

The combination of Christian and Mesoamerican iconography seems even more baffling when one recalls the persecution suffered by the leaders of Yanhuitlan shortly before the manuscript's presumed realization. The manuscript was likely sponsored by the cacique Domingo de Guzmán, following his return to power after two years in prison in Mexico City, where he had been formally charged and persecuted by the Inquisition. Perhaps don Domingo's defeated rulership after years of struggle accounts for the juxtaposition of different ideologies: pre-Hispanic gods and their importance in the Indigenous tribute system and Spanish and Dominican attempts to dominate local resources.

8.3. Discussion

As Quiñones Keber (1988, 203) remarked, Sahagún's project was inherently contradictory. The friars sought information regarding Indigenous religion and customs while simultaneously persecuting, demonizing, and destroying every manifestation of them. Nahua artists bore witness to a world in which the past that they were asked to portray was only visible in the ruins that surrounded the schools that they attended. In the Sahaguntine work, the reference to Classical antiquity and the abrupt passage to Christianity should be understood in this light.

Although it is deeply indebted to the artistic endeavors of the conventual schools, the Codex Yanhuitlan seems to propose a different model of coexistence. Mesoamerican gods, despite being depicted according to European conventions, were not framed within a Classical canon but rather were clearly presented as part of a Mesoamerican understanding of time, the calendar, and tribute. Mesoamerican gods and Christian symbols and institutions are represented in the Codex Yanhuitlan, in stark contrast to the conspicuous absence of European religion in the extensive Sahaguntine works (Terraciano 2010, 67). Despite its purported ethnographic stance, Sahagún's experiment is fraught with the impossibility of reconciliation between the Mesoamerican and Christian worldviews, as seen in the image of Motecuhzoma-Christ. Rather than a mediation between two worlds, as frequently suggested (e.g., Escalante Gonzalbo 2003, 191, Magaloni Kerpel 2003b), the Nahua artists who worked within the confines of the conventual schools belonged to a single world, replete with contradictions that could not be resolved in light of the friars' patronage and exigencies.

The use of monochrome reveals the mechanism by which the painted image was created and conceived and, by extension, reveals gaps in the friars' contradictory project. As previously suggested (Cline 1988, Magaloni Kerpel 2003b, 221), it is possible that Book 12 of the Florentine Codex offers a subversive view of Sahagún's project that was highly critical of Spanish military and political presence in Mexico. However, Indigenous artists were required to frame history through a dramatic and irreconcilable division between the periods before and after the conquest, a legacy that lingers in academia to this day. The Codex

Yanhuitlan, in contrast, manages to portray the Indigenous point of view on the colonial situation. As a result, Mesoamerican and Catholic sacred images and objects are given similar and equal treatment in the Codex Yanhuitlan. By contrast, in the Florentine Codex, Christian imagery is only indirectly found in the diabolical representation of God-Tezcatlipoca in Book 6 and the Motecuhzoma-Christ. The Codex Yanhuitlan indeed belongs to a long Mixtec tradition of picture writing that did not wane with the conquest but adjusted to the colonial context and continued well into the eighteenth century, whereas the Sahaguntine experiment was short-lived because it was incapable of translating and imagining Mesoamerican religious and cultural conditions in the colonial context.

Conclusion

Understanding Mesoamerican religious pictography requires rethinking and questioning our own conceptions of what pictures and calendars “do.” I proposed that pictographic images were not a series of finite symbol sets. While they were part of a larger cultural system, both their symbolic meaning and formal qualities were open to reinterpretation and reinvention depending on the occasion, time, and place of execution. Mesoamerican pictorials are characterized by an enduring but somewhat deceptive iconicity. As demonstrated throughout this book, iconographic studies and interpretations of Indigenous art rely heavily on external sources, which are often fraught with ignorance and prejudice on the part of the writers. In the Western artistic tradition, which has historically favored representation over abstraction, naturalism tends to be understood as a strategy that strips images of magical powers by constraining them to reality. In Indigenous America, where there is no external “text” (either written or recited) for explaining images (Severi 2004), the mimetic and iconic impulse is of a different nature, more akin to magic. Creating a picture by copying and replicating generates a second nature to the original capable also of multiplying its powers (Taussig 1993). By creating a picture of a god with the attributes of an animal or a plant, their unique abilities—flight, vision, strength, dexterity, and curative properties—are transferred to the book, where the image resides, and to the person invoking the god, who verbally replicates the power of the original. In other words, pictographic images do not function according to the Western semiosis that encodes meaning through external referents. Instead, they derive their power from the suggestion of analogies, assonances, and resemblances that generate meaning within the picture.

Understanding pictographic images as generators of meaning by association rather than symbols also has implications for the understanding of time and time-keeping systems as cultural constructions, as it contradicts the notion of time as objectively measurable and controllable by technological means. Mechanical, digital, and astronomical clocks that can capture time in an increasingly precise manner turn our conception of time into something unquestionable and absolute. What if time in Mesoamerica was understood as being inherently dependent on the *tonalpohualli*, the mathematical system employed to measure it, with all its possibilities and constraints? I believe that the numerous inconsistencies found in the correlation of the Christian and Mesoamerican calendars demonstrate that there was no impulse towards synchronicity in Indigenous America. Rather, time-keeping was conceived as a conscious activity for pondering human destiny and one’s place in the world. There were not two (or more) separate calendars in ancient Mesoamerica, one historical and one religious, because reckoning

with the past and envisioning the future always entailed mediation with the constraints of the present. A thorough reconsideration of the *veintena* cycle is a theme that extends over this entire book and encompasses both the potency of images and the calendar. I proposed that the visionary aspects of the *veintenas* were profoundly misunderstood and silenced by the friars and their pupils, who refrained from describing the most private and mystical aspects of the rituals and privileged information on their public execution instead. The fact that even the earliest colonial sources on the ceremonial cycle were compiled more than a generation after the last public performance took place further complicates the matter. The domestication of the *veintena* rituals relied on the creation of a calendar ad hoc and the pursuit of a correlation between Mesoamerican and Christian chronologies. Finally, I proposed seeking fragmented clues on the *veintenas* in pre-Hispanic and early colonial documents (the *Codices Borgia*, *Laud*, *Magliabechiano*, and *Yanhuitlan*) to counter and question the systematic reconstruction conducted by the friars.

Consequently, I believe that the strict distinction between religious and historical documents should also be questioned, as it relies too heavily on European and post-Enlightenment conceptions of history and religion. While there were certainly different genres of pictorial manuscripts (e.g., genealogical, tributary, and divinatory), separating belief from fact is not always an easy feat. Historical events, especially catastrophic ones such as conquest and famine, impact not only religious behavior but also ideas regarding divinity and destiny. Moreover, preconceived notions informed by one’s education and culture dictate the way in which even traumatic events are apprehended and understood. I would like to conclude this book with a note on a specific Nahuatl term employed to describe pictographic manuscripts in Sahagún (1950–1982, bk. 10, ch. 29). In a chapter dedicated to the discussion of the various kinds of people who dwelt in Mexico before the arrival of the Spaniards, the first paragraphs introduce the Toltecs, the putative cultural ancestors of the Aztecs. According to the text, “the Toltecs were very wise” (Sahagún, 1950–1982, bk. 10, ch. 29, 168) because they invented the year count (*cexiuhtlapoalli*) and the day count (*tonalpoalli*): “They established the way in which the night, the day, would work; which day sign was good, favorable; and which was evil [...]. All their discoveries formed the book of dreams.” In Nahuatl, the “book of dreams” is called a *temicamatl*, which is given as “book for interpreting dreams” in Anderson and Dibble’s translation. However, from the passage above, it can be inferred that the *temicamatl* was a book that contained all calendrical and mantic knowledge and not a separate book used to interpret dreams. Later in the same chapter, in a passage on the origins of the Mexica, the *temicamatl* is mentioned again as an invention of the wise and