

pot, from which the officiating priest emerges. Four colorful serpents enclose the burning pot. The Florentine Codex contains the following:

Thereupon likewise descended the fire serpent. It was just like a blazing pine firebrand. Its tongue was made of flaming red feathers. It went [as if] burning [like] a torch. And its tail was of paper, perhaps two fathoms or three fathoms long. As it came down, it was like a real serpent; it showed its tongue; it was as if it bent back and forth.

And when [the priest] had brought it to the base [of the pyramid], he proceeded carefully there to the eagle vessel. Then he went up [to the eagle vessel]: he also raised [the fire serpent] in dedication of the four directions. When he had [so] raised it in dedication, then he cast it upon the sacrificial papers; then they burnt.

And when he had come to leave it, when he went ascending to the top, then shell trumpets were blown. (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 2, ch. 34, 147)

The Codex Telleriano-Remensis (f. 5r) confirms that the feast of Xiuhtecuhtli was also celebrated during Panquetzaliztli. Four priests, each carrying a large pinewood bundle, performed the ceremony by orienting themselves towards the four directions, as seen in the Codex Borgia, where the four serpents around the burner form a square. On page 34 of the Codex Borbonicus, several god impersonators carry large pinewood bundles, but only four priests dedicated to Yoaltecuhtli (the lord of the night invoked during the New Fire ceremony, according to Sahagún; Anders et al. 1991, 223) direct their torches to the turquoise hearth in the temple. The New Fire ceremony was conducted not only to mark the conclusion of a fifty-two-year count (*xiuhmolpilli*) but also, on a smaller scale, to celebrate the closing of a four-year cycle (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 2, ch. 37–38). In the Codex Borbonicus, it is clear that the New Fire ceremony was conducted during Panquetzaliztli, as also corroborated by Sahagún (1950–1982, bk. 2, ch. 34). However, the same source (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 2, ch. 37) relates the drilling of a new fire during Izcalli. Similarly, in the Codex Telleriano-Remensis (f. 5r), the fire god Xiuhtecuhtli's ceremonies are described as part of Panquetzaliztli, while the god himself is depicted as the patron of Izcalli on folio 6v, where he can be seen sporting attributes of the “fire bearers.” These seemingly confusing elements indicate that the two celebrations (Panquetzaliztli and Izcalli) share overlapping features, despite occurring sixty days apart. In this light, the ceremony of the New Fire in the Codex Borgia (p. 42) can also be related to Izcalli (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2017, 521–523).

The proposed analysis is based on a close reading of a ceremonial trajectory that begins in Ochpaniztli and culminates in Panquetzaliztli with the New Fire ceremony in both the Codices Borgia and Borbonicus. However, there are two more important rituals that take place during

this long ritual sequence in the Codex Borgia that find a parallel not in a religious manuscript but rather in a historical account.

#### 4.3.1. The quest

In folios 20r and 21r (Fig. 4.17 and 4.18) of the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca, an early colonial document from Cuauhtinchan (a town in the vicinity of Puebla), two scenes depict consecutive rituals of political accession. First, four characters with the attributes of the god of hunting, Mixcoatl (e.g., red-and-white body paint and the instruments of his trade), lie atop a tree. According to the accompanying text (Kirchhoff et al. 1989, 171), the four men are *tlatoque* (rulers), who fasted for four days while alone in the woods. Two eagles and two jaguars, symbols of royalty, pour nourishing liquid into their mouths. As discussed by Olivier (2015a, 466–473), the objective of the ritual was to attain the status of nobility, which was finally accomplished with the perforation of the septum, the ritual represented in the following image. Nowotny (1961, § 15b, 251–252) first indicated that both scenes have a parallel on page 44 of the Codex Borgia. Figure 4.19 depicts a quadrangular temple enclosure, within which stands a colorful tree that sprouts from a round solar disk on the chest of Cihuacoatl, who also displays the attributes of the rain god. On top of the tree, a character dressed as an eagle receives precious liquid from a descending bat-like figure. The eagle-person is being nourished in the same manner as the *tlatoque* in the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca. At the same time, on the lateral openings of the temple, the beaks and teeth of an eagle, a jaguar, and a bird perforate the noses of three men who appear as fire serpent *nahuales*. Thus, the image fuses the two successive scenes of the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca, the nourishment of the *tlatoque* on the trees, and the perforation of the septum.

The nose-piercing ceremony on page 44 of the Codex Borgia is placed exactly between the sacrifices of Itzcolihuiqui on page 42 and Xolotl on page 43, which are tentatively tied to the *veintena* of Ochpaniztli in the present analysis, and pages 45–46, which end the ritual cycle with the New Fire during Panquetzaliztli. *Primeros Memoriales* states that, “at this time [of Panquetzaliztli], abstinence was practiced for eighty days, although there was not abstaining from eating. There was eating, but no one washed himself with soap or took a steam bath; no one slept with a woman” (Sahagún et al. 1997, 64). Information from the Florentine Codex (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 2, ch. 34) confirms that Panquetzaliztli was the culmination of eighty days of fasting that began during Ochpaniztli. Finally, a previously discussed passage in Motolinía (1971, ch. 25) states that priests known as “fire bearers” (*cargadores del fuego*) from Tehuacán, Teotitlán, and Coxcatlán began their preparation for Panquetzaliztli eighty days prior to the feast.

Elements of a quest are especially evident in the fasting of the aspiring *tlatoque*, as indicated in the image and text of the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca. Olivier (2008,

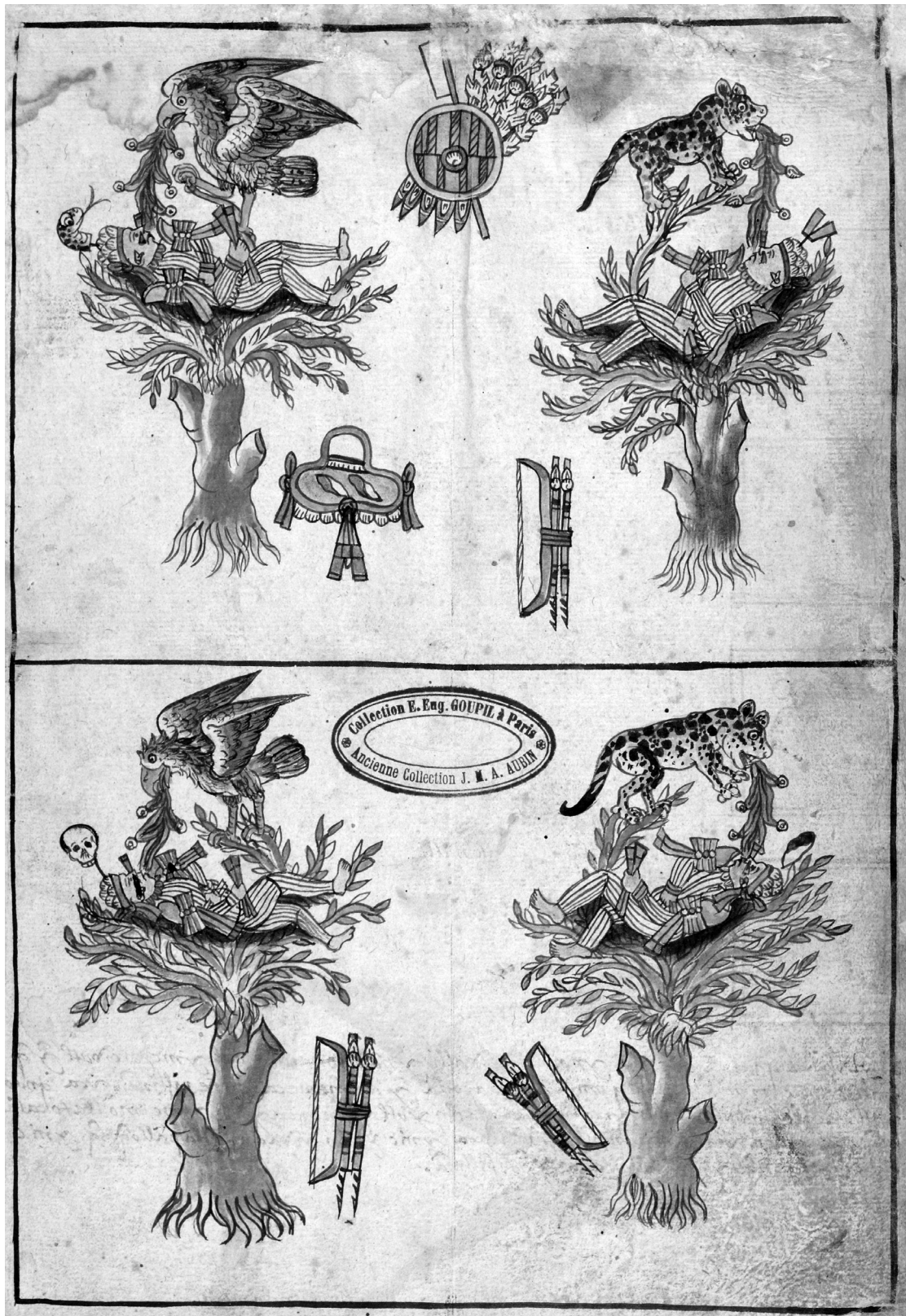


Figure 4.17. Vision quest of the tlatoque. *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*, f. 20r. Mexicain 46–58. Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

271–274) noted a relationship between the naked red-and-white striped body, conical hat, pierced nose, and other features of the so-called Huastecs (León Portilla 1965) and the ceremonies for the royal succession, when the

aspiring king symbolically died and was reborn with a new identity. I propose that these specific elements do not indicate a ritual death but are rather signs of a vision quest, a journey to the world of deified ancestors from which

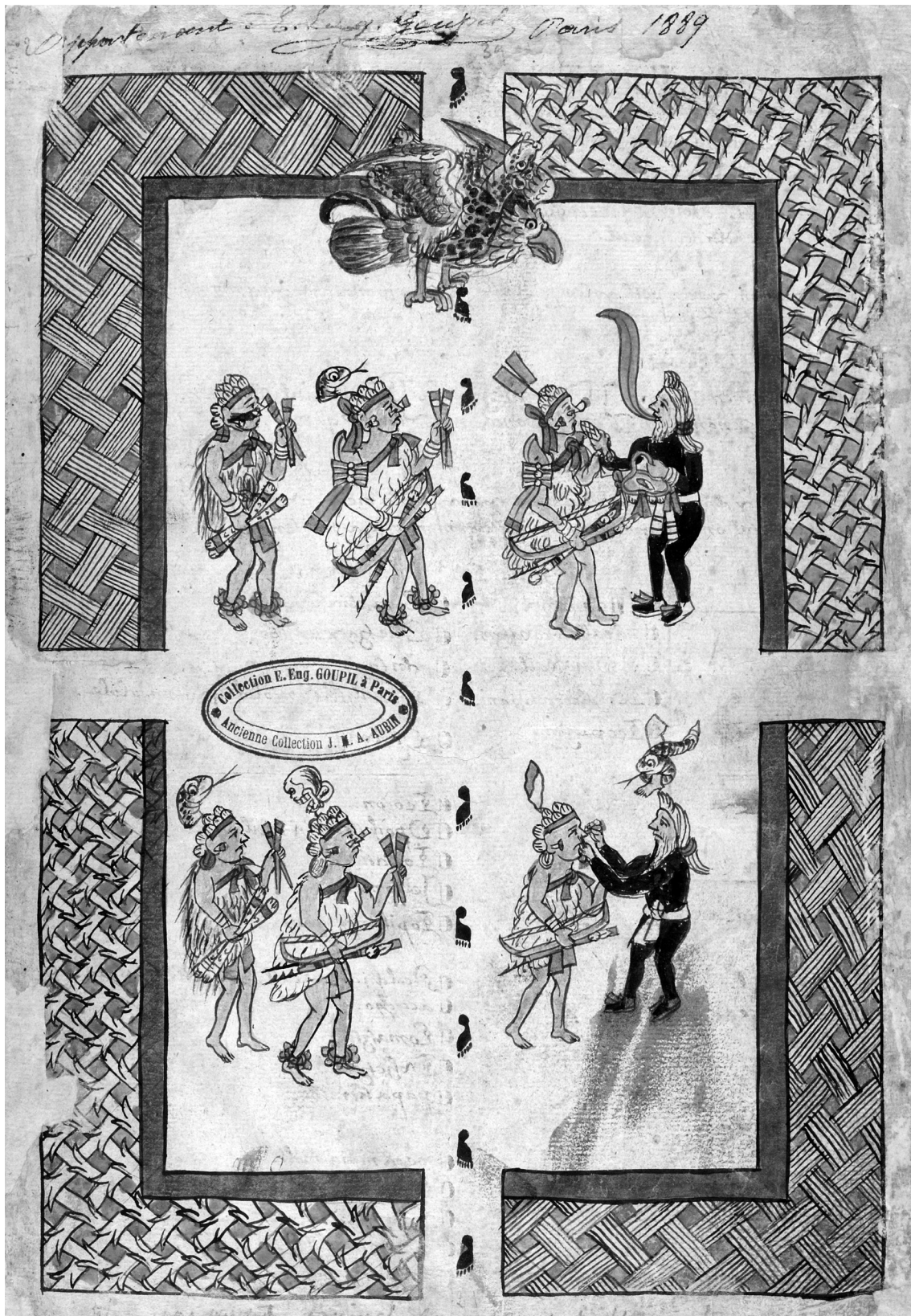


Figure 4.18. Nose-piercing ceremony. *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*, f. 21r. Mexicain 46–58. Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

aspiring rulers return with the knowledge and experience necessary for their leadership role. In the Codex Borgia, the sacrificed priest on page 43 is Itzlacolihqui, who begins his journey during Ochpaniztli and self-immolates

during Panquetzalitzli as Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli on page 45. Although political overtones may be present in the nose-piercing ceremony on page 44 of the Codex Borgia, the protagonist is the bird nahual priest in the middle of



Figure 4.19. Nose-piercing ceremony inside a temple. Codex Borgia, p. 44. Kingsborough 1831.

the scene who receives the precious nourishment while on top of a tree (possibly fasting), not the three characters on the sides.

As in Mazatec chants, the polyhedral figure of the priest can consecutively embody many and different characters, to the point of a confusing accumulation of identities. He is the absolute protagonist of the pages under discussion in the Codex Borgia. For example, on page 45, the Quetzalcoatl priest can be seen in the middle left of the image transforming into an eagle nahuatl and extracting the heart of a sacrificial victim plunged into a river. The same character, identified as Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli (Seler 1904, vol. 2, 71) due to his white body with red stripes, is on top of the tzompantli structure in the middle of the scene. The dynamic posture indicates that he is alive. The same attributes, in addition to the small net that he holds in his right hand (used to carry food during hunting), connects him to Mixcoatl, the god protagonist of the

veintena of Quecholli, which is celebrated right before Panquetzaliztli (Milbrath 2013, 30, Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2017, 517–519). Mixcoatl, the god of hunting, also shares attributes with the tlatoque of the fasting and nose-piercing ceremony in the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca (ff. 20r, 21r). Next, the priest himself appears bleeding on an altar. His body is in a dynamic posture and covered in a large white cotton cloth, which indicates that he is transforming into a sacred bundle known as *tlaquimilolli* in Nahuatl (Anders et al. 1993, 239). This means that the priest first made the sacrifice, then became the fruit of his own sacrifice. I propose that the priest, as the protagonist of the story, has the ability to subjectively take on the role of people, sacrificed, sacrificers, and even powerful objects in a rapid and dynamic manner, as was initially proposed for the scenes of Teotleco in the Codices Tudela (f. 22r) and Ixtlilxochitl (f. 99v), which are admittedly much simpler in their iconography and compositions.

### **4.3.2. Conclusions**

In this chapter, I proposed approaching ritual representations in colonial and ancient manuscripts in a novel manner. First, iconographic complexity and idiosyncrasies were framed within the idea of transformation—that is, the human ability to change and take different shapes, such as animals, gods, and natural elements. This ability, which is sometimes defined as “instability” in the anthropological literature on South American shamanism (Viveiros de Castro 1994, Alberti 2007, Lagrou 2009), creates a constant interplay between different characters and corresponding ceremonial roles.

While mythological explanations pursue clear meaning, imply causality, and create a reassuring but somewhat fictitious linearity for the narrative, the focus on ritual action brings process itself to the fore. Second, I propose primarily interpreting this process as a quest, again relying on anthropological literature on Indigenous American cultures (Irwin 1994) as much as my own field work in the Mazateca. The quest implies that ritual action is not only a process but also an open one with a desired—but not a guaranteed—outcome. While a shared and common belief system may provide a road map to the destination, individuality and subjectivity play a major role in the ceremonial context. In the literature on ancient Mesoamerican religion, ritual is mostly understood as a public event whose purpose was to create and foment social cohesion. By contrast, in this book, I propose that in the case of religious manuscripts, pictography was not merely a reflection of religious beliefs but rather a means through which religious knowledge was constructed and materialized. Although the purported mysticism of the Codex Borgia’s ritual pages, as remarked by Nowotny, may ultimately seem to preclude any possible definitive interpretation, we should not refrain from asking even unanswerable questions in our own quest for meaning. The following chapter argues for a reassessment of the backbone of religious books, namely the Mesoamerican calendar, vis-à-vis its representation in colonial times.