of humans, and the underworld). The gods communicated with each other through five cosmic trees, of which one was the great world axis, and each of the others was assigned to a particular corner of the world. The gods lived in heaven and the underworld. They came to earth one at a time through the trees.

Today, almost five centuries later, the cosmic trees continue to occupy a preeminent position in indigenous religions. Whether as columns, gods, or saints, they are differentiated (as in ancient times) by their particular color and continue to be present in indigenous beliefs, narratives, and rituals. The belief in the four lords of the corners of the world is not limited to Mesoamerican descendants. Of a very different septentrional tradition, the Kickapú mention the four grandfathers who reside in the corners of the world and act as guardians and intermediaries between humans and the supernatural

beings.<sup>36</sup> As is the case with other indigenous groups, the Kickapú assign four colors to the four quadrants of the cosmos and believe that the white maize came from the north, the black from the south, the yellow from the east, and the red from the west.<sup>37</sup> On occasion it has been convenient to modify the concept of the trees to adapt them to modern times. As a result, the Tarahumara believe that they are great columns of iron.<sup>38</sup>

### **Creation by Extraction**

There are myths, however, whose adventures do not conclude with the crystallization<sup>6</sup> caused by solar rays. On the contrary, the presence of beings in the world is initiated during the reign of Sun. This is how the Chole begin one of their narratives: "The days are already illuminated by Iijtzin [Sun]. Every night Ch'ujnia [the moon] appears when he comes to visit every night. As a result one can measure the days and time, and morning and afternoon. . . ." <sup>39</sup> They continue with a myth in which the being that will occupy a place in the world of Man will be extracted from another time-space to be placed in this one.

They had to bring many things in order that humans might adequately live. The Yaqui of northwestern Mexico and the American Southwest, explicitly refer to the necessity of having to bring from the other world what was necessary for human existence in this one. The great temporal division was the first Christmas, and the hero, the first man, Jesus. "Before the birth of Jesus there were no dances, harps, or *pascolas* [dancers]. Everything was in the earth and had to be extracted. Jesus knew how to accomplish this and he did so."<sup>40</sup>

Why did these beings stay in the other time-space? Various narratives from ancient Mesoamerican mythology refer to gods who were thrown onto the earth and into the underworld. Today the same is

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<sup>36</sup> Latorre and Latorre 1991, 266.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

<sup>38</sup> González Rodríguez 1984, 402-4.

<sup>39</sup> Morales Bermúdez 1984, 94.

<sup>40</sup> Rosamond B. Spicer, "The Easter Fiesta of the Yaqui Indians" (M.S. thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago, 1939), 72, cited in Olavarria 1990, 66.

reconfirmed when they say that when the Sun rose for the first time many of the gods went to live in subterranean sites. This is why they believe that these gods are the "hearts of the mountains."<sup>41</sup>

We know that the gods who remained on the earth function as the "hearts" of everything that exists in this world. But what did those do that went below the surface, inside the mountains or under the waters? To understand this we should reflect on the cycles of life and death. Within the great cosmic mountain there is an enormous kettle, the recipient of "hearts." The treasure belongs to the mother gods as well as the cold and humid gods who are in charge of the rains and the dead. Each year, at the onset of the rainy season, the lords liberate from their enclosure the spirits of plants, the forces of growth as well as the winds and the waters in order that they may cover the surface of the earth with vegetation. Then, at the onset of the dry season, when the powers of heaven and heat take over, the gods of rain collect their treasures and store them once more within their enclosures.<sup>42</sup>

The extraction myths describe the origin of mundane beings but refer mostly to confinement and liberation.

The flora paradigm includes all that exists, even the human being. The cosmic mountain has its replicas in the mounts throughout the world. Each indigenous group has its mount, and in each there lives a patron. He is the "heart" of the inhabitants of each community because he formed them from his essence as a great common ancestor. He also distributes over his people the waters, forces of growth as well as "hearts" of children, animals, plants, and money. When individuals die, their "hearts" return to the great storage vault to be cleaned and to give origin to new beings of their type.

Among these myths appear narratives describing several types that were lost because the "hearts" or "fathers-mothers" had fled the region. This is what the Otomi say of the tropical plants: "originally these plants lived on the altiplano, but their 'hearts' migrated towards the warmer lands of the Huastec and no longer grow at the higher elevations."<sup>43</sup> The Chinanteco believe that because of envy

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<sup>41</sup> Durand 1986, 173.

<sup>42</sup> For a more extensive discussion, see López Austin 1994.

<sup>43</sup> Galinier 1990, 489-90.

and sorcery the father and mother of cotton, and the father and mother of a fish called *bobos* left the territory. That is why these no longer exist in the region.<sup>44</sup> Below we will see several examples of these forms of creation.

### The Capture of the Gods

This archetypal form of creation comprises the most simple of myths—almost infantile stories that narrate how the animals and plants were created—and also more complex accounts. Among the latter one finds several astral myths, because as the Sun himself established his reign over the earth, he also became tied to the world of humans. It must be warned that Christianity has influenced these myths, establishing as a limit between mythical and human time not only the pristine birth of Sun, but also the birth of Christ, the crucifixion, or the beginning of evangelization. For this reason many Indians believe that the pre-Hispanic era corresponds to the period of divine adventures for which the images of the gods are those gods transformed during the first twilight.

#### ***The Armadillo and the Tepescuintla***

The Chinantec tell that two women of ancient times embroidered their blouses in order to don them when the Sun arose. The *tepe-scuintla* finished her work on time, but the armadillo did not. When the Sun rose, the armadillo had no option except to don the cloth still attached to the weaving frame. As a result, the swift woman ended up with the beautiful markings of flowers on her back while the slow woman appears as if her back were stepped upon.<sup>45</sup>

#### ***The Waves, the Sole, the Crab, and the Starfish***

Previously, in the Huave territory, they honored only Mijmeor Kaan—the Stone Virgin. But one day a priest arrived at the Temple

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<sup>44</sup> *Relatos, mitos y leyendas*, 91, 129–30.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

Within the Mountain, and Mijmeor Kaan fled to the sea. The movements of her flowered cape created waves and foam. All of the animals fled with her. The Virgin stepped on the *popoyote* fish. In doing so she created the sole fish. The jaguar stepped on the crab and left his mark forever on his back. The birds rose up in flight and abandoned their aquatic nests, and from these nests were born the starfish.<sup>46</sup>

### **Sun and Moon**

I chose the Mazatec myth of the origin of the Sun and Moon because different versions of this myth are repeated by many groups of Mesoamerican descent. The Mazatecs say that an old woman was working in her garden when she heard a noise in a nearby mountain. On the mountain she found two eggs the size of goose eggs among the branches of a tree. She carried the eggs to her home and placed them in cotton and she waited for them to hatch. Months later, as she was returning home, she found her house full of garbage and became furious. She searched but could not find the culprit. Days later the event recurred. On a third occasion she returned from the garden and heard sounds of children playing. Entering in silence, she surprised a small boy and girl, who ran to hide under the table. The children escaped through a window. The old woman discovered the empty egg shells and immediately understood that these children had been born from the eggs that she had cared for. She left the house, overtook the children, and forgave them for their mischief. They lived together for a long time until the children decided to leave in order to see the world. The old woman asked that they take her with them. They agreed, but when they crossed a bridge the children threw her into the river, transforming her into the mother of the mountain animals. As the old woman fell into the river the *tepes-cuintla*, the rabbit, the deer, and many other animals emerged on the banks. The children continued on their path until an old man warned them of a dangerous giant eagle. The children constructed a cage, climbed inside, and waited for the bird to attack. The eagle

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<sup>46</sup> Ramírez Castañeda 1987, 66.

came but could not harm them. So it took the cage in its talons and carried it to its nest on the summit of a mountain, which was covered with human bones and very skinny children waiting to be eaten by the monster. The boy who was born from the egg cut the hair of the captive girls and used it to braid a rope. Later he and his sister lassoed the eagle around the throat and strangled it. In order to descend from the summit the two siblings asked the animals for assistance. The bat found a solution. He ate prickly pear fruit of the *amate*<sup>47</sup> and proceeded to defecate on the side of the mountain. In his excrement were the seeds of the prickly pear. Suddenly, there arose a fronded tree adhering to the rock, which the children used to climb down. At the base of the mountain the children found the eyes of the eagle. The girl took the right, more brilliant eye, and the boy took the left eye, which was weaker. Soon the boy wanted to exchange his eagle eye for the one possessed by his sister, saying that he had had a greater role in the death of the monster than she had. But he could not convince his sister. Later, however, she became thirsty and demonstrated her weakness. Her brother had prohibited her from drinking water from a particular pond, but she disobeyed his instructions. She was punished by her brother, who obliged her to exchange the eagle eyes with him. He then beat her with a rabbit that became stuck on her face. Both children ascended into heaven. The boy with the more brilliant eye became Sun and the girl transformed into Moon.<sup>48</sup>

The unfolding of the myth seems to have an extra element: the episode with the rabbit, which in other narratives is employed to explain not only the weakness of the lunar light but also the shape (image) seen on the face of the moon. It is an unnecessary episode because the rest of the adventure not only explains the difference in light intensity but also the inversion of powers. The predominant power, originally in the hands of the girl, who possessed the more brilliant eye, is passed on to the boy, who proved to have a greater resistance than his sister.

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<sup>47</sup> A fronded tree whose pulp is used in the production of paper (*Ficus involuta*, *F. involuta*, etc.).

<sup>48</sup> Portal 1986, 49-54.

### ***The River and the Sea***

Near the Colorado River and the northern coast of the Gulf of California live the Cucupá, who through a long narrative, rich in adventures, explain that in the time of the giants, a boy went to see the world in the company of his dog. He searched for the feared monster that terrorized his fellow countrymen. After much walking, the boy and his dog arrived at the lair where the beast—large, black, very ugly, and covered with foam—slept placidly on his back, snoring and exposing his enormous testicles. One testicle was blue, the other red. The boy carefully approached with his harpoon. When he was close enough, he quickly pierced the blue testicle of the monster. He immediately did the same to the red testicle. The beast roared with pain and from his severed scrotum poured two streams of liquid that flooded the region. The blue liquid formed the ocean and the red, the Colorado River. The agonizing monster sank into the salt waters, where he became a god.<sup>49</sup>

### ***Edible Plants***

When the first chief died, the Kickapú did not know of many edible plants. The plants emerged from his buried body. From the head came the pumpkin; from his teeth, corn; and from his fingers, bean-pods.<sup>50</sup>

## **The Mixing of the Divine Substance**

The complexity of the myths of the origin of Sun and Moon allow us to identify the distinct forms of creation. One of them is the mixing of divine substances, for Sun and Moon are the children of Father Sky and the earth goddess. This is evident in the pre-Hispanic myth describing the birth of Huitzilopochtli, the solar god and patron of the Mexica. Huitzilopochtli was born to the goddess Coatlicue, who, while sweeping, saw falling from the heavens, a white feather, which

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<sup>49</sup> Ochoa Zazueta 1982, 188-97.

<sup>50</sup> Latorre and Latorre 1991, 358.

she put between her breasts. Later, when she went to find the feather, she noticed that it had vanished and she felt pregnant.

The Trique myth that I present below has the same hierogamic sense. It is a cruel myth in which grandchildren assassinate their grandfather, the deer, and rape their ancient grandmother. To understand this myth better I have included two versions because the first refers to hierogamy but does not end with the ascension of the astros. The second, however, does not mention hierogamy but does mention the ascension of the children to the heavens. The versions complement each other. I provide a compact synthesis of the two because the individual adventures are many and complex.

### ***First Version of the Origin of Sun and Moon***

The Trique tell of a young maiden who refused to marry in spite of the fact that she had several suitors. She did not accept marriage because she wanted to become a goddess and ascend to the heavens, which would be impossible if she were to have children. Her father therefore, did not accept the petitions of any suitor in order not to compromise the desire of his daughter. But on one occasion, in the face of the insistence of one of the suitors, he said: "Rise up to the sky to be there! There is no reason for you to remain on earth." The suitor ascended to the heavens. One day, when the maiden was lying face up on the ground, the man let three drops of water fall and the woman conceived two boys. The father was furious over the pregnancy of his daughter. She did not want the boys either. The father and daughter decided to kill the newborns by exposing them to danger. In spite of many trials, however, the children were spared. Later the boys, now grown, would find themselves with their grandmother, the old one, and their grandfather, the deer. They placed a trap for the deer, which they killed. They cooked its flesh and gave it to the grandmother, who was unaware of the crime, to eat of her husband's flesh.

This version finishes abruptly without mention of the ascent of the two boys to heaven in spite of the fact that the text indicates that they were to become Sun and Moon.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Hollenbach 1977, 159-65.

### **Second Version of the Origin of Sun and Moon**

The grandmother Ca'aj wandered about the heavens with a pine torch. But its light was not bright enough. One day she found in the water two fish, which she placed in her blouse. Later she stained her genital area with a fruit and pretended to have given birth to those beings. The children grew. One day they asked their grandmother to give them *tortillas* for their grandfather. They went to search for him in the mountains. When they saw that he was a deer, they trapped him, killed him, and cooked his flesh. Later they gave their grandmother the meat, and she cried upon consuming it. Days later the boys gave their grandmother a fruit to eat which produces drowsiness. While she was in a deep sleep, one of the grandchildren fixed a stone knife to his penis and the other fixed a piece of calcium to his. Both proceeded to rape the old woman. Afterwards they ascended to the heavens. When the grandmother awoke and saw her condition, she dammed her grandchildren. That is why the children of the Sun—who are the Trique—suffer much today in this world.<sup>52</sup>

### **The Mechanism of the World**

One of the most widespread myths in the Mexican territory is that of the deluge. It is a complicated myth. It has two parts that, on occasion, are narrated independently. The first tells of the adventure of a man who, enclosed in a tree trunk, saves himself from the floodwaters. The second part continues with the story of a dog that accompanied the man in a boat. The bitch would later convert herself into a woman to become the mother of mankind. Several authors, among them Horcasitas,<sup>53</sup> believe that this myth is the result of the merging of two distinct myths.

In a previous work I interpreted the first part of the narrative based on a comparison of the different versions of the myth.<sup>54</sup> Here I convey only that the hidden meaning is the establishing of the four cosmic posts whereby the gods travel.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 140-45.

<sup>53</sup> Horcasitas 1953.

<sup>54</sup> López Austin 1990, 472-79; 1993, 345-51.

Below I include a Nahuatl version of the deluge myth, which ends with a biblical reference to Adam and Eve. It is followed by another myth in which the idea of the planting of the four posts is done within a Christian framework. I close this section with still another myth concerning the formation of the world, which refers to the extension of the solid surface over the waters and the confinement of the gods to the underworld.

### ***The Deluge and the Bitch***

The Nahuatl of the western Sierra Madre narrate that a man cleared a parcel of land to prepare a garden. The next day he found that the felled trees were upright once again. This happened on various occasions, which led the man to hide in order to discover who was righting the trees. He observed the arrival of an old man who proceeded to put the felled trees back in their places. "Why do you do this with my felled trees?" he asked the man. The old one explained that it was necessary to fell one tree, hollow it out, place maize in the hole together with firewood, squash, several birds, and a bitch. He should then get in as well because there was going to be a great flood. The man did so. The waters came and flooded everything up to the heavens. The hollowed trunk hit up against the heavens and stayed there for two days. Later the waters receded but the man remained in the trunk for five more days. After the fifth day he sent a heron to see if all was dry, recommending that it not eat live beings. The heron departed but did not obey the prohibition. The man sent a crow, which also disobeyed his orders. Finally he sent the *tildio*,<sup>55</sup> which flew over the entire region and returned with the news that all was in order. The man emerged from the trunk, beat the ground with his stick, and produced the rivers and their banks.

The bitch lived with the man. One day while returning from his fields, the man discovered that someone had made him tortillas. Intrigued, he began to spy and found that the dog would take off her skin, transform into a woman, and cook for him. The man approached cautiously, threw the skin on the fire, and the woman could no longer transform back into a dog.

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<sup>55</sup> Name given to diverse cardiforms, small birds, pipers, with nonpalmated toes, a sharp and pointed beak, that live along the banks of rivers and lakes. Among them is the *chichicuilotle* (*Lobipes lobatus*, *Crocelia alba*).

In other versions of this myth, the couple gives birth to mankind. In what I have condensed here, they say that the man formed two human figures with the ashes of the skin and red soil. The dolls transformed into a girl and a boy. The two entered the secret garden of their father and, without his consent, took two apples. The father caught them in the act and scolded them for their disobedience.

### ***The Divine Teacher***

The Totonaco say that Jesus sang and whistled so well that the children asked him to be their teacher. At first Jesus refused because he was afraid that the kings who sought him would find him out. But when his mother told him that his destiny was to be a school teacher, he could not refuse. While he was in the classroom, the king's police arrived. They did not know Jesus because all of the children had the same faces. "Let us pay one of them to betray Jesus," they said. The traitor child approached Jesus and offered him a bunch of plantains. But Jesus discovered his intentions, tore off the child's head and stuck it on his rump. As a result, the traitor was transformed into a monkey. Jesus, with a miracle, made it impossible for the weapons of the police to fire and he could therefore not be apprehended. However, because the kings persisted in chasing after him, Jesus abandoned the school and, in his flight, planted a huge tree on the side of the road. He climbed the tree, stretched out his arms and remained hanging from the same. A while later, he repeated the same event on another path. He repeated this process until he had planted four trees along the side of each of four paths.<sup>56</sup>

### ***The Forming of the World and the Closing of the Underworld***

According to the Kickapú, Kitzihiata, the creator god, sent his son Wisaka to make the world for humans. Wisaka struggled against the supernatural beings of the waters, who took the shape of horned felines. His enemies sent a heavy snow, but he covered himself with

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<sup>56</sup> Ichon 1973, 96-97.

a cape and slept. During a second attempt to kill him, the felines of the underworld tried to drown Wisaka by raising the waters of the sea. But he made a boat and saved himself. The voracious turtle<sup>57</sup> and the dove offered him their help. Wisaka submerged himself and scraped mud from the feet and shell of the turtle, kneaded the mud together with the twigs brought by the dove, and made a great tortilla. Later he extended the tortilla to enclose the felines underneath. The thunders helped Wisaka to contain the beings of the underworld, who would not be liberated until the end of the world, when they would reappear to devour humanity. Wisaka asked the spider to weave a cloth to prevent the world from falling. The spider wove, and the world was hung by its extreme north.<sup>58</sup>

### The Extraction

The extraction myths describe the form in which the gods, hidden in the world of the dead, leave to acquire reality in the world of mankind. They refer to diverse processes such as the daily birth of the Sun with the myth that discovers a bright object in the form of an egg under a stone; the birth of fire, extracted from the beyond by the Tlacuache; the extraction of the edible seeds through the intervention of the black and red ants, and so on.

Here I give two examples: the arrival of the waters, and the parting of the maize spirit. In the second example, the maize dies but is replicated in his son. The boy journeys to the world of the dead, saves his father (the "heart" of the maize), and brings him to the surface. The "heart" carries out its generative functions by being reborn on the surface. However, afterwards it must return to the underworld. This is one of the beautiful and complex myths of present-day Mexico.<sup>59</sup> This synthesized version is told by the Nahua of Veracruz:

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<sup>57</sup> A robust turtle, notably aggressive, also known as *tortuga nordedora* [the biting turtle] (*Chelydra serpentina*).

<sup>58</sup> Latorre and Latorre 1991, 261-62.

<sup>59</sup> For an exhaustive discussion of this myth, see López Austin, "Homshuk."

### ***The Rains and the Fire***

In Yaqui mythology there is a richness-extracting actor. It is Babok, the toad. In different myths, and because of his astute qualities, Bobok obtains goods from the other world that are indispensable for human life. In one case he takes the rains to the arid lands of the Yaqui. In another he carries fire to deposit it in the rocks or inside of sticks. Long ago stones and sticks were devoid of sparks and fire. Bobok takes as his obligation those tasks which other animals such as the blackbird, swallow, crow, dog, and roadrunner are not capable of doing themselves. The astute figure presents himself before Yuku, the god of rains, and urges him to continue sending his lightning and storms. He fools him with his hidden and dispersed croakings. And like this he guides the rain to the fields of the thirsty Yaqui. He also submerges himself in the ocean waters to steal the riches from the god of fire. He escapes a furious persecution and carries the fire to the surface of the earth. In both cases his preferred tactic is the multiplication of himself as a target, because all of his sons, like him, participate in the moment of the persecution to laugh at the aggressor gods. From the feats of Babok, the Yaqui have rain and humans can now extract fire from stones and sticks.<sup>60</sup>

### ***The Venerable God-son Corn***

One day an elderly man and woman, who did not have children, found two large eggs, which they took to their home to be incubated by their hen. They ate one and waited for the other to hatch. From the egg emerged a boy named Si:ntiopiltzin. Already grown, the boy would go to the fields. On the way the iguanas made fun of him, shouting "Elote,<sup>61</sup> elote, stunted ears, in Where the Men Dry, there is your father." With the help of his grandfather he made a trap and avenged himself of the tauntings. While he was still a boy, he learned that several old men would go on a journey to "Where the Men Dry"

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<sup>60</sup> Giddings 1959, 18, 60, 63.

<sup>61</sup> "Tender ear of corn."

<sup>62</sup> Large reddish (leaf-cutter ants) that form long lines as they carry bits of leaves to their nests. The leaves are used to form beds on which grow fungi, which the ants later consume (*Atta mexicana*).

and asked his grandfather for permission to accompany them. One night, during the journey, while the boy slept, the *arriera* ants<sup>62</sup> ate his flesh and left only the bones. Si:ntiopiltzin captured one of them and with threats made the ants replace the flesh. The next night he again lay down on a rock. When we awoke, he found that the stone had devoured him. Only his head remained exposed. A small bird approached and told him how to free himself by urinating upon his own chest. The boy followed the advice, became free of the stone, and continued on his path. Finally Si:ntiopiltzin arrived at a place where his mother was weaving beneath the shadow of a *chicozapote*.<sup>63</sup> The boy approached his mother and asked for his father. "Your father died many years ago," she answered, and she showed him the place where he had been buried. The boy asked his mother to return to the house because he was going to revive his father. He warned that she not touch him or cry when she saw him. Si:ntiopiltzin resurrected his father and carried him because he was still somewhat drunk. When Si:ntiopiltzin's mother saw her husband alive she could not withhold her emotions. She began to cry and embraced the man. In this moment the father of the boy transformed into a deer and fled into the forest.<sup>64</sup>

### Today and Tomorrow

As during the difficult times of the colonial period, the modern Indians of Mexico continue their struggle to conserve the group cohesion that protects them from the dehumanizing tendencies of the dominant society. In the past it was the colonial domination. In the present, there exists a drive that pretends to homogenize people and transform them into producers and consumers in a global economy.

During the colonial period the Indians had in their cosmovision rituals and myths a strong support to maintain a protective group unity. Today this battle is even more intense, but it is unlikely that the ancient strategies will succeed against the current assaults on ethnic differences.

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<sup>63</sup> A tree of very hard and resistant wood from which chicle is extracted. It Produces a very sweet fruit (*Achras sapota*).

<sup>64</sup> García de León 1976, 80-84.

The future of the Indian myth is uncertain, and equally uncertain is the future of the entire indigenous culture.

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