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Náhuatl Erotica¹

As poetic as it was tragic, forceful, and revealing, what the colonial Maya scribes wrote has come down to us in the *Chilam Balam de Chumayel*: “To castrate the Sun: that is what the foreigners came here to do.”² It could well be thought that, as a result of that castration, several facets of the Mesoamerican cultural prism have since then been eclipsed, buried, and others hidden away in the chest of veiled day-to-day events. . . . Undoubtedly one of those facets, among the most important, was sensuality and, in particular, sensuality linked to eroticism.

In his most recent book, the great Miguel León-Portilla gives us a glimpse inside, not Pandora’s box, but Aphrodite’s chest, or rather, that of her counterparts Xochiquetzal and Tlazoltéotl. As is well known, in the Nahua universe, that chest has two compartments with two sacred mistresses. The former is considered, together with Xochipilli, the divinity of love and the flowers that evoke it, while the second was held to be the goddess of sensual pleasure and voluptuousness. Therefore, while Xochiquetzal protected pregnant women and midwives, Tlazoltéotl was the patroness of the *tlatlamianime*, the “ones who create joy,” as well as those who had illicit sexual relations, activities unrelated by principle with fecundity.

The chest that opens this original and particularly pleasant book by Don Miguel, whose texts are presented in bilingual versions, allows us to catch sight of those open corollas of those who become the owners of half the night when Tlazoltéotl arrives. This is described in the splendid fragment of the “Himno de Atamalqualoyan” (Hymn of Atamalqualoyan), which begins by saying, “Xochitl noyolo...” (Flowers is my heart)...

Flowers is my heart: the corolla is open,
 It is the owner of half the night.

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Our mother has already arrived, Tlazoltéotl has already arrived.

Does, perchance, the young prince lie down

in the house of the night, in the house of the night?

The one who lies down, the one who lies down, lies down:

now with my hand I make the woman turn,

now I am the one who lies her down.^{3,4}

And if our mother Tlazoltéotl is pleased to give us the gift of her visit in the middle of the night, that is not the only hour that we may meet with the being also called Ixcuinan and Tlaelcuani, “Mother who becomes the owner of the face,” since, as León-Portilla reminds us, citing the *Florentine Codex*, she was called the “devourer of filth”:

Because before her face, it was said, before her, all vanity was told . . . all the actions of the flesh, no matter how horrific, no matter how depraved, nothing was hidden from her out of shame. . . . It was said that Tlazoltéotl caused the dust and waste, the works of the flesh, Tlazoltéotl fostered them. And only she discharged, she purified, relieved; she washed, she bathed; in her hands were the waters, the green waters, the yellow waters. Before her the heart was known, before her face, people’s hearts were purified.⁵

Included in this book/chest (which, when opened, spills out sheaves of text filled with carnal games and vanities carefully chosen by the author, and suggestively and very attractively etched by Joel Rendón) is, among others, the famous story of Tohuenyo. He is none other than the warlock god Titlacahuan Tezcatlipoca, who, after assuming the guise of a Huastec merchant, began selling chili peppers in the Tula market without a truss, “wandering around nude, with his thing hanging out,” causing the daughter of Huémac “to become anxious” (who, it is also noted, was sought after by many Toltecs, because she was “*muy buena*,” “very desirable”).⁶ After seeing him, she became ill, “feeling poorly from Tohuenyo’s little bird,” saying that she

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would not get well until she cohabited with him —not without first sending him to bathe, be anointed and dressed, and have his hair cut.. Having done so, “the women got well in the moment.”

Another story shows that desire is not only for the young: two old women considered libidinous, after being surprised about to commit adultery with some young men, were questioned by Nezahualcōyotl (1402-1472) about whether they still desired “the things of the flesh” like when they were young:

Our ladies,
¿What is this I hear?
What is it you can tell me?
Do you, by chance, still desire the things of the flesh?
Are you not satisfied now,
Being as you are?

They responded that, in contrast with the old men, who “have no appetite for the flesh because they have already lost their potency, having spent it all in a rush and being left with nothing,” women never tired of it since, “there is in us like a cave, a ravine. Just wait. . . because its office is to receive.”⁷

Even today, as though echoing that ancient Mesoamerican idea, the jocular ritual language spoken by the Tzotzil from Chamula during Carnival uses euphemisms like “hole,” “cave,” and “place” for “vagina,” and “bone” and “muscle” for “penis.” They recite,

Stretch out, bone! Stretch out, muscle!
Remember your place, bone! Remember your place, muscle!
Don't leave your cave, muscle! Don't leave your cave empty,
bone!⁸

The tone is imperative, as though urging them to battle. And, in that sense, I could not help but remember that the first Tzeltal dictionary we have, written by Friar Domingo de Ara around 1560, translates “matchmakers”

as “*yhcoghel*,” which, literally, means “for the battle.” But another term, “*ghmonoghel*,” part of which is “*mon*,” or “carry in your arms, like a mother would a child”; and in the entry for “soothe,” we find that “*qmon*” means the same as “*yhcoghon*,” or “call, like the procuress, to sin.” Battle and soothing, an expressive binomial for carnal love.⁹

It is to these desirable battles that the *Chalca cihuacatl* (The Song of the Women of Chalco) refers. Don Miguel calls it the “song of enchantments, mocking, and tickling,” in which the poet Aquiahuatzin, a native of Amecameca (c. 1430-c. 1490), has the women of Chalco challenge the *tlatoani*, or chief, Axayácatl to a struggle that he can only win if he is sexually well endowed. Tradition has it that the song pleased the lord of Tenochtitlan so much from the first time he heard it in his palace, sung by a young Chalco resident, born in the year 13 Cane (1479), that he began to dance. And, thankful, he showered the singer with gifts (blankets, sandals decorated with turquoise, cacao, quetzal feathers . . .). And, what is more, chronicler Chimalpahin writes that “he made this song his own. When he wanted to feel happy, he always had it sung.”¹⁰

The erotic poetic assault continues throughout the book's seven parts, and the reader will discover it as he/she moves through the battlefield the book becomes. I will merely point out that it begins with an invitation to women to go in search of certain flowers, flowers “of water and of fire,” in *atl, tlachinolli*, flowers of the shield that evoke war, and it continues with the challenge to “little Axayácatl” to see if he is capable of “making” what makes me a woman “erect,” and that he do it little by little, in the manner of a charge and withdrawal, as corresponds to a true battle: “But no, no, do not deflower yet, little man. . . .” A companion in bed, intertwined and encircled by flowers, the *tlatoani* is invited to frolic on the exquisite mat while the female warrior, “with flowers the color of the bird of fire” makes her womb sound and offers herself up to the perforator.

Xolotzin. . . “Little companion, my little boy, you, Lord, little Axayácatl, we are going to be together, settle yourself at my side, make your man-being speak.” “Flavorful is your seed, you yourself are flavorful.” “Stir me like corn dough. . . Are you not an eagle, an ocelot? Do you not call yourself that, my little boy?” “Perhaps that is how your heart wants it, like that, little by little, let us tire ourselves. . . .” “Let us have pleasure on your flower-strewn mat, where you exist, little companion, little by little give

yourself over to sleep, be at peace, my little boy, you, Lord Axayácatl.”¹¹

It becomes clear to us that “playful Eros,” whom León-Portilla mentions, delights in Greek and Roman beds as he does on mats covered with quetzal feathers or simple woven cypress pallets when we carefully review the ancient and current Mesoamerican concepts and practices. It is impossible to dwell on it here, but just as an example, since the poem *Cococuícatl*, or turtle dove song, (in which the women joy-makers speak), mentions the “Otomi woman Champotzin,” I allow myself to remember that the Otomí of today conceive of the energy necessary for reproducing the universe as polarized in the form of two complementary male and female entities. According to Jacques Galinier, this would explain to a great extent the generalized sexualization and erotization that characterize their way of understanding the universe: a vast allegory centered on the topic of cosmic fertility, which even spills over into the language. There is a reason the labia majora are called mouth or sacred lips; the clitoris, the sacred eminence; and menstrual blood, blood of the moon.¹² The skin is understood as a kind of wrapping, shell, or bark that envelops the life force; this is why its “degeneration” anticipates the resurgence of life, like the wrinkled foreskin before an erection. The penis, in turn, is considered a cultural analogy for man, just like the individual has a life cycle: growth, climax, and decline. Without an erection, it is like a little boy; during the sex act, it arrives at its apex, and in death and after coitus, it prefigures the first ancestor: aged, wilted, spent.¹³

León-Portilla points out from the very first lines of the preface that the life and art of the indigenous cultures have lacked “the presence of erotic themes. As if the rigid ethics of the Indians, in this case the Nahua, had made it impossible for them to find inspiration and joy in love and sex.”

As Don Miguel points out, the texts in this book contradict that idea, as well as the idea that sexual enjoyment was conceived as one of the gifts of the gods and it was spoken of directly. This can also be seen in the *huehuetlatolli*, brief speeches that the pre-Hispanic Nahua foisted on their children to instruct and educate them. One of them says,

Listen well, my daughter, child of mine: the Earth is not a pleasant place [but]. . . so that we do not exist amidst tears

forever, so that we Men do not succumb to sadness, he, Our Lord, deigned to give us laughter, slumber, and our sustenance, our strength, our brightness. And this more: the earthly [sex], so reproduction could happen. All this intoxicates life on Earth so no one wanders a-weeping.¹⁴

We should also remember that other *huehuetlatolli* make it clear that the Nahua culture has rules and precepts about exercising sexuality. These included, for example, the value of temperance and discretion, like the one that warns youngsters, “even if you have an appetite to eat, resist; resist your heart until you are a perfect, sturdy man; note that if they open the maguey when it is young to extract the honey, it has neither substance nor does it drip honey; it is lost.”¹⁵ It is not for nothing that the evangelizers appreciated and recovered texts like these.

In any case, it is clear that if its divine origin marks the myth, linguistics makes the earthly nature of sex obvious: *tlaltipacáyotl*, “what belongs on the surface of the Earth.” From here we can deduce that being divine and pleasant in nature did not make him absolutely perfect and clean. It was thought that it cleansed forces of harmful, dishonorable impurities, while what was understood by “impure” varied according to social standing, sex, and marital status. For example, plebeians (those who were dissolute and incapable of governing themselves) were permitted greater freedom. It was also thought that fornication lessened the strength of the *tonalli*, on which the power of the government largely depended.¹⁶ Also, copulation of a married man with a single woman was not considered adultery, but the reverse, a single man with a married woman, was punishable by death. This proves that the objective was not so much to defend the integrity of the home, but the right of the husband over his wife’s sex life.^{17, 18}

The need to maintain a balanced population, in continual danger due to the death of men in battle and women in childbirth, translated into the insistence on monogamy; a repudiation of abortion (punished by death), sterile women, celibacy, separation, homosexuality, dissolute women, bawds, and prostitutes (considered “dead,” just like the adulteress). In fact, all the latter were conceived of as beings who had lost their human condition, and society resorted to threats of diseases in order to channel people’s sexuality.¹⁹

But, channeled or not, sexuality and eroticism in poetry were sung. We find this in the book *Tlaltónayan atla ca*

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tempan. . . , “Where the earth warms, on the edge of the water, the flowers have come to stand straight, where the rushes are, playing the flute. I, beautiful bird, in the hands of someone alive, I am only a woman.” “I, woman, beautiful vagina, my heart interlaces the orange rattle flower.”

The many ways of interlacing flowers and rattles would change in tone, rhythm, and melody, and went from singing aloud to become a cyphered language, a whispered melody, and even hidden writing in the colonial era—through-out which, despite many attacks, it managed to survive—and are undoubtedly a topic of enormous interest, but unfortunately, I cannot go into it here. However, I do want to mention at least three points:

1. The way in which the Spanish Crown and the Church attempted to apprehend several of these concepts and practices (all the better to more easily change them) can be seen, even if only indirectly, in the linguistic and doctrinal works, usually written by evangelizing friars. These works, despite all their deficiencies and biases, are invaluable aids in approaching topics like the human body, sensorial realities, and the reproduction of indigenous peoples in the colonial era, from the vantage point and ethics of their conquerors, it is true. But, tangentially, they also inform us of some Mesoamerican concepts and attitudes or even about the indigenous resistance to accepting certain concepts of European origin.

Thus, to cite one example, the famous *Confesionario* in Náhuatl by Friar Alonso de Molina, written in 1569, mentions “coveting” another body, extramarital relations, “touchings” that were considered “impure,” the use of or being a procurer, homosexual practices, marriages made not “to have children . . . , but only for mundane reasons or for dirty delight,” infidelity, adultery, having sex during menstruation, or by non-vaginal means, etc.²⁰

2. The subjected indigenous peoples came to know that, in addition to the transgressions of the body and the whims of the soul that their forbears had known, in the Christian view, it was possible to sin not only in “practice,” but even in the realm of volition. It was no longer necessary to actually carry out—or even attempt—this or that act in order to sin. It sufficed to want it or, having committed it involuntarily (as with nocturnal emissions), take pleasure in it. Time and again confessors are alerted: they had to specifically and repeatedly ask penitents about this, since the Indians rarely considered desires or thoughts as sins.

3. Thanks to the efforts of those Mesoamericans who learned to express themselves through the alphabet, letters, and ink of the new masters, as did the indigenous and mestizo chroniclers and other scribes, today we can get a glimpse of ancient wisdom, transmitted from generation to generation, and that migrated from the verbal arts to written texts. Some of these are enormously beautiful, such as, just to cite a few examples from the Maya world, such eloquent works as the *Cantares de Dzitbalché* (The Song of Dzitbalché) or *El ritual de los Bacabes* (The Rite of the Bacabes),²¹ where we see the erotic mixed with the religious and even with the esoteric, since the pleasure that accompanies the acts of impregnation brings with it not only the permanence of the group, but of the whole universe. Not in vain do the ancient Maya stories like the *Popol Vuh* speak to us of generations that were successively destroyed by their inability to maintain the deities, who were in turn, the sustainers of the cosmos.

I will close by citing two fragments of the *Cantares de Dzitbalché* that, together with the texts recovered by Don Miguel León-Portilla in this, his last book, help us to glimpse what the Mesoamerican sensual world retains of pleasure.

The first is part of Canto 4, *Coox-H-C-Kam-Niicte*, “Let us go to the reception of the flower,” a clear allusion to our topic, since, among the Maya, the flower (particularly the frangipani) is the symbol of sensuality. The poem reads, “All the beautiful women [have in] their faces pure laughter and laughter, while their hearts jump in their breasts . . . because they know that they will give their feminine virginity to those they love. Sing ye the Flower!”²²

The second fragment is from Canto 7, *Kay Nicté*, The Canto of the Flower, and refers to a ceremony that had to be performed on a moonlit night in a *haltun* (a natural well in live rock), where women used to go—and it is said in several towns that they still go—, led by an old woman “to make their lover return if he has gone away, or ensure that he remain near.” Even without the euphoria of the Mayan text, the canto still breathes sensuality and beauty:

The beautiful moon has risen over the forest; it ignites in the heavens where it remains suspended to illuminate the Earth, the entire forest. The air and its perfume sweetly come. . . . We have arrived inside the forest where no one will see what we have come to do. We have brought the frangipani flower, the *chucum* (*Harvardia albicans*) flower, the jasmine flower. . . . We brought the copal, the *cañita* ziiit vine, and the tortoise shell. . . . new shoes; everything new, including the ribbons that tie our tresses to touch us with the water lily; and also the humming shell and the old woman.

We are here, here in the heart of the forest, beside the well in the rock, waiting until the beautiful star that fumes over the forest comes out.

Take off your clothes; release your tresses; be as you came into the world, virgins, beautiful women. . . .²³

We should not be surprised that through ceremonies like this one, which engendered the senses by intertwining privileged landscapes, with music sweet to the ears, dress pleasant to the touch, perfumes of flowers and copal, and the luminosity of desire, the Mesoamericans could feel, as the sixteenth-century Tzeltal poetically said, *Nopquinal xcabi*, or meshed with the world.

Nothing is left to say except to thank Don Miguel León-Portilla, who, through this book, allows us to also mesh with the perpetual pleasure that is life. **MM**

Day of the Holy Cross, 2019

Notes

- 1 This article is a commentary on the book *Erótica náhuatl*, by Miguel León-Portilla (Mexico City: Artes de México and El Colegio Nacional, 2018).
- 2 Antonio Mediz Bolio, trans., *Libro del Chilam Balam de Chumayel* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1973).
- 3 I will cite the page(s) where the longer quotes can be found, so anyone who wants specifically to check the Náhuatl version (which I refer to only rarely) can do so. In order not to saturate the article with notes, I will not cite the page where shorter quotes are to be found, but they will always be put in quotes.
- 4 León-Portilla, *op. cit.*, p. 106.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 103.
- 6 León-Portilla notes that the expression “*muy buena*” (literally, “very good,” but meaning very sexy or desirable), like several others, many of which are still in current use, may well have links to what we know today as “*albur*” or the game/competition of double entendre.
- 7 León-Portilla, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-95.
- 8 Victoria Reifler Bricker, *Humor ritual en la altiplanicie de Chiapas*, Jaime Sabines, trans. (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1986), p. 42.
- 9 Mario Humberto Ruz, *Copanaguastla en un espejo. Un pueblo tzeltal en el Virreinato* (Mexico City: Conacyt, 1992), p. 171.
- 10 León-Portilla, *op. cit.*, p. 49.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 53-77.
- 12 Jacques Galinier, *La mitad del mundo. Cuerpo y cosmos en los rituales otomíes* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1990), pp. 635-655.
- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 189 and on.
- 14 Alfredo López Austin, *Cuerpo humano e ideología. Las concepciones de los antiguos nahuas* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1980), I, p. 276.
- 15 Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia verdadera de las cosas de la Nueva España* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1979).
- 16 López Austin, *op. cit.*, p. 447ss.
- 17 López Austin, *op. cit.*, p. 346ss. Another example of the domination of values understood as virile is that polygamy was allowed for distinguished warriors who had relations with women participating in the festival of Tlaxochimaco. Women, however, were considered the carriers of noxious forces tending toward imbalance.
- 18 Alfredo López Austin, “La sexualidad entre los antiguos nahuas,” Pilar Gonzalbo Aispuru, comp., *Historia de la familia* (Mexico City: Instituto Mora/UAM, 1993), pp. 88 and on. In López Austin’s view, the pre-Hispanic Nahuas thought, “All the sexual sins and excesses caused harm to the body: the illness of sin led to madness; the sinner caused damage with noxious emanations around his innocent fellows; girls who had lost their virginity would suffer the rotting of their genitals; sexual excess led to physical ruin, to consumption; the use of aphrodisiacs caused uninterrupted ejaculation and, with that, death.”
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 88ss.
- 20 Friar Alonso de Molina, *Confesionario mayor en la lengua mexicana y castellana* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1972), pp. 30-31. And when writing of the fifth commandment, he mentions that the female penitent should be asked if she had hurt the male during coitus “with harmful intent,” causing him to become ill or die.
- 21 Ramón Arzápalo, trans. and ed., *El ritual de los Bacabes* (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Filológicas, UNAM, 1984).
- 22 Martha Ilia Nájera Coronado, *Libro de los Cantares de Dzitbalché en la tradición religiosa mesoamericana*, Alfredo Barrera Vázquez, trans. (Mexico City: UNAM, 2007), p. 149.
- 23 *Ibid.*, pp. 156-159.