
Rethinking Indigenous Devotions in Central Mexico



INTRODUCTION

On April 18, 1665, several nocturnal comings and goings took place in Lachirioag, a Northern Zapotec community in Villa Alta, a district northeast of Oaxaca City in New Spain. These activities were uncanny from the vantage point of Antonio de Cabrera, an African slave whom Diego Villegas y Sandoval Castro, Villa Alta's *alcalde mayor*, or chief magistrate, had entrusted with the task of reporting any suspect activities. Cabrera's owner, the *encomendero* of Lachirioag, was also in town, discharging his duties as collector of indigenous tribute.¹ Cabrera's attention focused on several events that would have attracted little notice had they occurred at daytime or in an urban setting. He saw some natives enter the house of Lachirioag resident Gerónimo López late at night. They came in, passed two women at the door, placed a half *real*—a coin of moderate value—on the ground, and sat near two large pots in which deer meat simmered as a native stood nearby holding a reed shaft topped with a bloody rag, and another illuminated the scene with a torch.² As Cabrera drew closer, one of the women cried out a warning, and everyone left López's house in haste. A week later, Cabrera came across López and many adult residents of Lachirioag as they came down a hill and approached the town center early at night. Cabrera later noticed that some people were once again cooking deer meat in two large pots at López's house. Even later, just before dawn, Cabrera went past this dwelling and surprised several natives who were dividing the deer meat among themselves; as before, they exited the house in a rush.³

Even though these activities may seem innocuous when compared to the human sacrifices described in lavish detail in accounts of Central

Mexican idolatries since Cortés's time, this African slave's narrative provided the Spanish magistrate with the quintessential first step for a juridical inquiry into idolatry—a vivid denunciation of suspicious native activities. Cabrera would eventually turn out to be a less-than-reliable narrator, but the main question facing the *alcalde mayor* was deceitful in its plainness: Had Gerónimo López and his associates committed an idolatrous act? If so, what juridical proof could be offered of their guilt? Following the legal procedure observed in both ecclesiastical and civil idolatry trials, the magistrate arrested six defendants, collected testimony from witnesses, and sought to obtain idolatry confessions from the defendants in a spirited trial held between February and April 1666. To Villegas y Sandoval's surprise, unlike most Zapotec defendants in a similar predicament, López and his associates did not cooperate in the collective construction of an idolatry narrative in the courtroom. Instead, they insisted that none of the actions they had carried out were idolatrous, and they impeached Cabrera's testimony by noting he had been caught propositioning local women. The proceedings ended on an unusually ambivalent note, for Villegas y Sandoval absolved all the defendants, warning them they should avoid "any ceremony that may be suspected to be idolatrous."⁴

This case is, of course, highly unusual; not only did it involve civil rather than ecclesiastical justice, but it went against the dynamics of most other proceedings against native idolatry or superstition in Central Mexico, which often followed a predictable trajectory from discovery to conviction. This trial's unusual outcome and ambivalent depiction of the actions of the Lachirioag deer eaters—were the accused sharing hunting spoils or honoring a non-Christian entity?—force us to focus on seemingly pedestrian matters obscured from view by hurried avowals of guilt in other idolatry trials. Idolatry extirpaters not merely sought to prove that a certain observable action had taken place; they also strove to adjudicate a mental state and convict on a crime of thought. Given such a burden of proof, idolatry as a legal and social category could only be willed into existence by the concerted action of accusers and suspects in a courtroom. Before indigenous defendants chose to confess that a particular action was indeed idolatrous, all their accusers possessed were suspicious ritual implements and troubling narratives proffered by witnesses. Colonial idolatry could be adjudicated into being only after accusers and defendants crossed this epistemic Rubicon.⁵

In New Spain, the venerable Christian preoccupation surrounding the assessment of intentionality in a sinner's mind during the act of confession faced large linguistic and cultural barriers.⁶ The strange, fascinating—and, some interpreters feared, unknowable—motivations behind

forms of worship in Mesoamerican communities posed a formidable challenge to Christian theological discourse and cultural categories, which turned to various reappraisals of pagan beliefs in classical antiquity during the ebullient intellectual climate of the early Renaissance.⁷ In Central Mexico, a unique aspect of the response of Christian missionaries was the production of a vibrant doctrinal corpus in Nahuatl, Phurépecha, Zapotec, Mixtec, Otomi, and other indigenous languages with the assistance of scholars drawn from the ranks of the first native generations who lived under colonial rule. Furthermore, ecclesiastic and civil authorities developed institutional measures and discourses that sought to identify and publicly punish a broad range of indigenous activities that were labeled as idolatry, sorcery, or superstition.

Idolatry's opponents regarded their attacks on native beliefs as spiritual warfare—and this trope guided their efforts. In the phrasing of Bishop Diego de Hevia y Valdés of Oaxaca, idolatry extirpators would enter “this invisible war” by arming themselves “with God against the common enemy . . . fortified as he is in the hearts of natives.”⁸ To take Hevia y Valdés at his word, however, would be to adopt several troublesome assumptions: that the stakes in this war were evident and transparent to both sides, that native idolaters sought to present a united front against Christianity, and that this united front depended on an antipodal version of Christianity implanted by the devil in the natives' less discerning minds. Hence, the study of institutional attacks on indigenous beliefs and native responses in Central Mexico may appear to be an epistemic minefield: Did idolatry even exist? Should colonial idolatry be understood primarily as an expedient creation that merely advanced institutional interests and ecclesiastical career goals and fed on local enmities? Can we understand how native defendants thought about their ritual practices and about orthodox Christianity?

This work proposes an answer to these fundamental questions by means of three contentions. First, I argue that “idolatry” cannot be employed as a systematic analytic category, and that colonial idolatry had an uncertain ontological status that became attached to specific practices only through the conjunction of legal discourses, doctrinal rhetoric, and specific accusations and acts of avowal. In other words, public denunciation and confession, rather than the systematic application of a stable legal category, fixed what idolatry was as a thing in the world. Second, rather than employing a category like “indigenous religion,” which implies an inherent agreement regarding a central core of beliefs, this work starts with the assumption that there existed local diversity in terms of indigenous beliefs and practices, and that any attempts to bracket this diversity should be based on detailed ethnohistorical evidence. Thus, I

characterize the symbolic exchange between indigenous believers and their foci of worship as *devotions*, a flexible category encompassing rituals and observances. These devotions were shaped by a set of fundamental assumptions about the cosmos that sometimes, but not always, diverged in important ways from Christian cosmology. Third, native beliefs must be considered in their own terms through a close examination of available linguistic evidence. This work argues that the evidence about native ritual practices coming directly from documentary evidence produced by natives or recoverable from trustworthy nonindigenous sources through linguistic analysis has an epistemic status that differs from that of the descriptions of native ceremonies produced by less exacting chroniclers, doctrinal authors, parish priests, and civil or ecclesiastical judges. This is not to say that a pure, unmediated indigenous voice emerges from texts in indigenous languages. The evidence discussed in these pages allows only a partial and tentative reconstruction of the rich devotional worlds of indigenous communities in Central Mexico. However, an insightful reconstruction of them hinges on a serious consideration of the manner in which natives conceived, inhabited, and spoke about these domains in their own ways of speaking.⁹

This book builds on ground cleared by more than a hundred years of scholarship on anti-idolatry measures in Central Mexico, which has customarily examined the first decades after the Spanish conquest,¹⁰ and treated developments in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries in a rather sporadic fashion,¹¹ due in part to the fragmentary nature of extant sources. Paradoxically, Hevia y Valdés's "invisible war" is a suitably sharp trope for our limited knowledge about the struggle against idolatry in Central Mexico after 1571. This is because my project seeks to heighten the visibility of extirpation campaigns and native responses in Central Mexico by focusing on the dioceses of Mexico and Oaxaca between the 1530s and the 1760s and by proposing a novel periodization of eradication efforts. Here, I analyze exceptionally rich ethnohistorical and linguistic evidence about the persistence of clandestine forms of worship in these two sees, with a focus on two major Mesoamerican linguistic groups—Nahuatl speakers in the Coahuilca-Tlalhuica region, the Basin of Mexico, and the Toluca Valley, and Zapotec speakers in the Valley of Oaxaca, the township of Sola, and the province of Villa Alta. My analysis is based on a decade of research in twenty-nine archival depositories in Mexico, Spain, the United States, France, Belgium, Italy, and the Vatican, and it addresses the activities of about 160 civil and ecclesiastical judges and approximately 896 native idolatry, sorcery, and superstition defendants for whom we have biographical information. Map 1.1 shows many of the towns in and near the diocese of Mexico

discussed in this work, and Map 1.2 accomplishes the same task for the see of Oaxaca.

This chapter summarizes my approach to the vast panorama of colonial idolatry in Central Mexico. After presenting an interpretive model regarding indigenous devotions in preconquest Nahua and Zapotec communities, I analyze the conceptualization of idolatry and the procedural organization and punitive methods employed by its foes, propose a periodization of such efforts as a set of four distinct cycles, and provide a summary of quantitative and qualitative data regarding extirpation activities in the region between the 1520s and the 1760s. A final section contains a chapter overview.

THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF DEVOTION IN POSTCLASSIC NAHUA AND ZAPOTEC COMMUNITIES

A variety of texts from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are the fundamental sources for any interpretation of Nahua and Zapotec devotional practices in the two centuries before the conquest. Although no Nahua or Zapotec pictographic codex or paper document of undisputed preconquest origin has survived,¹² a number of extant colonial pictorial and alphabetic documents record the Postclassic political history of several Northern, Valley, and Isthmus Zapotec communities.¹³ A relatively large number of Nahua pictographic records based on preconquest texts and oral narratives were produced after the conquest, and several generations of indigenous and mestizo authors, which included anonymous chroniclers as well as Chimalpahin, Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, Bartolomé de Alva, Fernando Alvarado Tezozómoc, Diego Muñoz Camargo, and Juan de Buena Ventura Zapata y Mendoza, copied, modified, commented, and transcribed these records, as well as oral accounts, into alphabetic texts as early as the mid-sixteenth century. Moreover, Franciscans such as Andrés de Olmos, Toribio Benavente “Motolinia,” Jerónimo de Mendieta, Bernardino de Sahagún, Martín de León, Juan de Torquemada, and Juan Bautista Visco, Dominicans such as Diego Durán, Pedro de Feria, and Juan de Córdova, and Jesuits such as Juan de Tovar penned their own narratives based on native records.

Even though it is impossible to propose an overarching description of Mesoamerican devotional practices that does justice to local variations and historical transformations, any analysis of these practices must start with an axiomatic principle first embraced by Mesoamericanists