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# Preface

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What do you do when there are coyotes in your village? For the Nahua people of northern Veracruz, Mexico, the word *coyotl* (from which English borrows “coyote”) designates the small, wild dog, but it also signifies any non-Indigenous person. We were the coyotes: Alan, Pamela, and our then fifteen-year-old son Michael. That year of 1997–98 we had come from Indiana to Amatlán, a remote Nahua village of about 600 people, to continue our long-term study of social life and customs in a single community. So at least we were familiar coyotes.<sup>1</sup> Alan had been visiting and living in Amatlán since 1970, Pamela since a few years later, and Michael for most of his life. People smiled broadly and even giggled when we arrived, undoubtedly recalling our minor humiliations over the years as we adjusted to the unfamiliar patterns in Amatlán. In early 1998 we returned to the community after a brief trip to the capital city, and our friend and colleague Cirilo had an alarming glint in his eye as we approached him. He was, like all adult men in the village, a maize farmer adept in the slash-and-burn techniques of intensive horticulture. He was also a renowned ritual specialist and an accomplished diviner. By casting maize kernels and reading the resulting pattern, he could foretell events. As we sat down in the shrine that occupied a major portion of his house, he made an effort to suppress a smile, and said in a low voice, “We are going on a journey to make offerings to the *antihuiti*, the ancient ones. Why don’t you come with us?” We asked him where he and his followers were going and he replied, “Postectli.” We had seen this imposing mountain many times. It seemed far away but was actually just under 35 kilometers (roughly 20 miles) taking the least circuitous route from Amatlán and

so we said to ourselves, “A trek to Postectli can’t be all that difficult, can it?” We eagerly accepted Cirilo’s invitation but wondered why he chuckled to himself as we walked away. What do you do with coyotes in the community? Send them on a pilgrimage.

Over the next nine years we participated in five pilgrimages: two treks to Postectli and three others to sacred hills of lesser stature in the Nahua pantheon. These were experiences we shall never forget. Our aim in writing this account is to share those experiences, to document the remarkable events that transpired, and contribute to anthropological theory on religion and pilgrimage. We present color photos arranged chronologically to illustrate the steps in these sacred journeys, as well as drawings of the sacred cut-paper figures at the center of ritual activity, illuminating the details of their iconography. The exquisite cuttings are the focus of elaborate offerings on altars involving chanting and blood sacrifice. We provide background information on this Indigenous religion and world view along with statements from ritual participants so that those unfamiliar with Mesoamerica might gain an understanding of why Nahua people engage in such physically demanding and elaborate ritual practices. To place the ethnographic information into wider cultural context we also translate a sample of core myths and heartfelt chants delivered by the ritual specialists on the sacred journeys. We discuss religious treks among other groups in Mesoamerica and relate them, along with the Nahua examples, to worldwide practices of pilgrimage. Writing about religious pilgrimage is itself a kind of journey with its own set of challenges. It is our hope to present the phenomenon as both an experience and an intellectual

puzzle. We took our guide Cirilo's parting chuckle as an invitation and a challenge to stay the course on these two very different sorts of journeys.

In all of our years in Amatlán, we constantly asked ourselves how such cultural richness could possibly have survived 500 years of incomparably devastating and disruptive history. The Nahua, like virtually all Indigenous people, have been colonized and oppressed by alien groups. Today many live in a world where they are marginalized if not brutally oppressed by racism and ethnocentrism. Through it all, the Nahua have survived and even thrived at the edges of Mexican society, often in remote areas far removed from urban influences. The Huasteca of eastern Mexico where our study is situated is such a place. Indigenous people like the residents of Amatlán make up at least 50 percent of the population of the vast Huasteca region. There they have innovated and adopted strategies that allow them to be relatively self-sufficient and minimally dependent on Hispanic society; in short, they survive because they have learned to accommodate and work around local elites who covet their land and resources. Nahuas and their neighbors have been able to overcome threats and even prosper by following religious practices that create a strong sense of identity, dignity, and solidarity in the face of adversity. These rituals are a powerful attraction for those who wish to pursue their lives and celebrate being Nahua in a world dominated by Hispanics. Prior to the profound socioeconomic changes of the past half century, participating in these ritual events was the defining proof of Indigenous identity. Local Hispanic elites attend orthodox Catholic services and often look askance at Native American beliefs and rituals that are founded upon an enduring philosophy that celebrates life, defines the place of human beings in the natural world, and provides guidelines for how to conduct oneself on this earth. Relatively few people from outside the Huasteca know about this rich and living tradition of religious observances. This book focuses on the most complex and inclusive expression of Nahua religion: pilgrimage to the summits of sacred mountains.

We have been studying this remarkable Indigenous group for five decades, both in the field and through reports written by a diverse range of explorers and scholars. Nothing in our experience comes as close to revealing the essence of Nahua culture, religion, and world view as does going on pilgrimage. It is on the arduous trail and before complex altars where people are most free to express themselves as the possessors of valued traditions that, while not unchanging, trace to the ancient origins of Mesoamerica.

Like people all over the world, the Nahua marshal their cultural resources to create a space for themselves, to defend their autonomy, and to assert their humanity in the face of adverse conditions. The usual enemies of such traditions are at work in modern Mexico: rapid technological change, new roads and communication networks; a national and international economic system that militates against the small family farmer; and the dispersal of members of extended families that amplifies the dysfunction of small communities. The Nahua are aware of the potential culture loss, and leaders in Amatlán asked us to do what we could to document their ritual observances while those practices are still actively followed. This work is our attempt to comply with that request.

We have no reason to believe that Nahua religion will fully disappear anytime soon, but people clearly feel pressured by these external forces and by the departure of the younger generation to distant cities in Mexico and abroad. Our purpose is to show ancient Nahua ritual practices in detail and what they reveal about Nahua culture as it is lived today. The pilgrimages are the public face of Nahua religion. They reveal what the people themselves wish others to see, and it was our good fortune to be invited as witnesses to such devotion. In our experience, Nahua pilgrimages to sacred mountains, whether elaborate or modest, are structurally very similar. The ritual sequences and the paper figures employed in each instance were virtually identical, and participating in five pilgrimages led by the same cohort of ritual specialists enabled us to fill in gaps in the earlier documentation. The overall goal of the project is to provide a reasonable interpretation of a little-reported cultural practice grounded in carefully curated ethnographic materials. We hope our effort will ensure that members of Indigenous communities and Nahua scholars of the future will have access to an irreplaceable cultural-historical record.

But there is yet another goal we pursue in undertaking this description and analysis, and maybe it is the most important of all. Nahua religion can teach people a great deal about the world and their place in it. Once one becomes accustomed to beliefs and practices that at first may appear strange and unfamiliar, it is possible to glimpse a profound philosophy that posits the existence of a very different kind of universe from the one most Euro-Americans think they inhabit. It is a universe suffused with the divine, where balance and equilibrium are valued above all else and where people play an important role in its maintenance and preservation. Human beings are precious components of this kind of universe. They

are “sprouts of God,” in the words of the Nahua, but at the same time a part of something much bigger that involves all of the forces and elements of a living cosmos. We invite readers into a reality where water, earth, seeds, and sun interact with people on a daily basis to produce food and sustain life. It is a “radiant mirror-world,” as the Nahua put it. Many people recognize that we live in a time of crisis that is profoundly lacking in leadership and a global vision of sustainability, and dependent on extractive industries and productive practices that destroy the earth. People in the wealthiest countries are estranged from those very environmental processes that support their lives and livelihoods—the forces most deserving of reverence and respect. Fully recognizing our own limitations as cross-cultural emissaries, we present another perspective on ways in which humans can learn to coexist with one another and the natural forces that sustain them. The Nahua perspective does not require belief in deities or supernatural beings of any kind, despite how ritual specialists and lay people have chosen to explain their religion to outsiders like us. They may use words like “spirit(s),” “lord(s),” or “god(s),” whether or not they mean the Christian God or the Catholic saints, but their concepts do not translate easily into Eurocentric systems of thought and belief. Nahua religion is a celebration of the power of life, but it is the kind of life that is found in each and every being and thing in the cosmos. Understanding Nahua rituals can help each of us to recognize this omnipresent power and, in so doing, perhaps mitigate the growing sense of alienation felt by so many inhabitants of this diminishing planet.

It is our intent to demonstrate the greatest respect in writing about Nahua religion and world view and to adhere to the highest ethical standards of anthropological scholarship. We use the phrase “Native American” to refer collectively to the Indigenous peoples who inhabit the lands stretching from the Arctic to the tip of South America. In our usage the adjective includes Nahuas who live in modern-day Mexico. In Spanish, the Nahua and their neighbors belonging to different ethnic groups are

called *pueblos originarios*, the original inhabitants or First Peoples of the Mesoamerican culture area. To be clear at the outset, our focus is on Nahua pilgrimage and the practices of the religion known as *el costumbre* as they exist today; we do not systematically address questions about the antiquity of such practices or their linkages to ancient civilizations. Whenever possible, we use the words of the people themselves to capture the deeper meanings of belief and practice as part of a living religion followed by significant numbers of people throughout Mexico, particularly the Huasteca region.

Our decisions about how to represent concepts of Nahua and neighboring groups in English translation hone close to current but evolving practices. As acknowledged throughout the book, we take guidance from the standards of writing style and presentation adopted by Indigenous anthropologists and writers whenever possible.<sup>2</sup> We generally put Nahuatl and other non-English words in lower-case italics throughout the text (not merely at the first mention) in order to draw attention to the specialized vocabulary of *el costumbre* religion. The name of the most sacred Totiotzin, however, we capitalize and set in regular roman font because of its universal nature encompassing everything in the cosmos. We also capitalize the names of specific spirit entities that Nahua ritual specialists and storytellers temporarily extract from the reality of Totiotzin and incorporate into ritual chanting and traditional stories—the body of Nahua Oral Tradition. Our practice both reflects and respects the deference accorded them by Indigenous speakers. Because Nahua spirit entities are closely associated with what Euro-Americans call processes of nature, in our discussions of them we put their names in italics, not capitalized, in order to underscore that they are aspects of a much larger, singular reality. Any departure from these rules (e.g., occasional orthographic changes in the Nahuatl transcription and English translation of chants) we explain in notes. In sum, the names of Nahua spirit entities and Nahuatl terms may be written in various ways, depending on the context.

# 1

## Preparations for the Journey

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### INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM OF KEEPING TO THE PATH

Upon presenting us with the collection of cut-paper figures that he and his fellow ritual specialists had created for the typical pilgrimage to a sacred mountain, our friend and colleague Cirilo emphasized that he wanted everyone to know about the beauty of his religion. He spoke in Spanish with eloquent words of caution and advice:

These rituals are not a game, they are our life. I am giving you my sons and daughters, my devotion. I spent my life dedicating offerings to them, and they provide us with maize. God watches over us when we dig and plant maize, and we have to give something back. People no longer respect the things of this world. I am sorry that I am poor and must accept aid to make my offerings. But it is okay, I accept it with the best of intentions. Set up an altar. Follow the correct path.<sup>3</sup>

Cirilo's admonition poses a number of intellectual and practical problems. To follow a straight, true, or correct path ("camino derecho")—through life or on the pilgrimage trek—can seem difficult and frustrating. Sometimes the trail deviates or becomes treacherous, leading travelers in the wrong direction and causing them to slip off to one side or the other, or exacerbating errors of judgment and intemperate behavior that can result in disaster. Just as with any religious practice, there is no possibility of success without concentrated focus on a clear goal. Each individual faces the difficult task of recognizing the path and, once becoming aware of it, expending an enormous amount of disciplined effort required to follow it. Pilgrimage is the journey through life writ small. As a practice it provides both the path and the way forward for people willing to listen and learn. It is a significant social phenomenon that traces deep into prehistory and is found in cultures throughout the world. Going on a sacred journey changes people by putting them into direct contact with venerated places. A visit to such a center can alter the position of individuals in their home communities. Countless generations of pilgrims have come to recognize the profound value of this practice for their personal lives. While pilgrimage varies widely among different cultures, it speaks to our common humanity. In this work we present ethnographic information on how one group in Mesoamerica approaches the practice of pilgrimage and addresses the problem of keeping to the path.

We describe and analyze religious pilgrimages undertaken by Nahua peoples who live today in the tropical forests of northern Veracruz, Mexico. Nahuas speak the Nahuatl language, and they are heirs to the early civilizations of Mesoamerica, including the Toltec,

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It is our intent to demonstrate the greatest respect in writing about Nahua religion and world view and to adhere to the highest ethical standards of anthropological scholarship. We use the phrase “Native American” to refer collectively to the Indigenous peoples who inhabit the lands stretching from the Arctic to the tip of South America. In our usage the adjective includes Nahuas who live in modern-day Mexico. In Spanish, the Nahua and their neighbors belonging to different ethnic groups are

called *pueblos originarios*, the original inhabitants or First Peoples of the Mesoamerican culture area. To be clear at the outset, our focus is on Nahua pilgrimage and the practices of the religion known as *el costumbre* as they exist today; we do not systematically address questions about the antiquity of such practices or their linkages to ancient civilizations. Whenever possible, we use the words of the people themselves to capture the deeper meanings of belief and practice as part of a living religion followed by significant numbers of people throughout Mexico, particularly the Huasteca region.

Our decisions about how to represent concepts of Nahua and neighboring groups in English translation hone close to current but evolving practices. As acknowledged throughout the book, we take guidance from the standards of writing style and presentation adopted by Indigenous anthropologists and writers whenever possible.<sup>2</sup> We generally put Nahuatl and other non-English words in lower-case italics throughout the text (not merely at the first mention) in order to draw attention to the specialized vocabulary of *el costumbre* religion. The name of the most sacred Totiotzin, however, we capitalize and set in regular roman font because of its universal nature encompassing everything in the cosmos. We also capitalize the names of specific spirit entities that Nahua ritual specialists and storytellers temporarily extract from the reality of Totiotzin and incorporate into ritual chanting and traditional stories—the body of Nahua Oral Tradition. Our practice both reflects and respects the deference accorded them by Indigenous speakers. Because Nahua spirit entities are closely associated with what Euro-Americans call processes of nature, in our discussions of them we put their names in italics, not capitalized, in order to underscore that they are aspects of a much larger, singular reality. Any departure from these rules (e.g., occasional orthographic changes in the Nahuatl transcription and English translation of chants) we explain in notes. In sum, the names of Nahua spirit entities and Nahuatl terms may be written in various ways, depending on the context.

Aztec, and Maya. We focus on the performance of pilgrimage because it not only provides a lens by which to see Nahua religion and world view in a new light but also illustrates incisively the flexibility and persistence of Indigenous beliefs and ritual practices in the face of a half millennium of domination by Hispanic and other European and North American colonizers. We have had the privilege of participating with our Nahua hosts and friends in five arduous pilgrimages, spanning two decades, to the peaks of venerated mountains. In the following chapters we describe these remarkable journeys and present a detailed analysis of the associated rituals. In our effort to understand and convey something of the remarkable power of these proceedings, we have assembled an extensive photographic record of people's activities; we provide further context for the events by presenting a sample of ritual chanting and five core myths within the Nahua Oral Tradition, along with illustrations that record the iconography of a portion of the vast number of sacred paper figures that form the heart, body, and soul of Nahua religion. At the conclusion of the work we discuss a core feature of religious pilgrimage—namely, the way that completion of the journey enables pilgrims to redefine their place in the social group—that has surprisingly little to do with its actual meaning. Beyond our aim to document these Nahua sacred journeys, we hope to contribute a deeper awareness of the place of pilgrimage in cultures around the world. Summing it all up, we lay out some of the principles that underlie Mesoamerican iconography and cosmivision.

In the pages that follow, we make the case that Nahua religion is pantheistic and thus fundamentally different from theistic belief systems exemplified by Christianity, Islam, or Judaism. In theism, there is a deity who creates all living beings and all things, rules the cosmos, and intervenes in human affairs. For pantheists, however, the creator and the creation are one and the same: the cosmos itself is the sacred entity. Nahua pantheists have a monistic philosophy based on the belief that there is a single, seamless totality that is in itself indivisible but that has multiple and diverse manifestations, or aspects. People approach and address these diverse spirit entities during ritual offerings, engaging them through a complex system of social exchange, or reciprocity. Like the aforementioned world religions, Nahua religion is a form of monotheism and not polytheism, but its conception of divine oneness or sacredness is based on entirely different principles. Because they exemplify ontological monism, which asserts that there is only one kind of substance

or reality, the Nahua approach the artistic portrayal of sacred entities in a profoundly different way from the conventional Western understanding. While most Euro-Americans are dualists in that they assume a fundamental divide between signifier and signified, we will show for the Nahua that the signifier and the signified are indeed one and the same. We write that the paper images cut by practitioners (sometimes in the tens of thousands for a single ritual) are pictographs embodying within themselves aspects of the divine totality that are part of the strategy by which people gain the attention and cooperation of essential spirit entities. We show that the design of the images reveals core principles of Nahua religion and philosophy. Finally, we explain how this case study of the Nahua sacred journeys corrects and extends social-scientific theories formulated to explain the phenomenon of religious pilgrimage.

Pilgrimage takes people away from the security of home and community to a distant place known to have the power to transform or renew. Pilgrims must complete the sacred journey by returning to their place of origin. This type of journey has a remarkable grip on humanity as a whole. We have records of peregrinations dating from the earliest writings on earth, and archaeologists have shown that pilgrimages were a cultural feature of people who lived throughout prehistory. Pilgrimage is found in virtually every culture in the world at all levels of social complexity.<sup>4</sup> A *New York Times* op-ed piece reports on a UN study revealing that one out of every three travelers worldwide during a given year—an astonishing 330 million people—is on a pilgrimage.<sup>5</sup> In Mexico alone, 20 million people visit the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe at Tepeyac during a year's time. In Europe there are at least 6,380 Catholic shrines that attract between 70 million and 100 million people each year.<sup>6</sup> Even Protestants, who generally disavow pilgrimage because they regard it as a Catholic practice, are gradually developing their own traditions of sacred journeys.<sup>7</sup> Pilgrimage across the globe is increasing in popularity, even as a recent thirty-nine-country survey found a significant decline in the number of people who define themselves as religious.<sup>8</sup> In fact, pilgrimage exists in a great variety of forms, some of which merge with tourism. Although the Nahua sacred journeys described here are religious in nature, pilgrimages are not necessarily organized around standard religious beliefs. In Culiacán, Mexico, for example, drug traffickers make pilgrimages to the shrine of Jesús Malverde, a bandit who was hanged in 1909. The pilgrims wear Malverde scapulars and ask him for bountiful harvests of marijuana and coca, and to bless



their drug shipments destined for the US.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, pilgrimage transcends any specific set of beliefs or practices.

During the week of June 1–5, 1998, and again during the five-day period of June 13–17, 2001, we were invited to participate in two major religious pilgrimages organized by ritual specialists in a small Nahuatl village in the *municipio* of Ixhuatlán de Madero, northern Veracruz, Mexico. This area is centered on the Gulf Coast foothills of the Sierra Madre Oriental, to the northeast of Mexico City, which forms a core part of the larger Huasteca region (see figure 1.1, below, and discussion in the next section). On both pilgrimages we were accompanied by our son, Michael Sandstrom, who helped us in the work to document these mobile, highly complex sacred events. Our point of departure was the pseudonymous village that we call Amatlán in order to protect the privacy of the inhabitants—a place where we have conducted ethnographic research since 1970.

Our destination for both journeys was the peak of a remarkable sacred mountain called Postectli (sometimes Postectitla, spelled Poztectli or Poztectitlan in Nahuatl), located some 20 miles by trail from Amatlán in the neighboring *municipio* of Chicontepec, Veracruz. The basalt rock mountain is an ancient volcanic core that juts vertically out of the surrounding plain to an elevation of 745 meters (2,444 feet) above sea level (see photos 1.1–1.3).<sup>10</sup> Some Nahuatl use political offices to name and rank many of the important mountains in their sacred geography (as we discuss in chapter 2), calling Postectli “the governor” to indicate its prominence among the numerous peaks of the Chicontepec region. Chicontepec itself is the local pronunciation of a Nahuatl word meaning “seven hills.” As we recount below, Postectli and its companion hills were formed during a series of cataclysmic events recorded in Nahuatl myth.<sup>11</sup> Postectli means “something broken” in Nahuatl, derived from the verb *poztequi*, “to



*Left to Right*

**Photo 1.1.** A distant view of the sacred mountain Postectli (Postectitla) on a misty morning. At the base of this volcanic remnant is the Nahuatl town of Ichcacuatitla, Chicontepec, Veracruz. The top of the mountain is a popular destination for pilgrimages for the Nahuatl and other Indigenous peoples of the region.

**Photo 1.2.** Postectli is one of the most sacred mountains for Nahuatl and other Indigenous groups of the southern Huasteca. The Nahuatl town of Ichcacuatitla is just barely visible at the foot of the mountain.

**Photo 1.3.** View of Postectli from the village of Amatlán, Ixhuatlán de Madero, Veracruz. To the right are newly planted orange orchards. Some milpas have been converted to cattle pastures in this 2007 photograph.

split, to break lengthwise.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, from certain angles Broken Mountain looks like its top has been broken off abruptly. Just how this gigantic rock came to be fractured is integral to Nahuatl ideas about the origins of maize and explanations for the beginning of the current age and the very possibility of human existence. Undertaking arduous pilgrimages to this spectacular place, where pilgrims can both absorb sacred power and interact with the divine, represents the most profound expression of Nahuatl

respect and devotion. As we will demonstrate, Postectli lies at the heart of Nahua religious belief, myth, and ritual.

In 2007 we joined our Nahua and Otomí friends in undertaking three additional pilgrimages to lesser sacred hills in the region. On March 9–10 we trekked to Palaxtepetl (a name that can be translated as Male Turkey Mountain), many miles away from Amatlán but within sight of the village. Shortly after that pilgrimage, we traveled on March 15–17 to the range of hills called by their Spanish appellation Tres Pozitos (Three Little Wells). And on April 14–16 we visited Xomulco, another sacred hill whose name refers to a rock formation that resembles the hollowed-out gourd used to serve warm tortillas. None of these prominences is as imposing or as important in Nahua religion and myth as Postectli, but local people associate every one of them with the forces of rain and crop fertility.<sup>13</sup> Analysis of our field notes and digital photographs recording the chronology of events associated with these smaller-scale pilgrimages to Palaxtepetl, Tres Pozitos, and Xomulco sacred mountains confirm that they were structurally very similar to events recorded for the journeys to Postectli.<sup>14</sup> Figure 1.1 situates the four sacred mountains that are the focus of this book within the panoramic view of the Amatlán cognized environment.

In our description, we propose to combine the two journeys to Postectli to create a template for Nahua pilgrimage. We include additional ethnographic information from the 2007 pilgrimages to supplement the description. Although the organizers intended for the proceedings to unfold in essentially similar ways, Nahua ritual observances can vary in important details. A specific episode may sometimes be emphasized in a given ritual, but in subsequent performances of the same ritual it barely makes an appearance or is omitted altogether. By incorporating information from all five pilgrimages, we intend to provide as complete an account as possible of this fascinating aspect of Nahua religion and culture.

Our personal reason for participating in these religious events was first and foremost to join our companions as they journeyed to the most meaningful places in their sacred landscape. These consecrated locations are where spirit entities live, miraculous events unfold, and the divine cosmos reveals itself to those open to the experience. As the holy of holies, the places have profound significance for the Indigenous people of the region. We had heard about pilgrimages during our years of residence in Amatlán, but before 1998 we had never been invited to join in. As outsiders, we felt honored to be included in these events, and we came away with a whole new level

of respect for the sophistication and universal appeal of Nahua beliefs and practices. As ethnographers the invitation allowed us to provide a detailed, firsthand account of contemporary Indigenous pilgrimages in a region of Mexico that has been neglected until recent years. Our primary goal is to explore what these sacred journeys reveal about the more esoteric aspects of Huastecan Nahua ritual practice in particular and, perhaps by extension, Mesoamerican religion as a whole. For us, the journeys to the different sacred mountains constituted personal pilgrimages, the culmination of decades of anthropological research among the Nahua, and the ultimate demonstration of our hosts' generosity and willingness to share—an openness that has characterized our experience among them from the beginning.

We were greatly aided in this project by our Nahua colleagues, many of whom took an active interest in our work and were eager to help us. Local religious leaders and many lay participants, while sometimes not entirely clear about what we were trying to do, facilitated in documenting these sacred journeys. We owe a special debt of gratitude to the most powerful ritual specialist in Amatlán and the lead organizer of all five of the pilgrimages, Encarnación Téllez Hernández. Known widely by the nickname Cirilo, this village leader worried about the loss of Nahua culture in the face of outside influences. Like many communities in Mexico, as throughout the world, Amatlán is undergoing rapid, disorienting change as national and international economic and political forces penetrate the most remote parts of the country. During this period of rising turmoil and uncertainty, Cirilo witnessed his neighbors beginning to neglect the traditional rituals. Along with many older people, he expressed to us the fear that the upcoming generations would lose their way and soon become unaware of their own heritage. Everyone who participated in the pilgrimages could observe that few young people were in attendance.

Cirilo's way of thinking about these changes was to assert that things were better in the past and that people from that time lived longer, richer, and healthier lives.<sup>15</sup> From his perspective, the earth was getting exhausted from the abuse heaped on it by people who did not demonstrate proper respect. The poor condition of many human beings today is a result of the failure to understand what they owe to the earth in compensation for all the benefits it yields. Cirilo wanted people in the future to know about his work and to appreciate the efforts of his colleagues to achieve a balance between the human community and *cem-anahuac tlaltentli* ("everything in the world"), meaning the

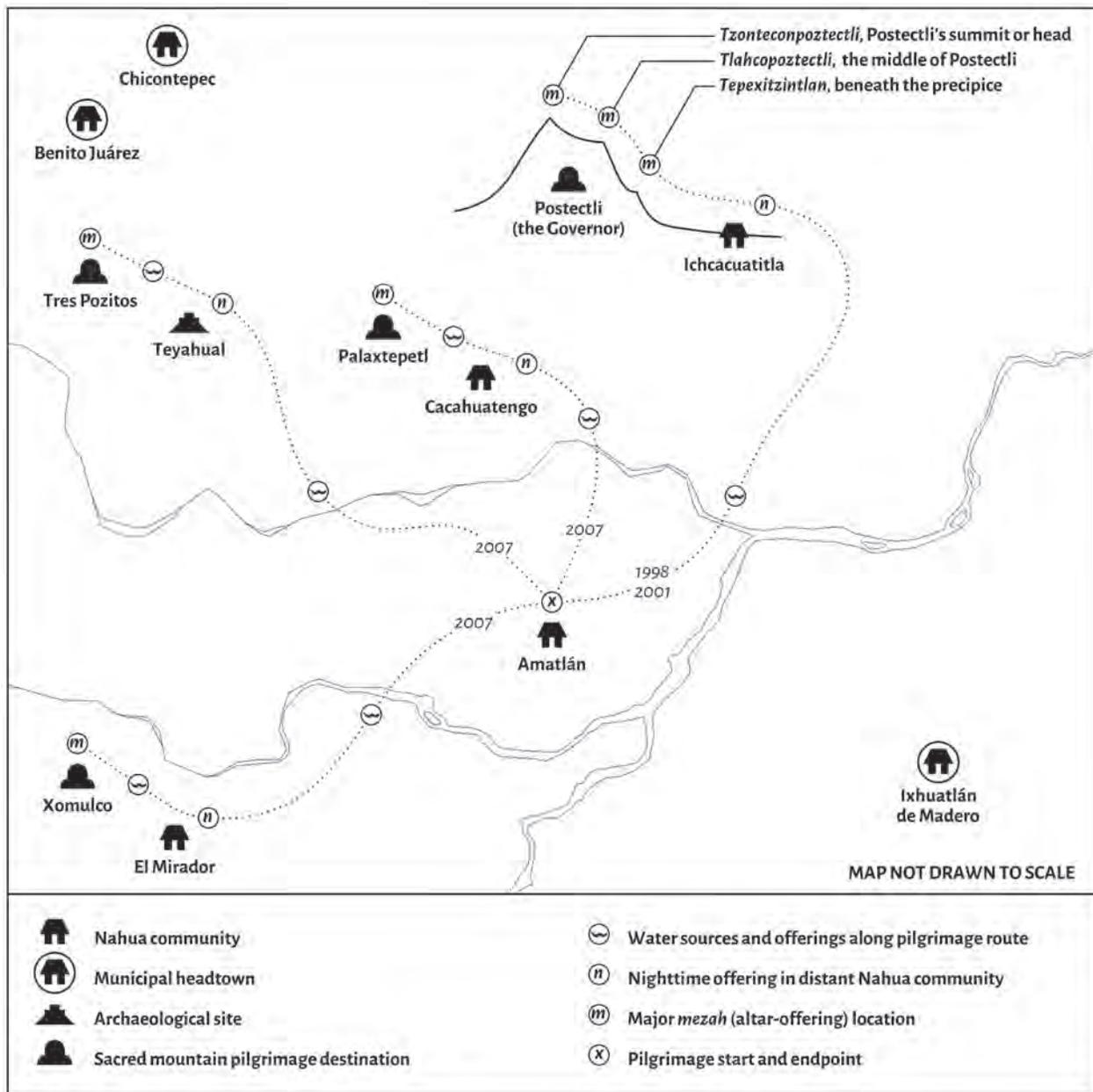


Figure 1.1. Schematic map of pilgrimage destinations in the sacred landscape. Map drawn by Michael A. Sandstrom.

forces of the sacred cosmos. As he declared, “I want people to see how beautiful our religion is.”

At the time of our first trek to Postectli in 1998, Cirilo was a man in his early sixties. He had devoted his life to being a *tlamatiquetl* or “person of knowledge” in order to cure sickness and serve his community. He combined tremendous charisma with an excellent sense of humor, and he welcomed us into his household on many occasions, taking it upon himself to teach us about his religion. We were invited to scores of rituals that he organized or was

party to, and he allowed us to ask questions and take all the photographs that we wanted. In typical Nahua fashion, his answers to our questions were spare and often cryptic: one learned by participating in rituals, not by talking about them. In addition, he generously provided us with ritual paper cuttings for us to take back to the US so we could demonstrate to North Americans how profound and sensible Nahua religion is. Cirilo was one of the most remarkable individuals we have ever met. He was a man who not only worked for his village but also exhibited

a level of openness and generosity rarely seen anywhere. His ritual offerings were masterpieces of beauty and coordination. When he constructed an altar, it was breathtaking, and his heartfelt chants caused people to pause and listen to the poetic words. Above and beyond these exemplary traits he was also the finest paper cutter in the whole region, replete as it is with talented paper cutters. The cut-paper figures he created to embody the spirit universe are works of art that exhibit unparalleled mastery. Readers will recognize Cirilo in many of the photographs that record the pilgrimages as well as in images that illustrate our earlier publications.

In 1998 we were delighted to learn that the Otomí master ritual specialist—Evaristo de la Cruz, to whom Cirilo was apprenticed—had accepted, along with his daughter Eugenia San Agustín Hernández, Cirilo's invitation to join the pilgrimage to Postectli. We were recruited to chauffeur them in our four-wheel-drive vehicle from their village of Cruz Blanca, several hours away. Evaristo was aged and quite infirm at the time, no longer able to walk the distance to Amatlán. His daughter was also an accomplished ritual specialist, and both of them were eager to join in the activities in Amatlán. All throughout the preparations and during the first major ritual offering Evaristo was seated prominently in the middle of the shrine, cutting thousands of paper figures and directing the people around him. He would sometimes abruptly cry out in Spanish, "We need two more cuttings of—" and name a particular spirit entity. It is a remarkable fact that he cut the figures and helped to coordinate the ritual even though he was completely blind; sadly, the Otomí master died about a year after the 1998 pilgrimage.<sup>16</sup>

In conversations with Cirilo and other villagers, we became aware that followers of the older religious traditions in Amatlán are facing a crisis. The form of their religion is largely Indigenous with an admixture of Spanish Catholicism, but these elements of European origin have been thoroughly fitted into the Nahua world view and blended with autochthonous ideas to form a local expression of Catholicism that is heavily weighted in favor of Native American beliefs and practices. As it exists today, the local religion is the result of forces unleashed since the early days of Spanish colonialism. Clearly, however, the twenty-first-century world has altered people's religious identity dramatically. In response to the rapid and dizzying changes that threaten to overtake them, nearly half of the families living in Amatlán had converted by the end of the millennium to one or another denomination of fundamentalist Protestantism. Unfortunately, these new

religions are intolerant of the local Catholic practices, setting the stage for intracommunity conflict.<sup>17</sup>

Dismissive Protestants are not the only problem, however, as the older traditions are further threatened by reevangelization efforts within official Catholicism. This movement, created by church leaders to counteract the Protestants' successes in Mexico, has sought to "purify" local religion by eliminating all non-Catholic (i.e., Indigenous) elements from people's beliefs and ritual practices. Followers of the Native American traditions call these reformed Catholics *aleluyas* ("alleluias"), presumably mimicking their singing and preaching styles. In a revealing exchange, a visiting Catholic priest accosted a friend of ours from a neighboring Nahua village and chastised him, proclaiming, "Your rituals are from the Devil." Our friend replied, "You have rituals for God, and we have them for the Earth." The combined threats from Protestants and Catholic evangelists had the people we know ever more eager to document their pilgrimage practices before they are overwhelmed by these repressive forces. Cirilo saw in us an opportunity to have the rituals "written down" (in his words) for future generations, and it was largely this anxiety coupled with his generous nature that led him to invite us to join in these extraordinary religious events and record them in such detail.

There are also more benign reasons why our presence as coyotes was tolerated during the pilgrimages by the more conservative elders of the village. Because of our extended periods of residence in the community, we have known many of the participants since they were children. We are also linked to many individuals through ties of ritual kinship, and the people from Amatlán knew from experience that we would cause them no harm. Pilgrimage participants came from multiple communities, and based on the gestures of surprise when they first spotted us, some seemed genuinely puzzled by our presence. The ritual specialists from Amatlán explained who we were, and aside from a single incident that we relate in chapter 3, no further mention was made about our participation in any of the events. As a final note regarding our impact on events, because pilgrimages are not only expensive and time-consuming and the numbers of motivated participants in a given locale are diminishing, our contribution of labor and money was clearly appreciated by the organizers. We want to emphasize how much of ethnographic work is truly a collaborative local effort. In turn, we feel it is our obligation to report accurately and illustrate completely what we witnessed. As part of our obligation and to show our appreciation to participants, we have made all



Figure 1.2. Map of Mexico showing the Huasteca Veracruzana region. Map drawn by Michael A. Sandstrom.

of our accumulated ethnographic photographs, recordings, and published works available to the people we know in Amatlán and surrounding villages. We are committed to fostering an accessible, open approach to anthropological inquiry and data preservation that serves not only the community but especially students of Nahuatl culture.

#### PILGRIMAGE IN THE HUASTECA REGION

The village of Amatlán and the four sacred mountains we climbed during the pilgrimages lie in the remote southern

portion of the vast Huasteca region (figure 1.2). The exact boundaries of this cultural-geographic area are disputed by scholars and local inhabitants alike, but there is general agreement that it is composed of portions of six Mexican states: Veracruz, San Luis Potosí, Tamaulipas, Hidalgo, Querétaro, and Puebla.<sup>18</sup> The Huasteca derives its name from a group of people who spoke a Maya language and occupied much of the region in the sixteenth century—the people called “Cuextec” by the Aztecs, a term based on their legendary leader Cuextecatli.<sup>19</sup> Members of this Huastec Maya group who call themselves

Teenek are today largely confined to the northern zone of the Huasteca.<sup>20</sup> The Huasteca has earned a reputation throughout Mexico for being a rugged place of vast cattle ranches replete with armed cowboys. It is also home to a large Indigenous population, estimated to be 50 percent of the 2.5 million people inhabiting the region.<sup>21</sup>

Scholars have generally relegated the Huasteca to a marginal position in the development of the great highland and lowland civilizations of Mesoamerica, notably the Toltec, Aztec, and Maya empires. Over the years, however, this view has gradually changed, and the Huasteca is increasingly regarded as an important region that has contributed much to cultural developments in Mesoamerica. The volume edited by Katherine Faust and Kim Richter (Richter and Faust 2015) shows how much “the Huasteca was deeply integrated with the rest of Mesoamerica.”<sup>22</sup> We, too, want to point out that in the years since we first entered Amatlán in 1970, rapid infrastructural changes now visible in many parts of the Huasteca (e.g., paved roads, electrification, installation of water delivery and septic systems, telephone service, and widespread construction using modern materials) make it no longer such an isolated and marginalized region.

The southern Huasteca is dotted with sacred landforms that are the destinations of pilgrimages organized by people living in the innumerable small villages where Indigenous customs persist.<sup>23</sup> As a premier pilgrimage destination, Postectli is an unusual and conspicuous geological monolith that shares its prominence of place in the religions of neighboring Tepehua (Hamasipiní) and Otomí people in addition to the Nahuatl.<sup>24</sup> Groups journeying to Postectli often include people from different ethnic groups mixed together, even though they speak unrelated languages; the sacredness of this very special place is such that it overrides such barriers.<sup>25</sup> The site qualifies as a “supernatural resource” for people of the region, although as we will argue, Nahuatl themselves do not acknowledge this natural-supernatural dualism.<sup>26</sup> At the peak of Postectli is an enormous concrete cross erected by the Catholic Church to symbolize in a not-so-subtle way the conquest of Christianity over the Native American religion. However, as we explain further, many Nahuatl have reinterpreted the cross to be a manifestation of *tonatiuh*, the sacred sun that animates the cosmos by means of its life-giving light and heat.<sup>27</sup> Nahuatl people of this region have borrowed freely from Spanish Catholicism, but they have done so largely on their own terms. When we first became acquainted with the southern Huasteca, we assumed that centuries of oppression, disease, and

missionary pressure had destroyed all but scattered fragments of the old culture. Instead, the people of Amatlán introduced us to a vibrant world that we could not have imagined existed.

Little is known of the history of pilgrimage in the Huasteca region. Jerome Offner (2012) has noted references to pre-Hispanic pilgrimages made by members of Totonac communities to sacred sites in the highlands near Xicotepec de Juárez, Puebla, just to the south of where the sacred mountain Postectli is situated. These peregrinations may be related to current Nahuatl practices, but additional ethnohistorical research in this region is needed for confirmation. In the *Relaciones geográficas*, written in the 1580s (in the section titled “Relación de Uexutla,” or Huejutla, Hidalgo, a place not far from Chicotepec, Veracruz), Francisco del Paso y Troncoso mentions a probable pilgrimage involving human sacrifice:

. . . and when they lacked rain, they went to a hill and sacrificed a boy by cutting his throat and later threw his body into a hole they had dug, covering it with a stone. And they beseeched their idol to favor them by providing water and any other necessity they may have had. And the one who cut the head of the boy had fasted for a day before, without eating a bite. . . .<sup>28</sup>

The statement describes a trek that could be historically related to the ones we observed in Amatlán, although the idea of sacrificing a person in this way is abhorrent by today’s standards.

The topics of human sacrifice and cannibalism have come to dominate many people’s understanding of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican religious traditions, and we would never attempt to rationalize such behavior. However, because it is the responsibility of anthropologists to explain such phenomena rather than issue facile condemnations, we believe it helps to put such practices in context. Despite attempts by well-meaning scholars to downplay human sacrifice, it must be stated that people (including children) were ritually killed by the Aztecs and other Mesoamericans. Such grievous acts are recorded throughout the world, in fact. Cannibalism may also have been customary, although evidence is sketchy and some documents show that the Aztecs themselves found the practice “shocking, even abhorrent.”<sup>29</sup> Because most information on human sacrifice in Mesoamerica was recorded by the conquering Spaniards, we cannot be certain of its scale. Reports by some chroniclers clearly exaggerate the numbers of victims, but the preponderance of sacrifices probably grew with the expansion of the Aztec imperial

state.<sup>30</sup> It must also be remembered that around the time of the conquest, large numbers of people were executed throughout Europe for religious reasons, including accusations of witchcraft and false conversion to Christianity, crimes adjudicated by the Spanish Inquisition. With their superior weaponry, Spanish and Portuguese conquerors of the time perpetrated the widespread slaughter of Native men, women, and children across Africa and the Indian subcontinent.<sup>31</sup> We mention these issues because today's audiences may well be put off by the Nahua practice of killing chickens or turkeys and sprinkling blood on paper cuttings laid on altars. We can only say that with rare exceptions, the fowl were killed not merely for their blood but were prepared and consumed as part of the rituals, and their food value was not wasted.

Very few outsiders have witnessed a major peregrination from this region, and fewer have been permitted to observe the entire pilgrimage process from beginning to end. We are unsure if pilgrimages originating from different communities vary in significant ways from the ones from Amatlán. Because people who participate in the sacred journey come together from distant communities and may even speak separate languages, it seems likely that pilgrimage practices throughout the culture area exhibit considerable uniformity. The setup of permanent altars at strategic locations also suggests that the sequence of ritual observances is commonly shared. One of the most detailed descriptions of a pilgrimage to the top of Postectli was recorded by Nahua anthropologist Rafael Martínez de la Cruz for a *licenciatura* thesis.<sup>32</sup> His descriptions match closely our own, and we note in our account his firsthand observations of many similar ritual offerings. Arturo Gómez Martínez, another Nahua anthropologist from the municipality of Chicontepepec, Veracruz, accompanied us on both pilgrimages to Postectli, and he was very helpful in expanding our understanding of the events. He and anthropologist Anuschka van 't Hooft participated in another climb to the sacred summit in 2012 and published a brief description of the event that, with a few minor differences, closely matches ours.<sup>33</sup>

#### THE NAHUA PEOPLE

Few who live in the US have heard of the Nahua, and fewer still are able to link them to the great civilizations of Mesoamerica. There are, however, useful summaries available for those interested in discovering more about this important Native American group.<sup>34</sup> The Nahuatl language spoken in Amatlán is the southernmost extension

of the Uto-Aztecan family of languages centered in the US Southwest, where Nahuatl-related languages include Ute, Paiute, Hopi, Comanche, and Shoshone; in modern Mexico they include Huichol, Mayo, Opata-Eudeve, Tarahumara, Cora, and Tepehuan.<sup>35</sup> As part of the long-standing discrimination against Indigenous people throughout Latin America, Spanish speakers often refer to autochthonous languages as *dialectos* ("dialects"), thereby implicitly denying them the status of languages in their own right.

The Nahuatl-speaking Aztecs of the early sixteenth century who lived in the capital city of Tenochtitlan called themselves (and were referred to by others as) Mexica; spelled *mēxihcah* and pronounced me-SHEE-ka,<sup>36</sup> which is the term from which Mexico gets its name. Contemporary Nahuatl speakers recognize the appellation but generally do not use it as an ethnonym. Instead, many Nahua people self-identify as Mexicano and call their language "Mexicano." Pluralized as in Spanish and pronounced me-hee-KA-no, Mexicano today connotes a citizen of Mexico and thus holds for some Nahuas a double meaning: a citizen of the modern nation and a proud descendant of the Aztecs (or, by extension, the other civilizations of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica), even though they may not be direct descendants of the Aztecs themselves.<sup>37</sup> The name "Nahua" designates a speaker of the Nahuatl language; however, it is a term that people recognize but rarely use to identify themselves. The Nahua who live in Amatlán also have a general designation for themselves and, collectively, for all other Native American groups: *macehualmeh* in Nahuatl, *campesinos* in Spanish, meaning "countrymen" or "farmers." The definition of *mācēhualli* (in the singular) today encompasses "human being, indigenous person."<sup>38</sup> In the Nahuatl spoken by the Aztecs, *macehualli* had other, more restrictive meanings, including "subject, commoner" as well as "[I]ndigenous person, speaker of Nahuatl."<sup>39</sup>

Most Nahua in Mexico today live in what was the periphery of the Aztec empire. The largest concentrations of Nahua are in the Mexican central highland region, Sierra Norte de Puebla, and the Gulf Coast, but Nahua settlements range from southern Mexico through Central America. The group extends into Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, where they are known as Pipil (a Nahuatl term meaning "children" or "nobles"), and into Nicaragua, where speakers of Nahuatl are called Nicaraos after a sixteenth-century leader who also gave his name to the modern country.<sup>40</sup> The Gulf Coast of Mexico is home to the largest single concentration of speakers of the Nahuatl

language today. Although the history of the Nahua people of this region is little understood, some scholars conclude that Nahuas of the Huasteca are remnants of a fifteenth-century Aztec invasion.<sup>41</sup> Based on her study of Nahuatl variations, linguist Una Canger concurs that there were two waves of speakers of the language that entered central Mexico and then moved outward from there. The first were the Toltec, followed centuries later by the Mexica. She writes that “the ancestors of today’s speakers of the dialects of the Huasteca . . . represent the first group of Nahuatl speakers—including the Toltecs—in central Mexico and further south.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, based on linguistic affiliation, ancestors of the people living in Amatlán may have preceded the Aztec incursion.<sup>43</sup>

It is very difficult to evaluate population figures reported for the Nahua and other ethnic groups in Mexico today. Language is not a completely accurate marker of Indigenous status or identity, but it gives a general idea of the number of people who identify as Nahua. The latest Mexican census count of 1,651,958 Nahuatl speakers three years and older confirms that it remains the most widely spoken Indigenous language in Mexico (INEGI 2020). Based on available information, we can safely conclude that there are between upwards of 2 million speakers of the language in Mexico and Central America.<sup>44</sup> Along with members of other Native Americans groups in the greater culture area, Nahuas join in the global movement of migrants searching for employment opportunities. Many Nahua men and women today work in the US on construction crews and farms, in retail or restaurants, and in other occupations. It is likely that those of us going about our own daily round may have encountered someone who speaks Nahuatl.

#### THE VILLAGE OF AMATLÁN

Amatlán is located in a lush, humid, tropical-forest environment. Nahua settlements in the Huasteca region range from small hamlets scattered across the countryside to communities organized into a grid, reflecting the urban model.<sup>45</sup> In 1970 the community had a population of around 600 people living in thatch-roofed houses made of poles lashed by vines to a wooden frame. Floors were of packed earth, and building materials were almost entirely gathered from the surrounding forest. Houses were widely distributed, hidden in the dense vegetation, and the households were loosely organized as nonresidential, patrilocal extended families.<sup>46</sup> Well into the late twentieth century most adult men dressed in homemade,

loose-fitting white cotton shirts and pants, tire-tread sandals, and a straw hat and carried a machete in a leather case wherever they went. Women arrayed themselves with earrings and multiple necklaces, beautifully hand-embroidered blouses, and long skirts decorated with horizontal bands. They went barefoot and wore their hair in long braids interwoven with colorful ribbons. Houses were sparsely furnished, and virtually all of the tools and implements in daily use were made locally, with the exception of cloth (formerly woven by the women) and the steel machetes essential to the men’s work.

The villagers produced food through slash-and-burn cultivation, which entailed clearing the trees and dense brush by hand using these razor-sharp machetes. Each family raised patio animals such as chickens and turkeys, fished in local streams, and gathered wild products from the forest. Major crops included maize, beans, squash, camotes, tomatoes, amaranth, chili peppers, and fruits of all types. It was maize, however, that was considered to be the most important crop—a crop customarily eaten in the form of tortillas cooked on a clay griddle or *comalli*—and as we will see, maize continues to play a central role in Nahua myths and rituals. Maize remains the staple in the diet, and people feel that it links human beings to larger sacred forces in the cosmos and yields benefits beyond its nutritional value. In his chants Cirilo sometimes could be heard to utter the phrase *Dios icuatzincahuan*, “sprouts of God,” to describe humans.<sup>47</sup> Speaking in Spanish, Cirilo underscored the supremacy of maize and its role in Nahua culture:

If not for [maize] we are not going to eat, we are not going to talk, and we are not going to drink a cup of coffee. This one always goes ahead. We have strength because we are eating [maize]. That is how this *antigua* is, this ancient one. She also talks about how we who believe should go on living: “If they do not believe me, they know my children. If they do not know me, I am going to teach them.” That’s what she says. She says if they do not believe in her, then she will teach them.<sup>48</sup>

The importance of maize for Amatlán residents is further reinforced by the explication offered by the novice ritual practitioner Raymundo, who also spoke in Spanish:

Well, yes, we live because of this maize. If there were no maize we would not eat, we wouldn’t be able to walk, we wouldn’t be able to speak. We couldn’t go anywhere if we didn’t eat. That is why maize is our blood. Everyone—it is the blood of everyone—because



**Photo 1.4.** View from the *xochicalli* (“flower house”) shrine on the first morning of preparations for the pilgrimage to Postectli in June 1998. The maize harvest is piled beneath new electrical lines serving the village of Amatlán, while a woman walks between her traditional thatched-roof house and a new house made of concrete block that eventually will replace the older structure.

even animals, some of them also eat maize. That’s why it’s the blood of the whole world, because without maize not even the rich would eat. But because there is maize, that’s why the rich eat. And the rich don’t believe anything because they already have money. We hold *el costumbre* rituals because we are poor. We have to buy things. If right now, for example, it does not rain, there would not be much maize. We would not have it to sell nor have it to eat. When it rains there is maize, and there is work. Many people do not have money now. Why? Because it has not rained—it has not rained, so they do not work. And when it rains they work, and there is money. They have to eat, they have to buy things. Some do respect *el costumbre* for this reason, yes, because in truth, yes, it really is true—maize lives and it feeds us every day. If there were no water, if there were no maize, what would we live on? For this reason it is said, maize is our blood and everything.<sup>49</sup>

Amatlán is an ejido, meaning that it is authorized and internally organized according to the laws and policies implemented under agrarian reforms following the Mexican Revolution of 1910–20. The people living in Amatlán exhibit a great deal of pride in their ability to remain free of overlords, including governmental officials and local ranchers. At the same time, villagers have long relied on ranch owners needing to hire them for temporary employment, enabling them to earn money to pay ejido taxes and buy necessities they cannot manufacture themselves. In the 1980s the federal government introduced electricity into the area’s rural

communities and rearranged the houses into a grid pattern to accommodate the lines, with assigned lots and unpaved streets (photo 1.4).

By 2007, there were still about 600 people residing in the village, but many fewer thatch-roofed houses were in evidence. Most dwellings were by then constructed of cinder block made locally, with metal-framed windows, flat roofs, and poured concrete floors. For the first time in history, someone walking through Amatlán would hear televisions blaring, the sound of mechanical corn grinders, and CD players belting out *ranchero* music. A few older men continued to wear white cotton shirts and pants, but most men and boys by that time preferred to dress in more urban styles, which included wearing shoes. Mature women tended to dress as before, but younger women also switched to urban-style clothing and footwear purchased at weekly markets. The primary productive activity in the region today continues to be swidden horticulture, and maize retains its prominent place in the diet and religious sentiments. But many traditional cornfields or milpas have been transformed into orange groves or cattle pastures as a result of government programs to move people away from traditional productive activities toward cash crops. The ideal of community self-sufficiency has been forgotten, and most households depend increasingly on money sent back to the village from younger members of the family who have gone away to work in cities. Amatlán has been reduced from an independent producer of its own food and wealth to a remittance economy dependent on outside sources of income. It is a pattern repeated in many small communities throughout the world.

It is important to have a clear picture of the constraints and limiting factors experienced by the people of Amatlán in order to better understand our analysis of their religious pilgrimages. The Nahuas and other Indigenous peoples are considered to be at the very bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy of the region. We have made the case that Nahua identity can be explained partly as a mechanism protecting against dominant-group violence and creating a separate realm in which people can thrive without directly competing with an overbearing Hispanic elite that attempts to dominate them in every way.<sup>50</sup> To be Native American is to be defined by the power brokers as someone lesser, with “low culture,” and incapable of negotiating the complexities of urban Mexico. Even if a person has a perfect command of Spanish, often his or her life experiences and education level militate against success in such a world.

At the village level, on the other hand, people sometimes feel hampered by strictly local constraints that leave them little room to innovate or experiment with new approaches to solving problems. A small community like Amatlán is home to one’s kin and in-laws—all the people one has grown up with since infancy. Everybody knows everyone else’s business, and there are mechanisms that keep things in a kind of stable equilibrium. Social pressure can be applied in uncounted ways. Anthropologist George Foster (1965, 1967) developed his controversial concept of “the image of limited good” to characterize the sense that people in small communities have of being locked in by multiple constraints. The idea is that people perceive the world as containing a limited store of utility (or good) and others’ success somehow subtracts from their own ability to succeed. This belief, Foster argued, prevents people from striving to get ahead through hard work or cooperation. His formulation has been roundly criticized by anthropologists, however, and even if the concept is faulty as he presented it, Foster detected a sense of stasis in village life that undoubtedly is felt throughout the world.<sup>51</sup>

Life in small communities can lock people into a set of relations, expectations, and obligations that can serve to dampen innovation or at least deviation from the accepted (so-called traditional) way of doing things. The rules of social life tend to be accompanied by negative-feedback mechanisms that channel and limit the range of responses available to people. An excellent example of how these constraints work can be found in the system of ritual kinship, which for the Nahua is a key mechanism of extending one’s social network.<sup>52</sup> It is important to have a wide network of support in situations where survival

is insecure and a formal social safety net is lacking. The system of ritual kinship in both Mestizo and Nahua communities amounts to a fairly intense version of the Euro-American system of godparenthood. Ostensibly, the most important tie of ritual kinship is between the adults—the godparents—and a child; called *compadrazgo* in Spanish, its literal definition is closer to “coparenthood.” Godparents typically buy clothes and presents for godchildren and are expected to take them in as their own should something happen to the parents. Godparenthood is clearly a form of social security for children. What we found in Amatlán, however, is that an equally important link is forged among the four adults. These men and women become ritual kin with a very powerful set of mutual obligations and expectations. Even as outsiders, we were frequently approached by people interested in becoming *compadres* as we began to form ritual kinship ties in the village.<sup>53</sup>

Such bonds of *compadrazgo* vary in intensity and strength, we found, but the complex web of intersecting relationships can create a straitjacket of obligations that become difficult to evade. If ritual kin ask for a loan, whether of money or effort, one is obligated to try to help. If a person also has ties of ritual kinship to members of the borrower’s extended family, he or she has little choice but to comply or risk jeopardizing multiple other relationships. The system works both ways, however, and people must not make unreasonable demands for fear that they will threaten others in the network. On numerous occasions in our years in Amatlán we have been asked for favors, some of which seemed clearly inappropriate, but we felt the strong pull to cooperate so as not to alienate others; such constraints on villagers themselves is much stronger. Innovators can face a daunting obstacle in overcoming the stagnancy created by such an enduring network of relations. For this reason successful entrepreneurs may feel they must leave the local scene to pursue their dreams elsewhere.

We caution the reader against misinterpreting this aspect of community life. The idea of leveling mechanisms, which have been described as systems of negative feedback (especially in rural farming communities, a context that requires a great deal of mutual support), has given rise to a pernicious stereotype that these communities are inherently conservative and immune to change. The failure of development programs around the world is often blamed on people’s so-called “backwardness” or unwillingness to embrace change that clearly would improve their lives. Our experience in Amatlán is

decidedly the opposite, and we do not wish to contribute to that erroneous view. We have documented many attempts on the part of individuals to launch new enterprises and improve the conditions of their lives. Somehow they were able to overcome local restraints and effect changes on a micro level. People have grown new cash crops such as peanuts, coffee, or limes, for instance, to sell at regional markets. We know individuals who have introduced animals such as sheep, goats, ducks, or rabbits to be raised and sold. Some have peddled clothing, sold frozen treats out of new refrigerators, or set up small shops and maize-grinding businesses, and one family in Amatlán opened a federally subsidized general store within the CONASUPO (Compañía Nacional de Subsistencias Populares) program. Other residents experimented with public solar-powered telephone service or developed taxi services with a newly purchased vehicle. We witnessed many examples of the indomitable entrepreneurial spirit among our Nahua friends and acquaintances.

Sadly, few such enterprises succeed in the long run, not because the people are somehow averse to innovation but rather because the system in which they are forced to operate militates against them. Communication systems are ineffective, roads are poorly maintained or nonexistent, and there is no mechanism for people to obtain financial support or credit to back their schemes. Furthermore, people may lack accounting skills or find that there is simply not enough money flowing locally to carry out a new enterprise. In any case, there is no banking system in which to keep accounts, corruption among local officials is widespread, and innovators lack access to regional or state markets. Virtually no one in the financial-services industry is willing to invest in milpa horticulture. In short, the success or failure of enterprise is ultimately determined not by the people who are too conservative or social ties in the local community but rather by the larger system in which the people are forced to operate. With finesse, local constraints can sometimes be skirted, but regional and national obstacles are nearly impossible to overcome.

All of these factors can lead individuals to feel that they are trapped and that any kind of movement within the local social system is difficult if not impossible. For some younger people, the lure of the city has proven irresistible, and they have moved out and on with their lives, restricting interaction with family members to brief return visits during holidays. There are few alternatives for older villagers who might lack facility in Spanish or who would have a more difficult time adjusting to the fast pace of urban life. Going from the familiar scene in Amatlán with its known

positives (not the least of which is the support of extended families) to an isolated existence in a city slum where dangers lurk is hardly an attractive alternative for most people, young or old. The one available choice for many people is to follow deliberately the path of traditions that define their Nahua identity and set them apart from the unforgiving social system ruled by Mestizo elites.

An important dynamic of Nahua religion is that it constitutes a form of resistance to the dominant social class that many refer to locally as *los ricos*, “the rich.” Here is Cirilo’s commentary (spoken in Spanish) on this overbearing group and on the power that the traditional religion brings to villagers:

Where I am, the rich person is just dirtying me. *El rico*, the rich one, gives me nothing. He does not see me. Yes, he does not see whether I might want something to drink, if I also would like to have a soft drink. But the rich person pays me no attention because he is rich. So they only want to drink their soft drink, their beer. And I also want some. That’s why I want to be rid of them. That’s why the cyclone that travels in the sea is raised—I, myself, am the one who raised it. One says that’s the way it goes. The patron saint of hurricanes goes out, as is said, from San Jerónimo [mountain]. Whether we accept what is going to play out in this year of 1998, San Jerónimo’s patron has spoken, and [she] said, “If they are not going to feed me, then three hurricanes are going to pass by in this year.” But we ourselves, that’s what we’re doing [making the offering]—all of us, myself included. Whether they like me in my village of Amatlán or not, I am helping with my own money, my own ritual offering. The others do not want to [cooperate] because they are little fools. They do not know where they are heading. But I am not. Frankly, I am for helping the people. I am for making offerings to the earth. I am for seeing the birth of God. We are going to give God a crown so God can witness us where we are. [God] has the list, the roll of names. We all live there. If we do not die, it is because she [*la antigua de san Jerónimo*] is guarding over us at night and during the day. That is why when you light a candle, you feel contented. We are attesting to those of us who are lighting a candle. Let us light one.<sup>54</sup>

For Cirilo, to participate in pilgrimages and ritual offerings not only balances the relations between human beings and the spirit entities, but it is also a political act that addresses the divide between the rich and the poor, the Hispanic elite and the less powerful villagers.

## PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION

Words have power in every culture in the world. For the Nahua, spoken utterances—*zanilli*, a synonym for Nahua Oral Tradition—are particularly potent tools. Words are for commanding attention, evoking reality, transcending daily experience, addressing the divine, conceptualizing the abstract and remote, or adjusting the precarious balance between humans and the surrounding spirit world. Perhaps because of their philosophy of monism, words are far more than labels or symbolic abstractions; words perform real work in the world, and a person's speech is generally taken very seriously. The measured words of a ritual specialist are particularly forceful and commanding. Throughout this work we present myths, chants, and many concepts taken directly from the Nahuatl. We have done our best to translate terms accurately while retaining some of the poetry, but inevitably much is lost in moving from one language to another. Nahuatl word power is difficult to convey via the printed page and across a considerable cultural barrier. Perhaps the most succinct way to convey to readers how the Nahua view words and speech is to quote the opening lines of a chant in Nahuatl in which Cirilo, standing respectfully before a village spring, addresses *apanchaneh*, the water dweller:

On this day, this word was raised, here where I have gathered the children of God, the sprouts of God, the sacred [flower] sounds come, the chants come, the orations come, the spoken words come. For all of them, everyone around here, I speak these words. Here we have come, all of us.<sup>55</sup>

Cirilo begins his appeal by establishing the power of speech for the Nahua. It is the ritual specialist who raises the word, to whom the prayers and orations come, and who speaks for others. His role as interlocutor is to communicate humanity's needs to powerful spirit entities, to have a dialogue with them, and to obligate them through ritual prestations to respond—that is, to provide answers.

Vocabulary pertinent to our theme of religious pilgrimage is collocated in the section “Nahuatl Glossary and Terminology” at the end of the book. However, we have found translating certain Nahua concepts to be especially difficult. The Nahuatl word *tlaneltoquilli*, for example, only approximates the Euro-American definition of “religion” in signifying “a system of beliefs, faith, devotion, and worship” directed toward powerful spirit entities.<sup>56</sup> Indigenous ethnographers admit that the meaning of *tlaneltoquilli* “is distant from its Western counterpart” and

that “Nahua conceptualize it as an ancestral belief, linked to both tangible and intangible objects.”<sup>57</sup> When speaking Spanish, the Huastecan Nahua call their religious practices *costumbres* or *el costumbre*, meaning “customs” or “the custom.” In conventional Spanish, the word *costumbre* would normally take the article *la*, but in changing it to *el* the Indigenous people of the region have claimed the word as their own with its own special meaning. The phrase can also refer generally to distinctive nonreligious social customs, that is, Indigenous Nahua practices as opposed to those of Mestizo elites.

The Nahua rely on recognized religious leaders to divine the causes of problems and to organize and conduct rituals, including pilgrimages. As we have mentioned, the Nahuatl term commonly used for this kind of leader or person of knowledge is *tlamatiquetl* (or sometimes *pahchihquetl*, “medicine person”), typically rendered in Spanish as *curandero*, meaning simply “curer” in English. In recognition of their ability to foresee events or determine the causes of disease and misfortune, the ritual specialist is sometimes called *tlachixquetl* in Nahuatl or *adivino* in Spanish (“diviner” in English).<sup>58</sup>

Nahua rituals are essentially elaborate feasts that beckon powerful spirit entities along with human participants to partake of the bountiful offerings on display. Experts like Cirilo must act as organizers, hosts, authorities on matters of the sacred and especially ritual techniques, as well as curers of disease. Such charismatic individuals fulfill a critical role in the community that demands courage, intelligence, empathy, and a desire to help people. At the conclusion of a ritual specialist's training, he or she is taken by the master to the top of a sacred hill where the person's status as a new practitioner is confirmed. Because any one of these Nahuatl appellations fails to describe the full range of their activities, we have chosen to use the unwieldy English phrase “ritual specialist” to refer to these Nahua religious leaders.<sup>59</sup>

We try to avoid using such culturally loaded concepts as “gods,” “deities,” or “spirits,” favoring instead the somewhat awkward “spirit entities” to refer to beings that the Nahuas themselves regard as operating in the everyday world. Nahua ideas about the existence of spirit entities are complex and not fully understood by most outsiders. As we explain more fully, Nahua spirit entities are more like energy centers or nonpersonalized forces associated with what people in the West might think of as processes of nature. Often the spirit entities appear to have individual histories, names, and personalities. They are animated and have agency, they cause things to happen like

making it rain, and they possess emotions and tastes just as a person does. However, as we argue, it is by providing them with these temporary or transitory attributes that ritual specialists can address and engage them in ritual exchanges on behalf of the human community. Outside of appearing as characters in myths or being named as concrete manifestations on ritual occasions, these spirit entities tend to lose their individual identities and return to being a part of the generalized life force of the cosmos. The people often use the Spanish word *dueño* (“owner”) to label such entities; thus, for example, a water spirit would be an “owner of the water.” However, even this construction fails to convey the variety of roles played by these beings. Again, we have settled on the expression “spirit entity” for its greater precision and intelligibility.

In anthropological usage “ritual” as a technical term refers to formal repetitive acts performed in sacred places or at special times with the aim of influencing spiritual beings—the Nahua spirit entities.<sup>60</sup> We use the term “ritual” interchangeably with “rite” or “ceremony” with the understanding that virtually all Nahua rituals involve some kind of offering sequence and, as such, are efforts by people to engage spirit entities in reciprocal exchange. Nahuas of the Huasteca refer to a ritual as *tlamanaliztli* or *tlamaniliztli* (“the spreading out of something” or “something spread out”) and also *xochitlalia* (“to put down flowers”). When speaking Spanish, they simply use the word *ofrenda* (“offering”). Another general term for a ritual offering such as described here is *tlatlacualtiliztli* (also *tlacualtiliztli*), meaning the “act of feeding someone or a spirit entity”; similarly, *tepetlacualtiliztli* is “the act of feeding the hill or mountain.”<sup>61</sup> In chants, the ritual specialists in Amatlán refer to libations sprinkled or splattered on the ground or the altar as *tlatzicuintli*, akin to offering a toast to the spirit entities. In some cases the ritual offering is called *tetlahpallole*, meaning “greeting.”<sup>62</sup> The commitment to sponsor a ritual is *se tlasenkawalistli* in Nahuatl, *una promesa* in Spanish (“promise” or “vow”).<sup>63</sup>

Some form of altar is the central feature in all Nahua rituals. People call the altar *tlaixpamitl* (literally, “something faced”) in Nahuatl. They specify the altar (or any ritual display) and the offering placed upon it using the Spanish term *mesa* (“table”). In the context of the ritual act of dedicating offerings on altars, the *mesa* conception is widespread and its meaning is complex. Apparently, the table as a piece of furniture constructed as a flat surface with four legs—so familiar to Euro-Americans—was novel to the people at the time of the conquest, and it soon took on a number of ritual uses. In his study of the *mesa*

in Indigenous Mesoamerica, John Monaghan concludes that tables became important because of their association with “officialdom, the state, the church, and European food habits and the fact that the power of the *mesa* in ceremony and belief is derived from the role it initially played as a place of mediation between Spanish colonialists and indigenous subjects.”<sup>64</sup> The contemporary *mesa* resembles the Catholic Church altar but represents a continuity with stone altars of the pre-Hispanic era. Its physical shape is a space or surface area described by a quincunx, an arrangement of four points in a square or rectangle with one point in the middle.<sup>65</sup> Most important of all, *mesas* reflect the “longstanding Mesoamerican proposition that the relationship of debt and merit, which are so important in structuring the moral universe, are articulated through self-sacrifice and expressed in acts of consumption.”<sup>66</sup> In sum, the conception of the Mesoamerican *mesa* (or *mezah*, the Huastecan Nahuatl spelling we adopt here to define the altar offering of *el costumbre* practice) is a construct that encompasses both the offerings of precious food and ritual items and the strategy whereby people expend value to keep in balance the tenuous relationship between humans and the powers of the cosmos.<sup>67</sup>

The Nahuatl word for pilgrimage, *nehnemiliztli*, refers to the act of leaving the community, visiting a significant geographic feature or historic location, and returning to the point of origin. By contrast, a procession is termed *tlayahualloli*, which refers to a group of worshipers proceeding from point to point within a community or the nearby environs. Leaving offerings at the local spring is an example of a procession, not a pilgrimage.<sup>68</sup> In *An Analytical Dictionary of Nahuatl*, Frances Karttunen defines the related Classical Nahuatl term *nehnemiliztli* as “the act of walking about, travel” and the related construction *nehnenqui* as “walker, foot traveler, pilgrim” or “one who comes to a fiesta from a distance”; the verb *tlayahualoā* is defined as “to go in a procession around something,” but no source attesting to the noun form is given.<sup>69</sup>

In Euro-American societies religion generally refers to activities or beliefs set apart from the routines of daily life, part of what we would designate “the sacred.” We use the terms “sacred” or “sacralized” throughout the book in keeping with the sense of the equivalent Nahuatl word *malhuilli*, “something protected, hallowed.”<sup>70</sup> Although it can be said that religious thinking or concepts of the sacred influence people in every culture, in the West it seems often compartmentalized, distinct from everyday affairs. By contrast, the Nahua sense of the sacred is more a part of living reality that informs everything that

individuals perceive and do throughout the day. People may make a small offering to the earth when eating or drinking, recall mythic associations as they pass a feature in the sacred landscape, or observe the sky for evidence of rain dwarfs in the form of dark clouds carrying water to the top of Postectli for distribution to the fields. While one can discern Nahua expressions of the sacred most clearly during particular ritual events, from our own observations we maintain that religious experience has a more ubiquitous presence for most Nahua than it has for many individuals in Western cultures.

As we explain more fully in chapter 2, the Nahua are philosophical monists in that they see all of reality, animate and inanimate, as the expression of a single sacred substance or ground of existence. In their view, the cosmos itself is the deity and all of the diverse objects and beings we experience in daily life are seen as manifestations or aspects of that single totality. This fact has led us to interpret ritual behavior and iconography in a way that might seem strange to those rooted in the Euro-American dualistic system of thought. To dualists, there is the unspoken assumption that a gulf exists between a symbol and what it represents, between a signifier and what it signifies. For philosophical monists such distinctions make little sense: the symbol and all that it represents partake of the same fundamental substance as that which is symbolized. In attempting to understand Nahua religion and ritual practice, it is important to overcome the imposition of philosophical conceptions of dualism based on a fundamental distinction between material and spiritual, body and soul, or representation and that which is represented.<sup>71</sup>

As we argue throughout the book, Nahuas have a pantheistic religious system leading them to regard altars and sacred paper cuttings not as representations of some deeper reality but rather as extensions of them—their very embodiment. In such a perception, a properly cut paper figure of the water dweller is not symbolic of the spirit entity or of water generally; rather, it embodies and reveals water and so serves as a window or portal into that singular reality in which water is a salient aspect. We generally avoid the terms “symbolize” or “represent” when discussing the meaning of the paper figures, substituting such words as “embody,” “manifest,” “disclose,” or “reveal” so as not to undermine our analytical efforts. These choices sometimes lead to awkward or repetitive phrasing, but we hope the technical terminology leads a deeper understanding of Nahua culture.

## BECOMING A RITUAL SPECIALIST

Ritual specialists are called to their profession through dreams (*temictli*, singular) or signs, such as a miraculous recovery from serious illness. There is a shared assumption that when individuals are chosen through such means, they must acquiesce and undergo several years of training as an apprentice to a master in order to serve their community. If they refuse such a calling, they are likely to face negative consequences, leaving themselves vulnerable to attack by spirit entities.<sup>72</sup> Among other skills, the novice must learn to cut hundreds of different paper figures, create and memorize long prayers or chants to address the forces of the cosmos, construct complex altars, and possess the organizational skills to coordinate the activities of dozens of helpers. Above all, in Cirilo’s words, “a curer is always thinking, always analyzing.” He or she has to have the talent to create rituals that are beautiful *and* produce results. To perform effective rituals, such individuals must possess powerful personalities that command respect and have the ability to maintain control of sometimes dangerous spirit entities. For larger ritual events, it is the well-organized ritual specialist who reaches out to political authorities to secure proper permissions and who contracts with musicians to perform the sacred guitar and violin music called *xochisones* (“flower sounds”). They are also the ones who make sure that the “flower house” shrine or *xochicalli* is filled with candlelight, the rich scent of copal incense (*copalli* in Nahuatl), and copious offerings (including flowers, of course)—gathering all the requisite items to dedicate to the spirit entities.<sup>73</sup>

As a child, Cirilo was an orphan, “dressed in rags” as he put it. He fell seriously ill, and a curer took him to the arroyo to cleanse him of infecting winds emanating from polluted water. When he dreamed of the water dweller, *apanchaneh*, whom he remembers as having blonde hair with fish coming out of her body, it was a sign of his fate to become a ritual specialist. As a young man, he apprenticed with Evaristo, the powerful Otomí ritual specialist whose reputation is widely known throughout the entire southern Huasteca region.<sup>74</sup> By becoming his acolyte, Cirilo brought together in his work two cultural traditions, and he would sometimes joke, “I am half Otomí.” People from both ethnic groups fully identified with the ritual procedures and eagerly participated in the pilgrimages he organized. His connection with Evaristo was one reason why Cirilo welcomed people from outside his community to the pilgrimages. Local Nahua had no problem with this arrangement, and the Otomí visitors seemed equally satisfied to

participate in a pilgrimage originating in a Nahuatl community. A consequence was that people from the two groups had to communicate in Spanish when speaking to one another, while those who spoke little or no Spanish could only interact with members of their own group.

At first, villagers were reluctant to recognize Cirilo as a ritual specialist, not an uncommon reaction among local denizens to newly minted practitioners of this esoteric profession. People from neighboring communities, however, were quick to call on him to cure their various ailments, and soon they would come to consult with him about future events, to find out how a child in a distant city was faring, or to determine the causes of a recent run of bad luck. As his clientele grew, people from Amatlán, too, began to consult him to settle important concerns. After several years, he began to take charge of village-wide ritual occasions such as *tlacatiliz* (the winter-solstice ritual, now combined with Christmas observances), *yancuic xihuitl* (the new year observance), and various planting and harvesting celebrations. It was just as his reputation was growing in the early 1980s that the Protestant invasion began in earnest and the crisis in Indigenous religious practice turned ominous.<sup>75</sup>

Another ritual specialist from Amatlán, María Dolores Hernández (Cirilo's half sister) also participated in the pilgrimages. She responded to questions posed by anthropologist Arturo Gómez Martínez, both speaking in Nahuatl, and explained how she became a ritual specialist:

MARÍA DOLORES: Well, it seems that I was very sick—I fainted, that's why they cured me, to strengthen me. I grew stronger [as if it were something natural] and they didn't explain anything to me—why should they tell me?—I was just growing up [without guidance or knowledge of my destiny]. Because I wanted to get married, they were going to make *mole* [rich food, in celebration]. But no, I was brought up with *el costumbre* in order to cure others, and that's why my mother began to cure me. My mother cured me so I could take on this work [as healer, a person of knowledge].

It required a lot of turkeys, *jutah!* [she exclaims] to do the curing—I needed many things: two large *chiquihuites*, two carrying baskets filled with *pemoles*, *tintines*, *alfejores* [types of cornmeal sweets]. All kinds of flowers, all sorts of things—they were taking it all. Bananas, chayote, camote, *acaxilotl* [a type of tuber]—we used it all. *Atole*, all the *alfejores*, salted and sweet *chahuacanes* [crispy tortilla treats]—all of it. We made sweet and

salted *bocoles*, *empanadas* and *gorditas* with beans—they did it all, just to take to the hill to cure me.

Because of it, I took on this work. I was fainting, but once they cured me, I no longer fainted. That's why I took on this work. I didn't want to do it, but two of my children died because I was not doing the work. I did not want to work with these prayers, these words [of *el costumbre* tradition], because I was ashamed—I was still a young girl. They cured me when I was only this big [indicating a child's height with her hand]. But because they proceeded to cure me—and I was cured—I felt I had to take it on.

My husband died and I began this work so I could go on making a living—I had nothing, with my husband dead. Well, I took on this work, and in this way I was able to raise my children. Even though I suffered greatly, well, I took on this work [wholeheartedly, despite feeling pressured]. Yes, I was able to buy myself some things because they were paying me for my work. I put babies to bed—I took on the work of laying down babies [a birth ritual that involves cleansing and putting a neonate down to sleep, analogous to laying the warp for weaving]. I began work as a bonesetter for people who had injuries. I received newborns, I cured them, I performed cleansings, I examined them to see their fate—that is what I went about doing. Well, yes, you'll start on the earth, you'll go to the altar, then you'll go to the hill—all of this I have gone about doing.

ARTURO: And how did you cure? How were you able to start to work as a *curandera*, a healer?

MARÍA DOLORES: Well, I dreamed it.

ARTURO: Ah, through dreams?

MARÍA DOLORES: Well, yes, I dreamed that the Virgen María was speaking to me. Jesús Dios told me how I must go about, what I must do. And as it happened, for a whole week I dreamed that a Mestiza woman came to talk to me. [She said to me,] “There, daughter. Wake up.” “Why?” [I replied]. [In my dream, she said,] “Well, a cat is there, wailing.” When I got up, I saw that it was a fox howling [an omen]—it was a howling fox. It went in this direction [pointing with her hands]. Then I realized the howling fox had climbed up and was gone.

So then the Virgen María came to wake me up. Everything that I was seeing, what I was looking at, I was ordered to see. And as I lost consciousness, I saw that I had arrived in heaven. I had arrived at the sixth doorway. It was beautiful—pure gold—and I saw coyol palm adornments arranged in the form of a star. I

passed through [an abundance of] coyol palm flowers, right through the door. Then [with a hand gesture, signaling no], Jesús Dios told me, as did the Virgen María, “We don’t want you here—although you were sent here, we are not going to receive you.”

And I was held here, and the Virgen took hold of me here, and God here [demonstrating how they grabbed her and asserted]: “We will not receive you, daughter.” Jutah! I saw the people just like worms, there they were [gesturing], there from above I saw how the people were. All of them received me with candles. God told them, “Don’t greet her—put out the candles. Your friend, your sister here, she will not stay. She will go because she is with child. She has to go back to see her children.”

And so I returned. I recovered because they helped me look into my future, to see my fate, so then I was strengthened. They cured me, again they cleansed me—yes, I became healthy and strong. If it were doctors alone they could not cure me—a doctor and a *curandero*, a traditional healer, they cured me.

I have spent a lot of money, not a little—I’ve spent a lot. I didn’t have a good house or resources because I cared for my children. I cared for my children, clothed my children, bought them something to eat, some chili, coffee, soap—everything that they lacked. It takes more than a day for children to grow up. It’s been rough—with hardship I’ve gone on living but I’ve had a hard time, a hard life. It was difficult to raise my children, and for this reason I weep. Sometimes I cry because I remember how I have cared for my children, how I have been surviving. And I was a young woman. That’s why I felt obliged to begin the path, and I dreamed—I dreamed about how I should act, how I should go along in life.

In this way I dreamed I could not be both in heaven and on earth. I was watching out to see how many meters further I had to go to come back to earth. And they told me I was not ready to die, that I am not going to leave this world. Well, I returned, I came back—that’s what happened.<sup>76</sup>

The young man from a neighboring community, Raymundo, who was quoted earlier and an apprentice to Cirilo at the time, also joined in the 1998 pilgrimage. During the preparations, he was asked how he embarked on the path to become a ritual specialist. The exchange follows, with Raymundo responding in Spanish to questions posed by anthropologist Hugo García Valencia.

HUGO: And you, who taught you? Dreaming alone? Or only seeing what [other ritual specialists] were doing?

RAYMUNDO: Dreaming and seeing what they do.

HUGO: And you get sick if you don’t want to do it, if you don’t accept?

RAYMUNDO: Yes.

HUGO: You didn’t get sick?

RAYMUNDO: Yes, for me it was nothing else that caused me such pure headaches. I was going to secondary school and I couldn’t study in class, I just couldn’t. I started to get headaches, nothing but daily headaches. And that is how I studied. I wanted to finish secondary school, but in the end they let me know I was done. As I went, I came here with my *compadre* Cirilo. I came to find out what happened to me because I had these daily headaches. He told me take on the work, the work of being a curer. I told him, “No, not me.” But he tells me, “No, you have to do it, you have to cure. Because, because if you don’t, you will continue to suffer from that pain as you get older.” Well, I got cured. And that is why I go along helping in every place they are going to hold the *costumbre*. I help them every place they go. They say that you dream of animals chasing you, the bad air, because I don’t want to do the work. They say that the bad air is going to get all over me, into my body. They say if I don’t take on this work, I could get sicker.

HUGO: And what animals did you dream about?

RAYMUNDO: Well, like cows, sheep, deer. All of those went chasing me. Snakes, all of this. It’s horrible, no?

HUGO: Or nightmares?

RAYMUNDO: Yes, and then [Cirilo] tells me, “If you do not take on this work, you are going to continue dreaming of these things.” “No,” I said, “no.” And then, “Well, okay, yes.” I’ve barely begun to work like this, but it’s been a long time that I’ve followed this *costumbre*, ever since I was young. I have been to San Jerónimo, I went to Laguna—places far away.

HUGO: Laguna is on the other side of the dam?

RAYMUNDO: Yes, [but] I don’t know where it is. It is very far. I don’t know where it is, but it is far. I had already gone as a kid.

HUGO: Where they went to see the sirens?

RAYMUNDO: Yes, over there, there at Laguna. Later, near here, at San Jerónimo.<sup>77</sup>

Through these exchanges we can appreciate how, in order to be able to cure and deal with the spirit entities, a ritual specialist has to have had dreams and survived a serious illness. Additionally, the new practitioner must begin to

develop a clientele to be a legitimate member of the profession. The most revered leaders among these specialists are the *huehuetlacameh* ("elders," singular, *huehuetlacatl*). Gómez Martínez reports that the position of *huehuetlacatl* is open only to males, but we did not find that was necessarily the case in Amatlán, where we observed that women could also achieve high status among this select group.<sup>78</sup> Based on his stature among his followers, we can say that Cirilo was a *huehuetlacatl*, although he would have surely disavowed the label out of modesty.

#### CONDUCTING RESEARCH ON NAHUA PILGRIMAGE

By the time we participated in our first pilgrimage in June 1998, we had accumulated a considerable base of knowledge about Nahua religion and ritual practice from this region. Without that familiarity, it would have been impossible for us to document the many ritual episodes that take place during a pilgrimage, particularly when they occur simultaneously or meld into one another. Despite this advantage, Nahua pilgrimages pose special methodological problems that ethnographers must resolve. No matter how friendly their dealings are with outsiders, Nahua ritual specialists and laymen alike are generally reluctant to provide exegeses of their religious practices. Ethnographers have found reticence a characteristic of interaction with Native American groups throughout the wider culture area.<sup>79</sup> People expected others to learn about the rituals by participating in them, as locals do from childhood, supplemented by occasional comments provided by the ritual specialists. Those with a deeper interest can apprentice themselves to an established master to learn more about the religion.

Another barrier to documenting major Nahua ritual events is that preparations and the ritual observances themselves often take place over many days and nights, allowing little if any opportunity for rest or to write up field notes. We were accustomed to Nahua ritual events lasting for days, but when they stretched into weeks, physical exhaustion became a major obstacle to participant observation. Finally, there was the problem of the extreme physical exertion required to keep up with the pilgrims once they embarked on their journey. Under such conditions, it is a decided challenge to record systematic observations, question a broad sample of participants, draft coherent field notes, or even pause to take photographs.

A number of deliberate strategies helped to mitigate some of these obstacles. First, we went as a team

and established a division of labor. During the first pilgrimage to Postectli, we gained permission of the ritual specialists to invite four Mexican anthropologists and a videographer attached to the Institute of Anthropology of the University of Veracruz in Xalapa to come along and assist in recording the proceedings. As we will discuss, some plans did not work out as envisioned, but we nonetheless managed to videotape about ten hours of the preparations during the 1998 pilgrimage. During the second pilgrimage to Postectli in 2001, two Mexican researchers accompanied us to help with data gathering. On both occasions we were able to spell one another and grab random hours of sleep so as to remain sufficiently alert. It was indeed good fortune to be able to participate twice in major pilgrimages to Postectli and thus ask questions and make observations on the second trek that amplified our comprehension of activities we had witnessed earlier. The three subsequent (and slightly less arduous) pilgrimages to different sacred mountains allowed us to amass new information. We are able to conclude that the variations we observed did not significantly modify the overall structure, purpose, and meaning of the Nahua sacred journey. An example of a difference that struck us as notable occurred on the second trek to Postectli when the organizers hired a small brass band (*banda de viento*) to accompany the pilgrims. Remarkably, the musicians played their instruments all the way to the summit of the sacred mountain. This unexpected development did not seem to interfere with the guitarist and violinist performing the sacred melodies or the construction of altars and dedication of offerings, all of which was consistent with the first pilgrimage.

We photographed or videotaped as much of the proceedings as we could. By making a visual record of the preparations, altars, and the offerings we were saved from having to write down detailed descriptions as events unfolded. To accompany this work we have selected many highly evocative images from the documentary record. One member of our team also brought along an additional video camera during the first trek in 1998, which allowed us to record ritual sequences that might have been lost after the premature departure of our hired videographer. Nevertheless, we were able to preserve only a portion of the audio content of the pilgrimages. Ritual specialists chanted intensively as they dedicated offerings, and it would have been ideal to record everything they were saying as they addressed the spirit entities on the pilgrimage trail. We hit on a solution to the problem of these

missing data almost inadvertently when we later analyzed the videotapes in our possession that recorded lengthy chants and explications delivered mostly in Nahuatl in the Amatlán shrine during preparations for the 1998 pilgrimage. We are fortunate to be able to include portions of these poignant invocations here. Adept practitioners of *el costumbre* religion create their own repertoire of chants, and they do not appear to modify them much for different ritual occasions. Thus, chants to the earth, water, or seeds performed as part of crop-fertility rituals during the year appear to be quite similar to those employed for the pilgrimage.<sup>80</sup>

One serious data-gathering challenge we faced was identifying the array of anthropomorphic figures cut from paper that play key roles in Nahua rituals. Ritual paper cutting was a widespread practice in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, but the Sierra Norte de Puebla and Huasteca regions of Mexico are among the few places where it survives today.<sup>81</sup> It was clear to us that we needed to know which particular spirit entities were being addressed at the various altars in order to make sense of the pilgrimages. The paper figures are the *tonalli* or “heat soul,” sometimes called in Spanish *sombra*, “shadow” or “shade.”<sup>82</sup> The important figures embodied in the medium of paper receive the offerings themselves, or they act as intermediaries and transmit them to other spirit entities. As León García Garagarza writes, these paper figures reveal “the ubiquitous forces that rule the world.”<sup>83</sup> In Nahuatl, a ritual paper figure is called simply *tlatectli* (“something cut,” plural, *tlatecmeh*) or sometimes *amatlatectli* (“paper cutting”). A figure embodying a particularly powerful spirit entity can also be termed *teoamatlatectli* or “sacred paper cutting.”<sup>84</sup> When speaking Spanish, people call the figures *muñecos de papel* (“paper dolls”) or simply *recortes* (“cuttings”). The most time-consuming activity in preparing for a pilgrimage is cutting the requisite number of paper figures, requiring many days and nights for ritual specialists and selected helpers to fold and cut the paper and ready the finished cuttings for use in rituals. After cutting the figures, they carefully fold open the eyes, the mouth, and some of the features of the body and head that distinguish one from another iconographically. They then count the figures and lay them out neatly on a decoratively cut rectangle of paper called in Nahuatl *petlatl*, after the sweet-smelling, woven palm mat used throughout Mexico. We consistently use the Spanish loanword *petate* for this paper bed or mat; another Spanish equivalent is *cama*. People may also refer to either the palm or paper *petate* by the Nahuatl term

*tlapechtli*, meaning “litter, stretcher, bed, platform.”<sup>85</sup> They stack the *petates* one atop the other to form several large bundles, and then wrap the contents securely in an actual palm *petate* for transport. These *petates* and the paper figures they contain are illustrated in chapter 6.<sup>86</sup> The figures are created in such profusion that it was impossible to identify them during the pilgrimage itself. We took photographs of altars and were able to recognize quite a few of the spirit entities involved, but we could not document them well enough to draw conclusions about how individual cuttings were deployed. We already knew the identities of the disease-causing figures that were used in the cleansing rituals held at multiple points during each pilgrimage, but the salutary spirit entities that participants carefully arranged atop and beneath the various altar displays remained beyond our reach.

Close questioning of ritual specialists revealed that they receive instructions from dreams about which paper figures to cut and the proper design of the various spirit entities. While it is undoubtedly true that dreams influence which figures populate each altar, we discerned some patterns in the identities of figures used at the different locations. We persisted in questioning ritual specialists about the matter until Cirilo, following through on his wish for us to document the pilgrimages, agreed to cut for us a representative set of paper figures identical to those he created for the pilgrimages to Postectli. Cutting so many paper figures is quite an undertaking, and he enlisted the services of three other ritual specialists for the task. He furnished the sample collection with labels specifying where each bed of figures was to be placed, from the village shrine to the altars leading all the way to the summit. He asked only that we compensate his compatriots for their time.

Before beginning the project, Cirilo inquired about which crops we grow at home so that he could cut the proper figures. We explained that we live in the city and do not grow our own food but that we wanted him to emphasize maize and beans. He seemed satisfied with the answer and within a few days the work began. Because the handmade bark paper, called *amatl* (*amate* in Spanish), is no longer manufactured in Amatlán (as it is in a few villages elsewhere in the region), he purchased thick stacks of manufactured paper at a distant market. The inexpensive pulp-paper product favored by Cirilo and his colleagues is of the quality of newsprint (*papel revolución*) and consequently fragile, becoming yellowed and brittle over time. The ritual specialists placed the figures they cut for us, twenty each, on the decorated *petates*. When finished, the stacks of *petates* formed two dense piles roughly 30

centimeters (12 inches) tall. We followed the project closely until one day, on a visit to Cirilo's *xochicalli*, we noticed the figures stacked on his altar and inquired about them. He assured us that the assembly of paper figures was complete and commensurate with what he would prepare for the pilgrimage to Postectli.

We were gratified but taken aback by the amount of work expended in the creation of so many paper cuttings. To compensate the ritual specialists for their time and effort, we produced an envelope containing the agreed-upon sum and offered it to Cirilo. He directed us to place it on the altar but said that we could not take the collection of paper figures at that time. In a hushed voice he pointed out that we had entered the period of *nanahuatilli*, a time when the souls of the dead return to the village in the form of masked dancers who go from house to house causing disruption. Following the Catholic liturgical calendar, the observance coincides with the Lenten celebration of Carnival (Carnaval) in early spring.<sup>87</sup> Cirilo informed us that it would be disrespectful and dangerous to carry the figures across the community with so many dead souls wandering about. We waited several days until it was deemed safe for us to take possession of the sacred paper images.

Immediately upon leaving Amatlán, we properly archived the images, painstakingly coding each one to keep it in the exact order in which we had received it. As part of our long-term research, we had already gathered and archived an extensive collection of the sacred cut-paper figures along with the name of the spirit entity and any iconographic data or mythic associations of each figure. We thus already had examples of many of the figures cut for the Postectli pilgrimage and were able to supplement the new cuttings with the previous information. To clear up any confusion, we took some of the problematic figures back to Cirilo for proper identification. We were able to correct quite a few errors before leaving the field, and we feel confident that we have a collection that is representative (if abbreviated) of the typical paper figures Cirilo would cut for the Postectli pilgrimage.

We want to be clear, however, that the drawings that illustrate the book do not reproduce the exact configuration of figures actually deployed in the pilgrimages we report on. The paper-figure collection was produced after the fact because the paper cuttings prepared for those rituals were unavailable for study, having been left behind on altars or destroyed during the proceedings. The demonstration set was cut by the same ritual specialists who participated in the Postectli pilgrimages and the subsequent journeys, and they assured us that these

illustrative cuttings were identical in every way to the ones they would actually produce for a major ritual event. We have known these generous people for years, and they have always proved trustworthy and reliable in the past, so we have no reason to doubt their word. The observations and photographic evidence that we present in this work affirm the ritual specialists' commentary on the identity, iconography, and deeper meaning of the figures.

It is important to point out that, as enormous as it is, the collection of paper figures for the Postectli pilgrimage does not by any means exhaust the range of images cut in Amatlán or other Nahua communities of the culture area. Virtually any being or object can be cut from paper by the practitioners of *el costumbre*. We have collected many such examples over decades of field research, and now we can fully appreciate that the spirit entities invoked in rituals and their embodiment in the medium of paper are limited only by the skill and imagination of the paper cutters. We will occasionally illustrate the iconographic and design variations of the figures and present ethnographic information on these earlier cuttings in notes.

#### ANALYZING NAHUA MYTHS AND ORAL NARRATIVES

Before ending this chapter, we want to recount a central myth that, among many other functions, links the sacred mountain Postectli to rain, maize seed and other crops, clouds, wind, thunder, and deer. The myth is about Chicomechitl or Seven Flower—the name of a sacred boy with hair the color of corn silk who is the spirit of the growing maize plant (*Zea mays*).<sup>88</sup> The story of Chicomechitl helps to explain why people are motivated to make the pilgrimage to Postectli.<sup>89</sup> Regarding the prominence of maize in the religious system, Nahua anthropologist Abelardo de la Cruz writes,

The cult of maize is one of the essential components of *el costumbre*. The Nahuas of Chicontepec maintain a strong religious connection with maize. Maize is more than a seed, more than a source of food in Nahua religion; it is primarily a deity. It is not easy for outsiders to understand this cult as a cultural expression. However, there is a parallel between both religions [Christianity and *el costumbre*], as maize stands for the image and blood of Nahua man just as in Christianity the Eucharist stands for the body and blood of Christ.<sup>90</sup>

The importance of Postectli as the home of maize and dwelling place of those elements required for growing the

sacred grain is attested in this statement made in Spanish by Raymundo, the young man then apprenticed to Cirilo. As he put it:

Yes, yes, that's the siren, that's the thunder, that's the lightning there. Thunder is one, lightning is another, no? And all the seeds that there are, they also live there [on Postectli]. The [good] wind has its house there. The sun also has its house there. Yes, that is why they're now going to cut so many paper figures. That's one of the earth. All of the saints have their cuttings too—that which is the siren, the thunder, the wind, the sun.<sup>91</sup>

During the course of ethnographic fieldwork research over four decades, we recorded well over a hundred myths, stories, and oral narratives told by Nahua men and women, most of whom lived in Amatlán. The people of this community continue to speak Nahuatl in their everyday interactions, and so we asked them to recount the stories in their native language. We paid bilingual research assistants to transcribe the narratives and translate them into Spanish and, later, into English. In April 2011 we deposited these primary resources (in draft form) in the Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America (AILLA) repository at the University of Texas at Austin to make them readily available to scholars and listeners interested in the corpus of Nahua oral literature. The Chicomexochitl–Seven Flower myth and the other myths we present here are actually composite renditions by multiple storytellers; as we present each story outline, we note the component sources preserved in the AILLA archive.<sup>92</sup>

We found that the core body of Nahua myths is highly variable, existing in different forms even within the same community. Despite variations, however, individual story outlines share key elements and likely draw from the same cultural reservoir of themes and motifs.<sup>93</sup> In Amatlán people prefer to use the Spanish word *cuento* (“story”) to describe oral narratives generally, but the Huastecan Nahuatl terms (in the singular) for such include *zanilli* (“spoken words,” “tales,” or “conversations”) as well as *tlapohuilli* or *tlapohuiliztli* (“stories of the grandparents”).<sup>94</sup> Although people may call these narrations “stories,” many are closer to our concept of mythic tales in that they reflect core concerns of the group that extend beyond everyday experiences and incorporate sometimes fantastic beings that have no counterpart in empirical reality. As such, they provide guidance for how people should think and feel about the world in general and particularly the important events that affect their lives. For this reason a myth is sometimes called *neixcuitilli*, meaning a “model” or

“example” or “lesson with moral significance.”<sup>95</sup> Typically, myths supply the reasons for why things are the way they are, and they elicit emotional responses from listeners as events of the narrative drama unfold. Myths can also provide the rationale for holding religious rituals. Probably the Nahuatl word *huhcapatlahuolli* comes closest to our concept of myth, meaning something akin to “ancient discourse.”<sup>96</sup> We call them myths reservedly, not to convey a sense of the stories being false or unreal, but rather to celebrate Nahua Oral Tradition that so effectively expresses the truths of a profound philosophy and world view.

For the reader unfamiliar with cross-cultural studies of myth, we wish to issue a warning. From the perspective of the people in a given society, the myths of people from other cultures always seem singularly outlandish. We can testify firsthand that beliefs and practices forming the basis of myths, religious dogma, and even day-to-day customs accepted as normal by many North Americans are seen by Nahuas in Amatlán as equally bizarre.<sup>97</sup> An alien world view expressed in myths can also threaten a person's grasp of reality and undermine his or her meaning system. For many reasons, the beliefs of people from other cultural traditions are often dismissed as primitive, foolish, and childlike. In addition to the inherent problem of ethnocentrism, myths are extremely difficult to translate adequately, especially across divergent language families. We found this to be particularly true in undertaking our project to record the Nahua storytellers of Amatlán. Recounting myths assumes that one's audience possesses substantial background knowledge, and in most cases that is an accurate assumption. Raconteurs often omit key points simply because everyone already knows about them, and so narrations often make little sense to outsiders and appear to lack a proper beginning, middle, or end. Of course, having the narrative requirement of linear development as a story unfolds is itself a cultural practice not found in every society.<sup>98</sup>

To illustrate, we first offer a short verbatim translation from the Nahuatl of the beginning of the Chicomexochitl–Seven Flower myth, which we recount in full afterward, supplying the needed contextual details. The storyteller was an old man from Amatlán named Jesús Bautista Hernández. He was accompanied by a younger Nahua man who had become a schoolteacher in a different community and was losing touch with his village traditions.

OLD MAN: How does it begin? Well, when Chicomexochitl was being raised, the boy didn't grow. They say he was killed. He's over there.

YOUNG MAN: He has something to do with the hill [over there]?

OLD MAN: He stayed over there.

YOUNG MAN: How was that? The boy stayed in the hill?

OLD MAN: He stayed there. Well, he . . . and there . . . [at first] he grew a lot. The one who takes care of him did that. That is the reason no one surpassed him in height. This . . . they are. This, too, is how big he was.

YOUNG MAN: About how big, more or less?

OLD MAN: This big.

YOUNG MAN: About a meter?

OLD MAN: Maybe, about one. . . .

YOUNG MAN: One meter tall, or less?

OLD MAN: Maybe two months.

YOUNG MAN: Two months . . . ?

OLD MAN: Perhaps about three months. So he is big.

YOUNG MAN: About a half meter, a half meter was his height?

OLD MAN: Yes.

YOUNG MAN: Um, his height.

OLD MAN: That's right. His grandmother killed him. Yes. His grandmother, she killed him. His mother was not home. She returned and found him quite dead. The grandmother made him into tamales so that she could eat him.

YOUNG MAN: Hmm.

OLD MAN: But his mother did not eat him.

YOUNG MAN: She didn't eat him?

OLD MAN: She did not eat her son. Instead, the grandmother went to throw him away.

YOUNG MAN: She went to throw him away?

OLD MAN: She went to throw him in a lake.

YOUNG MAN: In the water?

OLD MAN: In the water. The grandmother ran off, she left.

YOUNG MAN: She ran off?

OLD MAN: She went to throw Chicomexochitl away because she couldn't stand him. But it's not true. He survived after all, he didn't die. He went on to become Chicomexochitl.<sup>99</sup>

The narration goes on like this for many typed pages in the transcription. One point of clarification is that the old man is speaking of the maize as it is embodied in its spirit form. Thus, when the younger man asks about how tall the boy was, the old man, responding as if the boy were a maize plant, switches from meters to months: he was as tall as the maize after two or three months of growth. Even from this brief passage, it is easy to see that a great deal has been left out of the story. The young man, who is bilingual

in Nahuatl but not very familiar with the narrative, clearly was having a hard time following what the old man was saying. Yet the old man's approach is typical of the way that myths are told by Nahuas. With that said, we also must point out that several of the narrators we recorded recognized that we were naive outsiders and probably filled in details to make it easier for us to follow the stories.<sup>100</sup>

Among Nahua people of our acquaintance, men are the primary storytellers and carriers of the mythic traditions. Women are very familiar with the narrations but would agree to recount them for us only on rare occasions. As an aside, it is inevitable that when the stories begin, people stop what they are doing and gather around the narrator in rapt attention; all the other activities in the normally busy Nahua household come to a halt. For those who follow the religion of *el costumbre*, these narrations are riveting, and people apparently never tire of hearing them repeated. In order for us to understand the myth of Seven Flower we had to record multiple versions, piece together the narration, and question people about the more obscure points.<sup>101</sup>

In fact, the myth of Seven Flower makes perfect sense when conveyed in its entirety, although it tells of a world beyond empirical reality. One central character in the myth unfamiliar to most Western audiences is the grandmother of Seven Flower. She is a *tzitzimitl*, a frightening figure also found among the ancient Aztecs who is a kind of angry crone or hag with the supernatural attributes of a sorcerer. Paradoxically, she is associated both with fertility and with dangerous, disease-causing wind spirits.<sup>102</sup> We illustrate the Nahua myth of Seven Flower with ten fine, copperplate etchings created for the project by Michael K. Aakhus, reproduced here with the artist's permission.

#### MYTH OF THE NAHUA MAIZE SPIRIT CHICOMEXOCHITL (SEVEN FLOWER)

.....  
*According to the people of Amatlán, there once was an angry crone, a tzitzimitl, who lived with her beautiful daughter in a house in the tropical forest, far removed from other houses in the village. The old hag loved the daughter in an overly possessive way and lived in fear that someone would come along and take the girl away in marriage, leaving the tzitzimitl abandoned and alone. To prevent this from happening, she kept close watch on the daughter and even made her stay in a chachapalli, a large cooking pot, so that she would not meet other people, particularly boys.*

*One day when the young woman was getting water at the nearby spring to carry back to their house, she heard a rustling*

sound behind her and there appeared a handsome young man. He addressed her softly from a distance, saying he would see her again soon. She worried what her mother would say and turned to go home. As she began to walk away, she looked around just in time to see a beautiful deer, a mazatl, bound away.

She returned to the house and said nothing to her mother about the incident. That night, with her daughter secured inside the *chachapalli*, the old woman went bustling about the kitchen fire. The *tzitzimitl* suddenly heard laughter coming from the pot and became alarmed. She opened the lid and saw that her daughter was having an animated conversation with a flea that had gotten in. But the flea was actually the young man, who in reality was the mazatl, the transformed deer spirit that the girl had met earlier.

The old woman was furious and feared the worst. The flea escaped her wrath and fled into the night only to turn once again into a magnificent deer. The daughter of the *tzitzimitl* found herself pregnant, and in the time that it takes maize in the field to grow to maturity, she gave birth to a boy and girl, both already half grown. These were remarkable children with hair the color of corn silk. The young woman knew that she had given birth to *Chicomexochitl*—the maize spirit Seven Flower—and his twin sister, *Macuilli Xochitl*, Five Flower.

.....

In alternative versions of the myth, the old hag's daughter finds a crystal in the spring and puts it in her mouth to hide it from her mother. She accidentally swallows it and later gives birth to Seven Flower and Five Flower. In this telling, the maize spirit is the product of a virgin birth, but sometimes it is told that the deer spirit miraculously turns itself into a crystal that impregnates the girl. This version accords with the widespread Nahua belief that the deer is father to maize; we will offer a possible explanation below for this belief.<sup>103</sup>

At this point in the narration, the *tzitzimitl* grows angry at her grandson Seven Flower for coming between her and her daughter, even though he could hardly be blamed for the situation. In another rendition of the story, the old woman becomes furious with her grandson when he informs her that he intends to marry his sister. The prospect of incest drives the *tzitzimitl* wild with anger, and she vows revenge against him. In both accounts she plots to kill the boy so that she will no longer have to face his effrontery. His twin sister Five Flower drops out of the narrative for a while as the story continues:

.....

*The old woman became consumed with thoughts of revenge against the extraordinary boy and so entered into a series of competitions with him. She told him to go to the spring and bring back water in a matlatl or ayatl, a type of fishing net.*<sup>104</sup>

Seven Flower succeeded in the task and then asked his grandmother to do the same. She came back in a rage, soaking wet, having failed to carry any water. After thinking about the problem, she developed a plan to bury Seven Flower in the earth. She dug a hole in the ground and put him in, saying, "That should do it. Now we will truly see if you can grow." To make sure that the boy would die, the old lady also placed a tarantula in the hole as she interred him.

Seven Flower stayed within the earth for some time, but soon he began to sprout. He converted himself from a boy and grew into a vigorous maize plant. The *tzitzimitl* struck at the maize plant with a machete to prevent it from growing and repeatedly scolded the boy. She saw that the plant kept growing anyway, and so she left it alone for four months. By this time the plant had sprouted beautiful ears of maize. The tarantula that she buried in the earth with Seven Flower turned into its roots.

Then the old woman said, "Now you will see what I am going to do. Now I am going to make you into *atolli*," a sweetened beverage made of maize. She went out into the milpa and found two ears of maize stuck together. She placed them—Seven Flower and Five Flower—on the *metatl*, her metate or stone quern, and tried to grind them to meal. But in the attempt she broke her *mano*, the handheld grinding stone. The old woman went to a neighbor to borrow another *mano*, but it, too, broke when she tried to use it. Seven Flower was winning again.

She swore vehemently, "Oh, coward, whore of hell!" But somehow she managed to grind up Seven Flower and make *atolli* out of him. She prepared to serve it to the boy's mother who had just returned home. As his mother was about to drink the *atolli*, Seven Flower cried out, "Mother, you are about to consume your own son!" The daughter turned to her mother, the *tzitzimitl*, and exclaimed, "Oh, you have killed my son!" The old woman drew back, took the *atolli*, and went to throw it into the stream. At the stream bank, the *tzitzimitl* addressed Seven Flower, "Now, you are going to remain in the water where the fish will eat you. If I leave you in the water, the fish will finish you."

A few of the fish did eat some of the *atolli*, but the others fled. Those fish that consumed the ground maize were unable to vomit it up, and they developed the big bellies that they have to this day. The *acamaya*, a tropical crayfish, tried so hard to purge the sacred maize that even now its eyes bulge out. The water creatures menaced Seven Flower, who squirmed about and changed himself into a boy again. It was his soul, his *tonalli*, that had converted back into human form.

Seven Flower revived and began to annoy the fish with big bellies by poking them with a stick. The fish responded by proclaiming, "Coward, why are you wounding us?" Seven Flower answered, "Because you ate me, that is why I am injuring you." He searches for the wounded fish and grabs them, putting them into a basket.



Plate 1.1. The *tzitzimitl*, an old hag, hides her daughter inside a clay pot. Etching by Michael K. Aakhus.

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Plate 1.2. Seven Flower and his twin sister, Five Flower, are born. Etching by Michael K. Aakhus.

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Plate 1.3. Seven Flower is ground up and fed to the fish. Etching by Michael K. Aakhus.

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Plate 1.4. The turtle carries Seven Flower on its back. Etching by Michael K. Aakhus.

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Now Seven Flower wanted to leave. He asked several different types of creatures if they would help him travel to the shore. He asked the guavina, but this fish could not help because it darts fast but then stops and does not go far enough. He asked the crayfish, but it could not help because it only goes backward. He asked the mojarra too, but that fish couldn't help either since it swims sideways. None could help. But the turtle, who was off to the side listening, approached Seven Flower and said, "I will take you. I will carry you. I travel well carrying a load on my shoulder."

The turtle carried the boy for a long time until they reached the water's edge. When they arrived at the shore, Seven Flower began to strike the turtle on its back and make drawings on its shell. The turtle was upset, but in reality the boy was making his shell beautiful. From then on people have said, "Here comes the flowery painted turtle, xochiayotzin."

The turtle left the boy near his mother on the shore, far away from the tzitzimitl. Seven Flower's mother told him to keep away from his grandmother, but he responded that he was going to see her because he wanted to talk to her. He said, "At this point, she cannot do anything to me. I'm big already."

So the boy snuck up on his grandmother and could see that she had removed the scalp from her own head and was seated with it in her lap. She sat there, slowly picking lice out of her hair. Seven Flower climbed up into the loft of the house and urinated on her head. The old woman was annoyed but thought that it was mice that were responsible for the outrage. She never suspected Seven Flower.

The tzitzimitl attempted to put her hair back on but noticed that it would not stay in place on her drenched head. Growing increasingly frustrated, she constantly moved the hair around as her scalp dried. After a short while the hair became fixed, but it remained crooked on her head. Try as she might, she could no longer dislodge it. The boy approached the tzitzimitl and said, "What have you done, Grandmother?"

She exclaimed, "Ah, devil boy, then you are not dead!" Seven Flower said that he wanted to talk to her, but she didn't want to talk. The old woman instead dumped a cuartillo (a five-liter box) of tiny amaranth seeds on the ground and ordered the boy to pick up each and every one of them. She herself left to try her hand again at carrying water in the fishing net. The boy recruited all types of birds to pick up the seeds and return them to the box. When his grandmother returned again, empty handed, she saw the full box of the seeds and became even more enraged.<sup>105</sup>

Seven Flower's malevolent grandmother suggested next that they bathe in the sweatbath, the temazcalli, seeing the plan as an opportunity finally to finish him off. He agreed, and she suggested that he go in first. She piled on firewood until the temazcalli became glowing hot. After a short while inside, Seven Flower emerged unhurt.<sup>106</sup> Seven Flower suggested that the old woman

enter the sweatbath herself. The tzitzimitl did so and immediately burned up, leaving nothing but a pile of ashes.

Seven Flower took his mother to see what happened and told her that the tzitzimitl was no more, that she could no longer hurt him. Seven Flower searched for an earthen jug and placed the ashes of the tzitzimitl in it. He asked the toad if he would take the ashes and empty them into the sea. He warned the toad not to open the jug, no matter what. The toad placed the jug on his back, fixing it in his tumpline that he wore across his forehead, and transported it the great distance to the shore. As he hopped along, he began to hear buzzing and a great hubbub inside the jug. His curiosity overcame him, and he opened the jug and peeked in. At once, out flew all the world's biting insects and venomous snakes to torment man and beast alike. The bumpy skin that toads have today is the result of their ancestor's disobedience to Seven Flower.<sup>107</sup>

When the toad arrived at the sea and dumped the old hag's ashes into the water, they immediately changed into a caiman (or alligator or other crocodilian species) that swam slowly away. The rough, scaly back of the giant reptile is said to be the surface of the earth where human beings live, and so ultimately the tzitzimitl became the earth's surface.

After this escapade, Seven Flower hid a knife in his clothing and traveled to the sea. He approached the shoreline and began to splash around in the water. He beckoned to his grandmother, the caiman, who was floating nearby, eyeing him. She was still furious, but eventually she swam over alongside her grandson.

He remarked that she had a beautiful tongue and asked her to open her jaws so that he could see it. She complied, and he instantly grabbed the flickering tongue and cut it out with his knife. His grandmother shrieked and swam furiously away from the shore.

Seven Flower carried the tongue to the top of a hill and sat down to rest. He then began to whip the tongue around, causing thunderclaps and lightning bolts to discharge from the hilltop. He later entrusted the tongue to the pilhuehuentzitzin, the rain dwarfs, so that thunder and lightning can announce their arrival as they carry water from the sea to the sacred hills.<sup>108</sup>

Seven Flower then asked his mother to tell him about his father. She responded, "But he died a long time ago." He said to her, "But now, now he is dead, let's take him out. I will go get him, I will bring him back. I know how to take him out." His mother warned him, "And now, do not become frightened if you hear a bird or some sound. Don't get excited and maybe you will succeed."

His twin sister Five Flower went with him. They took along a palm mat and a rope. They located the grave and dug down to find their father. They came across bones, placed them in the palm mat, and tied it up. As they carried the bones away, papan birds called out, startling the twins, and the contents of the palm mat began to squirm and move about. As they lost their grip on the bundle, a deer suddenly sprang out and bounded off down the trail. The deer was their father.



Plate 1.5. The *tzitzimitl* removes her scalp. Etching by Michael K. Aakhus.

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Plate 1.6. The amaranth seed and sweatbath trials are put to Seven Flower. Etching by Michael K. Aakhus.

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Plate 1.7. The toad carries the ashes of the *tzizimitl* to the sea. Etching by Michael K. Aakhus.

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Plate 1.8. The sacred twins are aided in the search for *mazatl*, their deer father. Etching by Michael K. Aakhus.

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Chasing after the fleeing deer, Seven Flower screamed at it, “Your legacy is seven lead, seven steel, seven books, and seven reeds. From now on, people will hunt you, they will kill you.” After these traumatic events, Seven Flower and Five Flower escaped to Postectli to hide themselves inside the mountain. At that time, the monolith reached up to the sky and connected the earth’s surface with the celestial realm. All the crops, not only maize, depended on Seven Flower for their growth and abundance.

With the absence of the sacred children, the crops began to fail and the people were starving. Everybody, including the ancient ones and the saints, searched in vain for them, for they remained hidden. One day people observed ants carrying maize kernels away from Postectli and realized that the pair was hiding there.<sup>109</sup> The people sought far and wide for someone who could break off the mountain, but it was so enormous and strong that nobody knew what to do. They asked the *cuachenchere*, a huge woodpecker, to try to break open the mountain. The bird pecked and pecked all around Postectli to weaken it, but it remained standing.

The situation had clearly become desperate. As time passed and the sacred maize twins remained in exile, eternal night descended on the earth and the people grew hungrier. Finally, someone thought to call Zahhuan, the water owner who is chained at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico. Zahhuan’s fury was just what was called for to split open the mountain. The short-tempered water owner sent his thunder and lightning spirit helpers from the Gulf of Mexico to Postectli. They wreaked a wild and savage storm in their path. The night glowed with surreal light as the storm approached the sacred mountain. Although they attacked with all their force, thunder and lightning only produced immense noise and flashes of light. Still the monolith remained intact.

At last, Zahhuan himself reached Postectli, and with a magnificent effort he cast his thunderbolts at the huge rock. With a thunderous roar heard by the fleeing people over the chaos of the storm, the top of the mountain finally was broken off, permanently severing the link between the terrestrial and celestial realms. The force was so great that Postectli turned into an inferno. The conflagration lit up the black sky, casting an eerie glow over the landscape.

Seven Flower and Five Flower were now in grave danger as the fire threatened to incinerate them in their hiding place, reminiscent of the fate of their grandmother in the sweatbath. Soon clouds rolled in, sprinkling water on the mountain and cooling the molten rock.

The ancestors and saints searched frantically for the precious twins and their store of seeds. They were at last located and safely rescued from the inferno, but some of the seeds sustained damage from the intense heat. The white maize, *chipahuac cintli*, escaped unscathed, but the yellow maize, *costic cintli*, was scorched, while the *yahuitzin* or *yayahuic cintli*, the black or purple kernels, were

charred. To this day, maize varieties can be distinguished by the color of the kernels. Seeds of the other crops were also retrieved, and the human race was saved on that momentous day.

Zahhuan formed enormous piles of once-molten rubble from the top of Postectli, scattering them in all directions. These mounds with their rounded bases became the other sacred mountains that people visit every year to dedicate offerings.

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Not far from Postectli’s summit where this drama unfolded one encounters two narrow clefts in the basaltic monolith. One of the openings is said to be the home of thunder and lightning spirits that help bring rain to the fields. The other cavity is the dwelling place of the mother of Seven Flower and Five Flower. Storytellers in Amatlán address her as *Tonantzin*, “Our Honored Mother,” but she is familiar to many in her guise as the Virgin of Guadalupe.<sup>110</sup> It was in that cave that the ultimate earth mother gave birth to the seeds—maize, beans, squash, amaranth, chili, and tomatoes—that sustain human beings. In the same cave, people say, lives *apanchaneh*, the water dweller who controls the streams and calm bodies of water—a manifestation of the temperamental water owner *zahhuan*. Beliefs and rituals surrounding the siren were recorded in this region by Spanish missionaries in the mid-sixteenth century. Francisco de Zorita (1558) wrote about the great reverence that the people had for a deity they called *apanchantecuhli*, “water dweller lord,” who looked after rain and water on the ground.<sup>111</sup> He described how the local people offered food to this so-called “demon” and performed dances, reminiscent of practices found in Amatlán today.

The angry owner of water himself resides at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico. From there, *zahhuan* commands his servants, the *pilhuehuentzitzin* (“honored little old ones,” sometimes called *chaneque* or “dwellers”). These twelve rain dwarfs, dressed in iridescent golden clothing with black rubber sleeves, are said to be about a meter in height. Each occupies its own mountain peak, and together they carry water from the Gulf to the caves on Postectli where *apanchaneh* sprinkles it over the fields. People include these rain dwarfs in the list of sacred figures they call “saints,” or *santos*, and say that they carry walking sticks or staffs as well as axes, chains, and swords, striking them as they go along felling trees and raising the thunder and lightning. The prehistoric copper axes that people occasionally find in their fields are regarded as the machetes of these spirit entities.<sup>112</sup>

During the first pilgrimage to Postectli, we videotaped a man named Lucas from a neighboring Nahua



Plate 1.9. Water owner Zahhuan breaks off the top of Postectli mountain. Etching by Michael K. Aakhus.

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Plate 1.10. Maize returns to the people who observe *el costumbre* rituals. Etching by Michael K. Aakhus.

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community as he explained the nature of *apanchaneh*. He offered a clear explication in Spanish about this all-important spirit entity:

The siren is male and female. They are two things, yes, but it's the same. At one moment she is a young lady. At another time, she is a gentleman. One moment she's an alligator, another moment she's a girl—yes, the siren changes into many things. The siren maintains them [the people], she gives them food. That is why they make a vow [to her] so that it might rain. Yes, we also dress up the spring, and she promises to provide them with water there. The lady of the water, the siren, we ask her for a favor to see *diosito*, the little god. There at the spring we ask for plants, for example, maize, chilies, bean, peanut, oranges, banana, camote, and squash seeds. We ask at the spring . . . and the vow goes out over there. Even if it's animals you want, such as chickens, hens, turkeys, ducks, as well as cows, mules, horses, bulls—yes, you ask as part of a vow there.<sup>113</sup>

An important characteristic of Nahua religion essential to understanding its nature is that the spirit entities have mutable identities. They are not independent figures with stable, individual personalities. In myth and belief their protean nature means they readily blend into one another and shift personas. Such mutability was likewise a feature of the religion of the ancient Aztecs. In the minds of many people in Amatlán, *tonantzin* and *apanchaneh* are one and the same: the mother of maize is an aspect of the water dweller. Seven Flower and Five Flower themselves are merely nominal aspects of *cintli*, maize, and their distinctive male-female qualities are invoked by ritual specialists and storytellers for the purpose of addressing them in ritual or fulfilling some mythic role.

Just as Seven Flower and Five Flower went into exile within Postectli when they were treated badly by their *tzitzimitl* grandmother, they threaten again to depart if people fail to show them respect or demonstrate disrespect for others. The world is conceived as a perilous place: should the twins depart, the crops will fail and people will starve. People in Amatlán say that a ritual specialist during ancient times lured the seeds (and some say animal souls, too) from Postectli to the village so that they could support the people. Knowing the outline of this story we were astounded to learn that, to this day, paper figures embodying these seeds are carefully collected and preserved in a special wooden box kept on the altars of ritual specialists and laypeople who wish to demonstrate

their religious commitment.<sup>114</sup> These large paper figures of the crop seeds are often cut from a type of heavyweight, glossy paper called *papel lustre* in colors corresponding to the actual crop. We noted that these permanent seed figures are assembled in groups of three or four, dressed as a single figure in a cloth outfit befitting its gender. The female-designated figures are clothed in one- or two-piece dresses and outfitted with tiny hair combs or hairpins, braids of ribbon, earrings, rings, and necklaces. The ones dressed as males wear white cotton pants, shirts, and a colorful bandana. The groupings usually contain maize, beans, and chili, but sometimes a paper image of squash, camote, or another crop is included. Based on comments from the ritual specialists, the assorted figures make up a complete meal, reflecting the way that people actually consume these foods. We illustrate and analyze these dressed seed figures in chapter 6.

The box may also contain tiny pieces of furniture, implements, or articles of clothing such as miniature shoes. Periodically people set offerings before it, and they open the box and remove the figures for major ritual occasions, as we describe in chapter 3. Ritual specialists and their helpers scrub out the box and remove the clothing from each figure. They wash the clothes and let them dry, and afterward dress the figures again. The purpose of these activities is to create a pleasant, orderly environment for the seeds. People believe that disruptive and bad behavior will cause the seeds to depart and return to the cave on Postectli, leaving them without the means to produce food. A clear demonstration of respectful behavior includes dedicating offerings to the seeds during elaborate rituals. The ultimate act of respect is to undertake a pilgrimage to Postectli and make the offerings directly at the original homes of the seeds and other spirit entities. In sum, because of the primordial struggle at Postectli and the enticement of the seeds to remain in the village, people believe that it is imperative to hold ritual offerings to restore and maintain balance between human beings and the spirit entities that support life. Providing beautiful altars and offering the best food, drink, music, dancing, and chanting (as well as blood, the ultimate valued offering), they balance the debt owed by the human community to the cosmic forces that support them and keep starvation and annihilation at bay.<sup>115</sup>

The Seven Flower myth is central to understanding Nahua religion in this part of Mexico, and it addresses many of the people's significant concerns. As slash-and-burn horticulturalists coping without machinery with the unique flora and fauna of a tropical-forest climate, these

farmers rely on the fertility of seeds, the fecundity of the earth, and the vagaries of rainfall to produce the food they require to survive. They link weather phenomena and its impact on the fields to the erratic personality of the water owner *zahhuan*, who arbitrarily may bestow life by providing rain or inundate the world and exterminate its inhabitants. The myth concerning the struggle between Seven Flower and his dangerous grandmother, the *tzitzimitl*, addresses the abuses that humans inflict on maize. She buries the maize kernel in the earth, grinds it on a *metate*, and throws it into the water—just as ordinary people do every day. And yet the miraculous plant always comes back to life. The myth places people in relation to the entities of the spirit realm and to the natural forces they embody that make human life possible. It reveals a cosmos that is basically neutral regarding human interests but, at the same time, precarious and in constant danger of collapsing into chaos. The story of Seven Flower is also intimately connected to the sacred landscape of the Nahua. Postectli is more than an unusual geological formation. The monolith contains within it many of the key forces of the natural world that create the conditions for life. All such landscape features are part of a sacred totality that impinges on people's lives in countless ways.<sup>116</sup>

H. E. M. Braakhuis has examined the oral narrations about Seven Flower that we recorded in Amatlán.<sup>117</sup> Comparing them with oral narratives collected by other Gulf Coast ethnographers, he finds antecedents of the contemporary stories in the Borgia and Vaticano B codices. The ancient documents, as an example, show an old woman who breaks the *mano* while grinding corn on her *metate*. Based on his analysis, he concludes that the *tzitzimitl* in the Amatlán myth today corresponds to the Aztec goddess Cihuacoatl Ilamatecuhtli. Braakhuis argues that her daughter, Tonantzin (the mother of Seven Flower), is a version of the well-known Aztec deity Xochiquetzal, while Seven Flower corresponds to the deity Xochipilli.<sup>118</sup> Braakhuis interprets the myth of Seven Flower as marking the primordial transition from hunting and gathering to horticulture based on maize cultivation. The grandmother characterizes the older way of life and is threatened by the appearance of maize in the form of Seven Flower, and for this reason she tries to kill him. That the deer is father to maize underscores the idea that hunting and gathering preceded horticulture.<sup>119</sup>

The story of Seven Flower accomplishes much more than merely recording history, however; it illustrates for people what it means to lead an ethical, moral life. The life well lived reflects moderation, balance, and, most importantly,

respect for all things—for other people as well as the seeds and those elements of sun, earth, and water that make human existence possible. The all-important precept of “respect” is expressed in Nahuatl by the people in Amatlán as *tlatlepanittliztli*, a noun that means “that which looks upon, sees, or regards things respectfully” or “respect for something or someone.” Its opposite is *axtlatlepanitta*, a verb construction (and negation) that means someone or something “does not respect” or “lacks respect for something or someone.”<sup>120</sup> The story also explains phenomena of nature: why the skin of the toad and the surface of the earth are so rough, why the painted turtle has a colorful shell, why hills are rounded, why roots of the maize plant appear as they do, and why ears of maize come in different colors. The Seven Flower myth provides the rationale for holding rituals designed to ameliorate the sometimes difficult conditions of village life. It also shows that rituals are essentially social exchanges whereby values in the form of offerings are traded to spirit entities in return for human and crop fertility and life's necessities.

To illustrate the sometimes paradoxical nature of Nahua myth, we summarize another narration told about Postectli by our *compadre* Bartolo Hernández Hernández in Amatlán in 1990, which gives an alternate explanation for why the sacred mountain is broken off at the top:

.....  
*It seems that a long time ago, when Postectli was still whole, the earth mother Tonantzin was in her garden tending to her flowers. She became disturbed by the leaf-cutter ants crawling up the mountain from the earth below that were destroying the flowers. At the same time, sorcerers were ascending Postectli to spy on God and observe what was going on in the sacred realm.*<sup>121</sup>

*Something had to be done. To solve the problem, Tonantzin invited a large woodpecker to demolish the hill so the ants could no longer reach her garden. The bird pecked all around the peak, but the hill did not fall. She then invited the ancient ones, the water owner Zahhuan, and lightning and thunder to demolish the hill. After a monumental effort, they broke off the top of Postectli, and the fragments became all of the sacred hills in the region.*

*As the hill was being destroyed, the maize stored inside was exposed to heat. Some of it was burned black, some yellow, and some of the sacred grain was untouched and remained white. The burned maize was distributed to Zahhuan to plant in his milpa. The superior, untouched white maize was given to the thunder and lightning so that those ancient ones could plant it in their milpas.*

*Everyone thought the burned maize would not sprout and Zahhuan would fail in his efforts. To make matters worse, Zahhuan did not cut down the trees and brush and burn them to make the fields ready. He planted his maize on the feast day of*

*San Juan Bautista, June 24. He then went to live in the middle of the sea, where he made a great disturbance and sent rain to the fields. After a few weeks it sprouted and came up nicely.*

*The white, unburned maize planted by thunder and lightning, however, completely failed to sprout. They were furious and went around casting loud thundering noises and violent lightning flashes. Thunder and lightning asked Zahhuan, "Why did your maize grow and ours did not?" Zahhuan replied, "You only produce thunder and lightning, pure sound and light, but you do not bring rain. I went to live in the sea so that I could raise the clouds and send water to the milpas. I beat both thunder and lightning and succeeded in bringing forth Seven Flower, the maize, in all of its glory."*

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In this telling, the sacred mountain was severed by *zahhuan* to prevent ants and sorcerers from getting into Tonantzin's garden. We do not know how to reconcile this version with the rationale that Postectli was broken off to free the maize spirit. However, it is interesting to observe how many elements of the two accounts do coincide. They both offer identical explanations of the mechanism by which the mountain was broken, why maize comes in colors, the origin of sacred mountains, and the differing abilities of *zahhuan* and the thunder and lightning spirits. The variations between these two myths pose an analytical difficulty for us as anthropologists, but they do not seem to bother Nahua listeners. Evidently, wide variations in the Seven Flower myth exist among Indigenous people throughout the southern Huasteca, but we found no pattern linking specific variants with a particular ethnic group or locale. We conclude that the stories surrounding Seven Flower must be freely elaborated and widely shared among Indigenous storytellers of this region.

We want to make it perfectly clear that the Nahua individuals we know would not tell the story of Seven Flower in precisely the way we present it here. To make the account understandable to outsiders, we have organized

its narrative elements into a sequence that fits a time line and an internal logic that allows unfamiliar readers to follow the story. The reality, however, is more complex. Nahua stories are often composed of smaller narrative components strung together by the narrator—units or modules that stand on their own and often become stories in their own right. While we based the myth of Seven Flower predominantly on the narration of one Nahua elder with extensive knowledge of the corpus of myths, we have filled in gaps by compiling details from other storytellers who recounted portions of the overall myth. To validate our method, we recounted our composite version of this myth to Nahua colleagues familiar with the region's storytelling traditions (and we did the same with the additional myths we present below). They agreed that the major story motifs are readily comprehensible.<sup>122</sup>

What the storytellers themselves do is piece together narratives from these modular units, all of which are very familiar to Nahua listeners. What seems confusing to many of us is when these units contradict or depart from the broader story line. For example, the story of Seven Flower that Jesús Bautista Hernández told starts out by recounting how the maize spirit Seven Flower grew after being planted in the milpa. Jesús skipped over the entire earlier part of the myth involving Seven Flower's mother and the explanation of how she became pregnant. The story covers the trials of the maize spirit at the hands of his *tzitzimitl* grandmother and his exile to the interior of Postectli. It then switches to another story module in which ants crawl up Postectli and irritate Tonantzin, who then recruits Zahhuan to destroy the mountain and sever the bonds between the celestial and terrestrial realms. To us, such a shift seems abrupt, but to Nahuas the contradiction is understandable. What is important is that the story explains why Postectli was broken off. We examine this modular way of thinking in more detail in chapter 7.

## NOTES

1. Taggart (2008: 100) explicates the changing cultural meanings of coyote in a riveting analysis of ethnic conflict and violence among the Nahuatl of the Sierra de Puebla. Stresser-Péan (2009: 477) writes that across ancient Indigenous Mesoamerica, canines were symbols of "unbridled masculine sexuality," which may explain why Spaniards and other outsiders have come to be identified with the coyote. See Sandstrom (1991: 69) for more on the subtleties of ethnonyms used by Nahua people and their Mestizo neighbors, whereby *coyotl* has come to encompass, in an ironic sense, "gentleman."

2. We generally follow the usage and orthography guidelines recommended by the Native American Journalists Association (2018), Younging (2018), and Weeber (2020).

3. We recorded Cirilo's commentary in our written fieldnotes on February 18, 2007. Videographer Jeff Kaufman was there to document Cirilo's cleansing-curing ritual for a client with the participants' permission, but this exchange was not recorded. Our account of the pilgrimages in 2007 (featured in appendixes A, B, and C) is supported by our photographs and fieldnotes, but the video recordings remain to be curated for

public access. Throughout the book we cite numerous audio recordings of Nahuatl storytellers, along with the audio portion of videos documenting the 1998 Postectli pilgrimage, preserved at the Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America (AILLA); see Sandstrom and Sandstrom (1986–98, 1998).

4. See Preston (1992: 31); Graham-Campbell (1994); and Palka (2014).

5. Bruce Feiler (2014).

6. Nolan and Nolan (1997: 61).

7. Examples of Protestant pilgrimage are found in Nolan (1991: 20); Glazier (1992: 147); Coleman and Elsner (1995: 118–20); Clift and Clift (1996: 13, 16–17, 29–30); and Coleman (2004).

8. See Feiler (2014) and the Pew Research Center (2015) study, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape.”

9. Westwood (2003: 13).

10. Mapcarta.com locates the monolith at latitude 20° 54' 29" (20.9081°) north, longitude 98° 1' 46.7" (98.0296°) west and identifies it as Cerro Ixcacuatitla, a variant spelling of Ichcacuatitla, the Nahuatl community located at its base to the east; see <https://mapcarta.com/29791196>. Although the official government locality is named Ixcacuatitla, Chicontepec, Veracruz de Ignacio de la Llave (INEGI 2021), we spell it Ichcacuatitla, the more common designation in the anthropological literature. Many Nahuatl speakers in the region prefer Ichcacuatitlan, spelling it with a silent ending letter *n*; see the Wikipedia entry in Nahuatl at <https://nah.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ichcacuatitlan>, which translates the name as “place of cotton trees,” that is, ceiba or silk-cotton trees, the source of kapok.

11. The six other hills are Tepenahuac, Tzoahcali, Tepeixcitla, Xochicoatepec, Ayacachtli, and Xihuicomitl, reported in Báez-Jorge and Gómez Martínez (2000: 82); Gómez Martínez (2002: 106).

12. Karttunen (1983: 205).

13. The Nahuatl designation *tepetl* (and words constructed from the morpheme *tepe-*) translate as “hill” or “mountain” without regard to size, and so we have used both terms interchangeably throughout this work.

14. Our brief accounts of the Palaxtepetl, Tres Pozitos, and Xomulco pilgrimages in appendixes A, B, and C, respectively, are augmented by 220 captioned photos.

15. See Hill (1998) on the discourse of nostalgia among Nahuas in the Malinche volcano region of central Mexico.

16. Ochoa and Gutiérrez (1996: 96) and Martín del Campo (2006: 93, 169) report that the Otomí village of Cruz Blanca is a center where many Indigenous people in the region go to receive training as ritual specialists. Following the designation familiar in Amatlán and in keeping with usage widely referenced in the anthropological literature, we persist in using the ethnic-group name “Otomí” rather than ethnonyms such as “Ñahñiu” (Dow 2003: 25) or alternate names from other regions (Wright-Carr 2005). Dow (1995, 2005) provides cultural summaries of Otomí people living in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, as does Oehmichen Bazán (1995) for Otomí communities in central Mexico. Dow’s (1986) detailed analysis of Sierra Otomí curing techniques, religious beliefs, and symbolism is discussed

in chapter 6. In his multi-sited ethnography Galinier (1987) canvasses Otomí villages of the southern Huasteca and Sierra Norte de Puebla region; he examines (Galinier 2004 [1997]) people’s religious beliefs and practices within a framework of psychoanalytic theory. Lenz (1969: 86, 93–94) offers a brief description of an Otomí pilgrimage.

17. See Sandstrom (1991, 2001a, 2008a, 2010c); Garma (2001) on the impact of Protestant conversion in this area of Mexico.

18. Sandstrom (1995: 184).

19. Richter and Faust (2015: 3).

20. For a summary of Huastec Maya culture, see Ruvalcaba Mercado (2005) and classic works referenced in Alcorn and Edmonson (1995). The growing body of ethnographic work usually references the designation “Huastecs” (and the Mexican government calls the language “Huasteco”), but we adopt the ethnonym Teenek to avoid confusion with the region’s name.

21. Ruvalcaba Mercado (2015: 202).

22. Ruvalcaba Mercado (2015: 198).

23. See Stresser-Péan (1979: 247–48); Sandstrom (1991: 241–43, 300).

24. Heiras Rodríguez (2005: 226; 2008); Lazcarro Salgado (2008).

25. Morinis (1992: 5).

26. See Wagner (1997: 320) on the idea of a “supernatural resource.”

27. In the variant of Nahuatl spoken in Amatlán, *tonatiuh* is pronounced as if spelled *tonatih*, omitting the final syllable. In the book’s closing section, “Nahuatl Glossary and Terminology,” we provide more information on the orthographic system (Sullivan et al. 2016).

28. Paso y Troncoso (1905 [1580–82]: 188), translation ours. Jerry Offner kindly alerted us to this passage (personal communication, November 28, 2009).

29. Isaac (2005: 1).

30. For an updated review of human sacrifice in relation to Aztec dietary practices, see Ruvalcaba Mercado (2018).

31. Crowley (2015).

32. Martínez de la Cruz (2000: 75–97).

33. See descriptions of pilgrimages to Postectli and associated rituals by Medellín Zenil (1979; 1982 [1955]: 101); Báez-Jorge and Gómez Martínez (2000: 89–90); Gómez Martínez (2002: 108–13; 2004b; 2013); Gómez Martínez and Hooft (2012); Pacheco (2014); Cruz Cruz (2015); and González González (2019: 164–96). Also see similar descriptions by Hernández Hernández (1990) of Nahuatl pilgrimages near Amatlán and by Lara González (2019: 154–68) in Hidalgo and elsewhere.

34. See Madsen (1969) and Sandstrom (2010a) for general statements on the Nahuatl; Nutini and Isaac (1974) on Nahuas of Tlaxcala and Puebla; Sandstrom (2000a: 87–91; 2005b) and Rodríguez and Valderrama (2005) for coverage of Gulf Coast Nahuas; and Sandstrom (1995) and Valle Esquivel (2003) for summaries of Nahuas of the Huasteca; see also Montoya Briones (1964) and Marie-Noëlle Chamoux (1987) for ethnographies of Nahuatl communities in the Sierra Norte de Puebla.

35. Kaufman (1994: 39–40).

36. Karttunen (1983: 145).
37. Berdan (2014: xvii); Sandstrom (2017).
38. *Online Nahuatl Dictionary* (n.d.). <https://nahuatl.wired-humanities.org/node/203792>.
39. Karttunen (1983: 127); compare <https://nahuatl.wired-humanities.org/node/173016>.
40. Fowler (1989); Sandstrom (2010a).
41. For example, Hoof (2007: 265).
42. Canger (1988: 63–64).
43. See also Provost (1975: 28–29); Berdan et al. (1996: 291–93); and Berdan and Anawalt (1997: 131–41) on Aztec incursions into the southern Huasteca region. See Ochoa (1984 [1979]) and Ochoa Salas and Jaime Riverón (2005) for authoritative summaries of Huastecan prehistory; Pérez Zavallos (2005) on the region's ethnohistory; and Santiago (2011) for a brief environmental history. The pioneering archaeological survey by Medellín Zenil (1982 [1955]) includes information on contemporary ritual practices as well.
44. Kaufman (1994: 34); Sandstrom (2000a: 88–89, fig. 6.1); and INEGI (2009: 36–41).
45. A comprehensive ethnography of the village of Amatlán can be found in Sandstrom (1991, and the Spanish translation, 2010b). Sandstrom (2006) presents a memoir of friendship in the field, and Smith-Oka (2013) presents findings of her study of women's health in Amatlán. To help provide context for the present study, Alan began ethnographic studies in Amatlán as a graduate student in the summer of 1970, with an extended stay in 1972–73, and Pamela has participated in the research work since 1974. Our residence in Amatlán during the 1985–86 academic year was supported by a Fulbright research grant; by that time significant cultural and economic changes were evident in the village. We have written about these transformations based on fieldwork undertaken during sabbatical leaves in 1990, 1997–98, and 2006–2007.
46. Sandstrom (1991: 168–69). Sandstrom (2000b) proposes that the typical Nahua residence pattern constitutes an embryonic “house society.”
47. Knab (1986) discusses such botanical metaphors used by Nahua of the Sierra Norte de Puebla. We use the designations “maize” and “corn” interchangeably throughout the book, although the English word “corn” actually designates any predominant cereal crop grown in a region. For farmers in Scotland “corn” means oats, and in England it signifies wheat, but because maize is so common in the US, North Americans call it corn.
48. Statement 1, VHS Tape 1, MP4 counter 00:11:04–00:11:41 (AILLA resource ID: 284722). Cirilo's statement is part of the commentary by ritual specialists recorded in Amatlán by videographer Benjamín Marín López in 1998. The Nahuatl recordings have been transcribed and translated into Spanish by bilingual Nahua investigators Abelardo de la Cruz and Alberta Martínez Cruz (Tapes 1, 2, 4, and 5) and Eduardo de la Cruz Cruz (Tape 3). MP3 audio files derived from the five digitized 1998 VHS video recordings along with the annotated transcripts have been preserved in the Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America (AILLA), available for download after free registration at <https://ailla.utexas.org/>; see Sandstrom and Sandstrom (1998).
49. Statement 2, VHS Tape 1, MP4 counter 01:17:35–01:19:03 (AILLA resource ID: 284722).
50. Sandstrom (1991, 2008a).
51. Harris (1979: 297–300).
52. See Nutini and Bell (1980); Nutini (1984); Sandstrom (1991: 188–92).
53. See our account of negotiating such obligations in Sandstrom and Sandstrom (2011: 28–29).
54. Statement 16, VHS Tape 1, MP4 counter 00:06:08–00:08:52 (AILLA resource ID: 284722).
55. This beginning portion of Cirilo's chant is on VHS Tape 1, MP4 counter 01:43:28–01:43:45 (AILLA resource ID: 284722); the complete audio of his chant continues through counter 01:56:55, accompanied by the Nahuatl transcript with Spanish and English draft translations.
56. Also *tlaneltokilli* (Gómez Martínez 1999b: 1), following Gómez Martínez (2002: 11); translation ours.
57. Cruz (2017: 271).
58. Hernández Cuellar (1982: 40–46, 107); Lupo (1995: 63); Gómez Martínez (2002: 97–102).
59. Following the suggestion of Alice Kehoe (2000), we now avoid labeling Nahua religious practitioners as “shamans,” even though the term has commonly been used by other anthropologists in Mesoamerica and we have used it in the past. The Siberian term properly labels an Evenki or Tungus practitioner and usually refers to someone who enters into direct contact with spirit beings with the purpose of influencing them. Nahua religious leaders do make contact with such beings in dreams, and they sometimes act as mediums through which otherworldly entities speak, although their role differs from that of the Siberian ritual specialists. Iwaniszewski (2011) likewise concludes that describing Mesoamerican practitioners as shamans is generally inappropriate.
60. See Harris and Johnson (2007: 278).
61. Martínez de la Cruz (2000: 35–36); Gómez Martínez (2002: 130–31).
62. Reyes García (1976: 128).
63. Nava Vite (2012: 12).
64. Monaghan (2003: 146).
65. Maffie (2014: 230–40).
66. Monaghan (2003: 147).
67. In 2002 Sharon convened a symposium and curated the museum exhibit at the San Diego Museum of Man on the historical and cultural significance of *mesas* among Indigenous Mesoamericans (Sharon 2003); see also Sharon (1976). Dehouve (2012) traces the contemporary use of *mesas* in religious offerings to the pre-Hispanic practice of creating seats and thrones for deities. We adopt the alternative spelling of *mezah* as a Spanish loanword following Huastecan Nahuatl orthographic conventions; see the entry in Sullivan et al. (2016: 310), a monolingual dictionary compiled by a team of Indigenous lexicographers. The entries are being added to (and amplified with English and Spanish glosses) in the

*Online Nahuatl Dictionary* (n.d.). Abelardo de la Cruz (personal communication, August 18, 2021) confirmed the nonstandard plural form *mezaz*.

68. Arturo Gómez Martínez confirmed this distinction (personal communication, October 1, 2013); also see Orr (2001), who writes about Mesoamerican processions in pre-Hispanic Oaxaca.

69. Karttunen (1983: 162, 304); the usages may not be widely familiar to contemporary Huastecan Nahuatl speakers, however.

70. Karttunen (1983: 134); Cruz (2017: 271).

71. Martín del Campo (2006: 245) observes that for Pentecostal converts among the Nahua of Chicontepec, Veracruz, the Bible embodies the actual presence of God. Perhaps the converts, who vehemently reject traditional religious beliefs and practices, retain some of the philosophy of Indigenous monism.

72. Sandstrom (2001c: 316); Gómez Martínez (2002: 98).

73. Eduardo de la Cruz Cruz (personal communication, July 15, 2021) commented that the English word “shrine,” or *sanctuario* in Spanish, does not do justice to the Nahuatl concept of *xochicalli* (“flower house”) as the site where people gather for *el costumbre* devotions. He suggested that the designations *casa de culto* (“house of worship”) or, simply, *casa de costumbre* (“house of *costumbre* practice”) might be more apt, as today the observances often take place in a corner of a ritual specialist’s private dwelling. A capacious thatch-roofed *xochicalli* used for community-wide observances once stood near the center of the dispersed settlement of Amatlán until the late 1970s or early 1980s. People called the structure a “chapel,” or *capilla* when speaking Spanish, and the permanent, concrete-block structure in Ichcacuatitla (built for use by residents and visitors on pilgrimage) fits the conventional definition of a chapel as a place of worship. Sandstrom (2000a: 66–68) discusses the physical house–home altar–shrine in the context of Nahua social organization and cosmology. Here we persist in using the English term “shrine” in the narrow sense of a structure “that serves as the focus of the performance of some ritual,” per *Merriam–Webster Unabridged* (n.d.).

74. Barrera Caraza (1996).

75. See Dow and Sandstrom (2001) for an overview of this turbulent period throughout Mesoamerica.

76. Statement 3, VHS Tape 1, MP4 counter 00:51:05–00:56:25 (AILLA resource ID: 284722).

77. Statement 4, VHS Tape 1, MP4 counter 01:07:45–1:10:45 (AILLA resource ID: 284722).

78. See Gómez Martínez (2002: 73); also Gómez Martínez and Hooft (2012: 3). For additional accounts of how Nahua ritual specialists are called to their profession in nearby Acaxochitlán, Hidalgo, see Díaz Hurtado (2015). Knab (2004) offers what he calls a fictionalized account of dream interpretation among Nahua ritual specialists in the Sierra Norte de Puebla.

79. One telling example of the problem of determining the meanings of pilgrimage in Mesoamerica is offered by Straub (1992), who writes of her difficulties in reconciling historical and ethnographic data with participants’ statements about the

Niño de Atocha shrine in San Juan de Amatitlán, Guatemala, and speculates that the sacred journey to the church is related to rain and a solar-maize deity (and similar, as we will see, to the pilgrimage to Postectli). For other statements about the particular challenges of conducting ethnographic research in Indigenous Mesoamerica, see Vogt (1976: 1–7); Harvey (1991: 95); and Lupo (1995: 17–27).

80. We discuss the transcription, translation, and interpretation some twenty years later of the videotaped orations in chapters 3 and 4. Additional collections of orations in Nahuatl recorded in the Huasteca (with Spanish and German translations) appear in Reyes García and Christensen (1976: 45–119). Báez-Jorge and Gómez Martínez (1998: 79–89) transcribe and translate Huasteca Nahuatl chants into Spanish, and Lupo (1995: 107–243) analyzes orations from the Sierra Norte de Puebla, presented in interlineal Nahuatl-Spanish. For additional sources, consult Stiles (1985); Stiles, Maya, and Castillo (1985); Hooft and Cerda Zepeda (2003); and Hooft (2007).

81. The present analysis, especially chapter 5, updates the Nahua material in Sandstrom and Sandstrom (1986), which examined the complex of ritual paper cutting among Nahua, Otomí, and Tepehua practitioners. Sandstrom (1991: 229–322) provides additional information about the Nahua practices.

82. See further discussion of the *tonalli* soul in chapter 2.

83. García Garagarza (2012: 196).

84. Gómez Martínez (2002: 75).

85. Karttunen (1983: 290).

86. Braakhuis (forthcoming: 26n42), in discussing Mesoamerican rituals and oral narrations concerning maize fertility, posits that these ritual items may be designated as beds because the paper figures correspond to infants and children. We cannot affirm that the ritual paper figures are regarded as immature beings without further field research, but the suggestion is a fruitful one to pursue. We recorded a man from a nearby village who participated in the Postectli pilgrimage in 1998 and came early to help facilitate the work of the paper cutters by folding the sheets of paper and laying out the finished cuttings on their *petates*. The speaker used the Spanish verb *acostar*, “to lay down, to put to bed,” to describe the task.

87. Provost (1975) documents this rite of reversal in an ethnographic account of a nearby Nahua community; see also Sandstrom (1991: 251); Báez-Jorge and Gómez Martínez (1998: 47–55; 2000: 90–91).

88. Authors (including us) have rendered and translated the appellations Seven Flower, Siete Flor, and Chicomexochitl inconsistently in the published literature, sometimes capitalizing initial letters, hyphenating the compound name, or substituting numerals. Generally, we prefer to put the Nahuatl names of spirit entities in lower-case italics, not only to set them off in the text but also to avoid fixing their identities as proper nouns akin to the naming conventions that writers have adopted for the ancient Aztec deities. In so doing we aim to affirm that individual spirit entities are impermanent aspects of divinity. However, as we have stated, we depart from this convention and capitalize the names of entities rendered into

written English when they figure as terms of address in oral narratives and ritual chanting (versus terms of reference in our discussion). We apologize for this deliberate inconsistency, which may pose a burden to copy editors and strike the reader as ambivalent or even disrespectful, as if we mean to put Nahua entities on some lesser level compared to those whose names are capitalized (e.g., the Christian God or Dios, named Catholic saints, etc.). This is not the case, although the uncomfortable ambiguity that results is in fact central to our argument, as we hope to make clear.

89. Schryer (1990: 182–84) argues that the widespread Chicomechitl ritual complex in the Huasteca and Sierra Norte de Puebla derives from a 1940s revitalization movement centered at San Jerónimo, Puebla. Taube (2006) summarizes the body of evidence for the shared symbolic and ceremonial complex surrounding maize. Cruz Cruz (2015) places the veneration of Chicomechitl–Seven Flower in historical context in an ethnographic account of ritual practices in Chicontepec, Veracruz.

90. Cruz (2017: 271).

91. Statement 15, VHS Tape 1, MP4 counter 00:27:39–00:28:26 (AILLA resource ID: 284722).

92. See Sandstrom and Sandstrom (1986–98) for information about the resources (cataloged as AILLA collection ID: 124452) available after free registration at <https://ailla.utexas.org/>. Peregrina Llanes (2005, 2013, 2015) undertook a linguistic analysis of seventy-five of the storytellers' narratives for his master's and doctoral theses.

93. Additional sources of oral narratives include the following (although the list is far from exhaustive): Cruz Hernández (1982: 76–81); Leynes and Olguín (1993); Güemes Jiménez (2000); and Pacheco (2014: 103) relate variants of the Chicomechitl–Seven Flower myth told in Nahua communities in the vicinity of Amatlán. Hooft and Cerda Zepeda (2003: 23–55) present the myth as related by Nahua and Teenek people in the Huasteca north of Amatlán as well as stories (2003: 57–79) about how Postectli came to be broken. Variants of the story from Hidalgo appear in Szeljak (2003); Hernández Bautista et al. (2004); Lara González (2019: 187–89); and Tiedje (2008: 102–3) relates a version from San Luis Potosí. Stiles (1986) has published five Nahua myths collected in the 1970s in Hidalgo, where many familiar motifs of the Seven Flower myth are repeated but organized differently. Additional oral narratives were recorded in a Nahua community located not far from Amatlán by INAH investigators González González and Medellín Urquiaga (2007). García de León (1968) recorded a Nahua myth of the owner of maize among Nahua of southern Veracruz. Reyes García and Christensen (1976: 45–119) and Nava Vite (2012: 23–36) provide additional Nahua narratives from the Huasteca and Puebla regions. Stresser-Péan (2009: 431–42) discusses myths about maize among people in and around the Huasteca. Raby (2007) shows how the storyteller's gender affects oral narrations among Nahua of the Rio Balsas region. Hooft (2001, 2007) discusses concepts of time and space in Huastecan Nahua myth. Taggart (1983) undertakes the systematic analysis of a corpus of oral narrations he collected in the Sierra Norte de Puebla among speakers of Nahuatl (a

regional variant of Nahuatl). By comparing cognate tales from Puebla and Spain, Taggart (1997) examines definitions of masculinity, and he further shows (Taggart 2020) how Nahua in the region modify tales of water spirits to reflect political circumstances. Williams García presents a complement of Tepehua myths (1970, 1972) and chants (1966a, 1966b, 1967) from Ixhuatlán de Madero, and Ichon (1973 [1969]: 73–93) records similar stories about maize in neighboring Totonac communities. Myths about the origin of maize recorded by Alcorn (1984: 62) and Alcorn, Edmonson, and Hernández Vidales (2006) in Teenek communities in Veracruz and San Luis Potosí also closely mirror those told in Amatlán. Hernández Ferrer (2004) analyzes parallels in the Thipaak/Dhipak–Chicomexchitl–Seven Flower story cycle and the role of children in Teenek maize rituals.

94. Martínez de la Cruz (2000: 4); Arturo Gómez Martínez (personal communication, August 20, 2014) also confirmed these terms.

95. Burkhart (1996: 46–47); Taggart (1983: 161).

96. Arturo Gómez Martínez defined this term as well (personal communication, August 20, 2014), but it may be a construction unfamiliar to Nahuatl speakers elsewhere, formed from *hauhcapatl* (“antiguo, viejo, inmemorial,” i.e., “ancient, old,” and “beyond the reach of memory, record, or tradition,” as *Merriam-Webster Unabridged* defines “inmemorial”) + *tlahtolli* (“palabra, discurso,” i.e., “word, discourse”). Abelardo de la Cruz explained the morphemes forming the word are *hauhcapān* (meaning “up” or “high”), from *hauhca* (“far,” but locally connoting “a long time ago, ancient”). An anonymous reader suggested that “ancestral words” might be a plausible alternative, and Eduardo de la Cruz Cruz added “ancestral advice.”

97. We recall the shocked reactions of women in Amatlán upon hearing our account of a Tupperware party held for friends and relatives (Sandstrom 1991: 344).

98. See this point in Lee (1950).

99. Sandstrom (2012a).

100. See the similar explications given by Myerhoff (1974: 19, 114–15) and Bierhorst (2002 [1990]: 40).

101. For this composite account of the myth of Seven Flower, we relied for the basic story outline on the narrative told to us on December 26, 1985, by Jesús Bautista Hernández, an elder of Amatlán. His audio recording (no. 107), with the Nahuatl transcript and Spanish and English draft translations are preserved at <https://ailla.utexas.edu/>; see Sandstrom and Sandstrom (1986–98) for more information about the collection and finding aids. His account is supplemented by versions we recorded in 1990 in Amatlán: Bartolo Hernández Hernández (no. 3); Domingo Lagos Hernández (nos. 5, 25, 88); Nicolás de la Cruz (no. 19); Efrén Hernández Hernández (no. 39); Silveria Hernández Hernández (nos. 40, 41); José Luis (Carlos) Hernández Magdalena (nos. 47, 96, 97); Juvencio Hernández Hernández (nos. 56, 57, 64); Guadalupe Morales (nos. 69, 70); Antonia Hernández Hernández (no. 74); and Encarnación (Cirilo) Téllez Hernández (no. 92).

102. For more about the Nahua *tzitzimitl*, see Leynes and Olguín (1993: 129); Báez-Jorge and Gómez Martínez (2000: 94);

Klein (2000); and Gómez Martínez (2009). In Sandstrom and Sandstrom (2021: 89, fig. 3.1), we illustrate a paper image of the *tzitzimitl* given to us by Arturo Gómez Martínez.

103. Chinchilla Mazariegos (2010) compares the theme of impregnation in origin myths across ancient and contemporary Mesoamerica.

104. In some versions it is a *chiquihuitl*, “carrying basket.”

105. The motif of the murderous grandmother is repeated in the sixteenth century Quiché Maya text *Popol Vuh*, in which she tries to kill the hero-twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque (Tedlock 1985: 117–30).

106. In some versions he climbs out of the top of the sweat-bath to escape the extreme heat.

107. In some versions of the story the boy asks a *peon*, a worker or field hand, to carry the ashes, and the man himself is turned into a frog when he opens the box. This motif of containers filled with stinging insects is also found in the *Popol Vuh* (Tedlock 1985: 196).

108. The tongue of a primordial earth monster features in a similar story recorded by Stresser-Péan (2009: 478), who writes that Indigenous people of the region may have believed that some lizards and crocodilians lacked tongues and the myth thus explains another natural observation.

109. In another version of the myth birds heard noises coming from within the mountain, and they flew to inform people that the sacred twins had hidden there.

110. The autochthonous figure of *tonantzin*, also translated “our sacred mother” in Sandstrom (1982: 26; 1991: 242–44), is regarded as the progenitor of the seeds, and Ichon (1973 [1969]: 93, 136–42) records similar beliefs among the neighboring Totonac. Wolf (1958) writes about the symbolic associations of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and Burkhardt (2001) examines the pre-Hispanic divinity’s Marian associations.

111. Cited in Gómez Martínez (1999a: 31).

112. See Gómez Martínez (1999a: 13–14) for a somewhat different description from the Chicontepec region of these important spirit entities. Stresser-Péan and Stresser-Péan (2008) record beliefs surrounding small rain figures associated with caves in Teenek communities to the north of Amatlán. Lorente Fernández (2011: 97) reports for Nahuas in Texcoco that rain spirits called *ahuauques* (also small in stature) are said to be the souls of human beings.

113. Statement 11, VHS Tape 3, MP4 counter 01:05:48–01:07:23 (AILLA resource ID: 284726), recorded by videographer Benjamín Marín López, and transcribed and translated by Eduardo de la Cruz Cruz.

114. See accounts in Lenz (1984: 392–98) and Sandstrom (1991: 244).

115. Medellín Zenil (1979: following page 121; 1982 [1955]: 96) presents photographs of dressed archaeological figurines from the Huasteca. Analogous stone or clay boxes have been found in archaeological excavations in the Aztec region, often decorated with images of maize, water, and/or the earth; see studies by Urcid (2009, 2011); López Luján (2009); López Luján and López Austin (2010).

116. Sacred geography is discussed in chapter 2, but see Sandstrom (1991: 239–44) for elaboration on this point and the importance of place among the Nahuas (also Sandstrom 2000b: 67; 2004; 2008b). The Quiché Maya authors of the *Popol Vuh* discuss where “the yellow corn, white corn came from,” and in conjunction with it, tell of “a good mountain, filled with sweet things, thick with yellow corn, white corn . . . the rich foods filling up the citadel named Broken Place” (Tedlock 1985: 163). *Annals of Cuauhtitlan*, compiled in 1570, tells of the young Quetzalcoatl searching for the bones of his father (Bierhorst 1992: 29), while *Legend of the Suns*, compiled in 1558 (Bierhorst 1992: 146–47), recounts the Aztec myth in which ants locate maize inside a sacred mountain, lightning bolts break open the mountain, and the ancestors perform a maize-kernel divination (a divinatory method practiced in Amatlán today and discussed in chapter 3). Taggart (1983: 85–113; 1997: 47–48; 2020) provides detailed symbolic analyses of related myths among Nahuatl speakers of the Sierra Norte de Puebla, where lightning-bolt spirit entities rescued maize from inside a sacred mountain. Velázquez Galindo and Rodríguez González (2019: 80–81) record similar beliefs in the same region.

117. Braakhuis (2021).

118. Mikulska (2015: 81, 96, 107, 121) also links the identity of Seven Flower to Xochipilli in her study of the ancient codices.

119. The myth explains why Seven Flower’s deer-father, once brought back to life, bounded away from his mother Tonantzin, to be forever hunted and to return home only as meat to feed the family (Braakhuis 2010: 161–62); Braakhuis (2021) credits Seven Flower with the invention of fishing. See also Ichon (1973 [1969]: 87) and Stresser-Péan (2009: 386), who discuss Totonac stories of the maize spirit’s adventures. Myerhoff (1974) links the Huichol deer spirit to mythic accounts of the transition in ancient times from a hunting-gathering way of life to that of settled agriculture.

120. Abelardo de la Cruz explained (personal communication, April 27, 2018) that the verb *tlepānitta*, “to respect,” incorporates the morphemes *tlen* (“that” or “which”), *ipān* (“on” or “upon”), and *itta* (“to see” or “to look”). The root verb *itta* is a component that can also be translated “to look at oneself; to see something or someone” (Karttunen 1983: 108), and so a literal gloss might be “to see or look upon something or someone.” A further insight may be found in noun and verb forms of the English word “regard” (“an aspect to be taken into consideration”)—a synonym for “respect” related to “esteem” (as to hold in “high regard”), and “to look” (“to regard favorably”), defined in *Merriam-Webster Unabridged*. In the usage of *tlatlepanittaliztli* we have documented in Amatlán, the English connotation is something closest to “that which looks upon, sees, or regards things respectfully”; a more straightforward translation might be “respectfulness.” One can see expressions of the concept in constructions using *tlepānitta* in the ritual specialists’ chants, which we discuss further in chapters 3 and 4. Abelardo de la Cruz commented that the Sierra Norte de Puebla term for respect that Taggart (2008: 188–91) reports—*icnoyot* in the Nahuatl dialect—may incorporate ideas about sibling bonds or brotherhood with ideas

of compassion, both honing closely to the regard one feels for others. The Huastecan Nahuatl morphemes *icnī* (“someone’s sibling”) and, by contrast, *icnōtl* (“orphan,” or someone “humble, worthy of compassion and aid”), based on *icnēliā*, meaning “to have strong feeling for a person” (see the entry in *Online Nahuatl Dictionary* [n.d.] at <https://nahuatl.wired-humanities.org/node/203704>) or “to look after one’s welfare, to do a favor for someone, to be charitable to someone” (Karttunen 1983: 94) all point to an important semantic domain involving respectful relations. Additional sources that explore this critical area of Nahua understanding include Sandstrom (1991: 255); Hooft (2007: 223); Taggart (2007: 91–92); Lorente Fernández (2011: 204–5); and Maffie (2014: 523–27).

121. See Báez-Jorge and Gómez Martínez (1998: 36, 69) and Gómez Martínez (2004b: 258–59) on this element of the story.

We also report a ritual specialist’s assertion that Totiotzin ordered the mountaintop severed to prevent ants and other insects from reaching the sky realm (Sandstrom 1991: 241–42).

122. Additional stories preserved in AILLA that contribute to the Seven Flower story include: “The Hill Postectli” (no. 3), told by Bartolo Hernández Hernández; “A Boy and His Grandmother” (nos. 25, 88), by Domingo Lagos Hernández; “A Woman and a Boy” (no. 39), by Efrén Hernández Hernández; “The Witch” (no. 47), by José Luis (Carlos) Hernández Magdalena; and “A Girl and a Flea” (nos. 70, 74), by Guadalupe Morales and Antonia Hernández Hernández, respectively. The recordings and documentation can be accessed online or downloaded after free registration at <https://ailla.utexas.edu/>; see Sandstrom and Sandstrom (1986–98).