

Figure 1.11. Yoaltecuhtli ordering a counted offering. Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, p. 14. Loubat 1901.

The god of Figure 1.11 illustrates another specific iconographic feature that indicates a high degree of reflexivity in the image-making process. His yellow and gray facial paint is replicated in the small head mounted on his forehead. Both heads also produce a gray and smoky volute accompanied by star-eye symbols. An image that contains a smaller version or copy of itself is a rhetorical and stylistic device known as *mise en abyme*, French for “into the abyss” (Dällenbach 1989). The visual and literary rhetorical trope of repeating the entire image or narrative in a detail of itself has the rather destabilizing effect of creating an infinitely regressive situation in which the reader or viewer is being read and viewed at the same time in an endless spiral. The image or story appears to generate itself. Subject and object interchange so that the viewer’s and reader’s placement in the story is confused and their identity and existential status are questioned. The interchangeability of object and subject also has the effect of nullifying the boundaries between external reality and internal or enclosed fiction or projection. The image ceases to draw its meaning from an external point of reference and becomes its own source of referential meaning, which is evinced by the iteration of certain features. In our case, the iconography of the god is syncretic or ambiguous, mixing as it does the attributes of Patecatl and Yoaltecuhtli (Anders, Jansen, and Pérez Jiménez 1994, 218–219), but this is not a mistake, because the exact replication does not

leave any doubts about the *tlacuilo*’s (painter’s) original intention. Iterability rather than prototype constitutes authority (Derrida 1988). Self-referentiality is typical of the reflexive nature of divinity, according to Patton (2009, 176). The priest can read himself in the book while reading it, as suggested by the superimposition of roles in the images from the previously discussed codices. There is no need for an external myth to explain why the gods perform the ceremony the way that they do or sport certain attributes; they simply do. As modern scholars, we often make this mistake and look for external and reliable sources while forgetting the process by which a source does indeed function as such. In the field, a lack of explanation for certain ceremonial activities or beliefs is often taken as a sign of loss of meaning, without considering that willful repetition of a certain behavior is in itself tradition.

### 1.3. Divination and ceremony

Scenes that clearly depict the mantic reading of maize or other comparable divinatory practices can only be found in two cognate illustrations in the Codices Tudela (f. 49r; Fig. 1.12) and Magliabechiano (f. 78r). Figure 1.12 depicts presumably three stages of a visit to the diviner, proceeding from top to bottom. First, two men consult with a woman, who is not only talking to them, as indicated by the gray volutes, but also weeping. Then,

the central and main scene depicts a female diviner seated on a mat to the left. She is throwing maize kernels and black beans from a conch shell onto a white cloth. In front of her is an image of Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl, which also rests on a straw mat. Finally, a person who is talking and crying, presumably the client, is depicted below. While the act of crying is clearly an expression of the concerns that afflict the patient, it could also be interpreted as the tears that often accompany the vision and clarity attained during the ceremony (Jansen 1982, 196–197). In this case,

knowledge of one's condition passes from the priestess in the first scene to the person directly afflicted below through the reading of the maize in the middle. While the curandera in the first scene could immediately understand the situation, the clarity that comes from divination helps to communicate knowledge to the person below.

Comparing this image with the ones from pre-Hispanic codices, it is noticeable that the kernels and table are not present or naturalistically depicted in the latter



Figure 1.12. Priestess reading maize in front of Quetzalcoatl and a patient. Codex Tudela, f. 49r. Museo de América, Madrid.

(Fig. 1.10–1.11); rather, the manuscript itself becomes a mesa whose stuccoed surface mimics the white cloth, while the dot-and-line numerals signify both the number and position of the kernels, bundles, and candles. In the Codex Tudela, kernels and beans are placed at the center of the image, floating in the air, which mimics the position that they may take once they are on the cloth. Moreover, in the ancient books, one always finds the god associated with the offering but never the client and very rarely the diviner herself. The image in the ancient books needs an external reader to function and be properly activated (Díaz Álvarez 2016), as it is not a mere depiction of a narrative scene with an explanatory intent.

Among the Mazatecs of Oaxaca, the altar on which the kernels are thrown is covered with a white cloth and adorned with sacred images, branches, flowers, and candles; it is referred to as *yamixa tse* (white or pure table). It is always oriented towards the east, the place from which light, clarity, and knowledge originate. Don Isauro Guerrero explained the following:

Tso xi ndichjota chingana: Ndosen  
The revered grandparents say, clear and pure circle of knowledge

Ndonai ndona, kitsole chjota chingana ñaa  
Wise father and wise mother, that it is how our ancestors called it

Ndosen, naskana, kitsole je chjota chingana ñaa  
Circle of knowledge, they gave it a really beautiful name, our ancestors

Koa ya kjiroani ña bitjoni tsui, kjoama kjoatjao  
That is where the sun rises; from there the ceremonies and the rites (knowledge) came.

The expression *ndonai ndona*, which we translated as “wise father and wise mother,” refers to a place of supreme clarity, where knowledge is acquired (Carrera González and Doesburg 1996, 189–190). *Ndosen*, mentioned in the second line, has a similar meaning as a place found in the east, which in Western cultural terms could perhaps be indicated as “heaven” (Boege 1988, 174–183). *Sen* or *isen* evokes the idea that one’s nature or identity rests in a double, an image or representation of sorts.

According to Mesoamerican lore, the great culture hero Quetzalcoatl disappeared into the east at the end of his life. In the Codex Vaticanus A (f. 9v), the place is called Tlapallan, the Colored Place, a name related to the concept of *in tllilli in tlapalli* (black and colored), a metaphor for knowledge and the ancient books, whose figures comprise a black outline and colored areas. In the Codex Tudela (Fig. 1.12), Quetzalcoatl, the tutelary god of priests, sits in front of a wise woman, where today we see images of saints (Fig. 1.1). Behind the priestess is a gray circle decorated with star-eyes. Quetzalcoatl, the supreme deity of priestly knowledge, is seated in the east

and opposed to the west, which is associated with night and obscurity. Through a consultation with the diviner, one leaves behind uncertainty and turns towards clarity. Previously, Anders and Jansen (1996a, 214) interpreted the night symbol as an indication that the ritual of divination took place at night. María Sabina once related to Álvaro Estrada (1981, 63) that Toribio García, a chjota chjine of Huautla, used thirteen kernels of corn for divination. She said that he used to cast kernels during night vigils and again at dawn. In my experience, however, the reading of maize is not part of night ceremonies and is more often performed during the day, although it may be conducted in conjunction with night ceremonies, as explained in Chapter 2.

In pre-Hispanic manuscripts, star-eyes on a gray background not only indicate the night as a temporal marker but are also frequently an attribute of gods and ceremonial tools. On page 12 (Fig. 3.3) of the Codex Cospi, for example, two officiating priest-gods extend their censers towards a temple. While the character in the top scene can be identified as Tonatiuh and his related sun cult, the god below, Itzlacolihqui (Curved Obsidian Blade), wears a headdress with star-eye symbols and dark, smoky hair, which highlights his relationship with night and obscurity. A large smoke volute emerges from Itzlacolihqui’s incense burner and the temple itself, presided by over an owl, which contrasts with the colorful bird and bejeweled offerings of the temple above. The calendrical arrangement on the left associates the top image with the east, while the image below corresponds to the north (Jansen 2002, 288–302). In the Codex Tudela (Fig. 1.12), the priestess is an intermediary figure between opposing forces: the realms of clarity and knowledge versus the “other” realm—the place of the unknown, obscurity, and the ancestors.

Olivier discussed the intermingling of rather than the opposition between obscure and possibly negative forces on the one hand and clarity and knowledge on the other in his research on the identity of Tezcatlipoca (Smoking Mirror; Olivier 2003, 2015b). In both texts and images, Tezcatlipoca is almost inextricably related to Quetzalcoatl, the primordial priest of the east. By contrast, Tezcatlipoca, as his enemy brother, embodies night and darkness. The dynamic relationship between the two is clearly expressed on page 22 of the Codex Borbonicus, as previously discussed. Olivier (2003, 22) also highlighted that sacrifice, especially self-sacrifice or immolation, is closely related to music and prayer. Self-sacrifice is often represented in pictographic form as a flint knife, as previously explained in the birth of Lord 9 Wind Quetzalcoatl and the ecstatic flight of priest 1 Jaguar in the Selden Roll. The impalpable but pervasive quality of music and prayer is a primary manifestation not only of wind, Quetzalcoatl-Ehecatl himself, but also the “night wind” (*in yohualli in ehecatl* in Nahuatl), which is more commonly an attribute of Tezcatlipoca (e.g., Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 6, ch. 1). Visually, smoke, soot, and charcoal produced by burning flames were often used for the black body paint of priests (Olivier 2003, 185–189).

Following this interpretation, the night is not only a temporal accident but also a constitutive element of ceremonial action. On page 29 (Fig. 1.13), the scene that opens the long central sequence of the Codex Borgia is dominated by a large anthropomorphic incense burner with eyes and a fleshless mouth. Smoky volutes emanate from it, and their ends feature the head of a wind god, Ehecatl, a clear indication of a nightly smoke or wind. In this instance, the juxtaposition between night and Quetzalcoatl-Ehecatl becomes a blending, which indicates that the opposition is dynamic and not fixed. In the lower part of the image, the square enclosure opens to the next scene on the following page of the manuscript, where two intertwined smoke serpents generate two priestly figures from their mouths; their beaked masks and claws indicate

that they are nahuales. The image suggests that it is the smoke that generates the priests. Ceremonial actions, such as the burning of copal and other substances on a brazier, are not so much performed by the priest as they bestow the status of priesthood on a person.

Marina Mendoza of Boca del Río, a small village in the vicinity of Huautla, expressed the power and importance of incense burners in ceremonies with the following words:

Ni'kijain'la tiskangini nroa'i nañaa  
Our incense burner will never fall

Ni'kijain koi'tsaoya'ni nroa'i naa  
My incense burner will never cease burning

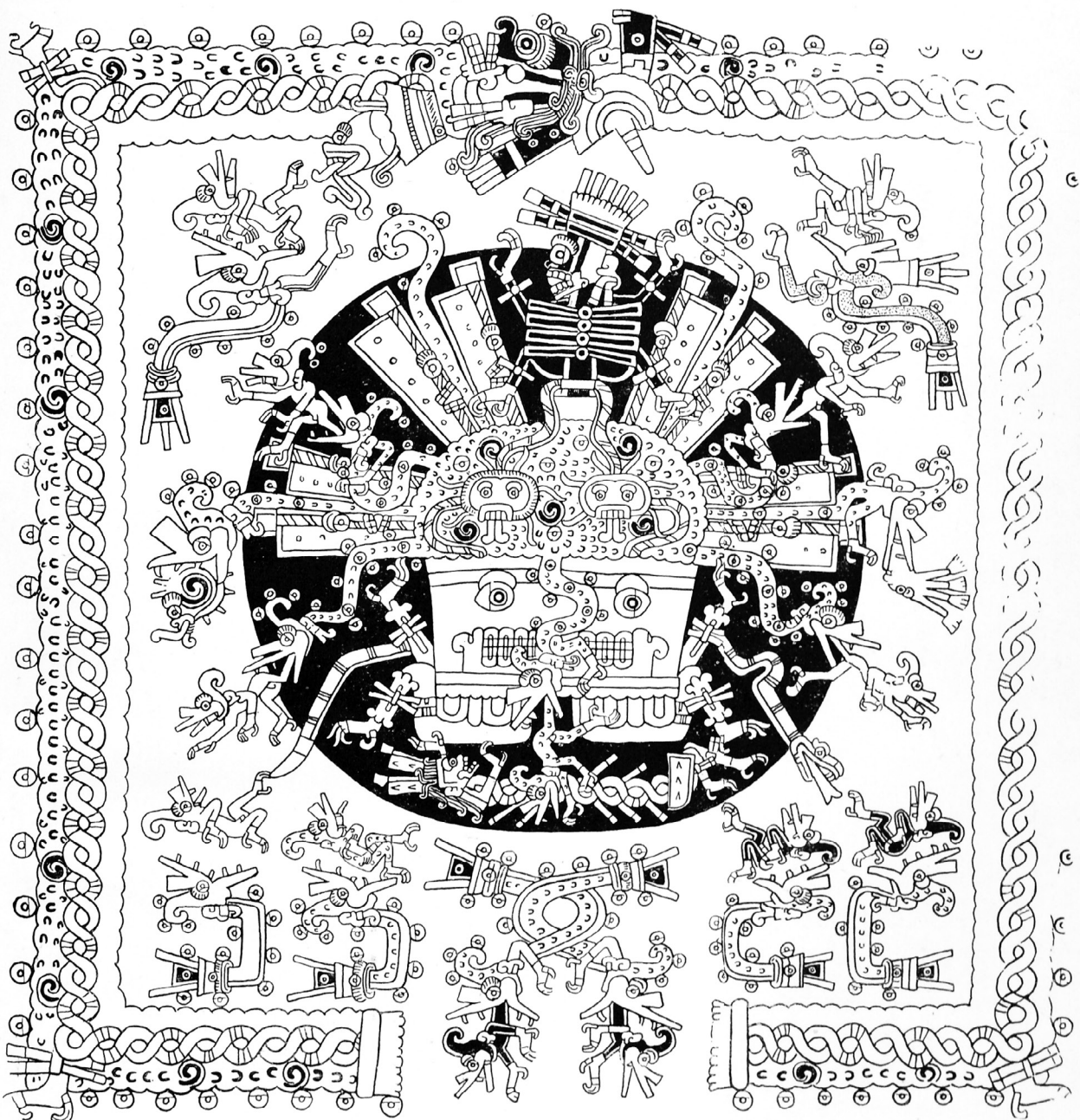


Figure 1.13. The incense burner. Codex Borgia, p. 29. Danzel 1923.

Finally, incense burners from the region of Tehuacán and Teotitlán, which are commonly referred to as *xantiles*, offer an example culturally and geographically close to both Huautla de Jiménez and the codices (Fig. 1.14). The term “xantil,” used today in the region to refer to any archaeological object, probably derives from the Spanish word *gentil* (meaning “pagan”) in reference to the religion practiced before colonization. Seler (1895, 35) was the first to identify the most-represented god in the *xantiles* as the central Mexican Macuilxochitl (Five Flower), a god of game, dance, and music who is similar to Xochipilli (Lord of Flowers). Despite its clear central Mexican iconography, the *xantil* is a typical artifact from the southern Nahua region, including the Mazateca and other areas of the northern state of Oaxaca. Although southern

Nahua iconography’s bearing on the interpretation of the codices and Mazatec night ceremonies are discussed at greater length in Section 3.4, it is worth mentioning the work of John Pohl (2007) on a *xantil* now housed at the Princeton University Art Museum. He identified the character on the *xantil* as Macuitonal (Five Soul), a patron god of sorcerers, diviners, and healers, thus emphasizing the intrinsically ceremonial nature of feasting, music, and dancing as activities that are more commonly associated with the Macuilxochitl-Xochipilli deity complex. A comparison of the Tehuacán *xantil* with the incense burner on page 29 of the Codex Borgia (Fig. 1.13) and the god on page 14 of the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer (Fig. 1.11) reveals the complexity of this type of object, which conflates the smoke, the representation of the god, and



**Figure 1.14.** Xantil, Mixteca-Puebla. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.

the priest who impersonates the god. Once the censer is activated by placing burning wood and other substances in it, smoke emerges from the holes in the nostrils, mouth, and chest. This fuming body, as seen in Figure 1.11, is not only a metaphor for knowledge but also an actual ritual and devotional object. Pictographic symbolism closely adheres to a lived experience and vivid perceptions of the senses (sight, touch, smell, etc.). Both Jansen (2002) and Pohl (2007) related the use and symbolism of the censers of southeastern Mexico to the consumption of substances such as *piciete* (wild tobacco) or sacred mushrooms, which induce altered states of consciousness as a means of attaining knowledge.

The ritual consumption of mushrooms, which takes place exclusively at night, is perhaps the aspect of Mazatec culture and ceremonies that is best known to outsiders. Sacred mushrooms are called *ndi'xitjo* (little ones that spring forth) in Mazatec, a reference to the fact that they spontaneously grow during the rainy season and cannot be cultivated. Since Gordon Wasson's numerous visits to the region, a Mazatec woman called María Sabina (Fig. 2.1), who was from Río Santiago—a small village located around half an hour's drive from Huautla—and lived in

the main Mazatec town until her death in 1985, became a world-renowned *chjon chjine* (wise woman; Estrada 1981). While written references to the use of sacred plants can be found in colonial sources from the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (e.g., the Florentine Codex, bk. 11, ch. 7 and Alarcón and Serna in Andrews and Hassig 1984, bk. 1), I discuss two clear pictographic representations in this section. First, the colonial Codex Magliabechiano (f. 90r; Fig. 1.15) explicitly and succinctly illustrates the consumption of sacred mushrooms. On a small page that depicts different and perhaps unrelated scenes (see also Section 7.2.5 for further discussion), a man seated on a straw mat appears to be in the act of ingesting a round object with a white stem while holding a similar object in his other hand. The man is probably ingesting mushrooms, which are sprouting from a patch of land right in front of him. A large skeletal figure looms behind him and touches him with his right claw. The composition suggests an opposition: on the one hand, the man performing the ritual is leaving darkness and death behind him thanks to the power of the sacred plants in front of him, which in this case would indicate clarity. On the other hand, the skeletal character can be understood as an ancestor who guides and touches or protects the man who undertakes the ritual. The



Figure 1.15. The ingestion of sacred mushrooms (lower right). Codex Magliabechiano, f. 90r. Florence, Biblioteca nazionale centrale, Banco Rari, 232.

colonial image of the skeletal figure creates a terrifying depiction of the power of the plant, perhaps suggesting diabolical overtones, but it can also allude to the fact that mushroom ceremonies can have terrible outcomes when they are not properly performed by knowledgeable people.

The only pre-Hispanic depiction of a ceremony involving the consumption of mushrooms can be found on page 24 of the Codex Vienna (Fig. 1.16). First identified by Caso (1963), this scene is part of a long sequence of rituals that precedes the rise of the first sun on page 23 (the manuscript's page count proceeds backwards). The ceremony takes place in Apoala, a town in the Mixteca Alta that is considered a place of origin for the Mixtec people, as indicated by the toponym on the bottom right corner of the page, where the reading of the scene begins. Next to the toponym, two spirits are engaged in a conversation on the day 4 Lizard, year 8 Reed. The narrative then proceeds upwards, alternating from right to left and from left to right. The ceremony is performed by Lord 9 Wind Quetzalcoatl, who first meets with an old priest, Lord 4 Lizard, seated on a temple platform before bringing forth the mushrooms in

the form of two goddesses, Ladies 4 Lizard and 11 Lizard, whom he carries on his back. Both women have white mushrooms sprouting from their heads. Jansen (1982, 196) noted that characters or gods with these calendrical names only appear in this scene and are not mentioned anywhere else in extant Mixtec codices. Next, the scene depicts a mortuary bundle placed on the ground and emanating smoke volutes, followed by a representation of the rain god Tlaloc and a maize plant; the same images can be found in a preceding scene on page 27 that relates to the invention of agriculture. This cluster of images is associated with an unspecified year 1 indicated by one dot and a year sign (interlaced A-O sign) in front of the mummy. It is unclear whether these chronological markers are a reference to specific times during the year when the ceremony must be performed or the establishment of the ceremony itself. The ceremony begins with Quetzalcoatl playing and singing with a human bone and skull to invoke the presence and help of the ancestors. In front of him sits a character who is visibly crying and holding two white mushrooms (to this day, mushrooms are consumed in pairs). In the Codex Tudela (f. 49r), I interpreted the act of



Figure 1.16. Mushroom ceremony. Codex Vienna, p. 24. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna.

crying as a reference to diviners' ability to see what afflicts a patient. The weeping character bears the calendrical name of 7 Flower—Xochipilli among the Nahuas, the god of music and feasting, who is similar to the xantil discussed above.

Jansen (1982, 197) transcribed an excerpt from a chant by María Sabina in relation to his interpretation of the ceremony in the Codex Vienna. It is worth reading the text again:

Chjon nga kjindia nia, tso  
Woman who cries I am, says

Chjon nga bixia nia, tso  
Woman who whistles I am, says

Chjon nga sitsin nia, tso  
Woman like thunder I am, says

Chjon nga sikane nia, tso  
Woman who rumbles I am, says

Chjon spiritu nia, tso  
Woman spirit I am, says

Chjon nga kjindia nia, tso  
Crying woman I am, says

(Wasson and Wasson 1957a, side 1, band 1)  
(<https://youtu.be/EqExyGM7FOA>)

Transcription and translation by Santiago Cortés Martínez  
and Alessia Frassani

In this excerpt, María Sabina associates the act of crying with meteorological manifestations, such as storms, wind, and rain. Her tears are like raindrops, and her cries reverberate like thunder. At the same time, the subject—María Sabina insistently referred to herself in the third person, as a woman—becomes an immaterial spirit who can inhabit the falling drops and resounding thunder. María Sabina describes an atmospheric phenomenon as a self-ascribed attribute in a manner similar to the night and star-eyes seen in the several aforementioned depictions from pre-Hispanic codices. Rain and thunder are not external and circumstantial meteorological accidents; they are constitutive of a subjective experience that occurs during the ceremony. It is clear that the words and chants of modern chjota chjine are analogous to images in the ancient codices and objects, such as the censer. Colonial sources, in contrast, despite being chronologically closer to the ancient manuscripts, did not utilize the full potential of images as generators of meaning but rather relied on pictography as illustrations, which turned the subjective experience of knowledge acquisition into an external and ostensibly objective point of view. However, this point of view was usually openly hostile to Mesoamerican religious experience. The comparison of the two images of mushroom consumption in the Codices Magliabechiano and Vienna once again highlights the

division in the depiction of sacred images and beings from the pre-Hispanic period and the colonial period. While ceremony participants in the Mixtec manuscript were gods themselves and performed a ritual of self-reflexivity, the solitary man's ingestion of the sacred plant in the later colonial depiction was divorced from the ancestor that he was encountering. The latter image is descriptive or etic, an anthropological expression that indicates the observer's external and analytical point of view. The narrative in the Codex Vienna, on the contrary, conflates human and communal experiences of the ceremony with the encounter with the gods to the point that the two fuse into a single complex image.

As previously mentioned, the mushroom ceremony in the Codex Vienna precedes and is actually the culminating event in a series of rituals that lead to the rise of the first sun on page 23. Participants in the ceremony (i.e., Lords 2 Dog, 1 Death, and 4 Movement and Ladies 9 Reed, 1 Eagle, 9 Grass, and 5 Flint) are well-known characters who prominently appear not only in the preceding chapters of the Mixtec creation narrative but also on the remaining pages (22–1), which relate the founding of regional dynasties. Therefore, the rise of the first sun is a liminal moment that marks the beginning of a new era in the world, out of the darkness of the ancestors' primordial time. Compared to depictions in colonial manuscripts, it becomes apparent that death, darkness, and night have connotations in Mesoamerican thought that are quite different from the European tradition. Passage through night and darkness and the ability to establish a relationship and communication with the ancestors are instrumental to the rise of the sun, light, life, and social organization. Darkness is not a static position of ignorance or a lack of understanding but rather a dynamic quest towards knowledge and the establishment of new order.

This chapter discussed the ways in which Mazatec chjota chjine and Mesoamerican wise people or priests more generally can subjectively generate their own personae, powers, and scope of action. Divination, especially when it directly addresses the ancestors who reside in another world, entails active engagement with them in an often dark and unknown realm. Unlike any functionalist view of rituals that posits adherence to an established protocol to achieve the desired effect, Mesoamerican divination and its ceremonies are extremely inventive and open-ended processes; they are geared towards reunion with the ancestors, who are the only ones who can grant supernatural powers to the living. Wagner's ideas on the "invention of culture" are especially relevant in this context (Wagner 1981, Zamora 2016).



## Night Ceremonies and Chants

Recordings of María Sabina's chants (Wasson and Wasson 1957a, Wasson et al. 1974) by American mycologist Gordon Wasson turned a humble but powerful woman into one of the most famous figures in modern Mexico, both within and outside of the country (Fig. 2.1; Estrada 1981). Nonetheless, despite the publication of the recordings along with full transcriptions, annotations, and translations of the recited texts in both Spanish and English (Wasson et al. 1974), the remarkable knowledge of María Sabina and many other *chjota chjine* from the region has not been given the attention that it deserves.

This chapter is an attempt to critically present and discuss original Mazatec chants that were recorded, transcribed, and translated by the author and Santiago Cortés Martínez, a *huauteco* with a long-lasting interest in the preservation and promotion of his native language, ceremonies, and traditional medicine. The chants provide a unique entry point into Mesoamerican healers' images of themselves and their knowledge and powers. Colonial poems and chants are also critically presented alongside contemporary examples to understand the historical depth and trajectory of Indigenous way of constructing personhood and agency in a ritual context.

### 2.1. Colonial views on night ceremonies

Along with other deeply misguided and negative terms, such as “idol” (*idolo*), that have been used to describe sacred Mesoamerican images in colonial and modern scholarship, “drunkenness” (*borrachera*) has been taken at face value when describing ceremonies, especially those performed at night, which are seemingly implied to be orgiastic, alcohol-fueled rituals. Such a misinterpretation is a direct result of the fact that every piece of information on the use of mind-altering, psychoactive substances in colonial sources was intended to demonize and extirpate their use. Treatises such as those by Ruiz de Alarcón and other friars compiled in the seventeenth century were veritable manuals for the identification of illicit Indigenous practices that involved substances such as *ololiuhqui* (*datura* seed), *piciete* (wild tobacco), and sacred mushrooms (*teonanacatl*; Andrews and Hassig 1984, Ponce et al. 1987).

The implications of such a prejudicial stance are seldom considered when relying on these sources for interpretation, perhaps due to common and long-lasting misconceptions of altered states in Western society and culture. Notably, Ginzburg (1983, 1991) unveiled how the witch-hunt craze



Figure 2.1. María Sabina. Fototeca del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico.