



Map 1. Places and regions mentioned in the book. Drawing by David Latorre Rendón based on García Cubas 1885.

## Introduction

This book presents a study of Mesoamerican religious experience based on an analysis of ancient religious manuscripts, the calendar that informs their structure, and the author's field work in the town of Huautla de Jiménez in the Sierra Mazateca of the state of Oaxaca. Collectively known as the Borgia Group, the Codices Borgia, Vaticanus B, Cospi, Laud, and Fejérváry-Mayer, and part of the Codex Tututepetongo concern virtually every aspect of Indigenous life. The 260-day calendar, known as *tonalpohualli* in Nahuatl, and its related iconography are the basic organizing principle of the pictorials, which have survived to the present day as the most important record of Mesoamerican religion from the pre-Hispanic period. The research was predicated on the idea that modern practices and ceremonies can shed light on the function and scope of ancient religious pictography in a way that other sources, such as those compiled during the colonial period, cannot, despite being chronologically closer to the ancient texts.

Iconographic and methodological advances in the study of Mesoamerican religious pictography have provided modern scholars with a fairly coherent picture of its contents and use. Written sources about the “customs” of the ancient Nahuas or other Mesoamerican peoples that were produced soon after the conquest can be usefully applied to the study of ancient pictographic documents that date to the centuries—or perhaps even the few decades—before the arrival of the Spanish (Nicholson 1973). Furthermore, the production of religious pictography did not cease with the establishment of the colony and the forceful introduction of Christianity into Indigenous communities; rather, it was transformed to inform Europeans about the religion and beliefs of the people of the New World, giving rise to a corpus of hybrid pictographic and alphabetic texts (e.g., the Codices Telleriano-Remensis, Vaticanus A, Tudela, Magliabechiano, Ixtlilxochitl, and Primeros Memoriales, as well as the Florentine Codex), which are frequently used in the interpretation of ancient manuscripts. While Seler (e.g., 1902, 1904) can be considered the founder of the iconographic method, Nowotny (1961) established the current interpretative paradigm that considers religious manuscripts as books for divination. Scholars such as Anders and Jansen (e.g., 1993), Boone (2007), and Mikulska (2008) have considered *teamoxtli*—a Nahuatl word meaning “sacred books”—as a sort of tarot whose combinatory properties were exploited by the diviner to answer questions posed by the client. The divinatory paradigm beautifully and wisely explains important questions about the sacred books, such as what function they served and how they were read. Thus, the genre and purpose of *teamoxtli* can be established. Divinatory pictography functions as a language whose coherent structure constitutes the grammar or syntax and whose meaning is derived from iconographic inquiry based on external, mostly colonial sources.

In this approach, the logic and semantic contents of the sacred books constitute a self-contained and closed language. Representations found therein—both individual iconographic elements and their relationships—are taken to articulate meaning according to an external reference, most commonly a written colonial source. For the sake of scientific research, this methodology enables the use of pictography as a tool for reconstructing Mesoamerican religion and customs. The pursuit of interpretation, however, can also take a different path. Rather than a means of logically and coherently expressing an external meaning, language can be understood as a way of inquiring about knowledge and meaning themselves. Rather than reflecting external content, often an all-purpose myth for the historians or iconographer, pictography can be viewed as consciously and purposefully generating its own significance. My line of thinking follows the reflections of Wittgenstein, whose philosophical inquiries were largely devoted to language, its limits, and its potentialities. The Austrian philosopher first considered that philosophy was essentially a process of elucidation and resolution of misunderstandings. With his famous statement, “What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent” (*Was sich überhaupt sagen lässt, lässt sich klar sagen; und wovon man nicht reden kann, darüber muss man schweigen*; Preface, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1922), Wittgenstein set the limits for what can be queried through the logic of language. With the further statement, “What can be shown, cannot be said” (*Was gezeigt werden kann, kann nicht gesagt werden*; *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, § 4.1212), he indicated that metaphysical, aesthetic, and even ethical questions are ill-suited to logical inquiry, at least in the way that it has been established in Western philosophical thinking.

A case discussed by Quiñones Keber (2002) demonstrates the applicability of this theoretical stance to Mesoamerican pictography. Book 4 of the Florentine Codex is devoted to the art of divination and provides substantial information for the interpretation of religious manuscripts. It discusses the days of the *tonalpohualli* and their influence on people born on these days. However, according to Quiñones Keber, a crucial aspect of divination was overlooked: the process by which the diviner deduced their mantic interpretation, which occurred in a formal and ritualized manner. Consequently, the images that accompany Sahagún's explanatory text bear little resemblance to the pictorials in ancient sacred books, on which the mantic reading was presumably based. For example, let us analyze the images that correspond to the trecena (a thirteen-day period) 1 Rain in the Florentine Codex (Fig. 0.1), a colonial manuscript, and the Codex Borbonicus (Fig. 5.1), an early colonial document with virtually no Spanish influence. In Figure 0.1, the glyph for 1 Rain is represented