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SOCIAL MEMORY IN ANCIENT AND COLONIAL MESOAMERICA

Before the Spanish conquest and well into the eighteenth century, Mesoamerican peoples believed that "time" and "space" were contained in earthly and heavenly receptacles that were visualized metaphorically. This circumscribed space contained the abodes of the dead. There, deities and ancestral spirits could be revived and the living could communicate with them. In *Social Memory in Ancient and Colonial Mesoamerica*, Amos Megged uncovers the missing links in Mesoamerican peoples' quest for their collective past. Analyzing ancient repositories of knowledge, as well as social and religious practices, he uncovers the unique procedures and formulas by which social memory was communicated and how it operated in Mesoamerica prior to the Spanish conquest. He also explores how cherished and revived practices evolved, how they were adapted to changing circumstances, and how they helped various ethnic groups cope with the tribulations of colonization and Christianization. Megged's volume also suggests how social and cultural historians, ethnohistorians, and anthropologists can rethink indigenous representations of the past while taking into account the deep transformations in Mexican society during the colonial era.

AMOS MEGGED is Associate Professor in the department of general history at the University of Haifa. An ethnohistorian of colonial Mexico, he is the author of *Exporting the Catholic Reformation: Local Religion in Early Colonial Mexico* and editor, with Stephanie Wood, of *Comparative Studies in Mesoamerican Systems of Remembrance*.

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Symbolic memory is the process by which man not only repeats his past experience but also reconstructs this experience. Imagination becomes a necessary element of a true recollection.

—CASSIRER,
An Essay on Man, The Human World of Space and Time,
1941, p. 52

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Acknowledgments

My preoccupation with social memory began a long time ago. During my B.A. years at the Hebrew University, I wrote a seminar paper in African Studies on "The Conceptualization of Time and the Ancestors in Traditional Yoruba Thought." My paper was about how the African mind "looks back" at the future. Africans join their ancestors after death, so that, for them, commemorating their ancestors could be interpreted as "a future memory." This recalls the comments of William Stern when talking about "future memory": "It is characteristic of the whole early development of the life of ideas that they do not appear so much as memories pointing to something in the past, but as expectations directed to the future – even though only to a future immediately at hand." Looking at indigenous ways of thinking about "future memory" in Mesoamerican thought has held my attention for almost thirty years.

This book is the product of a long and winding road. It took me almost five different versions, eight years of research and writing, as well as two sabbatical leaves to arrive at this final point. The beginning of this journey could certainly be traced back in time to my two-year stay at the far-removed Maya-Tzeltal *paraje* of Frontera Mexiquito (Municipality of Chanal), in the Chiapas Highlands, back in 1980. I learned that Mesoamerican concepts of the soul, the afterlife, time, and space were still very much alive in the hearts of the people I met there. One of the strongest memories of my stay is of a ritual process I witnessed by which the lost soul of a local child was summoned back by the Wahchetic lineage shaman. The shaman removed four charcoals from the hearth of the child's house and took them with him to the distant ravine where the child's soul was believed to have been lost. There, at around 4 a.m., he blew a conch shell in the direction of each of the four winds and recited a prayer to the old Earth gods (Ch'ul Lum K'inal). At dawn, when the shaman returned the charcoals to their original

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place and sifted water over them, the child's soul returned safely to his body.

I am forever indebted to my first and foremost guide in these matters, Santiago Jiménez Hernández Wahtch, who, along with his family, extended such warm and generous hospitality and counseling throughout those two years. And then, just recently, after almost twenty-six years, I have had the good fortune of being able to transfer these emotions into words and address them to him in person.

The various stages in the writing of this book benefited greatly from the discussions and sharing of ideas with two people in particular: Stephanie Wood, of the University of Oregon, and Daniel Graña-Berhens, of the University of Frankfurt-am-Main. Earlier drafts of chapters were also read carefully by a number of other people, notably Dana Leibsohn, whose patience and dedication I truly appreciate. From the time of my first sabbatical leave, at the University of California at Berkeley, back in 2000, I have benefited from the constructive suggestions and comments made by Bill Taylor. Kevin Terraciano, Matthew Restall, Bob Haskett, and Maarten Jansen, as well as the anonymous readers of my manuscript in its various drafts have all inspired me as this writing took its final shape. I am grateful to all of them. Special thanks to Clotilde Martínez Ibañez, archivist and research assistant from the Archivo General de la Nación in Mexico City, who gave me much help and guidance while I was searching, seemingly endlessly, for some lost files and information. Thanks are also owed here to all members of the staff of the Archivo General de Indias in Seville, Spain; to the members of the staff at the Archivo Nacional Agrario in Mexico City; to those of the Bancroft Library at the University of California at Berkeley; and to those of the INAH Archivo Histórico Judicial in Puebla. They all labor hard on a daily basis to provide us, the researchers, with the best conditions for accomplishing our goals. Ariane Cukierkorn, my personal research assistant at the University of Haifa for the past four years, has read tirelessly through the notes and bibliography, scrutinized the final draft for errors, and reconstructed some of the illustrations. I am indeed indebted to her for her commitment. Finally, the research for this book could not have been carried out without the generous support I received from the Israel National Fund (ISF-Humanities) between 1998 and 2001 and between 2004 and 2008.

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I dedicate this book to Orna, my wife, and to my two children, Shahaf and May, who provide me with a constant source of energy; they have had to bear with my frequent frustrations and anxieties, as well as share times of joy, all along this thorny road "back to Tollan."

Haifa, Israel
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Map 1: The Mexico Basin

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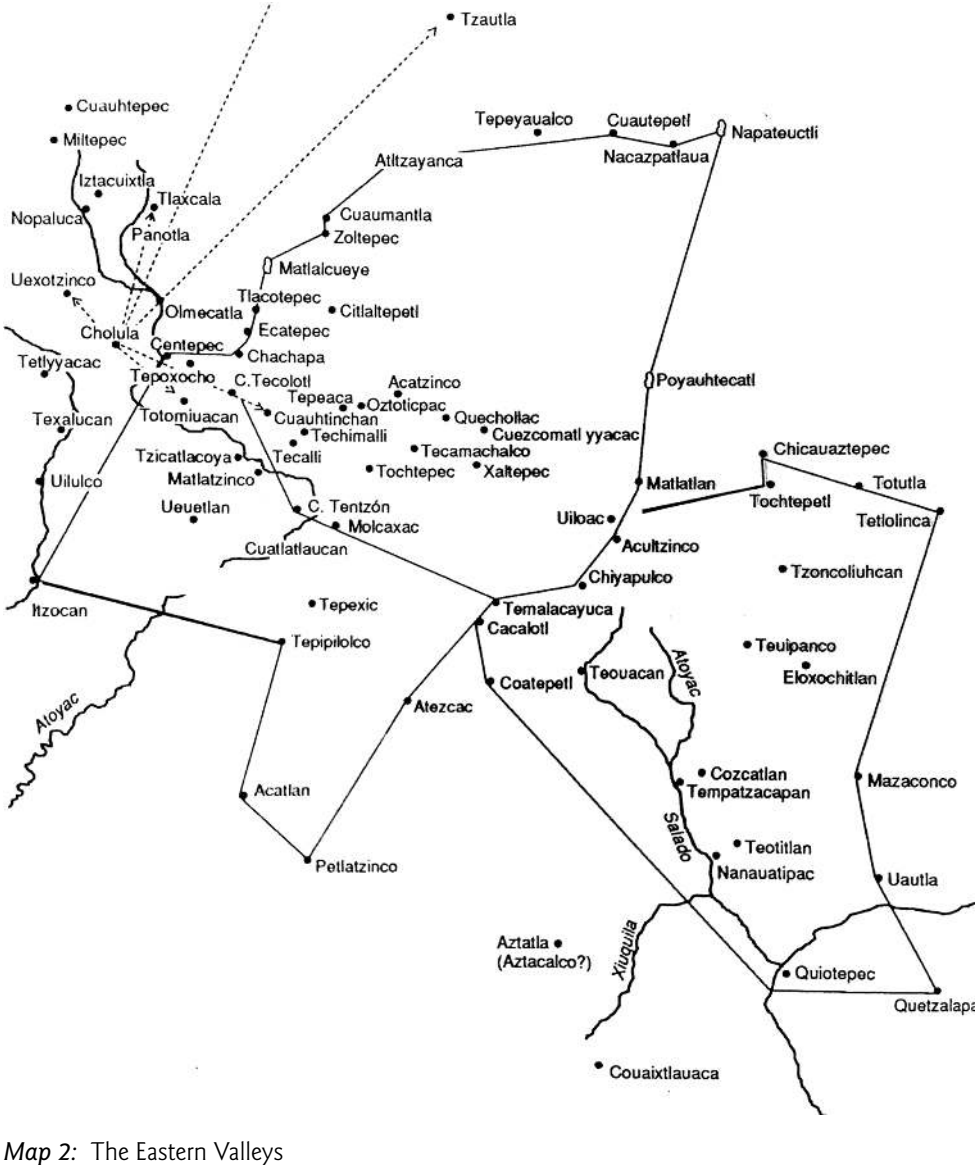

Map 2: The Eastern Valleys

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