

# Arild Hvidtfeldt's Contribution to Mesoamerican Studies

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The life and career of the Danish Professor of Sociology of Religions Arild Hvidtfeldt (1915–1999) was in many ways typical of many of the great Mesoamericanists of the first half of twentieth century, in that his way into the field was far from predetermined or direct. Thus, first educated as a journalist, Hvidtfeldt worked as a reporter in the earlier part of his life (1935–1963). As a foreign correspondent for the newspaper *Social-Demokraten* he stayed in Berlin from 1943–1945, including the final period of the Russian siege and heavy bombings. The years in Berlin and his meetings with high-ranking Nazis such as the Minister of Foreign Affairs Joachim von Ribbentrop are described vividly in Hvidtfeldt's memoirs (Hvidtfeldt 1995). It was also in Berlin that he made his first encounter with central Mexican religions. On August 1, 1944 he found and bought a copy of Eduard Seler's *Altmexikanische Studien II* (published in Berlin 1899) in a second-hand bookstore, and since "[t]he communication lines to the editorial home office habitually broke down because of Allied bombs [...] Hvidtfeldt had plenty of time to study Seler's analysis of the monthly ceremonies as described by Sahagún" (Canger 1999:74). Hvidtfeldt was amazed by the richness and details of the descriptions of the rituals and ceremonies and felt that here existed an almost ignored treasure trove of information, not only for the study of Mesoamerican religions, but also for comparative studies of the history of religions.

After having received an M.A. in the History of Religions in 1955 (at this time Hvidtfeldt was still a full-time employee at one of the major Danish newspapers based in Copenhagen), his earlier encounter with Seler's work with Bernardino de Sahagún's treatment of Aztec religion led him towards what would be the subject of his doctoral dissertation. In pursuing this he had good help from his contact with the German expatriate and Nahuatl philologist Ernest Mengin (1893–1973). Today Mengin is perhaps best known for his exquisite editions of important sources such as the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* in a series called *Corpus codicum Americanum medii aevi. Litterarum monumenta in lingua nahuatl et maya etc.* which were published between 1945 and 1952 by Munksgaard (the same publisher that would later put in print Hvidtfeldt's dissertation). Originally, Mengin had studied with Konrad Theodor Preuss (1869–1938) in Berlin but had fled the Hitler regime and taken up residence in Copenhagen in 1934, where he lived to his death in 1973. From 1949 until 1971 Mengin offered classes in Nahuatl at the University of Copenhagen (see



Arild Hvidtfeldt, 1966 (photograph by Rolf Rønne).

Nielsen and Fritz Hansen 2008), and thus also played a crucial role in laying the foundations for the later establishment of the Department of American Indian Languages and Cultures, of which Hvidtfeldt became the first director in 1971. Hvidtfeldt had been appointed Professor of Sociology of Religions the year before, and he split his time between the two departments until his retirement in 1985 at age 70.

Ernst Mengin was also among the opponents on Hvidtfeldt's doctoral dissertation, which bore the full title *Teotl and \*Ixiptlatli: Some Central Conceptions in Ancient Mexican Religion with a General Introduction on Cult and Myth*. In it, Hvidtfeldt discusses the relation between a god/supernatural being and its image or representation and concludes that this is basically one of identity, just as he suggests that the Nahuatl term *teotl* can best be understood and translated as "god" or "mana," and with regard to god images and deity impersonators among his conclusions was that it was the image itself, the *teixiptla*, which constituted the god. In a brief review in *American Anthropologist* Charles E. Dibble, one of the leading Aztec and Nahuatl scholars of the time, was not overly impressed by all of Hvidtfeldt's

translations of the Nahuatl texts, ending his review by stating that Hvidtfeldt's "translation forces the Mexican material to fit the theories he outlines" (Dibble 1961:408). It may also be said that one of Hvidtfeldt's concepts of the Aztecs and their culture, namely that they represented a transition from what he called "a primitive culture to urban culture" and that the religious practices would reflect this, is problematic today in the sense that the Late Postclassic Mexica were the inheritors of a long tradition of large urban societies in Highland Mexico going back at least to Early Classic Teotihuacan. Nevertheless, Hvidtfeldt's careful and groundbreaking study continues to inspire scholars and provide a basic framework for the discussion of Mesoamerican religions and deity impersonations in particular. Thus, *Teotl and \*Ixiptlatli* is still cited in works on central Mexican as well as Maya religion (e.g., Miller and Taube 1993; Houston and Stuart 1996; Monaghan 2000; Houston et al. 2006; Boone 2007; Nehammer Knub et al. 2009; Townsend 2009) and Hvidtfeldt is considered the first to have pointed out that "the Aztec used the word *ixiptla* or *teixiptla* ("representative" or "holy representative") to refer to all material manifestations of the gods, whether statues, human impersonators, or inanimate bundles and wooden armatures masked as the deity" (Klein 2001:34). Yet, references to this seminal study are also absent from some publications on Mesoamerican religion, perhaps partly due to the fact that the volume has been out of press for decades and thus no doubt out of reach for many interested scholars, perhaps particularly so in the Spanish-speaking parts of the world. With the forthcoming digital facsimile at Mesoweb, Hvidtfeldt's study will be more easily available, and it is hoped that it will make even more Mesoamericanists aware of this important piece of research.

Hvidtfeldt also produced a translation of Sahagún's twelfth book into Danish (Hvidtfeldt 1963), and he later wrote a well-informed supplementary volume on Latin America in a series on world history, also in Danish (Hvidtfeldt and Amstrup 1974), as well as a few other brief overview articles on Mesoamerican topics (e.g., Hvidtfeldt 1992), but he did not again pursue in-depth research on Mesoamerican religions and devoted most of his research and popular writings to broader comparative issues in the history of religions (e.g., Hvidtfeldt 1961, 1994; see also Warburg and Warmind 1985).

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