

Introduction

THIS BOOK SETS out to study Nahua forms of commemorating, as well as retrieving, the past, between the Late Post-Classic period (ca. 1430) and the mid-eighteenth century (ca. 1750). The database for this study comprises the diverse Nahua pictographic and alphabetic sources belonging to the early to mid-colonial period, which highlight the persistence and continual replication of Nahua ancient formulas of commemoration and retrieval, despite the fundamental changes that occurred in this society under Spanish colonial rule and Christianization.

The first argument I wish to make is that in Nahua historical consciousness and religious thinking, “commemoration” signified communication with the past in a versatile and transcendental manner. Human and supernatural entities, as well as historic events and mythological tales, embedded in their distinct habitats in the past, were far from being the fossilized remains of the cultural heritage. Rather, they were dynamic, multifaceted essences and abodes, with fluid territorial limits, that it was possible to continually approach, impersonate, and reach by way of reenactment and transcendence.¹ Moreover, the Nahua

¹ See, for example, Eleanor Wake’s “The Serpent Road: Iconic Encoding and the Historical Narrative of the MC2.”

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modus operandi of transcendence contained distinct procedures of retrieval that were intimately associated with the unique Nahua conceptualization of time and space, historical consciousness, and visual representation.

For the Nahuas, commemorating the past in a transcendental manner and through its reenactment required merging the historical, mythological, and godly personalities, as well as the far-removed events of other eras, with the leading figures and circumstances of the present. Omēteotl, one of the ancient divinities of the Nahuas, transcended mythical-historical time. He was thus associated with the origins of the universe and of time itself in the form of the 260-day sacred calendar.² One famous example of transcendence across time and history is that of the so-called historic founder of Tollan, Ce Acatl-Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl. He was also recognized as one of the prominent gods originating perhaps with the Olmeca-Xicalinca, in the Cholula area. In Nahua religious belief a given godly personality often transcended its limits and jurisdiction, merging with another godly figure of similar attributes or substituting for it. This is the case with Tezcatlipoca (God of the Smoking Mirror) and Mixcoatl (Misty Serpent), who shared many attributes and were intermingled during some of the Aztec feasts (such as the feast of Quecholli). Michael Graulich has shown that Mexica legends about Huitzilopochtli were modeled after legends about Mixcoatl.³ Similarly, Camaxtli was the same god as the red Tezcatlipoca, that is, Xipe-Totec.⁴

In this way, core mythological abodes, associated in the creation myths and canonic tales of migration with the glorious past and with the ancestors who dwelled in Tollan, could similarly be substituted or replicated by cities belonging to another epoch and geographic location. The best example is the city of Tollan, recreated or imagined in the form of Cholollan-Tollan, in Central Mexico, and in the form of Tulan-Ziwan, of the Maya highlands.⁵ This aptitude and tendency

² Debra Nagao, *Mexica Burial Offerings: A Historical and Contextual Analysis*, 86.

³ Guilhem Olivier, *Mockeries and Metamorphoses of an Aztec God: Tezcatlipoca, "Lord of the Smoking Mirror,"* 64.

⁴ Michel Graulich, "Las peregrinaciones aztecas y el ciclo de Mixcoatl."

⁵ Frauke Sachse and Allen J. Christenson, "Tulan and the Other Side of the Sea: Unraveling a Metaphorical Concept from Colonial Guatemalan Highland Sources."

of transcendence is best grasped through an interpretation of the unique Mesoamerican conceptualization of time and space, historical consciousness, and visual representation. These enabled the merging of historical, mythological, and godly personalities, as well as of far-removed events situated in other periods, with leading figures and circumstances belonging in the present.

My second argument is that the Nahua colonial memory plots do attest to the existence of what I call here “subtextual” and “supratextual” processes in Nahua social memory, and that these are intimately associated with distinct times and abodes. Mesoamerican peoples in general regarded time and space as an indistinguishable continuum. The four cardinal directions of the winds were likewise directions simultaneously of both time and space; time spans and year-clusters all had spatial directions. Nevertheless, in its vertical form the earth, or space, was visualized according to two fundamental levels or layers. One layer was the terrestrial surface, *tlalticpac* (on top of the earth), which was conceived as a circular or a rectangular space, surrounded by water, and extending to the four corners of the universe, where men lived. The other layer was the subterranean abode, Chicome Mictlan (the seventh place of the dead/underworld and of the ancestral spirits).⁶ The sacred divinatory almanac of the *tonalpohualli*, the 260-day sacred calendar round, which was made up of the multiples of 20 day-names and 13 day-numbers, determined the specific abode that the souls of the departed were destined for after death, their final resting places. Therefore, the recording, as well as the commemoration, of historic or sacred times remained acts closely tied to distinct abodes, where time was continually rejuvenated.

The “subtext” is represented metaphorically by the Nahua layer of the subterranean abode Chicome Mictlan, while the “supratext” is represented metaphorically by the *tlalticpac*, conceived as both “slippery” and dangerous, where men lived, were separated from their gods, and fought against each other.⁷ Furthermore, these two processes are recognized here as inseparable from the dual modes entailed within the Nahua ancient myths of creation, the historical-mythological tales

⁶ Luis Reyes García, *El anillo de Tlalocan: mitos, oraciones, cantos y cuentos de los nawas actuales de los estados de Veracruz y Puebla*, 19.

⁷ See Louise M. Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth: Nahua Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico*.

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of the Aztlan migrations. The first of these modes was the theme of harmony, and the coexistence and sharing of the sacred essentials of the heavenly abodes, Tamoanchan-Tlalocan-Tollan, deeply embedded within the subtext. The other was the contrasting theme of exile from the subterrestrial realm, characterized by human wanderings, and a continuous state of feuds and transgression, out of which emerged the diversified and fragmented versions of the heroic past, namely, the supratext.

Connecting the two contrasting “layers” and processes is the pivotal element of binding in Nahua thought and forms of commemoration, and serves here as a core methodological basis. In order to secure safe transitions from one state, fate, and time to another and from one abode to the next, it was not enough to reestablish the path connecting the earth, where humanity dwelt, to the place of the gods and the ancestors. Special measures had to be undertaken. Distinct godly personalities and unique ritualized practices and paraphernalia had to be designated for the task. The role and function of these godly personalities overseeing such ritualized actions was therefore primarily to readjust and protect, as well as to enable safe transitions. Ritualized actions that had to do with readjustment, protection, and transcendence are all represented in Nahua, Mixtec, and Maya pictography by the depictions and symbols of knotting, bundling, wrapping, weaving, tying, and entwining different substances, such as cords, grass, and cloth. These were applied by human diviners, shamans and god-bearers or god-impersonators. These actions of binding, tying, and wrapping enabled commemoration, transcendence, and retrieval from the past to the present, along with the materialization of new foundations, taking place during new eras, and in different abodes.

The structure of this book reflects the dual processes hypothesized here: Chapter 3 is dedicated to the theme of binding and transcendence in Nahua and Mesoamerican thought and praxis; Chapters 4, 7, and 8 deal specifically with the subtextual process, concentrating on places and landscapes of memory, as well as foundational rites and events. Chapters 5 and 6 are all about the supratextual process of fragmentation, focusing in particular on the role and function of canonic and counter-canonic memory plots among the Nahua and the Matlatzinca. First, though, in Chapters 1 and 2, I deal with methodology and patterns, and address the utilization of the sources.

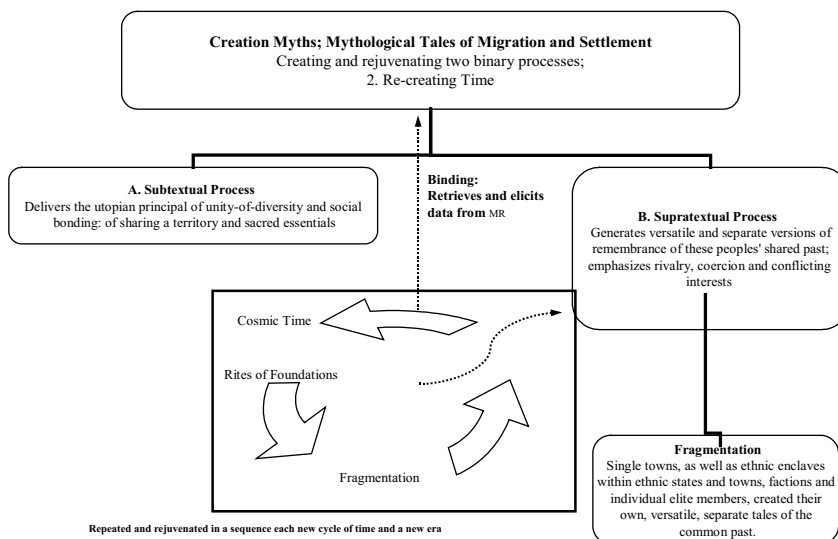


Figure 1: Nahua social memory flow: a model (by the author)

I take my cues in the context of memory from Paul Connerton's short but seminal work,⁸ which represents a leap in the study of social memory. It is unique in the space it devotes to the crucial roles assigned to those commemorative rites that function as mnemonic devices – as vehicles for the creation and reproduction of social memory. I argue that in social memory one is able to identify distinct operations of encoding, veiling, and retrieving information from the sacred past for the sake of commemoration. Sorting out, transferring, and reenacting commemorative tales are notable group activities that illustrate the operation of social memory. These modes of operation are always the outcome of a long-term process of habitual learning, experimentation, performance, and adaptation over years and generations. Each culture shapes them in a very distinctive manner, as will be seen from the study of Nahua culture presented in this book.

The subject of Mesoamerican forms of remembrance, before and after the coming of the Spaniards, merits greater interdisciplinary attention within the larger framework of Mesoamerican ethnohistory, art history, and anthropology. The complex relationship that existed all through the colonial era between native traditional writing

⁸ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*.

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systems, rituals, and symbolism on the one hand, and the functioning of social memory on the other needs to be explored more thoroughly. Remembrance and cultural memory are understood here as metaphors for how cultures or societies in Mesoamerica used their past to perform their future in light of new historical circumstances.⁹ This book also seeks to find and identify the formulas and the contents into which these societies injected their distinctiveness or identity, even within a changing world, and how different traditions and rituals were reshaped and joined for the sake of cultural identification. Apart from dealing with memory per se, the topic of social memory has many implications in the larger context of native societies in Mesoamerica, before and after the Spanish conquest. It has relevance with regard to how historians, ethnohistorians, and anthropologists may rethink indigenous responses to the European invasions; to the subsequent indigenous land tenure and conflicts; the local politics and leadership; community structure and cohesiveness; and the evolution of religious beliefs and practices. Our endeavor may lead to a better understanding of the uniqueness of pre-Columbian Mesoamerican systems of remembrance and of what made these local systems so resilient despite the deep transformations that native society underwent in Mexico during colonial times. I also hope to comprehend better how the colonial context may have altered some ways of remembering or introduced additional, new methods.

At present, the subject of social memory generates much interest in the field of pre-Columbian and colonial Mesoamerican history and ethnohistory. James Lockhart, Serge Gruzinski, and Enrique Florescano dedicated portions of their studies to the theme of indigenous collective memory by placing specific sources as well as themes that are more abstract in this very context.¹⁰ Arthur G. Miller is also notable for his earlier study of this theme.¹¹ More contributions to the study of indigenous memory contents and contexts are found in works of Stephanie Wood, Robert Haskett, and Matthew Restall, as well as in essays by

⁹ See Elizabeth Boone, *Cycles of Time and Meaning in the Mexican Books of Fate*, ch. 1.

¹⁰ See my treatment of these contributions in Chapter 2.

¹¹ Arthur G. Miller, "Transformations of Time and Space: Oaxaca, Mexico, Circa 1500–1700."

Ángel García-Zambrano and María Elena Bernal-García.¹² Elizabeth Boone's treatment of native memory within the larger context of pictorial forms of writing is especially noteworthy in this respect, and so is the more recent article in *Ethnohistory* by Lisa Sousa and Kevin Terraciano on a comparison between the Mixtec and Nahuatl versions of remembrance of the Spanish conquest.¹³ Still, the subject of Mesoamerican forms of remembrance, before and after the arrival of the Spaniards, deserves much work to be accomplished within the larger framework of Mesoamerican ethnohistory, art history, and anthropology.¹⁴

In 1521, the final fall of Tenochtitlan and of the rest of the Nahuatl ethnic states into Spanish hands and, therefore, the influence of Christianity was not simply a military defeat; it also marked the beginning of a new, foreign rule. Subsequently Mexico's cross-ethnic political arrangements were subject to far-reaching and profound repercussions, as were traditional forms of economy, religion, and communication. Nevertheless, the native pictographic and alphabetic sources from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century reveal how the deeply rooted core aspects and beliefs of pre-Colombian native cosmology remained alive and in praxis, despite the heavy price the society paid to Christianization and Hispanization. These sources also highlight the strong currents of continuity and maintenance of unique

¹² James Lockhart, "Views of Corporate Self and History in some Valley of Mexico Towns: Late Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries"; James Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries*; Serge Gruzinski, *The Conquest of Mexico: The Incorporation of Indian Societies into the Western World, 16th–18th Centuries*, ch. 3; Serge Gruzinski, "Mutilated Memory: Reconstruction of the Past and the Mechanisms of the Memory among 17th Century Otomis"; Enrique Florescano, *Memory, Myth, and Time in Mexico: From the Aztecs to Independence*; Enrique Florescano, "El canon memorioso forjado por los 'Títulos Primordiales'"; Stephanie Gail Wood, *Transcending Conquest: Nahuatl Views of Spanish Colonial Mexico*; Robert Stephen Haskett, *Visions of Paradise: Primordial Titles and Mesoamerican History in Cuernavaca*; Matthew Restall, *Maya Conquistador*; Ángel Julián García-Zambrano, "Ancestral Rituals of Landscape Exploration and Appropriation amongst Indigenous Communities in Early Colonial Mexico"; María Elena Bernal-García, "The Dance of Time."

¹³ Elizabeth Boone, *Stories in Red and Black: Pictorial Histories of the Aztecs and Mixtecs*; Lisa Sousa and Kevin Terraciano, "The 'Original Conquest' of Oaxaca: Nahuatl and Mixtec Accounts of the Spanish Conquest."

¹⁴ Amos Megged and Stephanie Wood, eds., *Comparative Studies in Mesoamerican Systems of Remembrance*.

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pre-Columbian forms of expression. Therefore, the native resilience in the face of change and the transformations that the native societies in Mexico underwent may be explained by the significant role that social memory played in recovering the losses and retrieving the essentials of the past in order to brace the people for the trials and tribulations that still awaited them.

In this regard, this book contrasts with what Enrique Florescano has argued in his book, *Memory, Myth, and Time in Mexico*.¹⁵ I wish to emphasize that, as late as the mid-seventeenth century, Nahua, Matlatzinca, Mazahua, and Otomi towns and hamlets in Central Mexico and beyond did in fact retain a very vivid memory of their sense of belonging to their former ethnic state (*altepetl*) and to their local ethnic entities.¹⁶ Furthermore, I stress that these towns were far from having lost their long-term memory of their sacred sites; they often returned to them and the memory of them was constantly nourished. I also disagree with Serge Gruzinski's idea that indigenous memories underwent a process of "degradation," which he describes as "the threefold eradication of categories, media and men, as well as a complete de-structuring of the perception of time or a re-composition of the past in the indigenous consciousness."¹⁷

My study is limited here to the Nahua, or the Nahua-influenced geographical area of the central plateau of Mexico, also known as the Anahuac Plateau, covering most of the lands and peoples stretched between the present-day state of Puebla to the east, and the Río Balsas to the west, down to the northern limits of the present-day state of Oaxaca. This area was composed of a multitude of towns, as well as ethnic and linguistic enclaves. In order to identify the processes and formulas of social memory, I discuss diverse examples drawn primarily from the visual and alphabetic Nahua colonial sources. Additional pictorial and alphabetic sources from the Maya and Mixtec cultures are also examined in order to provide

¹⁵ Florescano, *Memory, Myth, and Time in Mexico: From the Aztecs to Independence*, 113–15, 119–20.

¹⁶ See Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs: An Interpretation*, 21, 23. Also, Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest*, 330; Frances F. Berdan, "Trauma and Transition in Sixteenth Century Central Mexico."

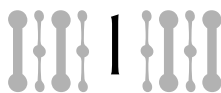
¹⁷ Gruzinski, *The Conquest of Mexico*, 94–5.

some cautiously selected cross-ethnic and cross-regional comparisons and affinities between diverse Mesoamerican concepts and symbolisms related to Mesoamerican writing systems. This allows for the rethinking of cross-regional, common social memory concepts in Mesoamerica. To quote Matthew Restall, “Despite differences of language, culture, and sociopolitical organization, Mesoamerican societies had so many cultural traits and practices in common that modern scholars and students may consider them as part of a single civilization.”¹⁸

While these primary sources are studied throughout the book within their colonial contexts, space is also devoted to their pre-Hispanic antecedents. Some terms, such as *altepetl* and *calpolli*, were used before the Spanish conquest, and their meanings were adapted to the colonial era. *Calpolli*, which had various meanings, was adapted to mean a ward, a territorial unit, or a temple.¹⁹ *Tlaxilacalli* – which strictly refers to a territorial unit within the *altepetl*, and *pilchantli* – in the sense of a lordly house, are obviously restricted to either the major Nahua domain of influence, or to areas that fell under Nahua direct or indirect control.

¹⁸ In Matthew Restall, Lisa Sousa, and Kevin Terraciano (eds.), *Mesoamerican Voices: Native Language Writings from Colonial Mexico, Yucatan, and Guatemala*, iv.

¹⁹ See Luis Reyes García’s comments on the *calpolli*. Luis Reyes García (ed.), *Documentos nauas de la ciudad de México del siglo XVI*, 21–68. Also, “calpolli”, in *Diccionario Wimmer, Grande Diccionario del Nahuatl*. See also Robert McCaa, “The Nahua Calli of Ancient Mexico: Household, Family, and Gender.”



Primers of Nahua Social Memory

MESOAMERICAN TALES OF MIGRATIONS

WHAT MAY BE learned from studying the essence of commemoration in the diverse Nahua colonial sources is that it is deeply embedded in the supposedly common, though highly conflictive and fragmented, substrate of the Nahua tales of migrations, settlements, and foundations created and shaped by the different Nahua migrant groups from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries A.D. These different tales contain all the patterns of elicitation, retrieval, selection, and replication that I strive to identify here, particularly in the dual representation of harmony versus exile and dispersal. States of transgression and rebirth were deeply rooted in Nahua thought and associated with the reenactments of the primordial myth and prime motif of Tamoanchan. Michael Graulich describes it thus: “It seems that the events commemorated every eight years on the day of 1 Xochitl, [are] the events that took place in Tamoanchan on the day 1 Xochitl of the year 1 Tochtlī” These commemorated events concern the modeled theme of transgression embedded in the sins committed by the goddess Xochiquetzal: her illicit picking of the flower from the Tamoanchan Tree and her reported illicit relations with Tezcatlipoca. This was believed to be the reason for Xochiquetzal’s exile and humanity’s subsequent expulsion from