Visiting the Calvario at Mitla, Oaxaca

a critical look at the continuity
of a religious practice

William R. Arfman

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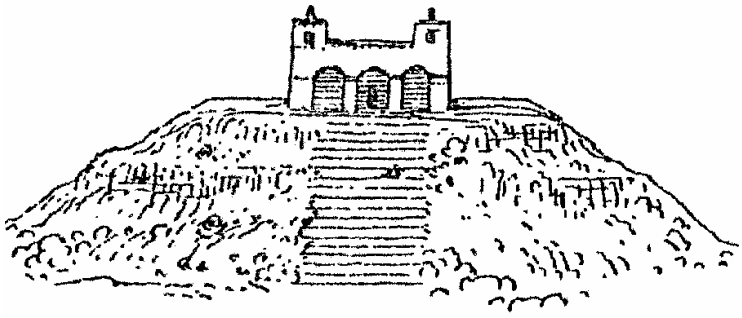

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Preface

Although my interest in religion as something that can be both appreciated and questioned can be traced back to my upbringing, the subject did not gain academic appeal to me until I followed some courses on the anthropology of religion and religious sciences to complement my archaeology programme. At first I saw these courses as a thing on the side, but quickly I learned that even in archaeology, and especially in the field of Mesoamerican studies, these ideas could easily be applied. After having written my B.A. thesis on the possibilities of applying modern concepts of ritual in archaeological analysis, I decided I wanted my M.A. thesis to be less general and aimed more at studying the historical background of a specific modern day case. But until I visited Mitla with some fellow students and two professors during a research project on present day market systems in Oaxaca, I had no idea what case would be suitable. However on that day, after having seen the main monuments, we also paid a short visit to the Calvario chapel (Fig. 1). Being there, everything fell in its place. The burning candles, fresh flowers, heaps of cacao beans and bundles of unclear content were such clear evidence of rituals taking place regularly in this early colonial chapel standing on a pre-colonial adobe pyramid right in the middle of a town overwhelmed by tourists. I had found my topic. Luckily one of my professors, dr. Laura van Broekhoven, was there to force me to overcome my anxiety to replace my planned week of vacation with a week of orientation in Mitla. For this I am incredibly thankful to her. Already during this orientation week when I stayed in a hotel, the owners, a talkative middle aged lady and her elderly mother who always spoke Zapotec[1] with each other, turned out to be interesting and useful conversation partners for which I thank them. During the rest of the week I mostly had casual conversations with Mitleños I happened to meet, such as a bike-cab driver or two guys who thought I could sell them marijuana. Although I did go up to the Calvario several times during the week I never encountered any pilgrims there. These visits did however bring me into contact with two ladies, a mother and daughter, that owned the *Miscelanea*[2] shop right across the street

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[1] Zapotec: one of the many indigenous languages spoken in the state of Oaxaca. Being from the Oto-Manguean language family it is often argued that in fact Zapotec is a language group which consist of several languages such as the Valley Zapotec spoken in Mitla. Zapotecs or Zapotecans is also used to refer the indigenous group speaking the language. Throughout this article the Spanish name for the language and the indigenous group is used and not the Zapotec one for sake of convenience since many spellings of the latter exist while the name Zapotec is widely known.

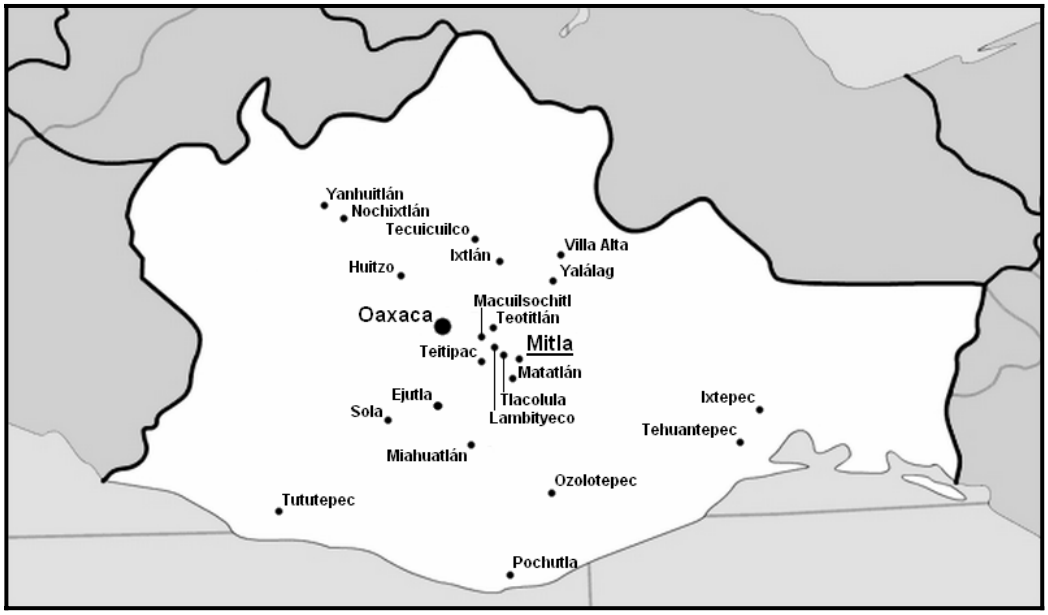
[2] Miscelanea: a type of small convenience store

Figure 1: The Adobe pyramid with the Calvario chapel on it (Picture by Arfman 2005).

from the adobe pyramid with the Calvario upon it. During my several visits to their shop we talked about such things as where the people came from that made offerings at the Calvario, for what reasons they came, when they came, why I was interested in it, what the weather was like in the Netherlands, what kind of food the Dutch ate, and so on. During my last visit to their house they even invited me to come and stay with them when I would return the next year as I had said I planned to. Luckily for me this invitation still stood when I returned in 2005. I was immediately introduced to the family, which consisted of three generations living in several rooms around a central patio. I was put into a temporarily spare room of my own, with a view on the Calvario. It was this perfect location that made research possible in a way that I would not have dared wish for. For this as well as for answering all my strange questions, putting up with my troublesome vegetarian ways and providing a home away from home in every sense I would like to thank the Olivera-Martínez family, especially Mari Elena, Josefina, Porfirio, Juan, Sergio, Sandra and Anna. Gratitude also goes out to Annemieke for being my travel companion, support and motivator in those days. Likewise I would like to thank all the pilgrims that so generously sacrificed some of their precious time in Mitla to make me understand. An understanding that I also could not have attained without the advice of Manuel Rios who send me to Abelardo, of the cultural youth organisation Mictlan, who was a great help and arranged for me to

see Gildardo, the alderman of culture who was a virtual font of knowledge. For his council and advice regarding my subject, the structure of this thesis and the actual text much appreciation goes out to my professor dr. Maarten Jansen. For standing by me during the writing phase even though she was going through hard times herself, as well as for sharing her life with me I want to thank Corinna. For similarly supporting me, both mentally and financially, as well as for raising me as they did I am grateful to my parents Gerrit and Leida. Admiration goes out to my little sister Annemiek, a continuing source of inspiration and laughter, and my friends for putting up with my yearly summertime absence. For co-financing this publication I would also like to thank my late great-uncle Hendrik for his generous gift.

Finally I would like to express my gratitude to the two funds that were decisive in making the fieldwork component of this thesis possible: the LUF International Study Fund and the Curator Funds of the Leiden University.



Map 1: The state of Oaxaca, Mexico with relevant place names.

Introduction

> "*[...] its language is zapotec, its original and primitive name was that of Liubá (which means grave), afterwards [...] the mexicans gave it the name of Miquitlan (of which the meaning in their language was hell or place of sadness), it is evident that both names have much in common with these meanings; given its various grave works, the sterility of its mountains, the little amenity of its valleys, and finally its scarcity of water*[3]." (Dupaix 1969 [1820]:121).

It was with these words that San Pablo Villa de Mitla, a Mexican village located 42 kilometers east of the state capital Oaxaca, and its elaborate Postclassic ruins were made known to the world in the early 19th century (Map 1). Written down by retired military captain and pioneering archaeologist Guillermo Dupaix, they are part of his detailed descriptions of the various archaeological monuments he was commissioned to describe by King Charles IV of Spain (Dupaix 1969 [1820]:2). Largely also due to the highly realistic drawings made of these monuments by professor of art and architecture José Luciano Castañeda, who accompanied Dupaix on his three expeditions, these sparked an enormous increase of interest in the Mitla monuments. This increase of interest eventually also lead to an increase of researchers visiting the town, from the American archaeologist William Henry Holmes (Holmes 1895) to the Mexican historian Nicolas León (1901) and the German iconographer Eduard Seler (1904). Later, between 1929 and 1933, the American ethnographer Elsie Clews Parsons visited Mitla three times to do extensive research for her seminal ethnographic work on the town. Originally being a sociologist concerned with the position of women within marriage, Parsons later became interested in ethnography. Although mostly a Pueblo-specialist she decided to go to Mexico because she had gotten interested in 'acculturation, with what the Indian culture took from the Spanish' (Parsons 1936:xii-xiii). In the introduction to her first chapter, titled 'Town and Population', Parsons gives an explanation of the meaning of the town's names that, unlike that of Dupaix, is based on local tradition:

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[3]"... su nombre propio y primitivo fue el de Liubá (el que significa sepultura) [...] la mejicana le pusieron el de Miquitlan (cuya voz en su lengua vale por infierno o lugar de tristeza) es evidente que ambos nombres, tienen mucha analogía con éstas voces; pues sus varia obras sepulcrales, la esterilidad de sus cerros, la poca amenidad de sus valles, y ultimamente su escasez de agua ..." Translation by Arfman.

"*The Mitleyenos themselves tell you that the ancient Zapotecan "kings" were buried at Mitla, even when they lived elsewhere. The subterranean buildings of Mitla and near by they believe to be royal burial places. Besides, the souls, las ánimas, of al Zapotecan people, from valley and mountain come to Mitla, "their earth-strong pueblo" (shtipgiechlu). Lyoba' (Place of Tombs) is the old Zapotecan name, which is still used in the mountain towns. Mictlan, or Mitlan, was the Aztec equivalent.*" (Parsons 1936:1-2)

Throughout her book, appropriately titled 'Mitla: Town of the Souls', this tradition of the souls coming to Mitla comes back when she talks about such things as pilgrims from the mountain towns making offerings to the souls at the ruins or at the graveyard, stories about going to subterranean chambers of the ruins to speak to deceased family members and the descriptions of the All Souls ceremonies.

Of course this very complete, but also very readable ethnographic work after some time had the effect that many such books have: it lured other ethnographers to also visit the town. Charles Leslie, who stayed in Mitla from May 1953 to May 1954 together with his wife and four-years-old son, was the first of these ethnographers. Coming to study the worldview of the townspeople he chose Mitla precisely because the 'general ethnography had already been recorded' (Leslie 1960:1). Finding that the Mitleños were most of all concerned with becoming civilized Leslie has the following to say about the traditions that Parsons based the title of her book on:

"*Parts of the rituals of death and of All Souls', and some narratives generally known by townspeople still referred to the legend of the town of the souls; but these references, in both the rituals and the narratives, were casual and disconnected. In some respects, at least, formal education and more intense contact with the larger society had narrowed the range of events that Mitleños conceived to be possible so that many elements in the traditional accounts of the long-ago seemed to them to be highly improbable.*" (Leslie 1960:22)

Going by these words one would not expect that 'the decayed legend of Mitla as the town of the souls' (Leslie 1960:22) would survive for much longer. However ethnographic fieldwork by Eveline Dürr for 12 months in 1991 and 1992, focusing on the cultural change in Mitla from the times of Parsons to the early nineties points in a different direction (Dürr 1996: 3). In her description for the All Souls' festivities she says the following:

"*The Mitleños have the conviction, that all the dead of the world come to Mitla, thus also the ones that did not die here. This conviction is found in many other villages of the valley as well, and Mitla is regarded there also as an important center for the deceased. On account thereof many visitors from other towns can already be found in Mitla about a month before the actual*

feast days. [...]. In addition the pilgrims compose a list with the names of their deceased family members and go with it to the archaeological ruins, to visit the subterranean graves. There they request Death, "jälgujt[4]*", to give the deceased license, to be allowed to visit them in November.*[5]" (Dürr 1996:201-202)

That in fact these practices are very alive even today became clear from my own fieldwork in Mitla during two day visits in June and an orientation week in July of 2004, as well as six weeks in July and August of 2005. It was during the first of these day visits, which could actually better be described as a tourist trip, that my eye was caught by a small chapel on top of an adobe pyramid that was highly visible from the main archaeological zone as it towered above the surrounding buildings. It turned out to be the town's Calvario, i.e. a chapel with three crosses that represents mount Golgotha where Christ died, and inside it all manner of offerings were placed such as flowers, candles, cacao beans and small bundles of unknown material. When I came back for a week in July people told me that these offerings were placed there by pilgrims from the entire region for the souls of their deceased loved ones, to ask them for small favours. They told me these people came to Mitla because they believed that the souls of everybody that died went there. Returning for a longer period in 2005 I discovered to my amazement that not only were there pilgrims visiting the Calvario to make their offerings almost every day, but that on many days there even where several groups. And all of this right under the noses of all those tourists that during the day stream in and out of their tour busses to see the famous mosaics on the main ruins (Fig. 2) or the Pillar of Death in one of the subterranean tombs where you can measure how many years you still have to live.

These offerings at the Calvario are also mentioned in Mexican archaeologist Nelly Robles' book on the various social actors involved in archaeological resource management in Oaxaca (Robles 2000:7.51). About the practices themselves, both at Monte Alban and Mitla, she states that they could be interesting from the standpoint of site interpretation, especially the ones from Mitla as they 'appear to be more consistent with ancient rites' (Robles 2000:7.51). She stresses however that not much is known about these offerings or the people placing them:

"*The theme and practice of such religious or magical rites in both zones is beyond the scope of this study, nor has it been the subject of research by*

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[4] Yälgujt: muerte (according to Stubblefield&Stubblefield 1991:129)

[5] "Die Mitleños sind der Überzeugung, daβ alle Toten der Welt nach Mitla kommen, also auch diejenigen, die nicht hier gestorben sind. Diese Überzeugung ist in vielen anderen Dörfern des Tales ebenfalls verbreitet, und Mitla gilt auch dort als ein bedutendes Zentrum für die Verstorbenen. Aus diesem Grund finden sich viele Auswärtige schon ungefähr einen monat vor den eigentlichen Festtagen in Mitla ein. [...]. Auβerdem erstellen die Pilger eine Liste mit den Namen ihrer verstorbenen Familienmitglieder und begeben sich damit in die archäologischen Ruinen, um die unterirdichen Gräber zu besuchen. Dort bitten sie den Tod, "jälgujt", den Verstorbenen die Erlaubnis zu gewähren, sie im November aufsuchen zu dürfen." Translation by Arfman.

others. Nevertheless, the remains they leave behind remind us that there is a group, until now essentially anonymous, with interests in the sites far different from those discussed here." (Robles 2000:7.52)

It is this gap in research that this thesis will seek to address.

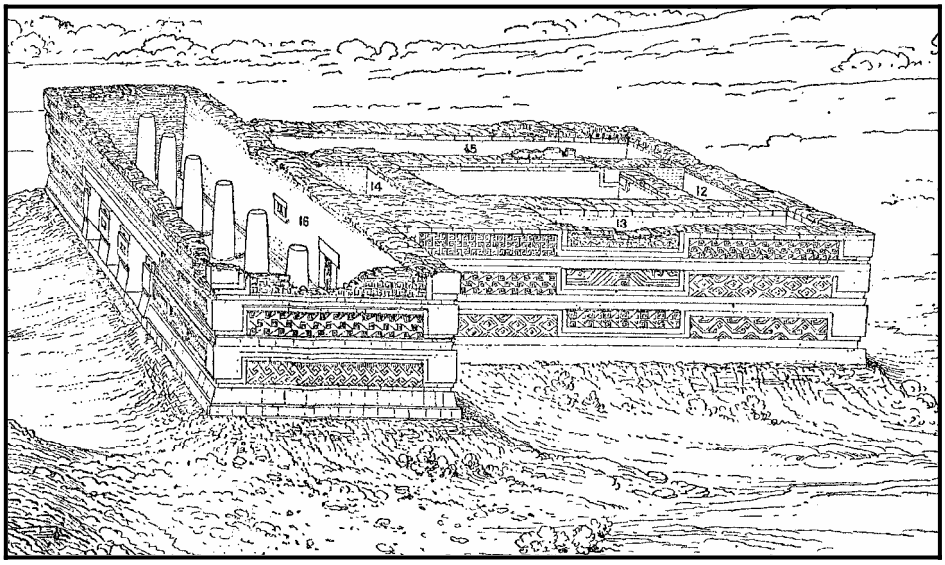

Figure 2: The Columns Group with its elaborate stone mosaic designs (Holmes 1895).

Chapter 1

Objectives and Methods

1.1 Research Question

The object of this thesis and the associated research was already mentioned at the end of the introduction as an issue that in previous works has been only touched upon in passing: the pilgrims coming to the Calvario at Mitla to bring their offerings to the souls of their dearly departed and to ask them for aid. However in writing this thesis my aim is not only to discuss and analyze the activities of these pilgrims but also to investigate the historical backgrounds of these ritual actions. To be a bit more precise this means that the goal is not merely to describe the offerings that are made and the stories that are told about Mitla and understand their function in the now, but to try to find out if in fact such traditions go back to pre-colonial times like Robles suggests. In other words, the thing under scrutiny here is cultural continuity. It is important to note that this means that instead of just supposing continuity between the then and the now, the objective here will be to investigate it, to see whether and to what degree it seems plausible when looking at the various sources available. In order to instrumentalize these issues they are formulated into the following research question: To what extent are the present day offertory practices and the present day stories about Mitla as Place of the Dead a continuation of Post classic Zapotec practices and beliefs?

1.2 Methodology

Studying the continuation of a certain practice from a period in the past to the present logically implies that you need information both about what people did then and about what people do now. In fact you will also need information from what people did in the period in between to be able to distinguish cultural continuation from re-invention of tradition or from mere coincidental similarities. Thinking about the research methods needed this means that you would need a way of getting data from the present as well as from the past. It is therefore that in this research a combination of literature studies and ethnographic fieldwork is used. The latter provides information about what people do and what they say about these matters today, and from the various types of written sources data can be taken on what people did and said in the past. Of course these several types of

sources have different types of problems and biases build into them and it is therefore important to reflect on them for a moment.

1.2.1 Fieldwork

The most important data used in this thesis comes from the ethnographic fieldwork that was mentioned in the preface and introduction. This fieldwork was greatly facilitated by the fact that from my room I could see when pilgrims went up to the Calvario so that I could go and sit in the open-fronted shop of the family I stayed with. There I would wait until I was sure that I could go up and start a conversation without harassing them while they were making their offerings. Starting with a polite conversation, mostly about them being interested what this gringo was doing here, this mostly lead easily to a conversation about what they were doing there, especially when I expressed my interest in the Calvario or asked where they came from. Most people turned out to be very willing to talk about why Mitla was important and why they came. The few that weren't I did not press since I was very well aware that they stood in their full right to ignore this strange blonde guy coming up to them with silly questions while they were doing something private. I did not use any type of recording device for my interviews because I was afraid that would upset the balance of these small conversations. I did sometimes make notes of (place) names, especially when the person I was talking to expressed the fear that I would otherwise forget or misspell them. Since almost all of the conversations were short and the desk in my room was close at hand this did not pose much of a problem since I could immediately write down all the important points that were made. In the evening I would then expand on these notes when writing my daily field notes on a computer in one of the internet cafés. I used the same procedure for the more official interviews I had, such as the one with the *regidor de la cultura*[6], though I made considerably more notes in these cases.

Above, the data coming from the fieldwork was designated as being the most important This is not to claim that this information is by definition more relevant or stronger than that from other sources, neither does this importance stem from the fact that it sometimes concerns previously undocumented information. It is important because this information gives insight into how these rituals and the stories related to them are part of a vibrant present day practice. These data can show these activities in their proper context, as a part of life, as something that people do and talk about, as something that is important to them. But what is most important about them is that by showing these practices to be something actual and real, it also shows them as complex: different and sometimes even conflicting stories are told and various different meanings are given to the same activity or the same offering. Writers of ethnographic literature often have had the

[6]Regidor de la cultura: alderman of cultural affairs elected by the townspeople every 2 years from among their own ranks.

tendency to ignore the variety encountered in real life in their quest for a cohesive and coherent image of the native world view. While no academic would be comfortable with stating what *the* American or *the* Dutch think about any subject, this is exactly what is often done with other cultures, thereby actually taking the life out of them, making them static. In fact by thus oversimplifying a complex case one is undermining a real understanding of other cultures being as real, vibrant and variable as our one. To be able to show and discuss this variety in stories, meanings and practices it is necessary to show the information in its proper context. It is for this reason that when information from conversations or interviews will be used it will not be presented as 'people say this' or 'people think that', but as 'I talked to this particular person coming from this particular place who told me that ...'. Another advantage from describing the context of what was said is that the reader will be able to evaluate it more carefully, thus making the whole more reliable and in fact scientific. A side-effect of this contextual approach to ethnographic data is that it demands the presence of a first person author. To take the 'I' out of the equation would be to render it useless: it is the I that initiates the conversation, that decides which questions to ask and how to formulate them, it is the I that decides what is important and that gets confused, and most importantly it is the I through whom's lens all of it is experienced. It is therefore important to make the I explicit in the descriptions of these fieldwork situations. When discussing written sources the I is of much less importance since he or she did not influence the original writing and it is already taking for granted that anything said about these sources without having some reference following it, comes from the author of the text. However in those cases when it is seen as important that it is stressed that what is said is strongly related to the author, the first person singular will also be used. In addition to the first person singular use is also made of the first person plural. This ‘we’ however should not be seen as referring to a multiplicity of authors, nor to an elitist group of insiders such as ‘we the ethnographers’ or ‘we the Mesoamericanists’. Rather it refers to a combination of the writer and the reader, and is used to include the reader into the thought process of the author such as in ‘in chapter five we saw that’.

Besides interviews and conversations the fieldwork also consisted of making observations. Since the rituals at the Calvario were performed by pilgrims that visited Mitla only for one or two days, there was not nearly enough time to create the kind of bonds of trust that are mandatory for using participant observation as a research method. Therefore only parts of the rituals were witnessed and only while standing outside, catching some glimpses from what was going on inside while conversing with one of the pilgrims who was merely standing by. When it was possible to go into the Calvario without any pilgrims or tourists present, photographs were made of the offerings in a systematic way. Four pictures were taken from the floor on each side of the base of a cross and four from what was lying on top of each side of the base, this was repeated for all three crosses following a fixed route. In addition pictures were taken from offerings that were located somewhere else inside or outside the building. Brief notes were made when things might turn out unclear on a photograph or when other observations

were made such as important changes from the last visit or new or special features that caught my eye. This method was chosen over detailed descriptions and making drawings since that would take too much time and enlarge the chance that I would disturb any pilgrims. Given that these pictures were taken from offerings by people that I could not ask permission to I initially had some doubts about using them here. On the other hand a man from San Marcial, a mountain village close to Pochutla, told me during a very pleasant conversation while his father was busy with his offerings that they didn't even mind the tourists coming up there and taking pictures as long as they didn't disturb anybody. It was after all a public and peaceful place. In addition an article has since been published in Mexico on almost identical offerings in a nearby and much less public cave showing several detailed pictures (Barabas & Winter 2005). Therefore I decided to use some pictures in chapter five as they would greatly elucidate the text.

1.2.2 Written Sources

The material used in the literature studies segment of the research can roughly be divided into two categories: primary and secondary literature. The difference between the two being that the primary sources were written in the period being discussed in them and that the secondary are not. In the following some general comments and observations will be made about the problems that arise when using primary sources and which ones you will have to deal with when using secondary sources.

The first observation we can make about primary written sources is that generally speaking they have only one standpoint, namely that of the author. When we read a description of an event we see that event through her eyes, when we read about what something means we in fact only see what it means to her or may be what she thinks it means to somebody else. In addition the author probably did not just write for the fun of it but had a specific reason in mind as well as a certain audience that she wanted to read the text. Another thing to consider is where the author stands relative to what she writes about, is she an outsider or an insider? Insiders of course have a much better understanding of what something is about but can be emotionally more committed to it, narrowing their views. Outsiders on the other hand might lack inside knowledge and are certainly more prone to misunderstandings however they might spot something that an insider would overlook because it is so obvious to him. And though one might think that an outsider will be better able to look at something more objectively, one should not overlook that mostly outsiders also make value-laden judgements about what they see those others do, which makes them just as subjective. All of this distorts the information that is contained in a source and when you use one you have to be aware of this. A final note can be made about primary sources when compared to what was discussed above about crediting variety. A primary source can seldomly show the complexity of different opinions

about and views on the world as it has only one voice, that of the author. When one wants to have multiple views on an issue one would need several different primary sources and compare them, not to find the best one but to look at how different people thought about something. When you do not have different primary sources from the same time period, as will often be the case in this thesis, this means that you should be aware that you are working with but one view amongst multiple. This means that even though there was a complex variety of opinions on what things are for, what they mean, and what is important, you have to make do with only one.

In this thesis three types of primary sources will be used: historical texts, ethnographic works and two promotional pamphlets. Although all are primary sources, i.e. they come from the period they deal with, they do deal with different periods. The historical sources are early to middle colonial, the ethnographic works are from the 1930's, 1950's and the 1990's and the pamphlets are for a cultural festival during Los Días de los Muertos in 2003 and 2004.

Secondary sources, such as academic books and articles, use primary sources. Since they are not themselves from the period they deal with they use the sources that are, to make a point or to understand what happened. In addition secondary sources can use other secondary sources, building forth on what was said about the primary sources in them. Since secondary sources use primary sources they also inherit many of their flaws, such as those discussed above. Ideally the writers of secondary sources are aware and beware of the biases inherent in their primary sources, in practice this is however often either not possible or not done. In such a case a writer could over rely on a source that is wrong or more probably gives only one of many versions of the whole picture because he disregards other sources on the matter, because he is not aware of their existence or simply because they do not exist. Besides inheriting problems from the primary sources secondary sources are also written by a person. And contrary to popular belief academics also have non-altruistic reasons to write something, they too have an audience in mind, they too can stand in- or outside their subject matter and they too have opinions and biases concerning the things they write about. Writers of secondary sources have many decisions to make about what theoretical framework to use and of course which primary sources to use or not use and in which way to use them. These decisions are not merely based on an unfailing quest for truth but also on such things as the academic school she is part of, the financers of her research, the guidelines for the journal where the article will be put in and the kind of readers that journal attracts. Concerning multiplicity of voice as discussed above the amount of opportunities available to the writer of a secondary source is strongly tied in with the number of different primary sources available on the topic at hand and the variety between them. Opportunities of course also have to be taken and therefore it is perfectly possible and in fact often seen, that even though many different kinds of sources exist still only one type is used. In these cases this can often be correlated with the author's motivations, intended audience, etc.

Four types of secondary sources are made use of in this thesis: iconographical (since I have only basic knowledge of interpreting iconography, the works of others are needed), historiographical (in other words those using primary historical sources), archaeological and those dealing with pre-colonial religion.

Finally it has to be mentioned that dividing the literature between primary and secondary sources is in actuality only useful as an analytical tool. In reality several of the sources have segments that are primary and segments that are secondary in nature. For example most of the early historiographical authors also gave first hand descriptions of what the town looked like and what went on in it when they had visited it.

1.3 The Chapters

Now the topic has been introduced, the research question has been posed and the methodology and various sources have been discussed this just leaves a short overview of the manner in which the topic will be addressed and the answers to the questions will be looked for. First of all, in Chapter 2, some of the theoretical underpinnings of the concepts employed in this thesis will be discussed using a selection of relevant recent literature on these matters in order not only to get from the literature definitions so as to elucidate the theoretical viewpoint but also to distil from some clear ideas that can be used as analytical tools in the process of answering the questions. In the following three chapters the actual data will then be discussed and interpreted. This starts of in Chapter 3 with a general look at the history of Mitla as a ritual centre, bringing different sources from several time periods (such as the early colonial and 20th century) together to try to answer the following question: what was the late post classic/early colonial reason for people to consider Mitla the Place of the Dead and visit it and what is the present one? Then in Chapter 4 the focus becomes somewhat more specific when the history of the Calvario chapel itself will be investigated and a hypothesis will be proposed on how the location for the ritual offerings to the souls shifted through time from the ruins and the graveyard to the Calvario. Chapter 5 then has the narrowest focus because in it the different categories of offerings today will be discussed and compared to what can be found in the ethnographical, historical and iconographical sources. Finally in the conclusion the most important points from the three main segments of the research will be brought together, reconsidered as to what they mean in light of the overarching question and finally combined to come to an answer to the primary research question. At the same time it will also link back to the chapter on theoretical considerations in order to both provide and contribute to the thinking about these concepts.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Considerations

It has already been stated above that the goal of this chapter is twofold. The first is that it seeks to present definitions for some of the concepts and terms employed in this thesis. Here it needs to be pointed out that these definitions are not presented as the most used, most adequate or most complete of all the definitions that are out there. Instead they serve mainly to enlighten the theoretical and academical point of view that is behind these writings, this is to say that they reflect what I think about these matters and which authors I consider myself indebted to. And because these theoretical underpinnings are so decisive for the way that data are perceived, used and presented it is important that the reader is aware of them. The second purpose of discussing the concepts that are important to this writing is to take from the literature some ideas, points or concepts that can then be used as analytical tools when dealing with the data. Because if theory and academic orientation will influence data treatment any way it is probably best to make them do so in a conscious and straight forward manner.

2.1 Cultural Continuity

The first concept to be discussed is the one that before has been called the 'the thing under scrutiny here', namely cultural continuity, and it can indeed be seen as that which lies at the basis of all that is written here. It serves as both the underlying assumption and as that which will be investigated. To be a bit clearer it is the existence of cultural continuity as a phenomenon in the Mesoamerican region that is accepted here, while the cultural continuity of the practices and stories that this thesis deals with is something that needs to be thoroughly studied. But then what is this phenomenon about, how to define this cultural continuity? For now it can be said that we are dealing with cultural continuity when an aspect of a culture's worldview remains present through time. Worldview is used here in its most basic sense, simply to refer to how people view their world. And although there are huge differences between different persons within a culture in how they perceive their world, there are also many correspondences. The term culture itself has of course become somewhat problematic, especially since we now realize that our ideas of clearly defined cultural zones are based too much on our present day, strictly bordered, nation-states. But is it not precisely

because many of its members share certain ideas and perceptions that we can talk about cultures in the first place? It is also important to emphasize that we are talking about aspects of worldview persisting over time, not a culture's worldview as a whole, since in practice no culture is static in such way. Another point that has to be made is that worldview can not be seen apart from its outward manifestations such as narratives, cultural practices and material culture. These manifestations are not only products of a worldview, they are what make it real and able to be experienced.

Probably the most classic approach to cultural continuity is what is called the 'Direct Historic Approach' which was employed by the archaeologists William Duncan Strong and Waldo Rudolph Wedel to use information from known historical sites to identify proto-historical ones (Fenton 1957:19-20). In his discussion of the requirements, purposes and methods for a proposed combination of ethnographic, linguistic and historical studies into a method called ethno-history, William N. Fenton, himself a well known Iroquois specialist, reworked the direct historic approach into what he called 'upstreaming':

> *'[This] point of view and method [...] rests on three assumptions: 1) that major patterns of culture remain stable over longer periods of time, producing repeated uniformities; 2) these patterns can best be seen by proceeding from the known ethnological present to the unknown past, using recent sources first and then earlier sources; 3) those sources which ring true at both ends of the time span merit confidence' (*Fenton 1957:20-21)

This method then had three requirements: a documented record of the period, extensive ethnographic and historical literature and scholars trained in either or preferably both fields (Fenton 1957:19). He also mentions four purposes of ethno-historic studies: using the ethnological present to gain insight into the archaeological past, using ethnological and linguistic findings to throw light on historical problems, contributing to the ideas on cultural theory, especially problems of cultural stability and change and finally studying linguistic change to understand cultural change (Fenton 1957:19-21). Fenton also warns against a 'built-in fallacy' of the up-streaming method, namely that of uniformitarianism, where the past is inferred completely from the present (1957:22).

The first problem when using Fenton's method of upstreaming is that in order to study cultural continuity in a specific instance we must first assume that major patterns of that culture have remained stable over time. But can we really assume this for the Mesoamerican cultural sphere in which our case is situated? According to Peter L. Van der Loo we can. In his excellent book ' Codices Costumbres Continuidad: un estudio de la religión mesoamericana' he not only dealt with all the important objections that had been made against the existence of cultural continuity in Mesoamerican religion, but also brought to light many instances of this cultural continuity by studying iconographical and historical sources in conjunction with ethnographical fieldwork (Loo 1987). Countering the first argument against cultural continuity van der Loo shows how George Kubler,

an art historian, wrongly applied Erwin Panofsky's term disjunction (Loo 1987: 11-14). Panofsky had demonstrated how symbols in visual art did not necessarily keep their meaning over time, because even though something might be depicted in two different periods their meanings can be very different because each is imbedded in another context. Even though van der Loo agreed completely that this was a problem to be dealt with, he also pointed out that this was not an argument against the use of cultural continuity. Especially since Kubler's own use of the term, i.e. to disqualify the use of sources like Sahagún on much older Mexican societies, had nothing to do with disjunction since there the problem was not of differing contexts but of complete lack of comparable context in the archaeological case (Loo 1987:12-13). Another argument made by Kubler was his claim that the indigenous cultures had been exterminated completely during the conquest. Van der Loo quotes a line by Kubler that in reference to a practice that is highly relevant to our case, namely the building of churches on the remains of old temple platforms, clearly shows his standpoint on these matters:

> '*The Christian churches erected upon their summits symbolize the conquest of pagan observance by Christian ritual*, [...]' (Kubler 1961: 15)

Van der Loo counters that while indeed this might have been the intention of the *frailes*[7], this does not mean that they completely succeeded. Because, as van der Loo points out, even though they changed many things, one needs only a single visit to a Christian church in an indigenous village to realize that many of the religious observances and rituals never fell under the Catholic rules (Loo 1987:15). Another argument used to support this idea of the dead Mexican culture was the claim by Madsen that the old culture had been decapitated when the old elite that oversaw religious life got extinct. The major flaw behind this reasoning, as van der Loo points out, is the assumption that there was a major difference in beliefs between the elite and the commoners while in fact they had a common base. Expressions might differ between classes and some more esoteric knowledge might have been exclusive to particular groups but most of the ideas and concepts were found in all social classes (Loo 1987:17). An excellent example of this can be found in the treatise by priest and ecclesiastical judge Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón, written in 1629 as a guide to identify heathen ritual practices in the Nahuatl language (Andrews & Hassig 1984). Though his treatise deals solely with 17th century customs in rural Guerrero, references can be found in it to nearly all important religious concepts and symbols that we know from the official Aztec state religion. This proves not only that the elite and commoners worldview were very similar, but also that these ideas were still around a century after the conquest began (Loo 1987:18).

While these points go a long way in discrediting the major arguments against the existence of cultural continuity in Mesoamerica there still remains a serious problem with studying it. Because the problem of disjunction as it was described

[7] Fraile: friar

by Panofsky, that of two similar looking scenes from two periods having very different meanings because of their differing contexts, still has to be dealt with. It is precisely by making use of the underlying problem of disjunction, i.e. context, that van der Loo found a solution to this problem. Inspired on the concept of 'significant associations' by Nicholson (quoted in Loo 1987:207) and that of 'basic theme' by Donnan (quoted in Loo 1987:207) he devised an analytical tool he called 'thematical units'. Instead of focusing on a single detail of the outward manifestation of a worldview, which is prone to differ in meaning depending on its context, one should focus on groups of elements that are often found together, in their proper context (Loo 1987: 20-26). That one of these elements can also be found in different thematical units at the same time only proves how important it is to focus on the group and not on the details (Loo 1987: 24). Many different types of elements can be included in a thematical unit such as gods, persons, narratives, objects and animals (Loo 1987:23). It has to be noted that it occurs only seldomly that all the elements making up a thematical unit will be found in one single scene, description or situation as people can make almost endless variations of which elements of a thematical unit to include or exclude (Loo 1987:22). To discover which elements a thematical unit consists of, as well as to understand the relevance and meaning of and the relationships between these elements, it is necessary to have written or spoken explanations from the experts on these groupings of meaning: the indigenous peoples (Loo 1987:23). This also means that this method can not be employed to investigate cultural continuity from periods before the post classic, since such explanatory sources do not exist for these periods (Loo 1987:25). When finally a thematical unit has thus been discovered and proven to exist through different periods of time this can then be seen as prove of cultural continuity for this complex of elements. What this in effect means is that information from one period can then be used to better understand the function and meaning of that thematical unit in another of the investigated periods (Loo 1987:23).

Summarizing we can say that we are dealing with cultural continuity when a certain aspect of a culture's worldview remains present through time and that these aspects should be studied through the constitutive elements of their outward manifestation within their proper contexts, i.e. their thematical units.

2.2 Syncretism

On first glance the concept of syncretism, i.e. the synthesis of different religious forms (Stewart & Shaw 1994), seems directly opposed to that of cultural continuity. Where the latter speaks about things staying the same over time, the former deals precisely with the mixing of cultural aspects. Van der Loo for example refutes claims that Mesoamerican religion is syncretic as having little value, as this could be claimed for almost all religions in the world, since all borrowed elements from other religions. He continues stating that present day Mesoamerican religion has its pre-Columbian roots, which give it its distinct form

and distinguishes it from other religions. In addition it incorporated elements of other religions, most notably Catholicism. This Mesoamerican religion should be studied in its own rights, without it being necessary to evaluate or devaluate certain elements for being pre-Columbian or not (Loo 1987:19).

It can clearly be seen here that van der Loo feels that labeling Mesoamerican religion as syncretic is a way of diminishing its rights to be studied as a religion of its own. It is precisely this association of syncretism with impurity and inauthenticity that is thoroughly discussed in Charles Stewart's and Rosalind Shaw's introduction to the book 'Syncretism/Anti-syncretism, the politics of religious synthesis' of which they are also the editors (Stewart & Shaw 1994). They show how syncretism has come to be seen as a negative term not so much through its meaning but through how it was used in the past (Stewart & Shaw 1994:3). This holds especially true for the second half of the 19th century when scholars of comparative religion used the term to characterize the religious life in ancient Rome and Greece as disorderly and confused, when they discussed syncretism as an imperial strategy of the Roman emperors or when they put it in an evolutionary scheme immediately prior to Christian monotheism. After this period it continued to be used often and kept much of its negative connotations (Stewart & Shaw 1994:4-5). In discussing the already mentioned association between syncretic and inauthentic, Stewart and Shaw came up with the concept of anti-syncretism, being an 'antagonism to religious synthesis shown by agents concerned with the defense of religious boundaries' (Stewart & Shaw 1994:7) and show that 'syncretism and anti-syncretism can both be paths to the construction of 'authenticity' (Stewart & Shaw 1994:9). For authenticity is not something inherent to a religion but a claim made about it by politically motivated actors. Such a claim is in fact not about purity, but about uniqueness, which both pure and mixed religions can be (Stewart & Shaw 1994:7). Another problem with the use of syncretism is that is often associated with the process of acculturation, a problematic term since it conjures up images of a person in a new cultural setting mechanically being assigned the appropriate cultural traits until completed. In reality of course these processes are about people acting and deciding, based on how they interpret what is going on. A process that could have multiple outcomes and is far from irreversible (Stewart & Shaw 1994:6). A similar problem can be seen when agency is not ascribed to religious participants but to the religion itself, making it seem like the religions themselves are doing the syncretizing (Stewart & Shaw 1994:16). Here it is important to note that it is not sufficient that two religions have certain similarities or correspondences that could facilitate synthesis, because these similarities must first be perceived as such by actors and then also acted upon (Stewart & Shaw 1994:16). Such actions of course need not always be intentional, and even intended actions may have completely unintended consequences (Stewart & Shaw 1994:19). It is often thought that intentional and conscious syncretism is a tactic only employed by the elite, while in fact many subgroups of a society strategically use synthesis, especially if it benefits their group (Stewart & Shaw 1994:17). Being an arena for establishing power relations syncretism can, paradoxically, be used both to appropriate and

subvert dominance, sometimes even at the same time (Stewart & Shaw 1994:21). In this capacity syncretism can be seen as an integral part of negotiating identities in situations where two religions meet (Stewart & Shaw 1994:19). The difference between syncretism 'from above' and syncretism 'from below' is a relevant one though, as there are different power relations involved. It is important however to understand that they are merely the two poles of a continuum, not different types of syncretism (Stewart & Shaw 1994:21-22).

How then can all these different ideas be applied to the Mesoamerican situation? In the epilogue to an extensive ethnographic work on the religion of the Totonacs, an indigenous group from northern Puebla, Alain Ichon gives us some of his ideas on syncretism in these regions that are quite useful (Ichon 1973). First he describes three possible attitudes towards religious syncretism in Mesoamerica: 1) to consider the 'pagan' elements in indigenous Catholicism as mere superstitious remnants from bygone days; 2) make a distinction between the mountainous regions where it was difficult to evangelize and the other parts where there was less difficulty; 3) acknowledge the existence of a mixed religion, that originates from the two religions combined (Ichon 1973:456). He himself, based on his own fieldwork, chooses the third option, but stresses that within this mixed religion it was the original indigenous religion that remained dominant (Ichon 1973:458). Even though he here seems to concur with van der Loo about the cultural continuity within Mesoamerican religion, there is however one mayor difference. Where van der Loo bases this continuity on thematical units of cultural elements that he found to be present through time Ichon says that while these outward manifestations might have been changed or supplanted through catholic influences it is the worldview that is behind these things and gestures that has persevered (Ichon 1973:457). When one looks closer at the description that Ichon gives of this process of synthesis it becomes apparent that Ichon's definition of cultural continuity is broader than van der Loo's. He poses that some elements of the traditional religion were conserved with their form and meaning intact, other elements were reinterpreted in a more or less catholic way and others were abandoned or substituted completely. Similarly some elements of the catholic religion were adopted without modification, some elements were reinterpreted and some were not adopted at all. Finally within the resulting new mixed religion this means that some elements of the two religions were combined, some elements were substituted by that of the other religion and of many elements the meanings were reinterpreted (Ichon 1973:459-461). If one would accept this model, which seems to be quite plausible, than this means that looking at thematical units alone might mean that you miss out on the cultural continuity of certain worldviews of which the outward manifestation, the elements making up the thematical unit, have changed due to syncretism. In addition it warns us that even when an outward manifestation remains the same this can still mean that the underlying worldview has changed in which case you can not speak of cultural continuity. Finally both outward manifestation and worldview could change, this is of course the clearest case of discontinuity.

To sum up, we have seen that syncretism, being the synthesis of different religious forms, has nothing to do with purity and authenticity. Instead it is an inherent aspect of two religions coming into close contact. This however is not at all an automatic process, but takes place through people perceiving and acting upon similarities. Because of these actions some elements of both religions will be adopted, some will be reinterpreted and some will abandoned. On the one hand these syncretic actions can be deliberately and strategically used to negotiate identities and power relations, on the other hand some actions will be unintentional or have unintended consequences. As a consequence of syncretism the outward manifestation of an aspect of a worldview might be altered though it itself remains which means that there is still cultural continuity.

2.3 Material religion

In the above segments on cultural continuity and syncretism we have talked several times about elements making up thematical units and outward manifestations of world views. One of the types of elements mentioned were objects and in fact when talking of others such as narratives, animals and persons these often come to us in material forms such as statues or depictions in codices. In the introduction various offerings were also mentioned as well as a chapel and a pyramid. It thus seems to be that when studying cultural continuity and/or syncretism the material dimension is a relevant one. However when one starts looking for theories on the material aspect of religions one finds that there is relatively little written about it. In her book titled 'Material Christianity' Colleen McDannell explains why this aspect of religious experience has often been ignored by those studying religions (McDannell 1995). At the basis of this apparent absence of interest lies the way in which the likes of Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and Mircea Eliade defined the very nature of religion. As McDannell puts it (McDannell 1995:4):

> *'A dichotomy has been established between the sacred and the profane, spirit and matter, piety and commerce that constrains our ability to understand how religion works in the real world'*

This dichotomy can be traced back to the thinking of Plato, Jewish thinking about God as a disembodied voice and much of the Protestant doctrine (McDannell 1995:5). In these traditions the domain of the sacred is that ideal and transcendental world that is completely set apart from ordinary and everyday life, in other words the profane. It is on this dichotomy then that most of academic theories on studying religion were build, while in fact this 'Puritan model' as Jon Butler calls it (quoted in McDannell 1995:6) shows to be problematic not only when applied to other religions such as Catholicism and Native American religions but in fact also when applied to many protestants. Since the material world was seen as belonging to the domain of the profane it got largely ignored by

most scholars studying religion, who were focusing on such transcendental things as words, ideas and world visions instead. And even when it was studied we inherited the prejudices that these religious traditions had about the material aspect of religion, most notably that they were nothing more than aids for the weak believers, such as women and children, while the strong believers could grasp the sacred directly (McDannell 1995:8-13). However when one reconsiders the material dimension of religion one can see that it

> *'shuttles back and forth so frequently between what scholars call the sacred and the profane that the usefulness of the categories is disputed'* (McDannell 1995:8)

By looking at what people 'do rather than at what they think' (McDannell 1995:4) it can be seen that material culture does much more than simply reflecting an existing reality, because experiencing the physical dimension of religion actually helps 'bring about religious values, norms, behaviors and attitudes' (McDannell 1995:2). Religious artifacts, landscapes, architecture and art embody as well as symbolize these patterns of belief (McDannell 1995:2). Material culture of course has no inherent meaning in and of itself, instead objects and places become meaningful when they are enlivened by people through use (McDannell 1995:3-4). It is through this religious practice that body and mind come together in what McDannell calls a multimedia event 'where speech, vision, gesture, touch and sound combine' (McDannell 1995:14). Through activating objects in religious practice people imbue them with a certain 'affecting presence' as anthropologist Robert Armstrong calls it (quoted in McDannell 1995:18). McDannell describes five possible ways in which religious objects can attain this affecting presence: 'by participating in the authority of institutional traditions and organizations' (p.18); by being used to maintain and create relationships with supernatural powers (p.25); by embodying memories (p.39); by marking community and binding members to each other (p.44); or by being a part of a fashion aesthetic (p.57). Of course none of these are exclusive and in practice objects can not only be used in different contexts and thus have different meanings, they can also have several meanings within one context. It is this ability to combine opposing elements that makes religious objects such a fundamental part of a religion (McDannell 1995:66). When studying material religion it is important to note that, because material representations can not be seen apart from the human world of meaning that surrounds it and that makes it possible for it to come alive, this ideology or worldview should be taken into account (McDannell 1995:15).

Above this very same point of looking at both worldview and its outward manifestation has also been made when discussing cultural continuity and syncretism, but what can be added to what was said there now the material dimension has been more thoroughly looked at? To put it simply, that though material culture has no meaning or power of its own, it can gain such an 'affecting presence' by being used by people in several different ways that can

complement each other. As we have to investigate how physical elements that are part of a thematical unit were added, reinterpreted or abandoned through time it might be very useful to consider the various kinds of affecting presences these elements had to understand their meaning and function.

2.4 Rituals

So far we have talked several times about the importance of people taking actions, for example that syncretism is the result of people acting upon perceived similarities and that objects and places are imbued with affecting presence through religious practice. The most famous type of religious practice is of course ritual, and since during the last decade or so an increased interest in rituals and their function and role within and outside of the religious context has led to a greater and more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon it might prove worthwhile to consider it here. Below four general aspects of ritual are discussed as they can be gathered from the current literature. Of course there are many differences and disagreements within this lively field of study, as there are every where, but this does not take away that some general trends in thinking can be recognized.

The first and probably also the most agreed upon of these aspects is time-depth. Already in the late 19th and early 20th century the two opposing camps of scholars, i.e. the myth and the ritual school although disagreeing on which was the earliest form of religious expression, agreed upon the importance of the aspect of repetition (discussed in Bell 1997:5-8). Put most simply, repetition means that what is done in ritual is never a completely new and one-time act. It is something that is repeated over time in “more or less invariant sequences” (Rappaport 1999:36-37). Catherine Bell also stresses this when talking about the role of invariance, showing that this invariance is often governed by rules (Bell 1997:153-155). Another of Bell’s characteristics that is important to note here is traditionalism, the idea that rituals are often viewed as perpetuating from the past into the present (Bell 1997:145-150). Here it is important to stress the word ‘viewed’. A ritual does not actually have to have a long past, it must only be interpreted as such. Thus a ritual must at least seem to be a repetition of something very much like it to be accepted. It must be seen as the natural way of doing things, not some strange new invention. From this feeling of great time-depth comes a big part of a ritual's power, it makes it older and bigger than the participants themselves and thus less contestable.

The second important element of ritual is symbolism. Concerning ritual symbols can be discussed on two levels: universal and specific. The universally present aspect of symbolism in ritual is what Rappaport means when he says that rituals are “not entirely encoded by the performers” (Rappaport 1999:32-33). Rituals are mostly not personal on the spot inventions but they carry with them the cultural categories encoded in the symbols used. They refer to specific social and cosmic orders and are simultaneously, as Clifford Geertz describes it, models

of the way things actually are and models for the way they should be (Geertz 1973 discussed in Bell 1997). Symbols can make things that are fairly unsubstantial such as spiritual, supernatural or higher beings into something concrete and therefore much easier understandable. Even though different participants may enter the ritual with different expectations, they all become channelled through the same symbolic focus (Turner 1974). By using symbols rituals can evoke feelings and give explanations of what is going on without going into the conflicting and contradicting details (Bell 1997:158). There is no direct need for explicitness (Bell 1997:167). When going into the cultural specific aspects of symbolism the most important one is meaning. What does a representation mean to people? In a certain culture many symbols will have a vaguely defined more or less commonly understood meaning. But due to difference in e.g. upbringing, personal experience and personal interests different individuals will often subscribe different or even contradictory personal meanings to a symbol. This way symbols can have their meanings severely altered or even completely lost over time. The ritual it self might very well be the source of this very change of meaning. For example a symbol that is actively employed in a ritual that due to changes in the society attains a new meaning to certain people, will very probably change meaning with this ritual.

The third element of ritual and probably the one that has gained the most renewed interest lately is performance. In every account of every ritual from all over the world there is one thing that will certainly bind them: something is done. Rituals are not merely ideas or concepts, they involve actual activity. By actually doing something, acting out a certain idea or ideal or by enacting a certain situation an integration of self, society, the world and the cosmos can come to pass (Alexander 1997:142-143). The things that are merely represented in stories and material culture become reality in ritual. In performing them they become understandable, recognisable, visible and both physically and emotionally feelable. And not on a complicated and abstract level but on a very actualistic and real level. The performance of ritual employs a human universal that is already alluded to above: the body. Every person has to deal with his or her body, and it is pivotal in our creation of self and personhood (Alexander 1997:143; Parkin 1992). In many rituals, though definitely not all, performance is done collectively. Several people together will act out a certain thing, thereby creating a collective experience in which a non-outspoken mutual understanding can be felt (Bell 1997:161) and the differences and structures that normally divide them can be replaced by a feeling of communal equality, an anti-structure or comunitas enabling societal and personal change (Turner 1974). Related to this performative dimension is the need of special material culture and special locations that can be actively employed in the doing of the ritual. This is for example clearly visible in an interesting application of ritual theory to a Mayan highland case by Linda Brown (Brown 2004:54), where she shows that by making decisions concerning the types of materials used in various rites, concerning the way these offerings are altered during the ritual and concerning the choice of location within the site

relative to a focal point different meanings are given to the materials used, the place where the ritual is done and the ritual itself.

The fourth and final element we will discuss here is not as outspoken in most works on ritual theory as are the other three: Communication. Nonetheless almost all of them talk about how rituals convey cultural messages (Bell 1997:65). Seeing ritual as a form of communication poses some interesting questions. Who is communicating with whom? What type of messages is conveyed? Are this conscious communications or subconscious ones? The most elaborate view on these problems comes from Roy Rappaport. His answers to the above questions are clear: people communicate with both themselves, other people and presumably have the feeling of communicating with spiritual beings (Rappaport 1999:51). He sees two types of messages being transmitted: canonical and self-referential. Canonical messages inform us about universal, everlasting non-personal truths about society and the cosmos. They are strongly related to invariance, order and repetition. Self-referential messages on the other hand inform us on the current physical, psychic or social state of an individual participant or group of participants. These two streams of messages in practice will always co-exist rather then being mutually exclusive.

Taking these four elements or aspects together we can see that rituals are physical performances, making them highly realistic and experienceable, that are removed from the contestability of the now because of their (perceived) time-depth. They are focused through commonly understood symbols, of which the meaning may be altered by the meanings given to the ritual. And in their entirety symbolize general truths about how things are and should be done, while simultaneously communicating the individual participation of the participants within this cultural field.

Tying all of this in to the theories that were already discussed some very interesting points can be made. First of all it is pretty clear that many instances of people activating religious objects are in fact rituals. McDannell's multimedia-events where body and mind come together are in fact ritual performances, where symbolic objects are used by people to communicate to themselves (for example about memories) to each other (for example by creating relationships within a marked community) and to higher beings (thus creating relationships with them). Some of these messages are self referential (marking membership of a community or showing awareness of fashion) and others are canonical (by referring to institutional traditions or to higher beings). From the first aspect of ritual that was discussed a sixth way in which an object can attain affecting presence can be concluded, i.e. by being perceived to have a great time depth. Often a religious object is made in ways to resemble or at least refer to objects much like it from previous times. Like was said above for rituals, the object hereby escapes the contestability of the here and now by making it older and bigger than the participants themselves.

As we already saw that many elements that make up a thematical unit are physical in nature, and we now see that these objects are often activated or enlivened by rituals it becomes clear that the concept of ritual is also important

for understanding continuity and syncretism. The clearest link of course is the importance of time depth for rituals and religious objects. Problematically however it is the perception of time depth that lends a ritual or an object its strength. Though this perception can be based on mere fabrications we saw that a ritual, and therefore also a religious object, must at least seem to be a repetition of something very much like it to be accepted. Could this then be why certain elements of a thematical unit can be added, reinterpreted or abandoned through time while the underlying worldview remains? Since we already saw that such aspects of syncretism relied on the perception of similarity this seems very probable. The relation between worldview and the elements that make up a thematical unit becomes even clearer when one realizes that most of these elements are indeed symbols and that by being used in a performance they communicate a combination of self-referential and canonical messages. It is largely through such messages that a view on the world is communicated by people positioning themselves in various ways within this view.

2.5 Religion

In talking about syncretism and religious objects a final important concept, that of religion, has already been introduced though it has not been defined or discussed here yet. Of course defining religion is no easy business as can be gathered from the almost infinite amount of attempts that are out there. These definitions can roughly be categorized as either intellectualist, where they attempt to define what religion tries to explain; as symbolist, where it is defined what religions represent; or as dimensional, where the various dimensions of religion are listed (Bowie 2000: 22-25). What almost all of these definitions have in common is that each of them is a grand attempt to come to *the* solution to the problem of defining religion. For simplicity's sake another path has been chosen here. The definition given below has but one single purpose, and that is elucidating how the term religion is used in this thesis. So from now on when the word religion is used it refers to an interrelated complex of practices, objects, symbols, narratives and world views. This however leaves us with a problem, because how can religion be distinguished from other interrelated complexes of practices, objects, symbols, narratives and world views such as economy or politics? First it can be said that to some extent it is good that these different fields can be confused with each other since in reality there are now clear borders between them. Religion in fact is nothing but a culturally constructed Western category (Bowie 2000:22; Stewart & Shaw 1994:10). However in many definitions of religion we find reference to something that religion deals with, i.e. supernatural beings, that at least sets it apart to some extent from other comparable fields (Bowie 2000:23). Although in principle useful, this term poses a problem with its clear reference to the sacred-profane dichotomy as these beings are presented as surpassing the profanity of nature while in fact many powerful entities in the Mesoamerican worldview are very much a part of nature. It would

be better to talk about extra-human forces as they are perceived as being separate from humans, but are not by definition more or less powerful than they are and need not be as animate as the word being suggests. The definition thus has to be modified into an interrelated complex of practices, objects, symbols, narratives and world views dealing with extra-human forces.

2.6 The approach

Bringing together all the theoretical considerations made in this chapter we can conclude the following: We talk about cultural continuity when an aspect of a culture's worldview stays the same over time. Such an aspect of worldview can be studied by looking at its outward manifestation. However one should not study an isolated element of such an outward manifestation but the whole thematical unit that it belongs to. Problematically, through syncretism between the pre-colonial religion and Catholicism, four things could happen to the relation between an aspect of a worldview and its outward manifestation: 1) worldview and outward manifestation stay the same; 2) worldview stays the same but its outward manifestation is changed; 3) the outward manifestation stays the same but the underlying worldview changes; 4) both outward manifestation and worldview change. Only in the first two instances can we still speak about cultural continuity. This means that we should not only study whether an outward manifestation changes or stays the same but also how it relates to the aspect of worldview that it both symbolizes and manifests. One way to do this is by investigating how people give material culture affecting presence by using it in ritual practices where canonical messages are symbolically communicated in performances that are perceived to have a certain time-depth. Here it is very important to include the explanations and stories that were and are told about the places, objects, rituals and extra-human forces involved in this religious complex, most preferably by the indigenous people themselves since they are the experts concerning their worldviews, not we.

Chapter 3

History of Mitla as a ritual centre

Going from the various theoretical considerations in the previous chapter to a consideration of data, this chapter focuses on a thematical unit that revolves around Mitla as a Place of the Dead. In the quotes in the introduction we already saw some of the elements of this thematical unit: Dupaix wrote that its Zapotec name was Liubá, which meant grave, while the Mexicans called it Miquitlan, meaning either hell or place of sadness. Parsons described how the Mitleños themselves considered the ruins to be royal burial places where the Zapotec kings were buried even if they lived elsewhere. She went even further in stating that Lyoba' or Place of Tombs as it was still called in the surrounding mountain towns was the place where the souls of all the Zapotecs went to. And even though Leslie thought these ideas were losing drama, Dürr not only mentions these same stories but also tells about pilgrims coming especially to Mitla to invite the souls home for All Souls'. In this chapter these matters will be explored more thoroughly. Starting off with several (early) colonial sources describing Mitla and the extrahuman forces worshipped there as well as those worshipped in other places in the *Zapoteca* and going from there to the interpretations that various secondary sources have given. The similarities of some of these hypotheses with a recent interpretation of some of the murals found in Mitla will then be critically evaluated. Next the information coming from the earliest historians and ethnographers shall be discussed, especially concerning Mitla as the Town of the Souls. The present situation will be illustrated by what both Mitleños and pilgrims coming to Mitla had to say about these matters. And finally, referring back to the conclusions of the previous chapter, an answer will be formulated to this chapter's main question: what was the late post classic/early colonial reason for people to consider Mitla the Place of the Dead and visit it and what is the present one?

3.1 Early Colonial Sources

3.1.1 Burgoa's Geográfica descripción

The earliest mention of the town of Mitla by Spanish sources can be found in *Fray*[8] Toribio de Benavente's work on the history of the natives of New Spain (Benavente 1914). Written somewhere in the middle of the 16th century it discusses the life of fellow Franciscan *Fray* Martín de Valencia who, after having preached and taught Christianity in the region of the just conquered capital of Tenochtitlan from 1524 until 1532, desired to go inland to do missionary work there (Benavente 1914:172). Thus, accompanied by 8 other friars, he went to the town of Tehuantepec where they stayed for seven months to teach the locals Christianity in Zapotec (Benavente 1914:172). They did this not only in this town but also in all the others they visited among which Mietlan, which meant *infierno*[9] in their language. Besides a description of the impressiveness of its buildings he writes that in the town there was a temple for the devil and a lodging house for its priests (Benavente 1914:173). It is important to note here that though we are talking about only a decade after the initial conquests, that some of the most fundamental links between Christian and indigenous thought had already been established by the early missionaries, especially the Franciscans (Loo 1987:187). One that is very relevant here is the equation of various indigenous gods with the Christian devil figure. Most notably this concerned the gods of death, given their horrific appearance and the fact that they were said to rule over the layer of the underworld that most closely resembled Christian hell (Loo 1987:187, Anders & Jansen 1994:130-131). It was this layer then, called *Mictlan,* meaning simply place of the dead[10], that was equated with the Christian hell or *infierno*. So when the toponym Mietlan is translated as meaning hell and the temples said to be dedicated to the devil we have to be aware that the first is not a translation but an interpretation and the second is a reference to an indigenous deity, possibly a god of death.

These same sort of references can also be found in what is both the most detailed account of the religious role of Mitla in pre-conquest times as well as the most overtly biased about its perceived heathenism: the 'Geográfica Descripción' of *Fray* Francisco de Burgoa. Dealing with the works of the early church, most notably those of his fellow Dominicans, in the state of Oaxaca it is a relatively late source, first printed in 1674. It is however based on the accounts of earlier Dominicans, combined with oral traditions. But since Burgoa writes without referring to these sources, it is all but impossible to find out where a piece of information came from, or even to which specific period it refers. All of this is further complicated by Burgoa's tendency to start preaching about the faults of these heathens who were lucky to have been saved by the Christians from Satan's

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[8]Fray: friar
[9]Infierno: inferno or hell
[10]Mictlan: Place of the Dead. From micqui = dead (an agentive of miqui to die) tlān = place of (place name suffix)

arms. Already in Burgoa's very first descriptions of Mitla it can be seen how information and religious interpretation are intertwined when he describes how this village, famed in all of the Zapoteca was named Mitla after hell for the depths it was located in (Burgoa 1989:120). The indigenous name Liobaa he translated as *centro de descanso* or centre of rest, because they were so foolish in their blind heathenism that they would go to hell to rest (Burgoa 1989:120). He continues stating that it was either nature or the great biblical flood that made a big empty and hollow space here that was then used by Satan to make the Indians live there (Burgoa 1989:121). Like the cliff of Xaguija or Teutitlan and the cave of Chalcatongo in the Mixteca it was then used as a grave for the lords. And here they also placed the biggest abomination: a supreme priest or *Cabeza Superior*, as a counter to the Catholic popes of Rome (Burgoa 1989:121). A priest so high that unlike the priests of Jerusalem or Mexico City even the king honoured him and respected him as closest to the gods and as instrument for all their graces and punishments (Burgoa 1989:121). They believed that only he was the mediator in all causes and they did his tasks on expense of their own blood (Burgoa 1989:121). He mimicked the Roman pope even in granting absolution to the living and grace and redemption to the dead. And it was for him that they built the palaces of the living and the dead (Burgoa 1989:121).

From these houses of the dead and living Burgoa describes four houses or tombs built above ground and four below, in the hollow they found there (Burgoa 1989:122). The four underground rooms are most interesting to us. Burgoa explains how in front there was a chapel or sanctuary for the *ídolos*[11] that were kept on a stone that served as an altar (Burgoa 1989:123). Burgoa describes in detail how the high priest, together with his lesser priests prepared for a feast or a burial, how they went down into the underground chamber, how he did a ritual at the altar where he went in trance and communicated with the idols, afterwards telling bystanders either what lies the spirit had convinced him of or what the high priest himself had made up (Burgoa 1989:123). With human sacrifices the ceremonies were doubled and the heart of the sacrificed was taken out and touched to the mouth of the idol while the body was thrown into a special grave or cavern behind a closed of door in the fourth room, reserved especially for the sacrificed and those that died in war (Burgoa 1989:123,124). And according to Burgoa it was for this horrible hollow that they had given the name Liobaa to this village (Burgoa 1989:124). The second of the rooms was the special burial place of the high priests, while the kings of Theozapotlan, the Zapotec capital, were buried in the third room (Burgoa 1989:123). Of the above rooms the first was for the High Priest, who had a throne that was even bigger than that of the king, who used the third room when visiting. The second room was used by the priests and assistants while the fourth served the other lords and captains when visiting (Burgoa 1989:124-125). And even though there was little room for these other lords they comforted themselves, out of respect for the place and without arguing

[11]Ídolo: idol. Derogative name used by the Spaniards to designate all physical representation of indigenous extrahuman forces. Used here despite its negative connotation because it is used in all the sources and has no good alternative.

or partialities, and because there was no jurisdiction but that of the High Priest (Burgoa 1989:125).

The importance of the Mitleño priesthood is illustrated even more in Burgoa's later description of the king of Tehuantepec who, even though he had been baptized, returned to his errors and idolatries in secret. Burgoa credited this lapse of faith most of all to the presence of some lesser priests and the High Priest of the supreme temples of Mitla himself (Burgoa 1989:350). When these temples at Mitla had become unusable, probably because of the Spanish presence, the king granted them a big space in his house (Burgoa 1989:351). This then became the temple of the gods that were in his soul, while to the outside he pretended to be a Christian (Burgoa 1989:351).

3.1.2 The Relaciones Geográficas of 1580

So far we have seen that apparently Mitla was ruled by a High Priest that due to rituals in which he communicated with his gods was very much respected by the Zapotec lords who were also buried in this place. Because of all this Mitla was famed in all of the Zapoteca. What Burgoa does not tell us however is who these gods he communicated with were. Luckily we have a collection of older sources, the so-called '*Relaciones Geográficas*', that among many other things deals precisely with this issue. These very interesting primary sources consist of the responses by local officials to a questionnaire issued by King Phillip II of Spain in 1577, requesting information about all of the Spanish territories in the Americas. One question in particular, i.e. number fourteen, is highly relevant to this thesis as it asks to whom the locals traditionally paid allegiance and who their gods were (Acuña 1984).

Written down by Alonso de Canseco, on the 12th and 13th of August 1580 and representing all that the local government and the oldest and most ancient Indians knew about these matters, the '*Relacion de Tlacolula y Mitla*' starts of in a familiar way with calling the town Lioba and in Mexican Miquitla, meaning *ynfierno* (Acuña 1984b:260). Answering the question about its gods it states:

> "*They worshipped the Devil and, among them, they had a married idol, and the woman they called Xonaxi Quecuya and, the husband, Coqui Bezelao, which in Spanish means "señor diablo". To these they worshipped and sacrificed, not only they, but all the valleys and villages, and they had in front of them dances with musical instruments. They sacrificed and killed children and men, dogs, chicken, quail, doves, and had the ordinary custom to get drunk in front of these idols*[12]." (Acuña 1984b:260).

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[12]"*Adoraban al Demonio y, enter ellos, tenían un ídolo casado, y la mujer se decía Xonaxi Quecuya y, el marido, Coqui Bezelao, que en español dice " señor diablo". A éstos adoraban y sacrificaban, not tan solam[en]te ellos, sino todos los valles y pu[ebl]os, y hacían delante dél sus danzas y bailes con instrum[en]tos de músicas. Sacrificaban y mataban niños y hombres, perrillos, gallinas, codornices, palomas, y era de costumbe*

So now we know that the primary extra human forces worshipped in Mitla were a pair of married idols that the de Canseco equates with the devil. What these two governed over however is unclear from this text. Maybe an answer lies in the translation of their names? Acuña does remark in his notes that *Xonaxi* is the Zapotec for lady, while *Coqui* means lord (Acuña 1984b:260). But while he gives a tentative translation of *Xonaxi Quecuya* as maybe coming from *Xonaxi Quiye Coyo*, meaning Lady 3 (or 5) Flower, a calendrical name, he gives no translation of Bezelao (Acuña 1984b:260). No answers are found in the rest of text either, though several useful points of information are given that can also be found in Burgoa's later writings such as that Mitla was the place for burial of the great lords of this kingdom, that there was a house of the *Bigaña* or High Priest, who like the Roman pope was head of the universal church, that there was a place upstairs used to govern his republic and get drunk and that there were four other halls were the idols were kept and the sacrifices were made (Acuña 1984b:261-263). If indeed all the valleys and villages worshipped this Lady Quecuya and Lord Bezelao who were tended to by a High Priest that was the head of a universal church, then maybe the *Relaciones* of other towns in the region have more information on them. The account of Tlacolula, located a few miles to the east of Mitla, is not very informative. It states only that they worshipped the devil and in its name had an idol named Coque Cehuiyo, to which they offered dogs, chicken and Indians and in front of which they drank and danced (Acuña 1984b:257). Many of the other *Relaciones* give more or less the same information, they explain that the people worshipped the devil, in its name had an idol of which sometimes the name is given, and to this idol they made various sacrifices and in front of it they got drunk and danced. Of course there are some differences based on the language of the region, but these mostly concern the names of the idols such as the area around Tututepeque where one can find many names of gods in Nahuatl (Acuña 1984:189-239). In the Nahuatl and Mazatec speaking town of Teotitlan, not to be confused with Teotitlan del Valle located between Oaxaca city and Mitla (see Map 1), there is in addition an extensive list of all the feasts in Nahuatl (Acuña 1984b:200). Amongst these we find two feasts that will become of interest below, namely the 8th feast called Micailhuizintli, feast of the little dead and the 9th feast called Huey Micailhuitl, feast of the big dead. During these feasts offerings were made for the dead (Acuña 1984b:200).

There are however also some towns that directly refer to Lord Bezelao, albeit not to his wife. The most simple of these is in the account of the Zapotec and Mixtec speaking town of Guaxilotitlan, present day Huitzo (Acuña 1984:214). There it is stated that they worshipped worked stones like persons that were kept in a house in the mountains. They call them Bezaloo, which means diablo and they were guarded by 20 to 25 *picana* or priests (Acuña 1984:214). To these idols the locals brought dogs and parrot feathers which were presented with *copal*[13], in

ordinaria emborracharse delante estos ídolos." Translation by Arfman.

[13]Copal: an indigenous type of incense

addition they offered blood from ear and tongue and with the yearly feast in their honour they sacrificed war slaves, which served to give strength and spirit for the wars (Acuña 1984:214). It is interesting to note that this account actually speaks of Bezaloo in the plural, and talks about several of these idols as being kept in a house near to town, not at Mitla.

A similar situation can be seen in the *Relacion* of Tecuicuilco and its three dependencies. Of all four it is said that the devil is worshipped in the shape of an image of wood and stone, some of them large, and all with different names (Acuña 1984b:91). Some were offered to for health, some for good times, others for rain, and the female ones for birth (Acuña 1984b:91). In addition to one god for all human needs each town also had its own patron that was revered above the rest, that of Tecuicuilco was named '*Coqu[i] Bezelao*, *principal dios de los diablos*[14]' (Acuña 1984b:91). For him they built a *sacrificadero*[15] in the mountains on a place called *Quiazee*, mountain of the mass (Acuña 1984b:91). For this god a feast was held on a special day every 260 days to which all the indigenous people came to sacrifice quail, coloured feathers, and green and blue precious stones (Acuña 1984b:91). These were then given to the priests who were assigned to this god by the local lord, these also sacrificed blood from the tongue and ears (Acuña 1984b:91). These priests however could not tell what these services were for exactly, except for health, good times and remedies against all the needs of the *pueblo*[16] (Acuña 1984b:91). Only they were allowed to enter this sanctified place, and they only made offerings at night (Acuña 1984b:91). These priests were the children of lords and other elite and were raised in the temple where they learned all the ceremonies. When one of them died or left after seven years, he was replaced by a new one (Acuña 1984b:93). They were not allowed to speak with women or drink pulque, but they were higher than the lords, influencing everything (Acuña 1984b:93). The three partidos had other patrons but performed the same ceremonies (Acuña 1984b:92). Here again we see Bezelao as an idol kept in a house in the mountains, guarded by priests without any mention of Mitla. Unlike in Guaxilotitlan however his name is used for a singular being, which is called the principal lord of the devils. Does this mean that Bezelao was the most important of all the gods, or is *los diablos* used to refer to a specific group of beings, of which Bezelao was the most powerful?

A somewhat clearer image of Bezelao's portfolio comes from the town of Ocelotepeque, near to Miahuatlan (Map 1). In this town there was a public house were the idols were kept and the *bigañas* lived, these took care of the temple and made the sacrifices to the idols including those of the war captives whose heart were taken out and put on an altar (Acuña 1984:88-90). In addition the lords and other principal persons drew blood from their nose, ear, tongue and 'other' body parts, this sacrifice was also done through the *bigañas*, who never left the temple (Acuña 1984:88-90). The *ídolo* was called Bezalao, *el demonyo*, the universal god who presided over the killing and helped them in war and was invoked when

[14]Principal dios de los diablos: principal god of the devils.
[15]Sacrificadero: building for performing sacrifices
[16]Pueblo: village

sowing and other agricultural activities (Acuña 1984:88-90). They also had others who were like councillors to him, one of these was Cozichacozee, the fiercely painted god of wars with his bow and arrows in his hand (Acuña 1984:88-90). But Bezalao was revered above all others because he was the *Dyos universal sobre todos*[17] (Acuña 1984:88-90). The town used to be governed by a *cacique*[18] called *Petela* or dog. He belonged to the generation who had fled the great flood on a boat. Of his generation he was chosen as the leader and the bravest but after ten years he died (Acuña 1984:88-90). Afterwards he was worshipped and offered to as a god and they kept his body buried, dried and embalmed. These bones were still on their correct place when they were found by the Spaniard de Piza who publicly burned them (Acuña 1984:88-90). But when three years later a disease killed over 1200 people the town officials started offering to his ashes again, so that Petela could be mediator with Besalao, so Besalao would temper the disease (Acuña 1984:88-90). Eventually these people were arrested, put in jail in Miahuatlan, then sent to Oaxaca City where they were tried and punished (Acuña 1984:88-90). Acuña points out that it is possible that the gods that the people from nearby Miahuatlan refer to in Nahuatl as *Tlacatecolotl*[19], being the name of the devil, should also be taken as a reference to Bezelao not only because both mean devil but also because Miahuatlan and Ocelotepeque are part of the same *Relacion* (Acuña 1984:77).

There are also some other towns for which Bezelao is not named but which still seem to have some relation to Mitla. In the case of Teitipac, located just southwest of Tlacolula, Acuña remarks how even though the *Relacion* gives 'rock on rock' as the translation of the Zapotec toponym *Zetoba*, it actually means 'the other grave' (Acuña 1984b:170). According to Burgoa it had this name to distinguish it from the normal burial place for the Zapotec kings at Mitla. He later even calls it the second entrance to the *Averno*[20] and the '*laguna Estigia*[21]' with Mitla apparently being the first (in: Acuña 1984b:170). The *Relacion* itself however gives little new information, talking about sacrifices made to the devil, and how they made idols and faces of him from stone, which were very ugly, it tells about sacrificing dogs and Indian slaves, how they then got drunk, danced and ate mushrooms. The latter are interesting as they made these people see many visions and horrible figures (Acuña 1984b:171).

Another interesting link might be seen between Mitla and Tehuantepec. In this town they had idols made of pottery, wood and precious stones that were sacrificed to as gods (Acuña 1984b:114). They had a principal idol of the town and the province and they talked to this devil visibly. At the place where it was kept there was an old and ancient Indian whose task it was to do the ceremonies,

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[17]Dyos universal sobre todos: Universal god above all.

[18]Cacique: originally a title among the Caribbean Taino speaking peoples that was adopted by the Spaniards as a title for all indigenous rulers.

[19]Tlacatecolotl: literally Nahuatl for owl-man, but later by Catholic priests adopted as a Nahuatl synonym for the devil due to its horrific appearance.

[20]Averno: underworld

[21]Laguna Estigia: The Stygian Lake, referring to the river Styx that in classic Greek tradition had to be crossed to reach the afterlife.

customs and sacrifices and they called him *sacerdote*[22] or *papa* (Acuña 1984b:116). The latter might of course mean that in this unique case they referred to a priest as a father figure but given the fact that Burgoa described how the High Priest of Mitla fled to Tehuantepec where he continued his activities it seems more likely that *papa* should be translated with pope. If this old Indian was then indeed the former High Priest of Mitla or his successor it would also seem likely that the principal idol of the whole province that is referred to in this *Relacion* is in fact that of Bezelao or maybe his wife.

3.1.3 De Córdova's Vocabvlario en Lengua Çapoteca

So far we have seen how idols called Bezelao are found in quite separate parts of the Zapotec speaking regions where they are sacrificed to much like other idols are. In addition he has been said to be the one who is sacrificed to by all the valleys and towns, he has been called the universal god of the devils, as well as the universal god who is prayed to for war and agriculture. We have also seen how other idols were seen as his councillors or as mediators between him and the people. And now, in looking for another possible link between a description of a god named in a *Relacion* and Bezelao we will finally see a tentative translation of his name. In the Relacion of the Zapotec speaking town of Iztepec it is said that their god was named *dios del palacio* or god of the palace (Acuña 1984:270). Although Acuña gives Pitao Quehui, an otherwise unknown deity name as a possible reconstruction, another possibility can be found in Thomas Smith Stark's seminal analysis of religious terminology in the Spanish-Zapotec dictionary of Fray Juan de Córdova (Smith Stark 2002).

Coming from an important Spanish noble family, and having served in the military in Flanders, Juan de Córdova eventually went to Mexico where he joined the Dominican order in 1543, going to Oaxaca in 1548 where he learned the Zapotec language. After he refused to comply to his superiors who had received complaints about the severity with which he ministered to the indigeneous people in his ministry he retired to the convent of Tlacochahauaya. There he wrote the first Spanish-Zapotec dictionary, with much attention to religious concepts, which was published in 1578 (Bandelier 1908). In Smith Stark's analysis of the different deity names in this work there are several entries interest to us. The first can be found under the heading *demonio*[23]: *peze-lào* or *pezèe-lào*, then under *Diablo grande principal*[24]: *pezè-lào-tào* (Smith Stark 2002: 24). The final part of this last name, *tào*, means sacred and can also be found in the titel *Pitào*, where *pi* means animated and the compound means god (Smith Stark 2002:5). This term is then also found under the heading *Dioses del Infierno*[25]: *Pitào peze-lào* (Smith Stark 2002:24). Interestingly we see here again that the text talks about

[22]Sacerdote: priest.
[23]Demonio: devil or demon
[24]Diablo grande principal: principal grand devil
[25]Dioses del Infierno: gods of hell

several gods of hell and about a principal devil. Could this mean that there are indeed several Pezelaos or might it be like Smith Stark suggests the result of Córdova's Christian worldview where there is one Satan who is the leader of a larger group of fallen angels? (Smith Stark 2002:25). Regretably Smith Stark's tentative translation of *Pezèe-lào* does not bring us any of the answers we have been looking for, except that it might provide a small link to the god of Iztepec as said above. Since *Pezèe-lào* has at least two accents it consists of at least two segments, maybe more. *Pe*, like *pi*, probably means animated while *zèe* seems to be a form of the word for pyramid, *lào* finally means face (Smith Stark 2002:24). This would then give a translation along the line of 'Face of the Pyramid', with the *pe* indicating that we are dealing with an animated being, not an object. It is important to note that under the entry for pyramid, being a hill of stone that you climb by stairs and where they sacrifice men, in addition to *zèe* it is also called *eèche peze-lào*, which seems to suggest a special relation between this god and pyramids if not a commentary by Córdova wanting to point out that on pyramids people are sacrificed, which is evil and of the devil (Smith Stark 2002:24). In addition to being mentioned in the entry for pyramid there are two other entries where *Pezèelào* figures. The first is *xicochìna pezèelào* or 'messenger of god, hell or the devil', which is a nighttime bird which is seen as a bad omen and which we will see more of below (Smith Stark 2002:26). The other is *xiniça pezèelào*, meaning 'water of the god of hell' or 'drink of the devil' which he calls the wine of the Indians (Smith Stark 2002:27). This could very wel be the liquor of crushed fruit mixed with wine of the maguey which Burgoa mentions, that was used in ritual drinking and which commoners were not allowed to drink (Burgoa 1989:125).

From Córdova's translations it becomes very clear that he associates *Pezèelào* with the devil. This leads Smith Stark to the conclusion that we are probably dealing with the god of the dead or the underworld that due to association with the insides of the earth was equated with the Christian devil (Smith Stark 2002:25). Interestingly this theory is supported by another entry in Córdova's dictionary where hell, the abyss and the center of the earth is not only translated as *capìilla* but also twice as *líchi pezè-lào*, meaning house of *Pezèelào* (Smith Stark 2002:25). Here we seem to see *Pezèelào* or *Bezelao* figure as the lord of the underworld in a very similar way to how van der Loo describes the Nahuatl gods of death *Mictlanteuctli*[26] and *Mictecacihuatl*[27] as they are depicted in the various codices of the Borgia[28] group (Loo 1987:99). These two were the lord and lady of the layer of the underworld of which we already saw above how it was equated with the Christian hell: *Mictlan*. It was this place that those who died a common death went to, since in the Mesoamerican religions it was not the way one lived

[26]Mictlanteuctli: Lord of the Place of the Dead

[27]Mictecacihuatl: Lady of the Dead. Micqui = dead (an agentive of miqui to die); tecatl = people; cihuatl = woman, lady

[28]Codices are pre- or early colonial folded books often made of deerskin that depict iconographic narratives. The Borgia Group is a collection of codices, painted in the Mixteca-Puebla style, that are largely of unknown provenance. They are grouped together on the basis of the religious, mantic and ritual nature of their depictions.

that determined the afterlife but the way one died (Loo 1987:100). Once arrived these dead served the lord and lady in their realm (Loo 1987:100). Concerning the trip to this place van der Loo refers to a description of this journey by *Fray* Bernardino de Sahagún, the well-known 16th century Franciscan missionary and co-author of the Florentine Codex. Sahagún writes how after death a person has to make a trip that goes between mountains, over a road guarded by a snake, past a green lizard, over eight plains, through the wind of knives, to finally cross the river of hell, called *Ciconahuapan*[29] on the back of a white or black dog (in Loo 1987:104). A similar trip seems to be depicted (Fig. 3) in Codex Vaticanus A of the Borgia Group (Anders & Jansen 1994:213).

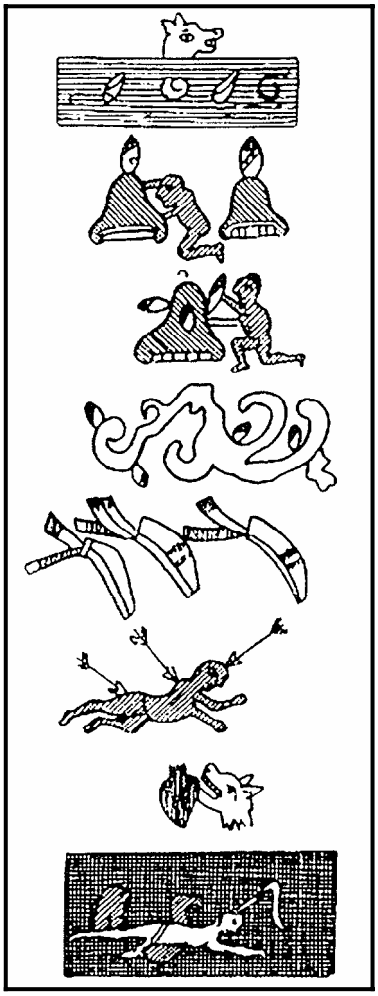


Figure 3: The road to Mictlan from Vaticanus A, f2. (In Anders & Jansen 1994: 213).

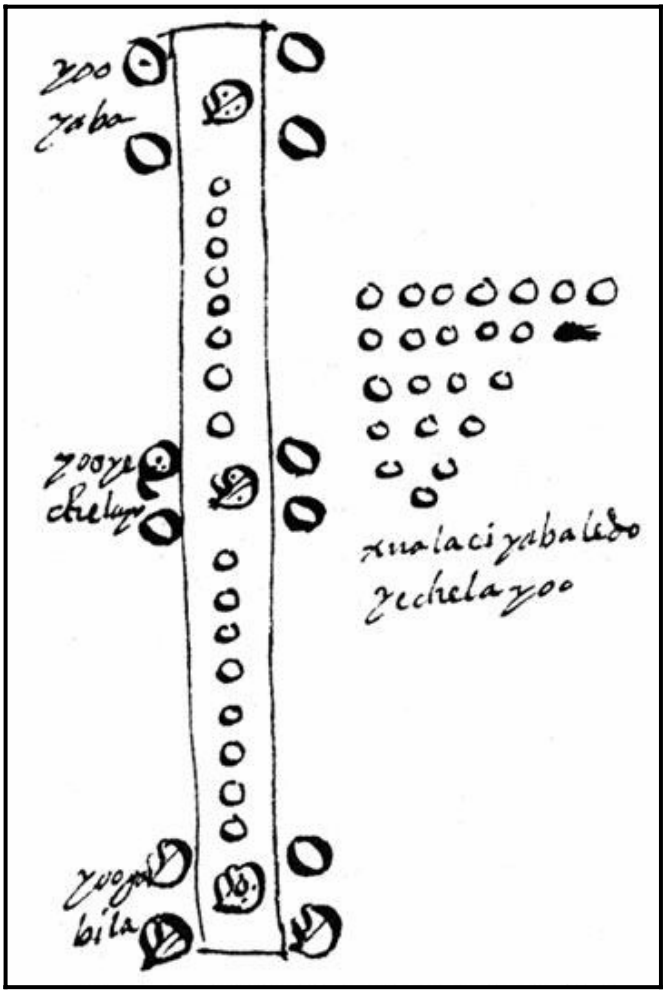


Figure 4: The Zapotec cosmos from Calender 11, AGI Mexico 882 (Tavárez 2005).

[29]Ciconahuapan: Place of nine rivers

3.1.4 Balsalobre's Idolatría y Superstición

However when we want to know more about gods of death we need not go to the Nahuatl speaking regions for information. There are also several interesting sources on this topic from the Zapotec speaking region. The first of these is written by Gonzalo de Balsalobre who was the Catholic priest of San Miguel Sola from 1634 until 1665 (Berlin 1988:9). It was in this town, presently called Sola de Vega, located eighty kilometres southwest of Oaxaca City, that in December of 1653 Balsalobre came into contact with a ritual specialist called Diego Luis who had in his possession a ritual text that he had translated from a Chatino original into Solteco, the Zapotec variant spoken in Sola (Tavárez 1997). This unexpected confrontation with the survival of pre-colonial beliefs in his town motivated Balsalobre to start an intensive five year investigation into these matters which eventually resulted in a small booklet (Berlin 1988:9). Based on the information in this text as well as the information in the various notes and trials that were later retrieved from archives Heinrich Berlin has made an interesting overview of the gods and rituals that were still very much alive in this Zapotecan town in the 17th century. Most interesting for us are the two lists of 13 deities given by Diego Luis in 1635 and 1654. Although Bezelao himself is not mentioned there are several relevant names in them. In the first the 5th god is called dios *de los muertos, que estan en el infierno*[30], the 7th is called *dios del infierno*[31] or Lucifer while the 8th is called *diosa del infierno, mujer de lucifer*[32] (Berlin 1988:19). In the second list the 5th is called *Leraa Huila*: *demonio, dios del infierno* and the 10th *Xonatzi Huilia*: *mujer del demonio* (Berlin 1988:18-19). Since *Huilia* is the local variant of *capìilla*, being hell or the center of the earth, there clearly is a Lord and a Lady of the Underworld in the 1654 list. However in the 1635 there are two gods associated with hell and one godess. One of these two gods corresponds in number to the god in the 1654 list but he is not the one that is married to the godess, of which the numbers do not correspond either. This same problem occurs concerning eight or nine of the other gods in the list (Berlin 1988:19). This confusion can not be explained by the fact that we are probably dealing with a calendrical deity list, because distances between gods would still correspond in that case. Maybe things can become clearer by studying the way these gods figure in the various rituals that are discussed? First of all *Xonatzi Huilia/Jonatzhuiliyaa/Jonatziquiliyaa/Xonaxihulia*, is offered to in favour of the sick and the dead, while *Leraa Huila/Lerahuilaa/Leraaquila/Letaaquilaa/ Coquiecabila* is mentioned several times as the one that chickens are sacrificed to after someone has died (Berlin 1988:22). In the text also a third *dios de la muerte* or *dios del infierno* is mentioned by Balsalobre who is called *Coquietaa/Coquieta/Coqueetaa/Coquetaa* and to him chickens are also sacrificed after someone has died (Berlin 1988:23). Could it be that this is the second of the two gods in the 1635 list? According to Diego Luis himself the two can not be

[30]Dios de los muertos, que estan en el infierno: God of the Dead, who are in hell.
[31]Dios del infierno: god of hell.
[32]Diosa del infierno, mujer de Lucifer: goddess of hell, wife of Lucifer.

separated from each other (Berlin 1988:23). This seems to be confirmed when comparing the statements of Diego Luis and those of his assistent concerning the same ritual after someone had died. While Diego Luis addresses *Licuicha*, who is the sun, *Coquiecabila* and *Jonatzhuiliyaa*, his assistent also names *Licuicha*, *Letaquilaa* and *Jonatziquiliyaa* but includes *Coquietaa* as well (Berlin 1988:23). Balsalobre himself states that there is only one god of hell with three attributes, namely *Coqueeta, Leta Ahuila* and his wife *Xoxaxihuila* (Berlin 1988:112). But this might just as well result from his catholised worldview as anything else. In his text two interesting other occurences of this god of hell need to be mentioned. The first is found in a hunting ritual where he is said to be the one that sends the dead (Berlin 1988:134). And in various rituals after someone died he and his wife are requested to prevent the deceased person to take the road back home where he or she would do harm (Berlin 1988:113). This concept of a road between this world and the underworld seems very familiar to the description we saw before by Sahagún. It can also be seen when a river, called *Quesoquasa*, next to which such offerings were made after someone had died is said to come from hell and is even called *camino del infierno*[33] (Berlin 1988:49,133).

3.1.5 The Villa Alta Confessions

A second valuable Zapotec source of information comes from the Villa Alta district, directly to the north of Mitla. It was in this region that in 1700, after two native informants in the town of San Francisco Cajonos were lynched for revealing a pre-colonial ritual, that an extensive inspection was started by a newly arrived bishop named Ángel Maldonado (Tavárez 2005). This campaign against idolatry proved to be one of the most successful ever in New Spain as Maldonado offered all communities absolution as long as they were willing to turn in their ritual specialists and would make full confessions of their ritual practices (Tavárez 2005). This resulted in a communal confession signed in Villa Alta by the elected officials of 15 Bijanos Zapotec, 27 Cajonos Zapotec, 26 Nexitzo Zapotec, 29 Mixe and seven Chinantec towns. In addition the Zapotec towns handed in 99 booklets concerning the Zapotec *piyè* or ritual 260-day calendar as well as four booklets with transcriptions of Zapotec songs (Tavárez 2005). Eventually, some time after 1704, these booklets were send to the Council of the Indies in Spain by Maldonado who wanted to use them to convince the crown to relegate control of ten parishes in the Villa Alta region from the Dominicans to him (Tavárez 2005).

Of the four booklets, coming from the towns of Betaza and Lachirioag, two deal with Christian extrahuman forces and two, AGI 882 Booklets 100 and 101, deal with Mesoamerican/Zapotec ones. Of these David Eduardo Tavárez has published a preliminary report of his translations (Tavárez 2005). In the songs there are references to four important founding ancestors, several pan-Zapotecan deities as well as local and calendrical entities (Tavárez 2005). Also there seems to be a

[33]Camino del Infierno: the road of hell.

strong relation between the songs in these booklets and the Zapotec cosmos like it is depicted in one of the calendrical booklets (Fig. 4). On this drawing we see the cosmos depicted with 8 levels between the House of the Sky, *yoo yaba*, and the House of the Earth, *yoo yeche layo* as well as 8 between this House of the Earth and the House of the Underworld: *yoo gabila*, giving a total of 19 layers (Tavárez 2005). And while the 9 songs of booklet 101 seem to relate to the passage between the House of the Earth and the House of the Sky, the 9 longer songs of booklet 100 seem to relate to the passage between the House of the Earth and the House of the Underworld (Tavárez 2005). This last conclusion is mainly based on the fact that in this booklet *gabila* or underworld is mentioned on 24 separate occasions while there are six references to Becelao Dao! So once again we see the main idol of Mitla mentioned as a ruler of the House of the Underworld, the place where the dead travel to and reside.

Concerning the dead and founding ancestors there are also some interesting passages in a book by Alcina Franch on calendars and religion among the Zapotec that is also largely based on the Villa Alta confessions (Franch 1993). In these passages accounts are discussed of people coming from the Villa Alta villages of Betaza, Yatee, Yaa and San Pablo who confess having made offerings to *una cabeza de un abuelo*[34], *cabezas de los abuelos*, *una cabeza de nuestro abuelo*, *cabezas de mis abuelos* or in Zapotec *Guiquiag Yagtal* (Franch 1993:114). In the account of a man from Yaa we get a more detailed description when he describes that he had in his possession a deerskin with drawings of the gods of his ancestors as well as two *cabezas de mis abuelos* or *Guiquiag Yagtal* which he had gotten from his father who had said to protect it with great care as they were from *nuestros abuelos* (Franch 1993:114). Franch interprets these *cabezas* as representations, probably of divinized ancestors as there are no known head portrets of specific individuals (Franch 1993:114). But might it not be that a more literal head was meant like with the dried and embalmed body of the deified cacique Petela of Ocelotepeque?

3.1.6 Secondary Sources

Having discussed several primary sources concerning Bezelao, the gods of hell or the underworld and ancestor veneration there are still a lot of questions that remain, such as is Bezelao a single entity or a group of entities? What is the relation between Bezelao as a god and Bezelao as an idol? Why do other towns also have a Bezelao idol while Mitla seems to have been the place where the high priest resided? And what is the relation between Bezelao as a god of the dead and ancestor veneration? All of these questions delve deeply into the nature of extrahuman forces in the Zapotec region in particular and Mesoamerica in general. Concerning these issues the authors of several secondary sources have

[34]Una cabeza de un abuelo: literally a head of a grandfather; nuestro abuelo: our grandfather; mis abuelos: my grandfathers

attempted to provide answers and it might prove worthwhile to look into their hypotheses.

Firstly there is the categorization of Alcina Franch who makes a difference between local gods, such as those of certain caves and mountains as well as specific idols, and the general gods that, with some local and temporal variations, all fit in a principally similar scheme for the entire Zapoteca (Franch 1993:95). Expressing doubt whether the god Coqueeta is actually the same as Coqueehila, Franch focuses mostly on the couple of the *dios del infierno/muerte* and the *diosa del infierno/muerte* (Franch 1993:98-99). He recognizes this couple in the *Coqueela - Xonaxihuilia* couple of San Miguel Sola, the couple of an unnamed deity and *Xonaxi Gualapag* in Villa Alta, the *Benelaba - Jonaji Belachina* couple found in the *Relacion* of Coatlan and finally of course in the *Coqui Bezelao-Xonaxi Quecuya* couple of Mitla (Franch 1993:99). He however does not give any arguments on why *Xonaxi Gualapag, Benelaba, Jonaji Belachina* would be related to hell, underworld or the dead, the three attributes of which he himself states that they are characteristic of this couple (Franch 1993:99). And as the existing translations for these names actually point in other directions the equation seems mainly based on the fact that these are all couples. Of *Xonatzi Huilia* he adds that in addition to the above mentioned deities she might also be the same as *Xonaxi Guapalap* from Comaltepeque, though no translation or reason is given, and Lady 11 Death from the works of Caso and Bernal while she is also the Zapotec equivalent of *Mictecacihuatl* (Franch 1993:101). Also following Caso and Bernal he equates *Coquebilaque, señor del centro de la tierra*[35] of Macuilxochitl, just west of Mitla with the god of the underworld as well (Franch 1993:102). And while that equation seems to be quite sound from a linguistic point of view, the one with *Coque Cehuiyo* of Tlacolula is, without any further arguments, questionable at the least (Franch 1993:102). Finally he connects this god to the old God 5F, found on various Zapotec urns, which also seems to be a god of earth and the underworld (Franch 1993:103). All of these are clearly attempts by Franch to position the couple of the *dios del infierno/muerte* and the *diosa del infierno/muerte* into a pan-Zapotecan scheme. And even though some of the associations he makes are quite evident, others are questionable or even unlikely.

On the other end of the spectrum we find Joyce Marcus and Kent Flannery (Marcus & Flannery 1994). They pose that even though the Zapotecs had a complex society, their religion did not fit the traditional scheme for such societies as it was neither monotheistic, nor did it have a pantheon of gods (Marcus & Flannery 1994:404). Instead they had a religion which was animatistic, concerned the worship of natural forces and veneration of ancestors and was governed by reciprocity (Marcus & Flannery 1994:403-404). These animatistic natural forces all had pèe or pi which is the breath, spirit, wind or vital force of all things that can not be manipulated by technology but only by reciprocal ritual such as lightning, the mountains and rain. These were all empowered by the 'Great Spirit' or sacred life force called *Pitào* (Marcus & Flannery 1994:404). Instead of a

[35]Señor del centro de le tierra: lord of the centre of the earth.

pantheon of gods, the Zapotecs revered their deified royal ancestors which had special powers to intercede with powerful supernaturals as long as their descendants made the appropriate offerings. These were called *penigòlazaa*, or the old people of the clouds, since these ancestors had changed into clouds. These ancestors were then mistaken by the Spaniards for a pantheon of gods (Marcus & Flannery 1994:405). For some reason however no sources are given for these final points concerning the ancestors turning into clouds and interceding with powerful supernaturals. In another article by Marcus some additional comments are added to the above (Marcus 1983). First of all he states that there was a supreme being, apparently the *Pitào*, which was never depicted but who created all the supernatural forces (Marcus 1983:345). About the ancestors he explains how they were often interpreted as gods but that you can clearly see they were actually human as they bear worldly titles, have calendar names and are highly localized (Marcus 1983:348). Concerning the deity list by Córdova, Marcus claims that this concerns a list of supernatural *pitào* forces and not of gods while Balsalobre lists the 13 supernatural forces that govern the days (Marcus 1983:349). Finally in an interesting note he adds that Bezelao, the lord of the afterlife might have been a legitimate deity, though it is still not clear how he was envisioned (Marcus 1983:348). But if this would be true, why then was Bezelao called a Coquì in the *Relacion* of Mitla while according to Córdova this is purely a sociopolitical title (Smith Stark 2002:47,50)?

In her article based mainly on the *Relaciones Geograficas* Jean Starr focuses especially on this position of Bezelao within Zapotec religion (Starr 1987). She argues that the Zapotecs did not act as a nation unless they were serving the ruler of Teozapotlan, who later fled to Tehuantepec (Starr 1987:371). And even when he is mentioned in the *Relaciones* one has to be aware that these accounts represent idealized history just as much as any source (Starr 1987:377). But most of all it was their state religion, directed by a statepriest and centred on the worship of their god Bezelao at Mitla that gave them group identity, albeit not by definition cohesion. The latter is clearly illustrated by the *Relaciones* of Cuilapa, Tlacolula and Macuilsuchil who all said to have been at war with Mitla or even oppressed it (Starr 1987:371). She points out that the *Relaciones* do not mention rituals to a creator god such as the one mentioned by Marcus, but rituals to Bezelao. And though we have seen several of these rituals mentioned it is mainly because Starr counts all references to the devil as dealing with Bezelao as well, that he becomes so omnipresent. But even though Bezelao was indeed often associated with the devil it is important to note that other gods were as well. This means that other lines of evidence are needed to be able to connect the devil to a god of the dead or the underworld and even then this could be another deity then Bezelao. About the worshipped *Coqui* who are mentioned in the *Relaciones* she says that they are probably either the mummified remains of past *caciques* or their idols and that they are specific to a town (Starr 1987:375). Once again the problematic fact that in Mitla Bezelao was called a *Coqui*, even though he was clearly not a purely local phenomenon, is not taken into account.

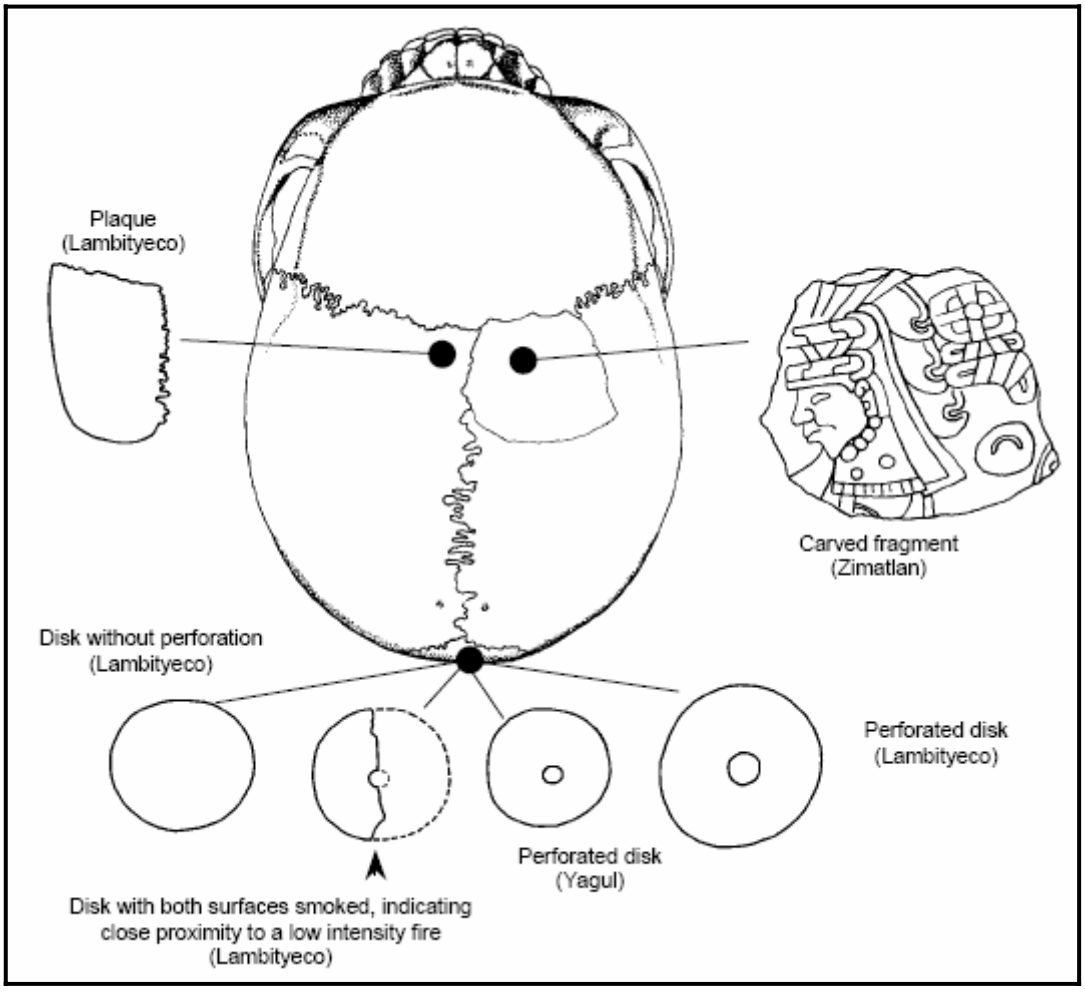


Figure 5: Objects manufactured from skulls with their provenience (Urcid 2005: 3.15).

Since the concept of a former *cacique* or *coqui* being worshipped after death either as an idol or as a mummy seems to have some bearance not only on the concept of gods and ancestors in general but also of Bezelao in particular, it might be useful to look into a recent work of Javier Urcid (Urcid 2005). As part of a larger work concerning Zapotec writing, Urcid discusses the decorations in a Postclassic mausoleum built on top of tomb 6 at Lambityeco only a few miles from Mitla. In these decorations persons can be seen carrying human femora in their hands and mandibles as bracelets (Urcid 2005:38). A frequency comparison of the bones found in the tomb shows that especially very small and large bones were missing. While the small bones were probably taken out before the tomb was cleaned before the many new interments of which there is evidence, the long bones were probably taken by elite to validate their status by using these parts of their ancestors like it was depicted in the mausoleum (Urcid 2005:38). Several examples of objects made of human crania from Lambityeco and nearby Yagul as well as inscribed skulls (Fig. 5) attest to this hypothesis. The several sealed or undisturbed, and thus non-looted, emptied tombs that coincide with settlement

abandonment also point to such continued ancestor commemoration (Urcid 2005:39-40). It now seems highly likely that the 'heads of our grandfathers' that were mentioned in the Villa Alta region also fit in this category, just as the bones of *Petela* of Ocelotepeque. Later in his book Urcid concludes that

> "*[t]he archaeological investigation of many Zapotec tombs in the last 100 years has made it evident that in the ancient cosmology the realm of the ancestors had a profound relevance in the social life of corporate groups, communities, and polities. In the semasiographic rendition of what evidently constituted a rich ritual life centered on commemorating and invoking ancestral figures, it becomes clear how the temporal and spatial dimensions of the living and the dead were intertwined.*" (Urcid 2005:148).

In addition the ancestors of the highest houses also personified the 9 or 13 divine beings of the calendar as well as other extrahuman forces (Urcid 2005:154). Thus concerning the persons that are depicted in tomb narratives Urcid follows neither Caso who considers them anthropomorphic deities nor Marcus who identifies them as prominent historical figures, but interprets them as individuals who played important social roles, by embodying ancestors and deities (Urcid 2005:27-28).

In his translations of the Villa Alta songs Tavárez also recognizes such a middle ground between a cosmology of local or regional deified ancestors or a pantheon of pan-Mesoamerican deities (Tavárez 2005:9). And inspired by the work of Urcid as well as the famous Quiché Popol Vuh narrative he concludes that these songs show a complex and maybe even shifting constellation of, amongst other extrahuman forces, Zapotec deities which are probably historically related to other Mesoamerican deities, calendrical entities and deified founding ancestors (Tavárez 2005:9). When asked about Bezelao he wondered whether this might have been the appellative of a deity, that could have been a deified ancestor, which was then given as a personal name to one or more rulers at Mitla (Tavárez: personal communication). He added that in such a case it would be very difficult to distinguish historical founding ancestors from deified ancestors and very ancient deities.

Could it be that Bezelao was such an ancient deity whose name was given to one or more rulers, or maybe the high priests at Mitla due to the fact that they were so closely involved with the burial of the Zapotec elite and their passage to the underworld at Mitla? Though this can never be more than a highly tentative hypothesis, especially given the absence of any sources pointing directly in this direction, it does given some plausible explanations of some of the questions that still remained. First of all it would explain why several towns have idols revered to as Bezelao, it was a common deity after all, while Mitla seems to have been more important in this sense, as its priests or rulers were more closely associated with the practices connected to this god of the underworld. Secondly it would clarify why the *Relacion* of Mitla is the only instance where Bezelao's idol is given the worldly title of *coqui* as he had been a ruler there. This idol might even have been

or have incorporated parts of this ruler or priest's skeleton. Finally it would account for the confusion between Bezelao in the singular and in the plural, though it was the name of a deity it was also the name of one or more ancestors. Alternatively Bezelao could have been a deified historical ancestor who was once the ruler or high priest of Mitla who in life embodied the god of the underworld and in this capacity was revered throughout the Zapotec speaking region. It could then even be that his name 'Face of the Pyramid' was a reference to this role as representative at these Mitleño temples. In any case it seems likely that Mitla, in its capacity of burial place of royalty and elite, was associated with the gods of the underworld and the dead and the journey that the latter had to make to the former.

3.1.7 The Murals

Interestingly the above hypothesis concerning the role of deified ancestors for Mitla has several points in common with a recent interpretation by John Pohl of some heavily damaged Mixteca-Puebla style murals (Fig. 6) that are found on the lintels of one the ruins of the Church Group in Mitla (Pohl 1999). Initially these were copied, described and analyzed at the beginning of the twentieth century by the German Mesoamericanist Eduard Seler from a largely Aztec point of view (Seler 1904). John Pohl however recognizes in them the Tolteca-Chichimec cosmogony showing the hero Mixcoatl-camaxtli, the Mixtec cosmogony, with Lord 1 Flower and Lady 13 Flower emerging from the river, and finally the Zapotec cosmogony (Pohl 1999:183-186). His interpretations of this last narrative, which can be found on the north wall, is of some interest to us. Though Pohl does casually refer to Seler's conclusions that these images are connected to the famous Toltec legend of the deified priest 9 Wind Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl, who is said to have built the temples of Mitla during his flight from Tula, he does not involve these in his own interpretations (Pohl 1999:179,186; Seler 1904:314-316). Instead he focuses on one segment of the mural which depicts the scene in the year one reed where two gods are carrying place signs on their back, one with a turkey head and one with a fruit tree. And another scene in which two similar figures both associated with the day sign flower and wearing butterfly crowns are seated in front of two temples that also have a turkey head and a fruit tree.

According to Pohl the deity sitting in front of the 'Hill of the Turkey' can be identified as Lord 7 Flower, who is also shown in the Codex Bodley seated and dressed similarly in front of the only other known depiction of such a Hill of the Turkey (Pohl 1999:187). In this scene in Codex Bodley Lord 4 Wind is shown as he visits three oracular priests: Lord 1 Death at Achiutla, Lady 9 Grass at Chalcatongo and Lord 7 Flower at the Hill o/t Turkey. This visiting Lord 4 Wind then is the son of Lady 6 Monkey of Jaltepec, a descendant of Lady 13 Flower and Lord 1 Flower (Pohl 1999:187). 7 Flower is also the name of the great creator god Tonacatecuhtli that in Codex Rios1 is the he father of all gods and lord of 13th heaven, a garden paradise where only sinless children and the purest lords went

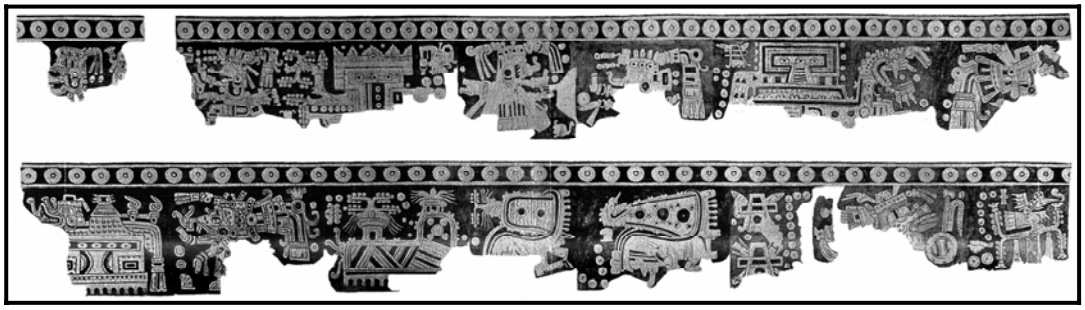


Figure 6: Selection of the mural on the Church Group's north wall (Seler 1904: plate xxxviii).

to after death. This, according to Pohl sounds very similar to Burgoa's description of the bounteous life that deceased expected to enjoy after death (Pohl 1999:187). Together with Mexican archaeologist Nelly Robles and a guardian of the ruins Pohl identified a small promontory 3,5 kilometres east of Mitla called *El Guajalote*[36] or *Guhdz Bedkol* as this Hill of the Turkey. He states that according to the anthropologists Schmieder, Parsons and Leslie this area is the most sacred of all the natural features and that it is still considered bewitched today. He also adds that Parsons documents legends of oracular forces in this area and that in another story recorded by her caves are called little mirrors, which are also depicted on this hill on the mural (Pohl 1988:188).

The Hill of the Fruit Tree on the other hand is not identified in any of the codices although Pohl claims that in Codex Rios124 the Aztec conquest of Mitla is represented by a fruit tree (Pohl 1999:189). He also sees another connection between Mitla and fruit trees in a legend recorded by historian M. Martínez Gracida in an unpublished manuscript written in 1906 and presently located in an archive in Oaxaca City. In this book however no sources are mentioned making it unclear whether information is taken from other sources, comes from local traditions or is the result of speculation or interpretation (Robles, Magadán & Moreira 1987:73). This being said, the legend tells of the priests of Mitla maintaining a bountiful orchard consisting of fruit trees such as nanches (image), guayabas and zapotes, which was destroyed by the Aztecs (Pohl 1999:189). A fruit tree with nanche berries is also used in Codex Vaticanus as a symbol of *Tamoanchan*, the 13th Aztec heaven. Nanche was supposedly also renowned for making liquor and might have been the crushed fruit used in the drink that Burgoa describes (Pohl 1999:190). According to Pohl nanche trees still grow in abundance around the ruins and the slope where the Group of Columns is built on is called *Roogeuii*, which many Mitleños translate as 'at the nanche tree' (Pohl 1999:190).

Having found these links between the locations depicted and Mitla, Pohl focuses on the deity sitting in front of these hills, but does not call him 7 Flower this time but 13 Flower, apparently confusing this deity with the female ancestor of the Lord who was visiting this deity in Codex Bodley. In any case Pohl states

[36]El Guajalote: the turkey

that through iconographic analysis of the deity's attributes it is clear that he is 13 flower or Bezelao, “lord of the Zapotec netherworld and patron deity of Mitla” (Pohl 1999:190). Apparently this iconographic analysis has something to do with the day sign flower being associated somehow with Bezelao. This Bezelao then is the prince of devils, the supreme universal god, the god of hell which in the Sola de Vega list holds the 7th place which in the central Mexican calendar would correspond to Xochipilli-Cinteotl, whose attributes match the painting (Pohl 1999:190). In Codex Fejérváry-Mayer a god with the attributes of Xochipilli-Cinteotl is depicted as the patron of rites on 13 Flower while in Codex Laud this deity is depicted seated below a composite fruit tree that also has nanche berries (Pohl 1999:190). Cinteotl is commonly a corn god, but in Codex Rios he is the patron of ritual drinking together with Mayahuel with whom he together presides over the 8th trecena being 1 grass, which is also the name of Bezelao's wife in the *Relacion* of Mitla (Pohl 1999:190).

Having linked the two depicted locations to places in Mitla and the depicted god to Bezelao, Pohl concludes that the priests at Mitla had oracular political power that was founded on control of the highest ranking royal dead, the most prominent of which were grouped at Mitla (Pohl 1999:193). Like 9 Grass who presided over the royal mummified dead of Tilantongo in the funerary cave of Chalcatongo, and thereby gained political power, Mitla was also the residence of one of the three oracular powers that was visited by Lord 4 Wind. These oracles 13 Flower and 7 Flower might even have been the high priests of Mitla (Pohl 1999:193-195). Pohl supports this hypothesis by claiming that courts were private places for drinking to excess to commune with ancestors, though he gives no source for this argument. In addition he refers to Burgoa's statement that the high priest told the assembled kings what the spirits of the dead had advised and to a passage in the *Relacion* of Teitipac where it is said that mushrooms were eaten to see the dead as ghostly shades (Pohl 1999:179,191). In addition to drinking to excess he states that the courts were also used to resolve disputes and arrange alliances and it was under these circumstances that the murals at Mitla with their themes of factionalism as well as multinational decision-making were read and performed (Pohl 1999:192). In conclusion he argues that Mitla was not allied to any of the three factions of which the cosmogonies were depicted but was a sacred space where all were equals. This is then reflected in the fact that even today Zapotec, Mixtec and Chatino speaking pilgrims come to Mitla as these are the inheritors of the three cosmogonies depicted.

The reason that Pohl's hypothesis was not included in the analysis above, even though it provides an interesting alternative from an angle not taken into account there, is not only due to the fact that it is based only on a partial study of heavily damaged murals but also that it is a patchwork of weak and suggestive connections between pieces of information of which the sources are often not given or do not check out. Some of these we have already seen such as Burgoa crediting either the priest himself or the idol with the advise that was given not the dead, the mushrooms in Teticpac giving visions of horrible figures and not of the dead and the name of Mitla's female idol being Lady 3 (or 5) flower and not 1

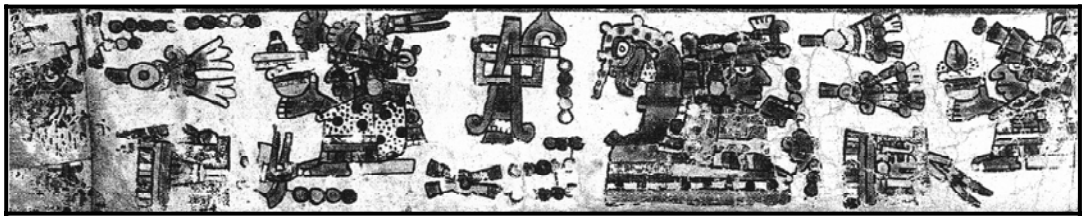


Figure 7: Lord 4 Wind visiting Lord 7 Flower at the Hill of the Turkey in Codex Bodley p. 31 V (Jansen 2005: 86-87).

Grass. The identification of the deity sitting in front of the Hill of the Turkey with Bezelao is not only weak because of this last error or his unargumented switch between 7 Flower and 13 Flower but also because the only given iconographical link between Bezelao and him is the day sign flower which seems to be taken out of thin air. Equating Bezelao to the 7th god in the Sola de Vega list and then equating this list to that of central Mexican calendars is also troublesome since none of the problems inherent in the two lists from San Miguel Sola are even mentioned. The identification of the promontory outside of Mitla with the Hill of the Turkey also turns out to be questionable as the reference he gives for the Zapotec name *Guhdz Bedkol* translates it as Turkey Spring which of course is something else entirely (Briggs 1961:103). In addition neither Schmieder, nor Parsons, nor Leslie called this area the most sacred of all natural features. That people would translate *Roogeuii* as 'at the nanche tree' also seems unlikely since it bears only passing resemblance to *ža-bäwi* meaning 'under the nanche tree' (Briggs 1961:104) or to *yagbäl huii*, being the Byrsonima crassifolia or nanche tree (Stubblefield & Stubblefield 1991:280).

But, given that the Codex Bodley indeed contains a scene (Fig.7) in which “on day 7 Flower, Lord 4 Wind went to pay his respects to Lord 7 Flower a deified ancestor, and at the same time a solar deity, in Mountain of the Turkey” (Jansen 2005:86-87) and Seler also identifies the gods before the two hills as sun gods (Seler 1904:317) there could still be a connection between this narrative and the consultation of a deified ancestor by Lord 4 Wind. However such a connection would necessitate an academically sound research of its own in which the full scene is studied, Seler's conclusions about Quetzalcoatl's flight from Tollan should be taken into account and a thorough and full review of all relevant iconographical material is made. Such an investigation lies outside the limits of this thesis though.

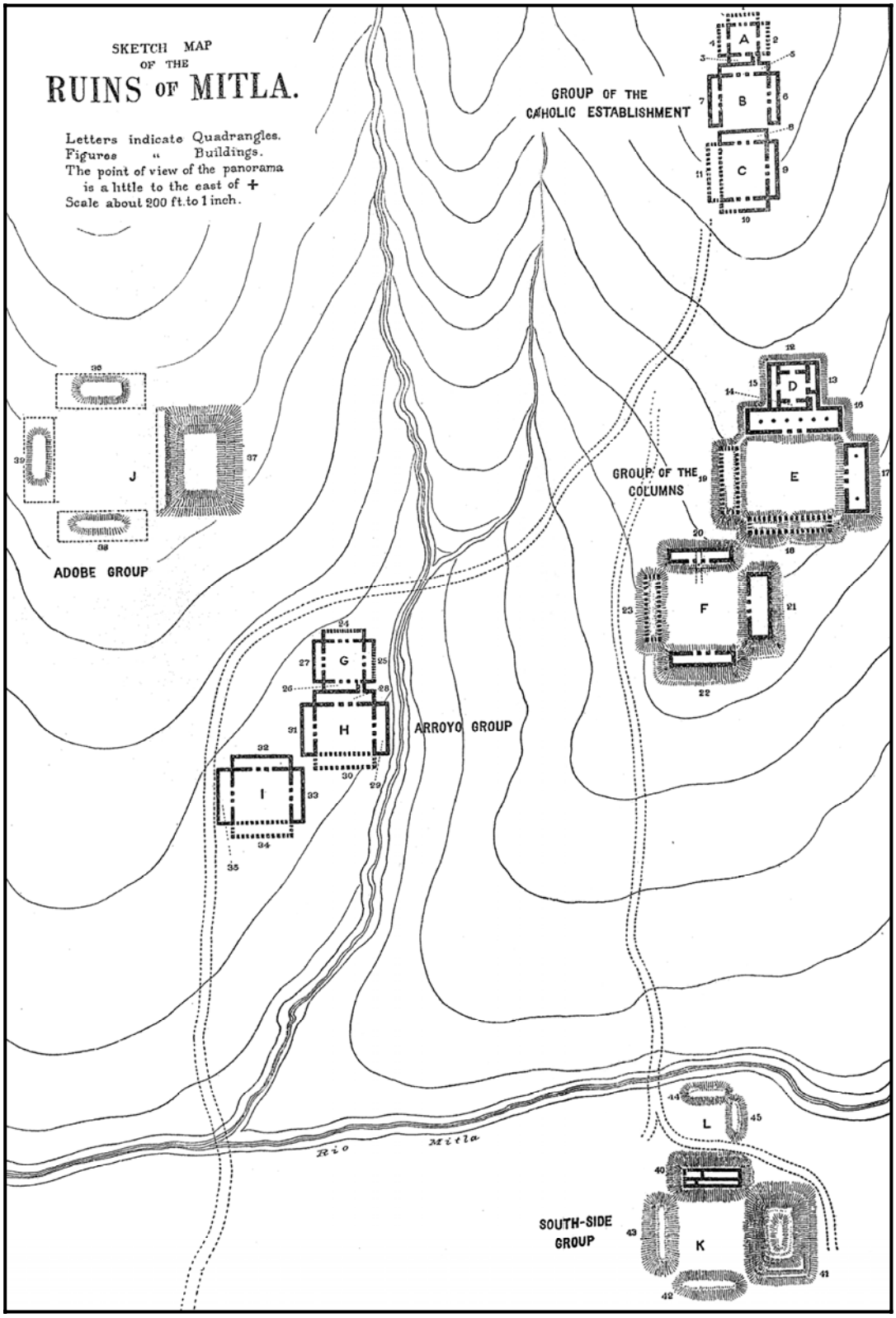
3.2 Early Explorers and Ethnographers

3.2.1 The explorers

After having discussed several early colonial sources it is interesting to go back to the quote of Guillermo Dupaix with which this thesis started, as we can now recognize the Christian reasoning behind his translation of Miquitla as hell or place of sadness. It is also interesting to see how Dupaix, like Burgoa 150 years before him connects the meaning of this name to Mitla's imposing surrounding landscape as well as its function as a burial place (Dupaix 1969:121). Later he adds that based on the quality of the subterranean architecture there must have been as much love for the deceased as there was for their god, whom he does not name (Dupaix 1969:132). And regarding Mitla's monuments he says that Mitla's location is better suited for these dead seeking their eternal rest, again a reference to Burgoa, than for royal palaces (Dupaix 1969:139).

Much more dramatic are the statements by explorer and historian A.F. Bandelier who in 1880 writes in a letter regarding his visits to Mitla about a terrible journey into the inferno, the ruins of Lyó-Baa, the gates of eternity (in Steck 1961:254). And fifteen years later the famous archaeologist William Holmes also connected the Mitleño landscape to its architecture, stating that the novel features in the latter were due to isolation of this people and their peculiar environment (Holmes 1895:229).

In his book titled 'Lyobaa ó Mictlan', Nicolas León, a Mexican archaeologist is the first to really go in depth concerning the background of Mitla's names. Translating Mictlan simply as place for corpses or cemetery, he is the first to translate the Zapotec *Liobá* as 'place of tombs' in addition to Burgoa's 'centre of rest'. He considers the real name to be *Yoopaa*: house of burial, but although this seems interesting given that we earlier saw a 'House of Bezelao' or 'House of the Underworld', León does not give a source for this piece of information (León 1901:44). A later translation by Acuña, using Córdova's dictionary, seems to concur on the latter half of the translation, i.e. *pàa* meaning grave, but translates *liyò* as inside of something (Acuña 1984b:260). This Zapotec name also comes back in the name that León says that the locals give to the palaces: *basul lyobaa*, with *basul* meaning wall (León 1901:42). The name he gives for the Palace, probably refering to the Hall of Columns, is especially interesting as it is *Yoopecheliche Pezelao* although again no source is given. In this name we can at least recognize the name for house: *yoo* and the name for pyramid: *che* and of course the name of Mitla's primary idol who is again associated with a pyramid, albeit concretely in Mitla this time (León 1901:44). Finally the segment *baa* also comes back in the Zapotec name for Tlacolula, being *Guchibaa*, with *guichi* meaning town (León 1901:45). Once again, just as with the Zapotec name of Teiticpac meaning 'the other grave', we see a town close to Mitla associated with burial, making it clear that it was not just Mitla but the whole area that was associated to burial and the underworld.



Map 2: The ruins of Mitla as drawn by W. H. Holmes (Holmes 1895).

Seler, translating Mictlan as 'Place of the Dead' and *Yoopaa* or *Lioo-baa* as 'Burial Place', argues that Mitla was such an important sanctuary because of the many caves in the area, which were used for burials, were the entrances to the realm of dead and the places where the ancestors originated from (Seler 1904:247,248). Concerning Burgoa's translation of Liobaa as place of rest, Seler explains that it is based on the fact that there are two different meanings for the root *-paa*, the other being 'resting' or 'taking a breath' (Seler 1904:247).

In Martínez Gracida's unpublished manuscript, which was located in an archive by Mexican archaeologist Nelly Robles and from which we already saw a legend concerning fruit trees, he uses some interesting names for the various monuments in Mitla (Robles, Magadán & Moreira 1987). Although it has to be mentioned once again that no sources are given and that these names therefore might just as well be fancy speculation on Martínez Gracida's part. First of all he calls the northern building of the Church Group (Map 2) the Monastery of Pitao Cocijo, after the Zapotec god of Rain, the building in the middle of this group the Monastery of the Priestesses or women and the southern one the Temple of Cozaana, after the Zapotec god of animals and hunting (Robles, Magadán & Moreira 1987:17,16). The Arroyo Group he calls the Monastery of the Men, while calling the southern building of the Columns Group either Palace of Eternity or Temple of the God of the Dead and the northern one Temple of Pezelao (Robles, Magadán & Moreira 1987:16,14,20). Although these names might just as well be fancy speculations on Martínez Gracida's part, it is interesting to see that some knowledge still existed at this point concerning Pezelao and that it is connected again to the same building in Mitla, as well as being associated with a God of the Dead.

According to cultural geographer Oscar Schmieder, who had taken interest in the settlement styles of the Zapotecs and the Mixe, Mitla was the place where the dead went to for the Mexicans but was mistaken by the Spaniards to mean hell (Schmieder 1930:33). He also describes how the Zapotec Lyo-bāā was already almost forgotten by the Mitleños, though it was still used in surrounding villages and by the Mixe (Schmieder 1930:33). Explaining that there was little agricultural interest in the mountains, he is clearly amazed by the fact that every creek, hill, and so on was named and known. One such place was a subterranean vault in the mountains called *Vasu-lyōb*, a name of which we saw earlier that it was used for the palaces.

3.2.2 The early ethnographers about the afterlife

Above we saw how Mictlan was the place where according to the Aztec those journeyed to who had died a common death and there they served the lord and lady of this underworld. And going by the several early colonial sources we have seen, the Zapotecs seem to have had a similar conception of the afterlife. In Elsie Clews Parsons ethnography, written in the 1930's, we come across something very similar when the fate of the deceased is discussed. Because while innocent

little children, or *angelitos*[37], are said to go straight to heaven, the adult dead go elsewhere and for their journeying spirits prayers must be said during the *novena* or nine day ritual period after burial (Parsons 1936:148,150). One man explained to Parsons that when no mass or *responsos*[38] are said "*para descansar la alma a la gloria*[39] "the soul might become lost in hell" (Parsons 1936: 152). The man however, like all Mitleños, did not belief in heaven or hell according to Parsons. Because though heaven and hell are familiar terms, they are not believed in or related to life after death. Instead afterlife is a continuation of this life with a little preliminary episode where the dead cross a big river called *Río Jordang*[40], carried by a black dog because the white dog is only for white people as he will not soil his coat. It is for this reason that black dogs should not be beaten or refused food as this will mean that you will be refused passage (Parsons 1936:152). After crossing the river the dead arrive at the next world which is a large nameless *pueblo* beneath the earth where one lives on just as in this life and with the same body (Parsons 1936:153). That hell did not take can also be seen in stories where the devil, as a slickly dressed person, bribes people to come and serve in his house which is a cave east of town. Parsons points out that it is obvious that these are the consequence of the early supernaturals being called devils by the friars (Parsons 1936:209-210). That this devil might be closely associated with a lord of the underworld is apparent from the fact that people are taken to serve in his house, just as with the dead serving the lord and lady of the underworld, and that this house is in a cave, which are often entrances to the underworld. The only place in town where Parsons found images of traditional devils with tails and horns was above the jail, she wondered however what would be the use of warning wrongdoers with the devil when they don't belief in hell, because what is the devil without hell (Parsons 1936:210)? Parson concludes that heaven and hell did not take as they clashed with the idea of going down to a *pueblo* in the earth. And thus the prayers are not actually to the dead in purgatory but to the dead for what one wants and the dead benefit from this only during their initial journey (Parsons 1936:530-531). In other words, God, the saints, the souls and the devil are associated with this life and with practical benefits and goods (Parsons 1936:211).

Twenty years later, when Leslie was doing his research, things weren't very different. Hell was translated in Zapotec as *gabihl* which people described as the realm of the dead coexisting with this one. Here the people lived who had made a good transition and had died of a normal dead and not of a *mala muerte*[41] such as murder or a fatal accident (Leslie 1960:49). Sin, which was seen as a burden and resulted in a heavy corpse, was also not seen as the deceased's own fault as it resulted either from *mala muerte* or from family members neglecting the proper rituals to lighten the body (Leslie 1960:50). It is for this reason that a soul stays

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[37]Angelitos: little angels
[38]Responso: a special prayer to the dead
[39]Para descansar la alma a la gloria: to ease the souls to glory.
[40]Río Jordang: The river Jordan.
[41]Mala muerte: bad death.

some time in the house to check if its kinsmen are not grudging the expenses. But while the inhabitants of the house can sense its presence, it is at the same time also travelling (Leslie 1960:53). This is probably also why people do not pray for a moral life but for worldly benefits since people should forgive themselves for seeking pleasure in this world of pain (Leslie 1960:50).

In a somewhat more Christian version in Julio de la Fuente's ethnography of the mountain village of Yalalag, a little to the north of Mitla (Map 1) hell and purgatory are inside the earth where it's hot and demons punish. This place however can soon be left when the proper prayers are said. Limbo on the other hand is somewhere in the sky where little souls, apparently those of little children, float without wanting to leave (Leslie 1977:275). According to de la Fuente the prayers during the *novena* are to chase away the dead from the house to the place of rest. From this place of rest the souls return each year with *Todos Santos*[42] (Fuente 1977:207).

3.2.3 Going to the Town of the Souls

In the quote we saw in the introduction Parsons explained how the souls of all Zapotecs would come to Mitla after death. And for this reason the people from the mountain towns called it *el mitad del mundo*, or middle of the world (Parsons 1936:1). And pilgrims from these town came to the underground chambers of Mitla because *Lyob' es el lugar de descansas donde se reunen todas las ánimas*[43] (Parsons 1936:287,207). A pair of such pilgrims came to the house of Eligio, a good friend of Parsons, one afternoon asking for *posada*[44]. The woman explained that she had had dreams of enemies killing her, so they came especially to Mitla where the souls go to to find a godmother of the candle[45] for the child so it would not get sick. She also knew of the stories of the black dog and of the owl which were signs of death as well. (Parsons 1936:375).

Describing the various omens that exist in Mitla, Parsons also tells about this owl which is a sign of death when heard at midnight or when one is dying. Stories exist of owls calling out someone's name who then dies within days or months. The barn owl is a bird of dead as well, as its call sounds like the cutting of the dead shroud (Parsons 1936:318). In addition both owl and barn owl are called messengers of God, just like the night time bird, *xicochìna pezèelào,* in Juan de Córdova's dictionary! That the owl is also strongly connected to the underground *pueblo* of the dead can be seen in two stories told by Eligio. In the first a hunter is out on a cold day when he encounters a barn owl sitting in a tree. The hunter

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[42]Todos Santos: All Saints. In Mexico integrated with All Souls into los Dias de los Muertos: the Days of the Dead.

[43]Lyob' es el lugar de descansas donde se reunen todas las ánimas: Lyob' is the place of resting where all the souls gather.

[44]Posada: literally hospitality it concerns a request to sleep at someone's house, while on pilgrimage or a trading trip.

[45]Godmother of the candle: a lady who will burn candles for the wellbeing and health of a child.

captures the barn owl and pulls out all his feathers and goes home. At night while in bed he is awoken by the assistents of the *presidente*[46] and taken to see him. But when he arrives at the *presidente* he sees that it is not the one of his own *pueblo* even though the man complains about having been done wrong by him. And although the hunter defends himself stating that he had been in the fields the whole day he finally has to pardon himself when the *presidente* brings in his *mayor*[47]: a barn owl wearing no clothes! He gets the choice to either replace the barn owl's clothes, go into the oven or fight the bull. Choosing to fight the bull, the man wakes up in his bed and explains his wife all that he had seen in the other world. Within three days he dies (Parsons 1936:361-362). In the other story a man from Mitla returns home from a trip to Tehuantepec to find his wife dead. First the man starts to cry, then he starts to drink. One night, while drunk, he meets an owl whom he threatens to kill. When the owl asks him why he wants to kill him, the man explains that he is weary of life and wants to talk to his wife. Owl then promises the man to take him to the town of the souls as long as he keeps quiet. The man then perceives that he is in a strange town with a white church were they were ringing the bell for mass. On owl's instruction the man sticks two needles in his wife's shawl on her way to church so she would return afterwards. Though she returns after mass she is with another man and asks her husband why he had come as it was not yet his time. He explains that he wanted to see her because he loved her very much and because he wanted to know where she had hid the money! The woman explains that the money is buried in the kitchen and she leaves with the other man. The man then gets very angry and sets fire to the house they enter. Returning to the owl, the bird gets angry at him because he had set fire to his own house. Though at first the man does not believe it, he sees his house in flames when they go back. From these stories people know that the souls live in the same house as in life (Parsons 1936:262-263).

That this town of the souls is actually located in or under Mitla is not only apparent from the work of Parsons but is also evident from an entry in the grammatical work of Elinor Briggs where Mitla is called *yedž aím*[48] or town of the souls (Briggs 1961:103). Furthermore reference to this is also found in the work of Julio de la Fuente. He explains how people still believed that the trip to the heaven, limbo or place of rest was a long one and that a black dog guides the souls over the river and serves as transportation (Fuente 1977:203). On the one hand this heaven is said to be situated in the sky, where god, the saints and the souls enjoy their eternal rest and the working on earth is succeeded by resting in heaven and souls have everything needed and have the same shape as in life (Fuente 1977:274). But on the other, in a contradiction of which he complains that the natives don't notice it, the souls also go to a place of rest which is

[46]Presidente: town mayor elected by the townspeople every 2 years from among their own ranks

[47]Mayor: senior, superior.

[48]Yec-: cabacera or regional capital; aim: soul.

situated inside the earth and which one enters through the *subterraneos*[49] of Mitla named *yo lubé*, *lugar de la tierra de Mitla*[50] (Fuente 1977:274). This underground place is guarded by *una gente no material*[51] that you have to ask for permission. Inside live the souls still united with their skeletons and clothes and on New Year's Eve they hold a market here and help in a mass. Therefore on this day the Yalaltecos, in big pilgrimages, go to Mitla. Also from this place the souls leave and return with Todos Santos, although they do this from where there bones are buried as well (Fuente 1977:275). Those that die during Todos Santos have to work as servants for the souls in Mitla (Fuente 1977:292). The latter again sounds similar to the dead having to serve the lord and lady of the underworld as we saw above.

Though Parsons still notes how for example the new town officials had to promise to respect the dead on their initiation, we have seen that Leslie considered these stories about Mitla as town of the souls as decayed legends that had lost drama to the Mitleños themselves (Parsons 1936:172; Leslie 1960:22). In general such stories seem to have survived however as Van der Loo writes how several ethnographies still show how the dead go to specific places that are not far from this world but very regional such as caves, rivers and clouds. These dead also sometimes still serve supernaturals there. Pilgrimages also still take place, for example among the Tlapanecos, the Mazatecos and the Zapotecos to these places of the dead, including stories about the river and the dog (Loo 1987:188-189).

According to Parsons pilgrimages such as these are among the most personal and vital expression of this religious system (Parsons 1936:303). And the long journeys these birds, as pilgrims are called, make on foot along century-old trails to 'go to see a saint' are very traditional according to her (Parsons 1936:65,390,527). The most important time of pilgrimage to Mitla are with New Year as De la Fuente pointed out, and with the feast day of Mitla's patron San Pablo on the fifteenth of January. On this day groups of pilgrim traders from mountains camp around, first visiting the church, giving candles and making ritual rounds and afterwards mass is said and *responsos* are made for the souls. On the Tuesday a mass is paid for by the pilgrims (Parsons 1936:243-246). Parsons also points out that saintly reputations come and go and that for example San Pablo is considered more miraculous by pilgrims than by Mitleños who take him for granted (Parsons 1936:205-206). Leslie adds to this that pilgrimages are also occasions for trade and entertainment and that fashions change considering the popular locations (Leslie 1960:58).

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[49]Subterraneos: subterranean chambers.
[50]Lugar de la tierra de Mitla, place of the earth of Mitla.
[51]Una gente not material: an immaterial people.

3.2.4 The nature of souls

Now that it has been established that Mitla was seen to be the place where the souls went to after death and was closely connected to the town of the souls where they reside, there are some questions concerning these souls that need to be addressed. Most important of all is the question what the relation is between these souls and the various concepts we discussed in the first part of this chapter. But other questions like what these souls look like and what they do are also relevant.

Parsons herself considered Mitla as the place of the dead to probably be a survival of the ancient cult for the dead (Parsons 1936:509). This ancient cult for the dead chiefs or priests was then strongly related to the present day cult for the souls (Parsons 1936:522). And she adds that there could be no doubt that offering to the dead and feeding them was a preconquest tradition (Parsons 1936:524). In addition to offering to the dead she also relates several stories of people talking to the dead (Parsons 1936:207). These however were specific individuals such as partners or parents while the concept of the souls included all the dead. Also those of whom the names had been forgotten and according to Parson's good friend Eligio names of ancestors were not well remembered. Names of parents were remembered, but not of grandparents who died longer ago. His mother for example did not even know her deceased grandparent's names (Parsons 1936:94). And *responsos* for example were not just said for deceased family members either but also for the dead at large such as on monday when people burned candles for the souls in front of two small images that represented them (Parsons 1936:208). It might be that one of these images referred to *las ánimas solas*[52], to whom you pray for all necessities of life, while the other refers to *las ánimas comúnes*[53], to whom you pray for long life, like in the distinction made by the *curandera*[54] Agustina (Parsons 1936:208). The *ánimas solas* were a common concept. Urbano, another Mitleño curandero, for example defined them as the souls of those that die away from the pueblo and Rosa Hernandez, a curendera from San Baltazar, placed a large candle for these solitary souls behind the door of the church at New Year. However *las ánimas comúnes* seemed unknown to anybody but Agustina (Parsons 1936:208). Alternatively Parsons wondered whether the term *las ánimas comúnes* might have something to due with the ground in front of the main altar that is sometimes refered to as the communal grave (Parsons 1936:151). Interestingly the souls of whom de la Fuente said that those that died during All Souls had to work for were also called *ánimas comúnes* and on the first of November, with All Souls, *responsos* were said in the middle of the graveyard at Yalalag for the *ánimas inominadas*, which seems to be a related concept as well (Fuente 1977:292).

Concerning their shape de la Fuente describes the souls as in principle invisible spirits, though some have seen vaporous forms rise out of the body of a

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[52]Ánimas Solas: solitary souls
[53]Ánimas Comunes: common souls
[54]Curandera: a female ritual and herbal healer

just deceased person. Dogs and other animals notice these souls and make a noise (Fuente 1977:268). On the other hand when talking about the dead residing in the underground place entered in Mitla he said that they were still united to their skeletons and their clothes (Fuente 1977:275). Might it be that they are without body in this world, while being corporeal in the town of the souls?

3.2.5 All Souls

One aspect of the nature of the souls has already been mentioned several times, namely that they return from their *pueblo* of the souls with the All Souls festivities. Also called *Los Días de los Muertos*[55] the two days of All Saints and All Souls have been combined in Mexico into one larger feast dedicated completely to the souls. In Zapotec this feast is called *tohgol* meaning 'dead old ones' (Parsons 1936:281). The festivities start already at noon on the 31st of October when the double bells ring like at a child's funeral and the *angelitos* return to their former homes. The next day, the 1st of November, when at noon the bells ring normally these children leave again and the adults return home, staying until noon of the 2nd of November (Parsons 1936:281). On the house altars food and drink, flowers, candle, copal, and other ornaments are laid out. Toys and sweets are presented for the children, and for adults what ever it was that they liked most in life. Bread rolls are assigned to the deceased family members by name, with larger ones for the grandparents. Relatives and *compadres*[56] of the deceased visit and contribute a *cariño*[57] to the altar and they receive food in return. There are no lights on at night and in the early morning and afternoon the cemetery is visited and offerings are made there as well (Parsons 1936:281). Everybody knows that the souls come for what is set out for them as several stories are told of people who have seen them (Parsons 1936:282). In one such story a Mitleña sees her father and her mother kneeling at the altar and praying and eventually putting all the offerings into a basket and going away. In another story from San Miguel Alvarrados a glass of water was seen levitating at the place arranged for the deceased father. (Parsons 1936:282). For these festivities all the glass, plates, cups, bowls, and sometimes even the clothing should be new as otherwise the souls would be saddened and displeased. This makes it the most costly ceremony of the year (Parsons 1936:282).

Leslie similarly describes people buying new clothes, pottery and baskets (Leslie 1960:55). He also relates several other stories that are cited as proof of the existence of the souls and their yearly return home (Leslie 1960: 56). In one such tale a lady called Juana neglected her altar for All Souls as none of her family members had died in Mitla. And even though a worried neighbour brought her some food to put on the table she was to exhausted from work and set it aside. But a moment later she went into trance as she saw the souls of her parents

[55]Días de los Muertos: Days of the Dead
[56]Compadres: godparents
[57]Cariño: Little present.

enter the hut together with that of a Mitleña friend of her. After the souls had left disappointed she woke from her trance and cried out for them, but they were already gone. A few months later she died (Leslie 1960:56). In another story the soul of a drunkard is seen knocking over everything on the altar when he realizes there is no liquor for him. And in yet another story a bread is knocked of the altar by a man who had promised to do so on his deathbed. In addition the story of the man who was taken by owl to see his deceased wife and accidentally burned down his own house out of jealousy was also still told (Leslie 1960:56).

Howard Leigh, Research Consultant at the Frissell Museum of Zapotec Art in Mitla, expounds on the term *togol* meaning 'old dead' which is used in contrast to the normal word for the dead: *guht* to indicate the souls that return with All Souls (Leigh 1960:2). Because those that died since the last All Souls festivities remain in the 'House of the Dead', to take care of it. The term is also used when someone dies during *Todos Santos* when people said that 'the *togol* took him' whatever the actual cause of death might have been (Leigh 1960:2).

In the Zapotec names that these two days have in Yalalag (Fuente 1977:290), namely *ža lni ke bi' dao'* meaning 'day of the feast of the children' and *ža lni ke be' ne' gulé*, 'the day of the feast of the dead' we see a clear connection to the 'feast of the little dead' and 'feast of the big dead' mentioned in the *Relacion* of Teotitlan. This seems to suggest that there is also a long cultural continuity behind this ritual. However as anthropologist Rossanna Lok has pointed out, there has little thorough research been done into these matters (Lok 1991). In any case it is on these days that the souls leave Mitla to follow the roads to their relatives wherever these may live (Fuente 1977:289). When they arrive there they eat the aromas of the food laid out for them and leave again on the souls of grasshoppers (Fuente 1977:291). During the festivities in Yalalag social behaviour changes with children being told to be quiet so not to offend the souls, and the adults acting grave (Fuente 1977:291). Yalaltecos also tell that in Mitla the old people used to sit on banks at the altars with their arms crossed and squatted just like the *antiguos*[58] buried their dead. The children were forbidden to look outside and look at the flying insects as these were the manifested souls and they would fall out of the air (Fuente 1977:291).

3.2.6 The ancients and other extrahuman forces

Apart from the souls Parsons also talks of several other extrahuman forces about whom stories were still told in the 1930's. According to her by the 1930's these old gods lived only in such folktales, obscurely hidden under nicknames. The only exception to this was the Rain deity Lightning as not only stories were still told directly about him but until some time before her fieldwork rituals involving him were also still performed. In the most famous story Lightning keeps clouds and hail in three jars that he can let loose on the world (Parsons

[58]Antiguos: the ancients.

1936:211). Flood on the other hand is caused by a water serpent with two horns falling from sky. Another horned serpent lived in the Lake of White Water, where she was the *madre del agua*[59], but she was killed and the lake went dry. Until that time a feast was held there every year with New Year's Eve (Parsons 1936:223). In Tlacolula they said that in the river at Mitla there lived a winged serpent which controlled the water. One year when there was a great drought people even threatened to go to Mitla to kill it so the water would flow again (Parsons 1936:223). Other nature related extrahuman forces are worshipped less directly as apparently there also is some theistic feeling for the earth as can be seen in the libations that will be discussed in more detail in chapter five and Parsons also heard from a pilgrim and some old people that they still prayed to the sun upon waking (Parsons 1936:215-216).

The ancient people that built the temples are said to have lived in a period of darkness before the first sunrise. When the sun finally rose they went underground where they turned to stone (Parsons 1936:216). In this way the *antiguos*, in Zapotec called *rebengulal* or *rebentiem,* meaning people of that time became the idols that are still found around Mitla today (Parsons 1936:216). Marcus and Flannery relate how in Tehuantepec idols such as small pottery figurines in burial positions are called *penigòlazaa*, the old people of the clouds which was also their name for deified ancestors (Marcus & Flannery 1994:409). In Mitla *ídolos* may be called a saint or given a saint's name while going the other way around saints are seen as Mitleños who were turned to stone (Parsons 1936:217,521). Idols can whistle, especially on Monday, Wednesday or Friday or rattle to be found or so more will be found. One lady living close to the ruins told Parsons how her bed had been shaking, and after she moved it she heard noises coming from the corner and found some old bones (Parsons 1936:217) This same lady had an *ídolo* on her altar 'for safekeeping' as there was quite a trade in these (Parsons 1936:218). Parsons' good friend and clever trader Eligio even threatened to report a seller from Santo Domingo to the Inspector of Archaeology after the man had increased the price, saying that the item was *milagroso*[60]. The old man knew of course that Eligio wanted to resell it with huge profit to tourists (Parsons 1936:218). It was of course illegal to dig in the ruins, but people did it secretly as there was no reward when finds were reported. Parsons herself even bought such a *monito*[61] from San Baltazar that had red paint on green painted stone and was covered in yellow wax. She states that it clearly had had a long life both as *ídolo* and as *santito*[62]. Eligio however said that idols were never used to adore an altar as they were *malos*[63] (Parsons 1936:218).

One of the most famous stories told in Mitla about the ancient people who eventually turned into stone deals with *Sus Ley*, or Sacred old Woman who was the patroness of weaving and according to Parsons might have been the old

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[59]Madre del agua: mother of the water
[60]Milagroso: miraculous
[61]Monito: literally little monkey, term for idols
[62]Santito: little saint. Used often to designate an idol that is used as a saint.
[63]Malos: evil or bad.

patroness of Mitla. She was married to *Gol Gisâ'*, or Old Man Stone Cloud, who lay on his back all day (Parsons 1936:222-223). In the story she adopts two orphans, as she herself was barren, to bring food to her husband every day. Resenting them the children kill *Gol Gisâ'* by taking out his heart and feeding it to *Sus Ley*. She plans to enact her revenge by suffocating them in her sweat bath, however they escape and prevent her pursuit by throwing her weaving sticks in her way. Eventually they are also attacked by her brother in the shape of a serpent but the little boy kills him and takes out his eyes. Cheating his sister out of the brighter eye he is turned into the sun by God while she is turned into the moon (Parsons 1936:222-223).

When the sun rose and the ancients went underground *Sus Giber*, whose name can not be translated but who was the patroness of cooking, did not. She was the cook of Montezuma who was the lord of the monuments, though he lived with the rest of them in the fortress west of Mitla. Her kitchen, her spring, her third ranch and she herself turned to stone on mount Girone where they can still be seen today (Parsons 1936:220). She was prayed to originally by woodchoppers, by merchants and for money and in the 1930's she was said to still reanimate on Wednesday and Friday to bathe in the river (Parsons 1936:221). Her son *Etlakwatla*[64] was a diviner who understood the stars and he was the one who warned them about the coming sun. He was also Montezuma's master carpenter, while Salomon was the master-mason who designed the mosaics and worked with stone blocks who were still light as husks and easily transportable in these times (Parsons 1936:221,289). When the sun rose Montezuma himself didn't remain stationary but moved to Mexico City from where, in the period that Parsons did her fieldwork, he was still said to return every year at New Year's Eve to dance the *Conquista*[65] (Parsons 1936:221). On this evening besides doing his dance, Montezuma also gave wealth to those that had the luck to see a shining cock that when caught and locked up turned to gold three days later (Parsons 1936:289). In other versions a man meets Montezuma himself who tells him to take offerings to his brother San Pablo at the church, in return he gains a sack which is later full of gold but also a snake who is the spiritual owner of the gold. The man returns to also ask a cat but gains a snake instead. Since he was not allowed to tell his wife she kills the snake out of fear and thus Montezuma takes everything back (Parsons 1936:290-293). That Montezuma was also used as a general title for the ancients can be seen in a story which tells how the monuments were built by the Montezumas, *gulal* or *ídolos* who eventually withdrew to the lake of Mexico. Montezuma was also used as a name for the *ruinas encantadas*[66] (Parsons 1936:348,430). Parsons concludes that Montezuma figures as a deified priest that bestows blessings as well as a chiefly leader living in a fort (Parsons 1936:504).

In Yalalag ídolos are called *yîg gwláse*, which according to de la Fuente means 'stone of the heathens' though 'stone of the ancients' is probably a closer

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[64]Etlakwatla: seems to be a degenerated form of Quetzalcoatl.

[65]Conquista: literally meaning conquest this is a folk dance depicting the dramatize events of Cortez at Montezuma's court.

[66]Ruinas encantadas: enchanted ruins

translation. (Fuente 1977:266). These idols then are either considered to be the ancients or to be of the ancients. They are not associated with a specific spirit but are either seen as curiosa or used ritually in a way that will be discussed in more detail in chapter five (Fuente 1977:266). Until some decades before de la Fuente's research special ceremonies were done for these *gwláse* on New Year's Eve just like they still were done by Yalaltecos for the souls in Mitla (Fuente 1977:306,275). De la Fuente also recorded a story regarding ancient heathens of gigantic stature who were also called *be'ne'gwlase* and lived when there was only darkness and cold (Fuente 1977:347). These people worshipped idols, trees, stones and wells and built houses of big stone blocks in the earth. When the sun came they hid in their houses some of which can still be found today deep in the earth, here you can still encounter them (Fuente 1977:347). With the sun came the cross and the true religion and the giants hid because of their false religion. After the first sunrise other people came, also *guláse*, who were the direct predecessors of the Zapotecs and used *hechicerias*[67] to protect the 'Indians' against the Spaniards (Fuente 1977:347).

3.3 The present situation

3.3.1 The ancients and the journey after death

Some of the stories about the ancients are still known today in Mitla as I found out on two separate occasions. The first was when Bonifacio, the only real Mitleño guide of the archaeological zone, gave me a tour around the various archaeological sites in Mitla. During this tour he started telling me of the time before the first sunrise when the stones were still light and easy to work, regrettably however we were interrupted at that point. The second time was when Porfirio, the grandfather of the family I stayed with, took me with him to show me the Cave of the Devil, which will be discussed in more detail in chapter four. Climbing the mountain side he pointed out to me a field of boulders which were the kitchen utensils of *Sus Giber*, though he did not know her name. In addition he told of a man and a woman that turned to stone when the world changed and the sun came up. He told me they belonged to the before sunrise people who had built the monuments.

From two entries in a dictionary published in 1991 and based on 15 years of research in Mitla and with Mitleños it also becomes clear that some knowledge regarding the ancients was still known (Stubblefield & Stubblefield 1991). Resembling closely the terms used by Marcus and Flannery as well as by Julio de la Fuente *bengaloo* is translated as ancestor or person of antiquity while *bengool* is said to mean *anciano* or ancient one (Stubblefield and Stubblefield 1991:8).

In a recent article that is partially ethnographic and partially archaeological and which will be discussed in more detail in chapter four, Alicia Barabas and

[67]Hechicerias: witchcraft, see chapter four.

Marcus Winter also tell about these persons of antiquity (Barabas & Winter 2005). Mitleños had told them that you can still hear and see these *gente anterior*[68] at night in the field. These *almas de los difuntos de antes*[69] live in *el mundo de los muertos*[70] which looks like the world of living. This is also the place where even today the body of the deceased travels to, while the spirit goes to God although it first stays with the living for 40 days. At the end of these 40 days it goes through Mitla, where at the archaeological zone it enters the underworld through a path of obstacles such as a river crossed on the back of a dog. This belief about a trip to the tombs of Mitla can not only be found in Zapotec, but also in Chontal and Mixe villages (Barabas & Winter 2005:30). We see her again the idea of going to God through the underworld that we also saw in Yalalag. However in another section where Barabas and Winter describe the various functions of caves in the Mesoamerican worldview yet another version is discussed. Describing caves as places that are portals to the underworld, the place of origin of the lineages, the burial place of renown ancestors and the birth and disappearance place of various culture heroes and saints, they explain how several communities have a cave for life rituals and one as entrance for the souls (Barabas & Winter 2005:22-23). It is there that they make the long dangerous route with many obstacles to the world of the dead where they live, not corporeally, but in spirit (Barabas & Winter 2005:23).

In a small article concerning the reopening of the Frissell Museum in Mitla Benjamín Maldonado Alvarado also describes how the various Oaxacan cultures have different albeit all very Mesoamerican concepts of the underworld (Maldonado 2004:18). This Mesoamerican aspect can be recognized in that they all concern the soul making a trip of several days, through the natural landscape, to the underworld. During this trip it rests, eats, drinks, buys, overcomes dangers and pays debts often ending in a cave where the soul enters the underworld. For some Oaxaqueños this underworld is located in or under Mitla, for others it's located beneath their own *pueblo*. Sometimes communication is possible at the entrance points of this underworld with related deceased (Maldonado 2004:21).

That the various beliefs which Parsons and Leslie described concerning this journey after dead had not disappeared can be seen in Eveline Dürr's ethnographic studies of Mitla in the early nineties (Dürr 1996). She describes how the soul of a dead person remains in the house to check on its family members during which time it can be felt in dreams, in the air and causes people to sleep badly. A child also still becomes an *angelito* immediately (Dürr 1996:265). At the burial offerings are given for the trip after death and the river that is crossed on a black dog is still called *Rio Jordang*. If death was natural than the deceased person lives on in the afterlife with the same appearance, job, status and so on as in life. This is believed even though the Christian heaven and hell are known. With an unnatural death, the soul does not find rest and lingers on. She also

[68]Gente anterior: people of the past.
[69]Almas de los difuntos de antes: Souls of the dead of the past.
[70]El mundo de los muertos: the world of the dead.

concludes that it is the manner of death and not of life that determines ones fate in the afterlife (Dürr 1996:268).

3.3.2 All Souls

That the belief in Mitla as Town of the Souls from where the dead return with All Souls has not disappeared either we already saw in the passage by Dürr quoted in the introduction. Pilgrims coming from such places as Pochutla and even the Mixteca go to Mitla in the month before the festivities to request Death or *jälgujt*, to allow their relatives to pay them a visit (Dürr 1996:201-202). One 'informant' even translated *jälgujt* with *dios de la muerte* (Dürr 1996:201) which although probably not a literal translation is obviously very interesting when looking at cultural continuity. Regrettably however no details are given concerning this person or the circumstances of the conversation this was said in. Another important preparation for All Souls are the big purchases that are done on extra big markets in Mitla during the weeks beforehand, in Oaxaca or at the *plaza de muertos*[71] in Tlacolula. The special All Souls bread from Mitla is sold to other places. It is considered better than the bread from Tlacolula which Mitleños find obvious as the dead came to Mitla and not to Tlacolula for a good reason (Dürr 1996:202-204)! The days before the festivities begin the food is prepared, the house is cleaned, the deceased's clothes are washed and the altar is decorated (Dürr 1996:204). When people have moved and visiting the old house has become impossible, the souls are notified of the change of address (Dürr 1996:207).

The general procedure of the celebrations are still much like in the 1930's though some say that the *angelitos* only stay until dark as children can't stay too long. The children are also presented small bags to take what is left with them, and they also visit relatives and godparents (Dürr 1996:205). On the second morning, i.e. the first of November, the graves are cleaned in the morning, and at noon not only bells but also fireworks are heard. On the graveyard the dead are requested to go with them to their former homes to celebrate. At home the doors and windows are left open throughout their visit so they can leave and enter as they want (Dürr 1996:205). And in the air moving through the house the souls can be felt (Dürr 1996:209). Recently people also stay longer at the graveyard to also eat there and these meals are also filmed (Dürr 1996:205). Only those who are dead more than a year come, as the others have to guard either the houses in the afterlife or the cemetery. This is why the months before All Souls most people die: so that there are enough guards (Dürr 1996:206). However after the evening dinner with souls people are visited that have lost someone during the last year, and a small altar is made for them too (Dürr 1996:210). People will stay up all night, going from house to house (Dürr 1996:212). Stories are also still told such as that about the man, who didn't have an altar out of disbelief, and consequentially died within a year and that about man who thinks his wife is

[71]Plaza de muertos : Market of the dead.

making clothes for a secret lover, but with All Souls sees the soul of her former husband collecting them (Dürr 1996:209-212).

The second of November, the day that the adults souls leave again at noon, is also dedicated especially to *las ánimas solas*, the souls who had no family in Mitla or came from elsewhere (Dürr 1996:213). And the next day there was a procession to the graveyard with the Virgen de la Soledad to the graveyard where a mass and responsos were said for the dead, including the *ánimas solas* (Dürr 1996:213). Rossana Lok describes how in the Nahuatl speaking town of San Miguel Tzinacapan in Puebla, the third to the ninth of November the souls of those that died in other ways are commemorated (Lok1991:60). In Mitla a new practice related to Halloween was recently introduced, namely that of little children going through the streets dressed like monsters or the dead asking for money or fruit of the altars (Dürr 1996:213-214). In the past, so Dürr was told by an old man, there used to be altars at the ruins because the kings were buried there, these were decorated with *ídolos* as people did not have enough saints (Dürr 1996:206). Like with the pilgrims inviting the souls we again see a strong connection being made between All Souls, the tombs and the ancients.

In the introduction we saw that Leslie claimed that the stories told about the ancient ones who made the cruciform subterraneans where the souls were to meet in the afterlife were decayed legends that had lost drama to the Mitleños (Leslie 1960:21). However in the last few years several projects were developed in Mitla to revalorize indigenous culture and especially Mitla's special connection to All Souls. For example when the Frissell Museum reopens it will have a hall dedicated to the *inframundo y regreso anual de los difuntos*[72] because Mitla is the underworld where the souls live and from where they return each year (Maldonado 2004:18). The hall will document this cycle with its practices, rituals and conceptions, also showing the importance of reciprocity during the *novena* and All Souls (Maldonado 2004:19). Another project is developed by the cultural and commercial youth organisation Mictlan that is not only planning to do exhibits in Europe but also organises a festival around the *Dias de los Muertos* with re-enactments, lectures, dance and story and altar competitions. In their flyer it can be read that their aim is to transform Mitla into a highly cultural community, by revalorizing what is still present. By exploring the cultural and touristic potential of the Days of the Dead, they want to show that in Mitla there is not only archaeology and artisanry but also hospitality. And by involving Mitleños themselves they hope to raise the standard of living. In the flyer Mitla is described as the *lugar de los muertos*[73] were the kings and priests were buried and as one of the places were death has an important role. Where one lives, enjoys, cries, laughs but above all respects death. And with All Souls life stops for a feast full of rituals from our ancestors. In short it is described as a festival for revalorizing the indigenous culture and showing it to visitors. It can complement the already world-famous Guelaguetza folklore summer festival in Oaxaca and

[72]Inframundo y regreso anual de los difuntos : the underworld and the yearly return of the dead.

[73]Lugar de los Muertos: Place of the Dead.

will put Mitla on the regional, national and international calendar as *La Ciudad de los Muertos, y el recinto del Señor de la Muerte, llamado Mictlantecutli*[74]!

During the Guelaguetza festivities in 2005 in Oaxaca I was present at the showcase where Mitla presented itself. Apart from showing the traditional mourning costume and describing the rituals related to burial it was especially the introductory speech which was of interest. In it Mitla, *lugar de los muertos*, was described as a magical place where traditions lived on such as the Zapotec language and the making of textiles. It used to be a religious centre where the Zapotecs built their monuments, made stone *ídolos* and asked favours to *Mictlanteuctli* and *Mictecacihuatl*, the Lord and Lady of the Dead. When the Spaniards came new religious activities were performed though it remained a religious centre. It was not said however in what way it was a religious centre today nor was it mentioned that people believed that the souls went to Mitla after death.

3.3.3 Mitleños about the Place of the Dead

That the beliefs about the souls coming to Mitla after death had however not been forgotten since the early nineties when Dürr did her research became clear to me already during my preliminary fieldwork in 2004. Even before my bed had been made, Gloria of the hotel had already explained to me that the offerings at the Calvario had been placed there by people coming from towns such as Miahuatlán, Ejutla and nearby Matatlan. According to a bikecabdriver I spoke with later that day these people came because Mitla was an important area where many ídolos are found. A statement of which I only much later realised that it might have referred to much more than I understood then. The next day when I asked Gloria about it she said that these people come because the name Mitla comes from Mictlan, meaning place of the dead. The people from this region believe that the souls go to Mitla after death and that's why they come. They come from mountain towns and other small towns close by and they are Zapotecs. When I asked about Mixes and Mixtecs she also mentions the towns Nochixtlan and Ixtlan (Map 1). When I met the family that offered me a place to stay for the next year, Josefina, the grandmother of the family informed me that the pilgrims came on foot to visit the souls of their towns. They came from such places as Nochixtlan, Miahuapan, Matatlan, Tlacolula as well as the Oaxacan coast. She was sure however that the Calvario was not visited by any Mixes. The most spectacular account that I got that year however came from the two guys who had hoped to buy marijuana from me as I was Dutch. They called Mitla the place of death, *el centro de los brujos*[75]!

The next year Porfirio, the grandfather of the family I stayed with, told me that according to Mitleños as well as people coming from elsewhere Mitla is the *mitad*

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[74]La Ciudad de los Muertos, y el recinto del Señor de la Muerte, llamado Mictlantecutli:
The City of the Dead, dwelling place of the Lord of the Dead, called Mictlantecutli.
[75]El centro de los brujos: the centre of the witches.

del mundo[76] though he was not sure what world this refers to. When I asked Gloria of the hotel about this when I visited her she agreed that Mitla is indeed the centre of the world and her old mother Teresa immediately added that it is the centre of the world of the dead. She continued explaining that the whole of Mitla is an archaeological zone with tombs underneath. That is how the town got its Zapotec name: Liobaa, which she translates as on top of the tombs. Mari Elena, daughter of Porfirio and Josefina and my actual hostess, was familiar with the story of crossing the *Rio Jordang* on a black dog when I asked her about it, though she adds that these are all mere *cuentos* or stories. The most elaborate explanation of the meaning of Mitla's name I eventually got from Gildardo, the *regidor de la cultura*. According to him Mitla was the *Pueblo de las Ánimas*[77], not *lugar de los muertos*[78] like many scholars said. And it was most certainly not purgatory as some had suggested. Instead Mitla is a special and sacred place where the souls come to rest. Although Town of the Souls might not be the most literal translation of the Nahuatl Mictlan it does seem to be very close to the Mitleño and in fact Mesoamerican conception of the afterlife. That the souls of the entire region come to Mitla to rest was also explained to me by the guide Bonifacio who however was more interested in telling me how in the past every year a woman would be sacrificed to *Mictlanteuctli*, the God of Death! Although Parsons also describes such a local belief about sacrificial victims being tied to the Pillar of Death (Parsons 1936:288) the reference to the Nahuatl name seems to be a more recent addition as we will see below.

An alternative to Gildardo's account of the afterlife was told to me by Abelardo, the founder of youth organisation Mictlan. He described Mitla as *la pasa*[79] between this life and the eternal life after death, the centre through which all the souls go. Statements similar to these can also be found in the organisation's flyer. Here it is described how for the ancient Mexicans death had great religious and philosophical meaning. These Mesoamericans shared a complex expression of death with the Egyptians, namely that to die in matter was to transcend to the ancestral spirit. The ancients developed an esoterical significance to death that survived the conquest and syncretized with occidental ideas in the ensuing 500 years. Thus Mexicans were forever intricately connected to death in a way that was not rationally explainable. They did not fear death because this was not the end as they would be reborn in the divine. These traditions have survived until this day and Mitla is still one such pass to the eternal life.

It appears to be that these ideas about Mitla being a pass to the eternal afterlife as well as those concerning Mitla as the place where *Mictlanteuctli* was worshipped can be traced back to one source: a small tourist guide by Guillermo Marín (Marín 1993). Advised to me by Abelardo, it seems to be the only available source written in Spanish on such issues as death and the afterlife in relation to Mitla both as the Nahuatl underworld as well as the town itself. Regrettably it is

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[76]Mitad del mundo: middle of the world.
[77]Pueblo de las Ánimas: Town of the Souls.
[78]Lugar de los Muertos: Place of the Dead
[79]La pasa: pass

entirely written from the outdated viewpoint that is employed by some Mexican archaeologists and historians that attempt to explain all indigenous traditions from an idealized and spiritualized Aztec angle. It talks about the spiritual knowledge of the Classical world that was first buried, then revalorized by the Aztecs only to be devalorized by the Spaniards. And that to understand these ancient traditions, western conceptions should be replaced by a dialectic worldview: they lived to die and they suffered to live eternally. Therefore these people tried to go to their deaths purely, living a life of conscience (Marín 1993:1-4). Not everybody had this spiritual potential for immortality though, so most went to one of four other places such as Mictlan, a place of nothingness, where those with a meaningless life and death went to. This was a hard journey that involved crossing a river on a dog, crossing mountains, sharp rocks and eight snow topped hills, as well as eight plains, a tiger and a lizard. At the end of this four year ordeal eternal sleep was the only thing that had been achieved. Mictlan was a mystical place of contact between earth and the underworld, a portal to nothingness (Marín 1993:4-5). Several access points to *Mictlantecutli*'s domain exist throughout Mesoamerica and Mitla was one of these. It was built on a plan based on understanding of life energy, that is now lost. But Mitla's builders were initiated in these classical secrets that made the material into the spiritual (Marín 1993:5-7). The only piece of information in the entire booklet that seems to be of any actual interest is that it claims that the Spaniards gave Mitla San Pablo as patron because this saint lived in a cave for a large part of his life (Marín 1993:5). That the people of the Mictlan youth organisation use a source such as this in their attempts to revalorize local traditions, though being regrettable, is of course not a fault on their behalf. Rather it is the fault of all the scholars writing in English and failing to report back to the people that these issues actually concern.

3.3.4 Pilgrims about the Place of the Dead

Of course not only the Mitleños had things to say about Mitla as the place where the souls went to but the various pilgrims whom I spoke to, most of whom had made trips to Mitla especially to make their offerings to the souls at the Calvario, did as well. A couple from Santa Catarina Cuixtla, close to Miahuatlán for example had made a two hour bus-trip to Mitla while a group from Santa Maria, near to Sola de Vega had to make a five hour trip to thank the souls and they were going back on the same day! A large group coming from San Vincente, also close to Sola de Vega, however stayed for two days, sleeping at the house of friends for *posada.* A young man from San Marcial, close to Miahuatlán, who was in town with his father and grandfather also stayed in Mitla for several days, as the trip there was eight to nine hours. He said he liked going to Mitla more than going to the famous pilgrimage destination Juquila because though the latter was more miraculous there was more fun to be had in Mitla. The couple that came the farthest away however were from the city of Cardenas in the state of Tabasco

which was twelve hours by bus. They hadn't made the trip especially to go to Mitla though, they were in Oaxaca for a while and had decided to go to Mitla which was also known as the place where the souls go to in their region! They were thanking the souls and when I asked about these she explained to me that this concerned both the souls in general and the specific ones or *abuelos* and *abuelas*[80]. Likewise when I asked an old couple from San Miguel Mixtepec whether the souls they had offered to were specific souls or the *ánimas solas* he answered that it were both as well, though he especially mentioned the fathers and the mothers.

Other pilgrims also explained to me why exactly the souls were coming to Mitla. Such as an old man who now lived in Oaxaca City but came from a village near Pochutla who described how all the souls come to Mitla where they enter the ground. And a man from Tlacolula, from where pilgrims often come to the Calvario, who explained that the souls go to Mitla to rest because the town is *encantada*[81]. Another explanation was given by an old couple from Santa Cruz Citta, near to Miahuatlán calling Mitla *el centro del mundo de las ánimas*[82]. The same term was also used by a group coming from San Miguel to place offerings for *los abuelos*. Their town is also close to Miahuatlán and they had travelled together with the group from Santa Cruz Citta. A blind man from Santa Lucia, an hour from Miahuatlán, uses a comparable term: *la Cabacera de las Ánimas*[83] that seems to be closely related to the name for Mitla that was given by Briggs: *yedž aím* (see note 40). In addition he uses the term that Gildardo was so opposed against: *La Purgatorio de las Ánimas*[84]. Interestingly he adds that the souls offered to here are *muy ancianos*[85]. A man from San Marcial, a mountain town close to Pochutla where they speak the southern dialect of Zapotec, similarly calls Mitla the centre of the world. He even tells that the archbishop once visited Mitla and also called it *el mitad del mundo*! Regarding the other world where the souls go to he said that it is located under Mitla. Apparently attempting to explain that this other world is also somewhere else he made a gesture with his arm over the town lying in front us, but eventually gave up and sighed that these are only *creencias*[86].

3.4 Conclusion

Going back to the question asked at the beginning of this chapter we can now answer that the late post classic/early colonial reason for people to consider Mitla the Place of the Dead had to do with the fact that Mitla was apparently the burial

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[80]Abuelos and Abuelas: Grandfathers and grandmothers.
[81]Encantada: enchanted
[82]El centro del mundo de las ánimas: centre of the world of the souls.
[83]La Cabacera de las ánimas: The capital of the Dead.
[84]La Purgatorio de las Ánimas: purgatory of the souls.
[85]Muy ancianos: very ancient.
[86]Creencia: literally belief, but often used in a derogative sense to indicate indigenous beliefs as superstitions.

place of Zapotec royalty as well as the seat of a highly esteemed High Priest who presided over these burials. This priest worshipped a couple of married idols of which the male one, Coqui Bezelao, appears to have been closely connected to the Zapotec God of Hell/the Dead/the Underworld. It could be that Bezelao was the name of this god and that it was given to one of the high priests who was therefore latter worshipped as an ancestor himself or even that Bezelao was originally the name of such a priest and that when he became a deified ancestor it was used a name for the God of the Underworld. Why Mitla even became the burial place of esteemed Zapotecs in the first place is unclear, though it has been contributed to the natural environment, especially the many caves,in the mountains that surround Mitla on the north, west and south, associated as they are with burial and ancestry. It has to be noted that is somewhat unfair to speak only of Mitla as related to the burial of important Zapotecs as several other tombs are located at this end of the valley and at least two towns in the area, Teiticpac and Tlacolula, also have Zapotec names associated with burial.

Secondly the current reason for Mitla being considered the Place of the Dead is that in a wide region it is said that the souls of those that die journey to Mitla, it being the centre of the world, where they enter the underworld or Town of the Souls where they go on much like they did in life. It is also said to be the place from where these souls annually return to their former houses with All Souls.

The real question that remains however is how and if these two reasons are related to each other. In other words, is there really a relation between the cult for the dead chiefs or priests and that for the souls, like Parsons claimed? Can we speak of cultural continuity, did this aspect of the local worldview stay the same over time? In order to answer this question we have to look at the various elements that make up the outward manifestation of Mitla as Place of the Dead. In addition we also have to consider whether the outward manifestation has changed even though the underlying worldview has not.

Clearly many elements of today's cult for the souls are similar to those of the post classic veneration of the souls as well as the worship of the god of the underworld. This concerns small things such as owl being said to be a bad omen and a messenger of 'god' but also many larger things such as the dead making a difficult journey, crossing a river on the back of a black dog to go to an underground world where they have to serve its ruling extrahuman forces. The same goes for the fact that still the way one dies determines ones fate after death and not the way one lives. That Mitla is not only a burial place but also the entry point to the underworld can be seen as clearly in Burgoa's statements about the deceased going into the ground to find the markets of their ancestors and his reference to Mitla being the entrance to the underworld and the Stygian Lake as it is in the several statements by present day pilgrims. Even the areas where worship of Bezelao was mentioned seems to correspond to the places where present day pilgrims come from. Because even though I only encountered Zapotecs, Dürr did mentions Mixtecs and Gloria mentioned Nochixtlan while in the *Relaciones* the Mixtec speaking town of Huitzo mentioned worship of Bezelao.

Of course Christian influences can also be seen. Some of these are fairly straightforward such as the river that has to be crossed to reach the Town of the Souls being named after the Jordan river in which Jesus Christ was baptized and Montezuma's master-mason being named Salomon after the Jewish priestking that built the great temple in Jerusalem. But in the case of heaven, hell, purgatory and the underworld things become less clear with some saying that heaven is the place where souls go to after having gone through the underworld while other say that the soul first resides in purgatory or hell before finding rest in the underworld.

Considering all these points there is but one element that very clearly changed: the extrahuman forces to whom the cult is addressed. There might have been celebrations akin to the days of the dead in the post classic world, given the feasts mentioned in the *Relacion* of Teotitlan. But it is clear that there are already some important differences between a cult for idols of royal deified ancestors and a cult for the souls of parents and grandparents, let alone between the latter and a cult for gods of the underworld who presided over souls. There seems to be however a strong link between the two in the *gwláse* or ancients. These people of the times before the first sunrise share some interesting features with both deified ancestors as well as with the souls. First of all both deified ancestors and the ancients eventually become idols and are as such used in rituals. And Montezuma, being the most important ancient, was a great founding ruler while in Yalalag the ancients were described in a way akin to powerful priests. Secondly a strong similarity between the ancients and the souls can be seen in the old man's description of the altars that were put up at the ruins where the kings were buried and which were adorned with idols. In addition the group of souls called *ánimas solas* seem to resemble the *gwláse* in that both constitute a largely nameless group of unnamed ancestral extrahuman forces. That the concept of an underworld god that presides over the dead in his realm has not been completely lost in time either can be seen in the request made to Death to release the souls for All Souls, especially since one man even called him the God of the Dead. It is however clear that mostly today's cult is aimed at closely related souls and not to ancient ancestors or underworld gods. This apparent shift in focus is most probably the result of a synthesis of the old ancestor cult and the Roman Catholic cult for the souls in purgatory. Apparently the concept of a soul making an arduous journey to the underworld survived because it so closely resembled the concept of the Catholic soul having to reside in purgatory to be cleansed. It might be that the friars saw in this idea of the travelling soul an opportunity to explain the concept of purgatory, heaven and hell. If this was the case we must conclude that they did not succeed since we saw above that there is still much confusion between the various concepts, though with that of the underworld remaining the most dominant. Given this outcome of the syncretic process it is clear that the result is not Catholic in the traditional sense. But neither can it be called a uniquely Mesoamerican or indigenous concept anymore as it is clear that in this case some elements of the pre-colonial worldview have definitely changed due to contact with Christianity. Rather a new worldview concerning the afterlife and the

associated cult has come out of the contact between two religions, one that seems to be heir to both traditions.

Thus there can be said to be a clear continuity in some aspects of Mitla as the Place of the Dead, in some cases the outward manifestation of this worldview only changed somewhat but concerning the extrahuman forces involved this worldview did change although even here it still has some strong Mesoamerican characteristics as well as Christian ones.

In chapter five we will see that in fact the rituals performed for gods of the underworld, deified ancestors, the ancients and the souls are in fact very similar but first we will look at how the concept of Mitla as Place of the Dead has manifested in the Mitleño landscape.

Chapter 4

Continuity of the Calvario as a ritual location

In the preceding chapter we have seen that throughout time, from at least the Post classic onward, Mitla has been an important centre that attracts people from a wide region. This importance seems to stem mainly from Mitla's relation to such things as the burial of important figures, ancestor veneration, the god of death and offerings to the souls. In this chapter the focus will become somewhat narrower, leaving Mitla's position in the region behind to investigate how this relation to death and the souls has manifested in the town itself. From the introduction we already know that today one of the important locations for offerings to the souls of deceased loved ones is the Calvario chapel and from Dürr's statement it became clear that at least during All Souls the ruins were also visited (Dürr 1996:201-202). But has the Calvario always served this purpose? What have other sources to say about the chapel's function? And what about the ruins and other archaeological sites? And how do the church and the graveyard tie in to all this? In answering these questions several other topics will also be discussed such as rituals related to what is called witchcraft[87] and cursing but also how Mitleños themselves perceive all these traditions, stories and practices. Since it is important to consider these issues within a timeframe they will be discussed in three parts. The first part deals with the information that comes from Fray Burgoa, from the early explorers and from the little archaeology that has been done. In the second part the mainly ethnographical data from the first half of the twentieth century is presented and the third part deals with the last few decades and also includes my own fieldwork. Afterwards the developments that can be gathered from the data discussed in these three parts will be considered from the angle that was discussed in chapter two.

[87]Witchcraft is of course a very derogative term which use originates from a misunderstanding of indigenous religions by interpreting them from a European point of view. But since both authors and Mitleños use precisely this term, or its Spanish counterpart, in its negative sense to designate two distinct types of activities, i.e. shape changing and cursing an enemy, it will be used here as well to reflect their attitudes.

4.1 Early Sources

4.1.1 The Calvario and its Predecessors

About the Adobe pyramid on which the Calvario is build little is known archaeologically. The broken tourist sign tells people that the layout of this three-tiered pyramid together with the three heavily eroded one-tiered ones behind it, standing around a central plaza is typical of the Classic period style from between 250-750 A.D. In a small book by Nelly Robles and Alfredo Moreira on reconstruction plans for several of Mitla's historical building there are some references to the discovery of a square structure in the middle of the plaza by a team from the Universidad de las Americas (Robles & Moreira 1990:120). This research however has never been continued nor has the initial work ever been published. Nowadays the only thing that can be seen on the plaza, besides some grazing animals or kids playing soccer, is a square sized hollow more or less in the middle of the plaza. The earliest mention of the structure is by Guillermo Dupaix, who points out that the original stairway of the main pyramid was on the side of the plaza, on which still a trace could be seen of the ancient altar (Dupaix 1969 [1820]:134). About the pyramid itself he says that it was a pyramidical oratory, erected for the false deities of this nation (Dupaix 1969 [1820]:133). The descriptions of the famous archaeologist William Holmes roughly seventy years later are less speculative, consisting mainly of measurements. He gave the group the name which is now its official designation: Group of the Adobes, after the sun dried adobe brick measuring about 15x6x2½ inches with which the four pyramids are built (Holmes 1895:234,273). According to his measurements the central plaza is at least 150 ft square, and the main mound is 30 ft high, with the summit measuring 60 ft from east to west by 80 ft from north to south (Holmes 1895:273). He also refers to a large squarish block of stone a few yards from the main mound, but does not call it an altar (Holmes 1895:273). Referring to the drawing made by Dupaix' companion Castañeda (Fig.8) he finds it hard to believe that back then these mounds were still so well preserved, since they were now so eroded (Holmes 1895:273). More along the lines of Dupaix' speculations we find Eduard Seler calling the terraced pyramid 'an ancient temple without doubt' (Seler 1904:253). In his unpublished document M. Martínez Gracida goes even further calling it the 'Pirámide del Sol', it is however again completely unclear what his sources were (Robles, Magadán & Moreira 1987:16).

Also from Gracida we learn that the first colonial building on the site was a temporary church which stood on the pyramid from 1547 until around 1590 when the church at its present location was finished (in Robles & Moreira 1990:107). An earlier work on the architectural history of the historical buildings in Mitla (Robles, Magadán & Moreira 1987) contains a description of this first building by Gracida. He tells that since there was no place in Mitla where the sacraments could be administered, a *tequio*[88] was assembled. They build a

[88]Tequio: from the Nahuatl *tequitl* meaning cargo or duty. Used as a term for public works

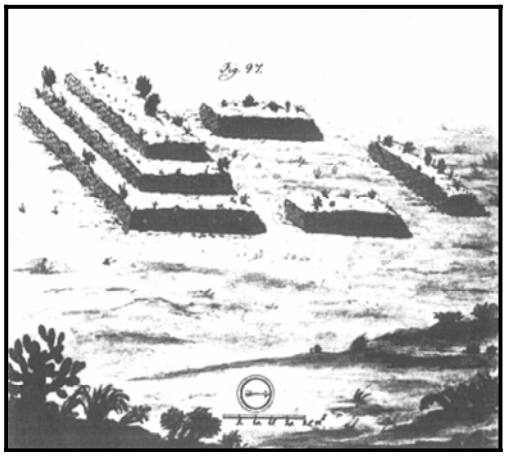

Figure 8: The Adobe group by Castañeda (Dupaix 1969 [1820] Lamina 36)

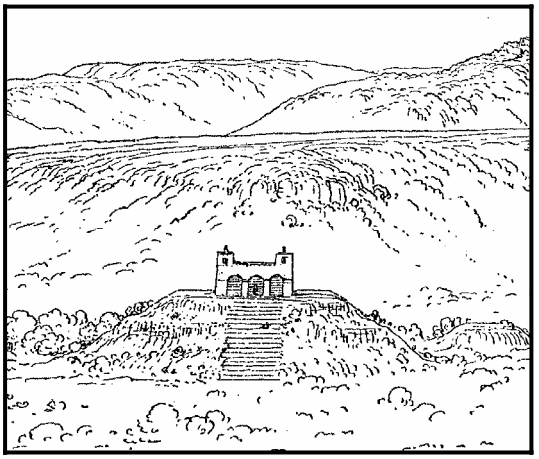

Figure 9: The Calvario on the Adobe Group (Holmes 1895)

triangular hall of 25 varas long and 10 wide (1 vara being 83 cm.) with adobe walls, a wooden/reed roof and an altar in one of its corners. The location was chosen because it was the most visited spot by the Indians (in Robles, Magadán & Moreira 1987:16). Regrettably Gracida gives no clear information on what the purpose of these regular visitations was, except that he called it a Sun Pyramid as we saw above.

According to Schmieder (1930:40) the first actual church of Mitla was built on the present day plaza and dedicated to Saint Nicholas, in his days the foundations still stood and served the market. This is probably the same building that Gracida is referring to when he talks about a group of 500 men that started building on the plaza after the hall on the Adobe Group was finished in 1575 (in Robles, Magadán & Moreira 1987:15-16). He however adds that this project was never finished since the *cura*[89] had it stopped. The reason being that there was too little money and it was too far away from the ruins that are now called the church group, where he and his servants lived (in Robles, Magadán & Moreira 1987:16). Eventually in 1590 a church was finished in the southern part of what is now called the Church Group (Robles, Magadán & Moreira 1987:16). In front of the church they made a spacious graveyard with a big central cross (in Robles, Magadán & Moreira 1987:21). Robles et al. themselves however add that on this spot no traces of this graveyard or the cross were found archaeologically, however on the south side of the church two colonial tombs were found (Robles, Magadán & Moreira 1987:21).

The amount of interest that the early researchers had for the Calvario which was built on the main mound of the Adobe Group in the 17th century is probably best reflected in the drawing by Castañeda of which we already saw that Holmes was somewhat sceptical of its realism. Although we can clearly see the four

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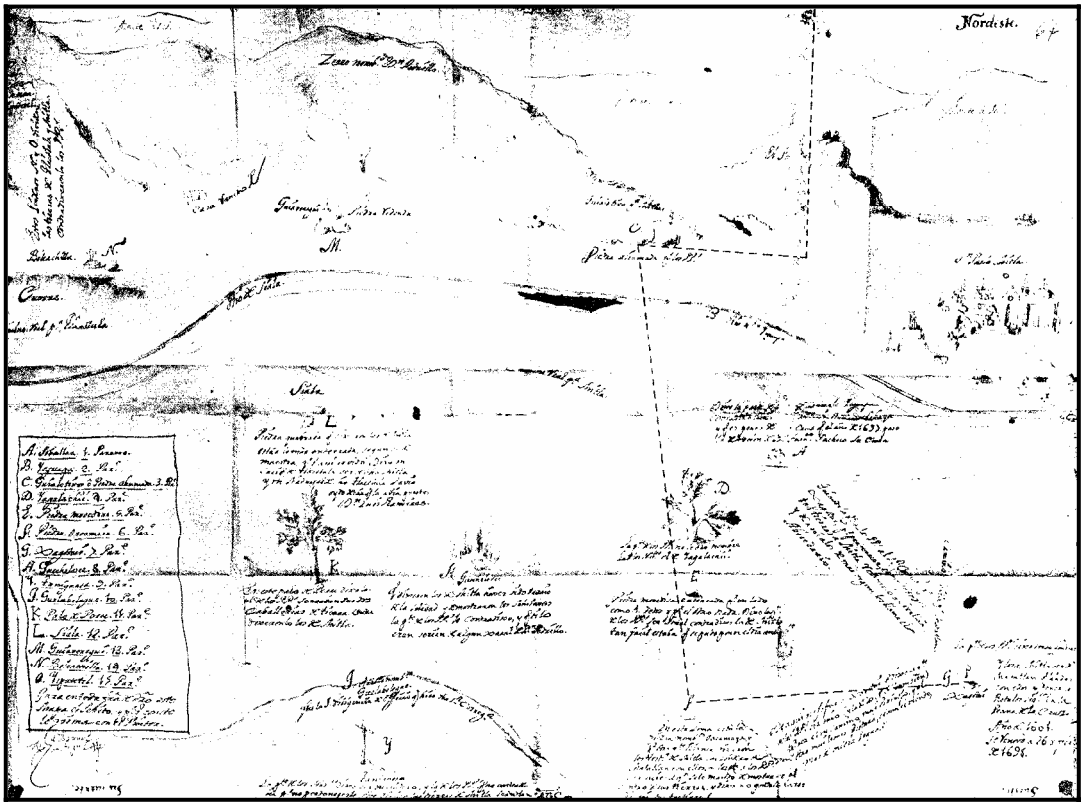
in which members of all the town's families are expected to participate at one point.

[89]Cura: priest, sometimes also used for his residence.



Map 3: The 1697 map showing the town of Mitla and its Calvario in the east (Schmieder 1930).

pyramidical structures standing around a central plaza, there is no trace whatsoever of a chapel on the main one. In the descriptions accompanying the drawing Dupaix mentions only that the main mound now serves a Calvario, and when he adds that the stairs leading up to this chapel were built on expense of the monuments his opinion on its relevance becomes even more apparent (Dupaix 1969 [1820]:134). A similar attitude can seen when Holmes describes the Calvario as 'a small Christian chapel of primitive design and construction' (Holmes 1995:273). He however does not omit its presence on his simplified panorama of Mitla (Fig.9). This panorama is not the oldest depiction of the Calvario, as it can also be recognized in a map of the land of San Pablo Mitla of 1697 (Map 3), which Schmieder found in an archive (Schmieder 1930:158). Schmieder himself however does not mention the building at all. Nicolas León, who mentions the spectacular view from the Calvario, was the first to mention the engraved stone above its main arch (Fig.10) which states that this work was finished at the 30th of April of 1677 under the authority of Diego de Robles (León 1901:42:25). He did however misread it as saying the 20th of April of 1671, a mistake that was later copied by Parsons (Parsons 1936:7). About the stones for the stairway he adds that they were taken back by D. Leopold Bartres who was at that point reconstructing the Columns Group (León 1901:25). An interesting historical detail that the early explorers did not mention can be found in Eveline Dürr's book where she states that the building was built by Carmelites and was dedicated to Saint Carmen

Figure 10: The engraved stone above the central arch (Picture by Arfman 2005).

(Dürr 1996:198). She does however not mention a source, nor could she remember it later (Dürr: personal communication). Her assertion could be related to the fact that the street leading to the Calvario is named Carmen Sérdan, she however was a female revolutionary from Puebla. This means of course that we should be careful with this piece of information, it is however very interesting as Julio de la Fuente mentions that with a public ceremony for All Saints the Yalaltecos make a procession to the graveyard with the images of San Juan and the Virgen de Carmen (Fuente 1977: 289). An even stronger link to the souls can be found in an ethnographical book by Rossana Lok where she describes the Virgen del Carmen as the one who receives the souls of the deceased in heaven but also as the one who sends the sinners back to the world of the living in the form of an animal (Lok 1991:41). Regrettably she doesn't give a source for this function that is far from canonical for the patroness of the Carmelites, who was herself named after a chapel for Mary on Mount Carmel, a town in present day Israel (Zimmerman 1908). Thus if it would be true that the Carmelites built the Calvario than this would mean there could be an interesting correlation between the adobe pyramid and a mound important in Christianity and maybe even a very tentative link between the Calvario and the souls.

4.1.2 A Backdoor to Hell in the Ruins

In the previous chapter we already saw that, according to Burgoa, there were four subterranean rooms under the Columns Group. Of these the front room was used by a high priest to commune with idols that were kept on an altar there (Burgoa 1989:123). On this same altar the heart of sacrificial victims was supposedly taken out, touched to the idols and then thrown into their '*sepulcro de sus bienaventuradas*' (Burgoa 1989:123). Burgoa described this 'burial place of their blessed', where the bodies of sacrificial victims were thrown in as well as those great lords and chiefs that died in battle, as a dark and gruesome room closed of with a stone slab (Burgoa 1989:124). It was through this portal that those oppressed by hardships and diseases begged to be allowed to enter the underground cavern to which Mitla supposedly owed its name, to walk through this dark centre, seeking out the markets of their ancestors (Burgoa 1989:124). This statement by Burgoa, is the first that points out a concrete relation between a specific location in Mitla and the world of the dead. Of course Burgoa himself did not recognize this statement for what it was, because he was preoccupied with the fact that apparently these people actively sought out their own doom by entering an abyss of darkness as he calls it (Burgoa 1989:124). Continuing Burgoa describes how later a group of priests wanted to investigate if this tradition still lived and heard that the cavern continued for 30 leagues underground. To convince the people of their errors they entered the subterranean carrying torches and rope, so not to get lost in this confusing labyrinth. They found corridors like streets with pillars but because of the bad stench, a cold wind that extinguished the torches and various poisonous reptiles they quickly left this 'backdoor to hell' and completely walled it up (Burgoa 1989:124). Later researchers kept connecting this subterranean room with mortuary practices not mentioning any other traditions (Dupaix 1969 [1820]:132; Holmes 1895:271). León however openly questions if Burgoa really visited the site because no traces of hidden doors or infernal subterranean places that were covered were found (León 1901:14). It is true that Burgoa descriptions of the buildings and their rooms are unclear. It is for example hard to tell if the four subterranean rooms refer to rooms under the four buildings of the southern part of the Columns Group, which is dubious as only two entrances to subterranean passages have been found in this plaza. It could also be that he is referring to one of these two, in which case the four rooms would refer to the three passages with the centre being the front room. However Burgoa never claimed that he himself entered these subterranean rooms or saw this walled-up door leading to infernal caverns, he only mentions them as things that were told to him. And whether there was ever actually a room with a door through which one could enter underground caverns is not what is relevant here. What is relevant is that these narratives point out an important feature of Mesoamerican worldview, namely that the afterlife is not seen as some far away spiritual place out there but an actual place in this world. Being an actual place this also means that it, or at least those liminal places that border it, can be visited by people.

4.2 Early ethnographers

4.2.1 The Calvario as a Place to Curse

When reading Elsie Clews Parsons descriptions of the Calvario the first impression is that she shares the disinterest or even disdain for this chapel that we already saw above. Calling it 'the ugly brick-built calvary perched on the ancient pyramid', and later on describing how she climbs the stairs to the 'three white crosses enclosed in their ugly brick chapel' we get the impression that its only function is to 'sit on a step of the calvary-pyramid and watch the return of the wood-gatherers to their yards' (Parsons 1936:7;277;34).

It turns out however that the building also still serves a completely different purpose, namely its official one, i.e. that of representing the three crosses at Mount Golgotha. During *Semana Santa*[90], on Good Friday to be precise, a procession is held with Christ in his coffin accompanied by San Pedro and the cock, the Apostles and the Centurion from the church to the Calvario. Here an all-night wake is held by the Apostles, with the Jews and the Centurion bringing them atole and bread around eleven (Parsons 1936:274-275). The next day, on Saturday, small household groups visit the Calvario to offer flowers, burn a candle and pray. Finally, after dark, The Mother of Sorrows is carried in a procession to the Calvario to bring her son back to the church (Parsons 1936:277).

In his book about the religion of the Totonacas, Ichon mentions that in Mesoamerica the church, the cemetery and the Calvario are often integrated in what he calls the 'culto pagano' (Ichon 1973:301). In Parsons' book some examples can also be found of this phenomenon. She for example describes how merchants seek omens for a trip by throwing stones at a mark such as a canyon, an aperture in a tree or at the crosses of the Calvario. You need but one hit, but if you miss three times you go away very sad (Parsons 1936:320). Even more apparent are the stories told about the Calvario at San Baltazar, where on New Years' Eve apparitions or a market are seen (Parsons 1936:287;237). Parsons however never mentions pilgrims coming to the Calvario to make offerings to the souls of deceased loved ones, a practice she would not have easily overseen, given that her book is subtitled 'Town of the Souls'. About the early 1950's Charles Leslie was even clearer when asked about such offerings being placed, stating he never heard of or observed pilgrims coming to the Calvario, the only time it was involved in public ritual as far as he knew was during Semana Santa (Leslie, personal communication). In his book Leslie does however refer to another ritual practice for which the Calvario was (in)famous, one that Parsons also mentions, i.e. witchcraft and cursing.

Parsons gives a lengthy description of witches being said to change into animals, stealing away children, causing sickness through sending injurious things into the body and using the evil eye. She also details several ways of

[90]Semana Santa: Holy Week, being the week of Easter.

healing witchcraft, and also discusses several methods to keep witches out or even trap them (Parsons 1936: 131-140). There are said to be many witches in Mitla, but they are unknown since finding them and naming them is too dangerous (Parsons 1936:138). In the Zapotec mountain town of Yalalag, were Julio de le Fuente did his ethnographical research in the 1940's, it also used to be said that all Mitleños were *nagual-gatos*[91]. When somebody in town died while there were Mitleño coffee traders in town they were blamed and those giving them shelter were accused of protecting witches (Fuente 1977:341). And even in the 1940's Yalaltecos were still afraid of sleeping out in the open when they were in Mitla out of fear for the *naguales*, especially close to the main ruins (Fuente 1977:342).

In addition to these stories about shape changing witches Parsons also describes a ritual for punishing wrongdoers that has some interesting features:

> "*To bring misfortune to anyone who has robbed you, i.e., to bewitch him, you soak a candle of animal grease, a gandel sa', in salt and oil, and light it at the wrong end, the thick end, in the Calvary, at noon, on a Friday. It is for San Antonio, and you talk to it, telling it of your loss and that you wish misfortune to befall the thief.*" (Parsons 1936:141).

In a later description of the saints she adds that:

> "*It is well known at Mitla as elsewhere that the saints may work harm. When people visit the Calvary at noon it is to pray against an enemy...*" (Parsons 1936:206).

And in a discussion of the limited role that the devil plays in Mitleño worldview she says:

> "*Even when you want to injure an enemy, you do not pray to the Devil, you visit the three crosses of Calvary, at noon time.*" (Parsons 1936:210).

According to Leslie there were no more witches left in Mitla in the traditional shape-changing sense when he was doing his research. However *maldades*[92] and other magical devices were still used against enemies (Leslie 1960: 37). Such black magic was performed by appealing to saints, e.g. by binding the image with a cord and locking it in a box, only freeing it when the enemy would have been punished or by suspending them in a dark water well (Leslie 1960:61). Another method can be seen when Leslie describes how a lady named Tehuana desired for

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[91]Nagual-gatos: Nahual-cats. Here we see still see how the Nahuatl word for spirit companion, nahual, is used to designate a shape changing witch, a clear and very common example of a Mesoamerican concept being reinterpreted along the lines of 16th century European thought about shape shifting witches.

[92]Maldades: evil deeds, for example curses.

revenge when she caught her sick husband with the maid she had hired to take care of him while she was away making money to pay for his medical treatment:

> "*Every morning she feverishly lit evil-smelling candles of mutton grease before her household image of Jesús Nazareno and begged that her husband and the girl be struck with disease and misfortune. At noon she put the image in the blazing sun to burn as she would have her betrayers burn.*" (Leslie 1960:41).

Later on, when she got convinced that her misfortune might be due to the fact that she and her husband because of political turmoil once failed to give Jesús Nazareno the festival they were supposed to give, she decided to sponsor a new celebration in its name, also hoping that this would make here curses more effective (Leslie 1960:61). When Tehuana's husband eventually gashed his head there were many speculations about the involvement of witchcraft and its effectiveness (Leslie 1960:42). The most common reaction to these incidences however was ridiculing those that practiced it while privately taking precautions or being tempted to use it when provoked (Leslie 1960:38-39). Such was also the case with Juan, Teresa and a widow across the street who had laughed at Tehuana but later on:

> "*Teresa, Juan's wife, was convinced that he had been sleeping with the widow and told other neighbors that she had gone to the Calvario to petition for revenge by burning candles behind the crosses.*" (Leslie 1960:42).

So while in this period the Calvario does not seem to be used by pilgrims to make offerings to the souls of their relatives it does very clearly figure in another ritual complex. Might there be a relation between the two practices? Interestingly Leslie also mentions another force that these petitions to harm an enemy can be addressed to, *las ánimas solas*, the souls of people whose names had been forgotten (Leslie 1960:38). Not only does Julio de la Fuente also mention this practice, of addressing the souls for cursing an enemy, for the Yalaltecos (Fuente 1977: 340), it also figures in a description that Parsons gives of pilgrims coming to Agustina, a curandera, for divinations:

> "*The first client, from San José Pobresa, is a young woman carrying a baby. She is a widow and cannot take care of her cows properly. Somebody is stealing from her herd. What shall she do to check the robber? She is to offer two candles, one in the Calvary, this against her enemy, the cattle thief, and one at the cross in the churchyard, to the souls, and on October 8, the fiesta of the Virgin of Juquila, she is to visit Agustina again. Meanwhile Agustina herself will pray to the souls, pray that the robber turn to robbing the rich instead of poor widows...*" (Parsons 1936:309).

It was during this advise that Agustina made the distinction between *las ánimas solas* and *las ánimas comúnes* that we saw in chapter one. According to Dürr Agustina was still especially dedicating herself to *las ánimas solas*, paying both masses and *responsos* for them in the early nineties (Dürr 1996:213).

However Dürr also describes how as a consequence of the witchcraft allegations, of which the offerings found in the Calvario were seen as proof, the building was eventually closed by the authorities in the mid eighties (Dürr 1996: 23-24 and personal communication). A curandero from Miahuatlán that I spoke when he was visiting the Calvario added that it was the *presidente* who did not want the people to do evil things like maldades. Mari Elena, my hostess added that in addition to the witchcraft there were also complaints that it was so dirty inside, with people killing chickens, breaking eggs and with the wax of all the candles.

4.2.2 The Churchyard and the Ruins

Even though Parsons does not mention any pilgrims coming to the Calvario to make offerings to the souls of dead relatives she does however refer to such offerings at other locations. Describing the events of New Year's Day, of which we already saw the importance of the night before, she says:

> "*..., some mountain pilgrims come into the churchyard to kneel at the old graves and leave their marigolds. Deliberately, as if habitually, one woman moves from grave to grave; she leaves her yellow blooms on three graves. On the stone behind "the column of death" in Montezuma's Palace lie also some of the yellow flowers of the dead and of the saints.*" (Parsons 1936:170).

Later she adds that at all fiestas the old gravestones in the churchyard are strewn with flowers by townspeople as well as pilgrims from mountain towns who believe that the souls go to Mitla (Parsons 1936:207). In her conclusions Parsons considered this practice to be a clear indication of the survival of the old cult of the dead (Parsons 1936: 509). This apparent connection between the souls and the old graveyard is of course in itself far from surprising. That more is going on however becomes clear when Parsons describes that the river that was mentioned in the previous chapter, the one that souls have to cross on their way to the next world is identified by some as the small stream between the town and the old churchyard (Parsons 1936:153). Here again, just as with Burgoa's descriptions of the subterranean rooms, we see a clear link being made between a location in town and the afterlife.

About these *subterráneos* Parsons also tells an interesting story. When a lady from the town of San Miguel diverts a question about belief in the souls by stating that at Mitla people believe that they could speak with the dead, Parsons adds that this at least used to be true as:

> "*Miguel Mendes told me that when he was a boy he went with his mother to an ancient subterranean building,* [...], *where she talked with his deceased father, about a piece of land in dispute in the family. The deceased said his widow would have to let the matter rest the way it had been settled.*" (Parsons 1936:207).

That visiting the subterranean passages was not merely a thing of the past becomes clear when Parsons discusses a cross that used to stand at the west side of the ruins where merchants left their goods to find money in its place upon return (Parsons 1936:287). Parsons wonders whether this might have been a way to divert attention from the ruins as a shrine (Parsons 1936:287). If it was, it failed, since the cross had now been removed and the *subterráneo de muerto*[93] was still visited as a shrine by pilgrims, but not by Mitleños, on New Year's Eve and on the feast day of the Virgen de Juquila, the eight of October. They would come as to the middle of the world to offer flowers, burn a candle and make their *pedimentos*[94] or prayer-images (Parsons 1936:287). Formerly the candles were placed on a boulder in the northern arm of the underground cruciform which has the column of death at its centre but this was now prohibited by the federal department. Parsons herself witnessed a group of about 20 pilgrims outside this place in discussion with the custodian who was telling them only to place flowers and not to burn candles (Parsons 1936:288). That these regulations had a strong effect is evident from de la Fuente's description of the pilgrimages that Yalaltecos used to make to the tombs at the ruins of Mitla on New Year's Eve. That is, on the night that the souls held a market in their underground place of which these tombs were seen by some as the entry point (Fuente 1977:274). In the past many people came to burn candles, food and money for the wellbeing of the souls of their relatives but in the 1940's only few still went to ask for good fortune to the souls of their ancestors (Fuente 1977:310). According to him this decrease of pilgrims, also from other mountain and valley towns, was largely due to an increase of surveillance (Fuente 1977: 310).

In his book Leslie hardly mentions any activities at the ruins, considering the stories about the ancient ones who build the crossroads where souls where to meet to have lost their value for Mitleños who were striving to become civilized (Leslie 1960:21-22). However when I asked him about this he said that a few people did still come to make offerings to the souls at the ruins, but that people told him that in the past much more people from mountain villages came to contact souls of dead family members there. To this he added the story of a Mitleño who worked for a film crew that was shooting in the ruins, guarding the equipment during the night. He said he had been frightened to spend all night in the ruins but that nothing had happened and that today people had much less of these beliefs (Leslie 2005: personal communication).

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[93]Subterráneo de muerto: Subterranean of death, being the one with the pillar of death.
[94]Pedimento: request

4.2.3 A Hidden Entrance in the Church

Above Alain Ichon was quoted as saying that often the church, the cemetery and the Calvario were integrated in the local indigenous religious traditions. Of the latter two we already saw some interesting examples and indeed concerning the church Parsons has some as well. We already saw for example how Rosa Hernandez placed a large candle for the *ánimas solas* behind the church door. And when talking about the saints working harming, she tells about a Mitleña who claimed to have been bewitched inside the church by a chanter who knew all the saints there (Parsons 1936:206). And when after the mass on the feast day for San Pablo the priest was saying responsos for the dead and candles were burned for them, he had no idea that some of the pilgrims that were present came straight from a curandera who had prescribed these responsos as part of the cure (Parsons 1936: 243-245). Nor did he suspect anything on all the other occasions when the burning of candles, the saying of responsos and the paying for a mass was part of a curing ritual (Parsons 1936:232). Concerning the two images of the souls that were used every Monday during a mass for the souls, the priest seemed to be more aware of its implications since he was said to be opposed to the visible aspects of the cult for the souls (Parsons 1936: 515). Parsons suspects that he might even remove these images, which she considered to be another survival of the old cult for the dead, out of dislike for the Mitleño cult for the souls (Parsons 1936: 208;509). In a tale by Miguel Mendes, who also told about his visit to a subterranean room with his mother, the connection between the church and the souls becomes even stronger when he tells about a widow who is told to take candles and flowers to the church to speak with her deceased husband there (Parsons 1936:207).

Howard Leigh, Research Consultant at the Frissell Museum of Zapotec Art in Mitla also relates a fascinating story concerning the founder of the museum, E. R. Frissell in which the church also figures (Leigh 1960:2). He describes how in November of 1959 a young man who spoke Zapotec, Spanish and English died only forty hours after Mr. Frissell, who spoke only English. Even though the young man died of acute alcoholism the belief was voiced about that Mr. Frissell, a man of importance and wealth had taken the young man with him as an interpreter to the subterranean Zapotec 'House of the Dead' (Leigh 1960:2). Leigh points out that this story has an interesting resemblance to a Zapotec term that can be found in the Vocabulario Castellano-Zapoteco by Fray Juan de Córdova, i.e. *totija penitoóoga* which means "*Sacrifice a man or woman to a lord or lady who died, for burial with them.*[95]" This could then point to an interesting interpretation of the several double burials that have been found in Mitla and the wider region (Leigh 1960:2). Leigh's concluding point however is the most relevant to this thesis:

[95]Translation from Spanish by Leigh.

> "*I believe that for all Zapotecs the House of the Dead is the great subterranean labyrinth at Mitla, described by Burgoa, which archaeologists have been unable to find. The Mitla people claim that its entrance is hidden by the high altar of the Catholic Church.*" (Leigh 1960:3).

Clearly we see here yet a third instance of a specific location in town being brought into relation with the world of the dead.

4.2.4 Other Destinations on New Year's Eve

The ruins and their subterranean chambers are not the most popular pilgrimage destination on New Year's Eve, that honour is reserved for the *Cruz de Milagro*[96]. Even though Mitla has many crosses, it is this one, at the boundary between Mitla and Mátatlan and less than half a mile away from an archaeological site, that is always referred to as *the* Cross (Parsons 1936:233). On New Year's Eve, after mass, both Mitleños and pilgrims from towns nearby walk to the cross, build small fires and then start making the *pedimentos* or prayer images that the place is famous for (Parsons 1936:233). These *pedimentos*, made from little stones and other natural material, are miniature representations of what the maker longs for in the coming year such as a house, livestock, beehives, fields and crops or money. When Parsons visited the site in 1930 she witnessed at least 300 little clusters of these prayer images (Parsons 1936:233). Julio de la Fuente also describes how people from Yalalag visit this Cross at New Year's Eve to ask it for material gain (Fuente 1977:262). Some old Yalaltecos even name the ruins close by as the real entry point to the underground place of the souls (Fuente 1977:274). Leslie adds some interesting details in his description of this practice that had not lost popularity at all, unlike the pilgrimage to the ruins. He describes how before building the prayer images people would make a petition to the Cross, of which a typical version was dictated to him:

> "*I have come to ask for chickens, if you will give them to me. With God's aid, in another year I will have plenty of chickens. Now I am going to where there are more people to ask if by chance they have chickens to sell. So that I will have more chickens, I am going to buy a few. I will see if you have chickens to give me I will see what each one costs.*" (Leslie 1960:75)

Then after the *pedimentos* were built people started to ritualistically buy and sell the images, using pebbles that represented the money of God (Leslie 1960:75). According to Leslie it was this behaviour that was so typical for the Mitleño worldview because it fused their trade-oriented 'Acquisitive Society' with their morally regulated 'Good Society' (Leslie 1960:75). However when a group of American tourists was present at this ceremony one year this did make some

[96]Cruz de Milagro: The Cross of Miracle

townspeople too ashamed to make their prayer images and trade them (Leslie 1960:77).

There are also several tales related to this cross, for example one telling about a boy who found a sack of gold next to it that had turned into a stone next day (Parsons 1936:287). Rosa Hernandez, the *curandera* from San Baltazar we saw earlier, placed elaborate offerings at this Cross with a prayer to *Dios, La Cruz de Pasíon* and *San Pablo* (Parsons 1936:286). This ritual will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. Stories are also told about subterranean passages leading from this cross to the main ruins in Mitla, just as they are said to exist from the ruins to Mexico City and from Mitla to a cave at Zaachila.

A third destination on New Year's Eve used to be the *Cueva del Diablo*[97], at the end of the valley, four kilometres to the east of Mitla. Located beneath the mountain *Girone*, i.e. the windy mountain, Parsons associates it with the cave of Windstorm, the *behdondursh*. This whirlwind may be related to the mountain-dwelling rain deity Lightning, even though Parsons also associates it with a spirit of sickness. In any case it is said to have a devil on top that cuts people (Parsons 1936: 215). It is probably after this 'devil' that this cave is now named. In addition Parson remarks that since there are also several ancients tombs located on *Girone*, their also seems to be 'some association between the lordly or priestly dead and the mountains' (Parsons 1936:214). The tradition of killing a turkey and taking it to this cave was however no longer practiced on this night according to Parsons (Parson 1936:233). When she visited it however, it became clear that it had still been used until relatively recently, because even though the entrance was overgrown she found not only miniature vessels of pre-colonial times but also potsherds that could be no more than fifty years old (Parsons 1936:295). Stories were also still told about how one should ask permission to Sus Giber before entering it so she would accompany you. Once inside you would be attacked by large serpents and a black bull would appear before you, to fight. Then the devil himself would appear on a horse and take you to the Mountain of Twenty Peaks. You would return within an hour and receive sacks of gold that you had to keep in trunks and boxes that were guarded by serpents. Then you should continue to live poorly (Parsons 1936:296). Another story tells of a market appearing in the cave on a Wednesday that only the lucky can perceive (Parsons 1936:296). Stories about townspeople receiving their money through such a deal with the devil were discounted by some, especially the wealthy merchants, while others firmly believed in them (Parsons 1936:15). Interestingly de la Fuente writes how some Yalaltecos describe this area, and especially the *piedra de Mitla*[98], a vaguely anthropomorphical stone of which we will see below that it is Sus Giber herself who turned to stone, as the entrance to the Mitleño underground realm of the souls (Fuente 1977:274). And it is in this underground realm where every New Year's Eve these souls hold a market (Fuente 1977:275). But before entering permission had to be asked to *una gente no material* (Fuente 1977: 275). It could

[97]Cueva del Diablo: Cave of the Devil. For discussion of the use of diablo as a translation of the original names of Mesoamerican extra-human forces see chapter three.

[98]Piedra de Mitla, stone of Mitla

very well be that this story from Yalalag, with its markets and asking of permission, also lies at the basis of these Mitleño stories about asking the devil for riches, and that the latter was just more heavily influenced by catholic ideas that associated such practices with the devil. It was this association then that made Mitleños reluctant to admit to Leslie that the cave was again used, something he could clearly see when he visited it. It also clearly underlies the embarrassment that some townspeople Leslie knew had about a group of other Mitleños visiting a cave near the Cross that was also reported to be a dwelling place of the devil-who-gave-wealth (Leslie 1960:95). Might going to this cave be connected then to the entry to the souls' market that old Yalaltecos also located nearby? This could then very well mean that unlike the cross placed near the ruins, which coincidentally was also connected to trade, the *Cruz de Milagro* was actually a successful attempt to divert attention.

4.2.5 "Now we are Civilized"

In the introduction we already saw how Leslie regarded the stories about Mitla's ancients in the time before sunrise and the ones about the souls coming to town as decayed legends that were losing their meaning to the Mitleños who were mainly occupied with becoming civilized and considered these traditions to be too embarrassing and too 'Indian' (Leslie 1960: 22;63). Concerning the rituals on New Year's Eve we just saw how townspeople were embarrassed by the presence of American tourists and because others went to the caves on that night.

Even though Schmieder (1930:42) enthusiastically described how the Mitleños might lack a good education but were still very interested in their history, we can already see the early onset of this attitude that Leslie describes in Parsons' book. She for example describes how the belief in the *nagual* was waning except in relation to witchcraft, how she doubts that Urbano the *curandero* himself beliefs in his rituals, how her good friend Eligio and his friends started doubting the existence of the saints, how he went to to a mestizo spiritist instead of to the subterranean chambers when he needs advice after he lost something, how the *ídolos* that are found came to be seen as commercial products, how the beliefs about the column of death were slowly turning into tourist lore (Parsons 1936:80;129;206;208;218;288). Also many people, when asked about a local belief, answered that they didn't belief in it, but others did (Parsons 1936:316). And in line with Eligio's conclusion that *ya es moderno*[99] she even states that in a few decades the many customs will have lapsed and *idioma*[100] will only be spoken in the Indian fringes of the town, the centre having become civilized (Parsons 1936: 397;21).

Of course several reasons can be identified for why Mitla was losing so many of his traditions during this period, such as the protestant missionaries from the

[99]Ya es moderno: now it's modern.
[100]Idioma: literally language often used as derogatory term for indigenous languages.

U.S. that settled in town (Leslie 1960:9) and the increase of tourists coming to town bringing with them new ideas and more guards at the ruins. Concerning the protestants however Dürr writes how they mainly recruit under the newcomers that are attracted to Mitla because of the weaving and tourist industry (Dürr 1996:28). If this was also true when they just got to Mitla however is unclear. In an unpublished article for the Fifth World Archaeological Congress, Bernd Fahmel Beyer makes some other interesting observations about why the Mitleños had lost their feeling for the site and did not even have any knowledge that it was made by Zapotecs at all (Fahmel Beyer 2003:2). Most importantly he discusses how a second alienation of the site, the first being when the old priests where chased away by the Spaniards, took place when Alfonso Caso designated the site as being Mixtec in 1942 (Fahmel Beyer 2003:3). This decision was partially based on the appearance of the murals we saw in chapter three but also had much to do with the fact that though there was already a visitable Zapotec site, Monte Alban, there was no such site for the Mixtecs (Fahmel Beyer 2003:2-3). And since this misunderstanding was never rectified towards most Mitleños, as we will see below, this meant that they missed a cultural discourse to valorise the site (Fahmel Beyer 2003:2-3).

4.3 Recent ethnographers

4.3.1 Inviting the Souls at the Calvario

In 1990 for the first time archaeological interest in the Calvario chapel can be seen, from the side of the INAH[101] in a small book by the Oaxaca division describing the current state of Mitla's historical buildings, both pre-colonial and colonial, and advising on their conservation (Robles & Moreira 1990). It describes the Calvario as dominating the urban landscape with its back to the plaza of the Adobe Group, leaning somewhat to the east and having two belfries without bells (Robles & Moreira 1990:107). Many different types of material were used in building it, even including some segments of the main ruins' mosaics, in a manner that seems to stem more from convenience than design (Robles & Moreira 1990:108). Although the arches on the south and east side used to be open they are now filled up with adobe blocks (Fig.11), the middle one on the east side being fitted with a doorframe and a door (Robles & Moreira 1990:107-108). The roof is made of uneven beams, reed and tiles and it leaks because of fissures in its construction. This even though the Church Committee had changed this roof in 1988 (Robles 2000:7.28). Through the combination of wind erosion due to its height and the several cracks in the walls it has become highly unstable. And since the building is only periodically used it is very much neglected. (Robles & Moreira 1990:108). Their final conclusion is that the building should be included

[101]INAH: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, the governmental institute supervising all Mexican archaeology.

Figure 11: The Calvario from the southwest (Picture by Arfman 2005).

in any preservation and conservation plans for the Adobe Group (Robles & Moreira 1990:120).

In another book by Nelly Robles, on the various social actors involved in archaeological resource management in Oaxaca, we see however that the main interest still seems to lie with the adobe pyramids. She worries most about the recent building of a school that intrudes on the Adobe Group, practically sharing its space (Robles 2000:6.15). She fears that by building this school more people will be attracted to go and live near to it and that allowing an official building to be built on such a place will be seen as a justification of intrusion (Robles 2000:6.21). She also complains about how the Tourist Circuit, the circle of roads leading the tourists through town, gives a false impression of the archaeological zone which results in only a fraction of the tourists visiting the 'physically imposing' Adobe Group (Robles 2000:6.37). In stark contrast she describes the Calvario and the Church as evidence of cruel religious subjugation (Robles 2000:3.7).

However when we read in Dürr that the *Río Jordang*, the river that the souls have to cross, is described to her as a stream that is sometimes visible at the Calvario we begin to suspect that the building not so much subjugated the old traditions, but was integrated in them as Ichon suggested (Dürr 1996:268). Several stories that were told to me during my research seem to point in the same

direction such as when Teresa, the old lady of the hotel, tells me that there is a tomb under the Calvario or when my hostess Mari Elena told me that her neighbour had said that there was a subterranean passage leading from the Calvario to the old fortress west of town. However when I asked Porfirio, the grandfather of the family I staid with, about this he stated that that would be impossible since it is all pure rock. When I continued with asking about such stories in the past he explained that in the past, until forty years ago, the Calvario would be used for a wake with a meal during Semana Santa but not anymore today. Eveline Dürr also wrote that it wasn't used anymore for this purpose as it was closed, but that on the Thursday of the Holy Week people would still place flowers and candles outside the Calvario (Dürr 1996: 192). However concerning another important religious feast, All Souls, she relates an even more interesting story:

> "*On the second Sunday of October many people from Miahuatlán appear who are on their way to a feast in Tlacolula and make a stop-over at Mitla to sell their basketry there and pray to San Pablo, who in their view is a very powerful saint, in addition they put down cacao beans, flowers and candles at the Calvario for their dead, who will receive these gifts upon their arrival in Mitla*[102]." (Dürr 1996:202).

Mari Elena, my hostess, confirmed that people from Miahuatlán still came by on their way to Tlacolula today. A young man from San Marcial, close to Miahuatlán, whom I spoke with while an older man was making offerings inside the Calvario however said that according to him it was the first Sunday, not the second. On another occasion a man from Santa Cruz Citta, another village near to Miahuatlán, told me he doesn't know anything about this, but he does know that some people from that region go to Mitla on the second of November for All Souls. Above Dürr described this day was dedicated especially to the *ánimas solas*. Abelardo, of the Mictlan youth organisation we saw earlier, confirms that many pilgrims come to Mitla during this period but he knows nothing of a specific day for the solitary souls. More detailed information I got from Gildardo, the *regidor de la cultura* with whom I had an extensive interview. He explained how from the first of October, which is the feast day of the Virgen del Rosario, pilgrims come to Mitla to invite the souls of their relative to come home during *Todos Santos*. On this same day *responsos* are said especially for the *ánimas solas* just as they are on the third or fourth of November.

When I asked Eveline Dürr about where the offerings she mentioned were placed, since the Calvario was still closed off, she replied that they left their

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[102]"Am zweiten Sonntag im oktober erscheinen sehr viel Leute aus Miahuatlán, die auf dem Weg zu einem Fest in Tlacolula sind und in Mitla einen Zwischenstopp einlegen, um dort ihre Flechtwaren su verkaufen un zu San Pablo su beten, der aus ihren Sicht ein sehr mächtiger Heiliger ist. Auβerdem legen sie auf dem Calvario Kakaobohnen, Blumen und Kerzen für ihre Toten nieder, die diese Gaben bei ihrer Ankunft in Mitla in Empfang nehmen werden." Translation by Arfman.

offerings at the front door (Dürr, personal communication). The *curandero* from Miahuatlán who said that it had been the *presidente* who had closed the Calvario however added that people who came *para bien*[103] to the Calvario could ask the *presidente* for permission in which case he would send the police to open it up. Eventually, on her return visit to Mitla in August of 1993, Dürr observed that in the nine months since she had been gone, the Calvario had been re-opened. This had been done in an all together forcible manner according to the people she spoke with (Dürr 1996:24).

4.3.2 Pilgrims about the Calvario

In the literature there are but a few accounts that describe pilgrims coming to the Calvario to make offerings to the souls there. One of them by Nelly Robles we already saw in the introduction, another by Guillermo Marín, in his tourist folder that was discussed in the previous chapter, is more sensationalist than it is informing:

> "*To this day, in the compound named the group of the adobes, on top of a pyramid a chapel was constructed wherein there are 3 crosses, in which can be seen offerings made by the inhabitants of the region with a spine chilling syncretism*[104]." (Marín 1993:7)

Not only finding out why these pilgrims were coming to Mitla but also why they were visiting the Calvario and not some other place in town was one of my main reasons to do my fieldwork. In my conversations with the pilgrims numerous explanations and stories were related to me that will all be discussed below.

One of the most straightforward explanations for coming to the Calvario was given to me by a lady from San Sebastian de las Grutas close to Sola de Vega. The lady herself apologised that she did not know much about all of this and though her mother did, she only spoke Zapotec and seemed eager to go to the church. So while her little son was hanging around, clearly being bored, she quickly told me that there is a *creencia*[105] that all the souls come to Mitla and that at the Calvario you can speak with them and that is why they placed some candles.

A more elaborate version came from the old couple from San Miguel Mixtepec that were willing to speak to me even though they were just more or less chased away from the Calvario by a group of young Mexican tourists who just barged in there taking pictures and asking them questions. The man explained that they had come to the Calvario because you can speak with the dead in there. He added

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[103]Para bien: for good (purposes)

[104]Hasta la fecha, en el conjunto llamado grupo de adobe, en la cima de un pirámide se construyó una capilla en donde hay 3 cruces, en las cuales se ven ofrendas hechas por los moradores de la región, con un sincretismo escalofriante.

[105]Creencia: literally belief, but often used in a derogative sense to indicate indigenous beliefs as superstitions

that there is a story that there was once a portal where you could go to the souls but this had been closed now and nobody knew where it was anymore. But at the Calvario it is still possible to visit the souls. You can just speak to the dead, for example your mother or father, and then you understand what they say.

A similar story came from a very old man who was born in a small village near Pochutla but now lived in Oaxaca City, he hadn't been in his hometown for twenty or thirty years. Sitting in the shop drinking a *mezcal*[106], he explained with the deep voice of someone who has seen a lot in his life that he came to Calvario to thank God and ask his deceased parents for forgiveness. Because all the souls went to Mitla where they entered the ground through a stone at the ruins, they lived there underground and could come up only at the church and at the Calvario.

The young couple coming all the way from Cardenas in the state of Tabasco also came to thank both God and the souls. In the past people from their town also came to Mitla to visit the Calvario, but never any other places in town.

A group from Santa Maria, also close to Sola de Vega, consisting of an old man, a younger couple and a little boy came only to say their thanks to the souls. Even though the young man did not know exactly why the souls come to the Calvario he was however sure that it has something to do with the chapel, not with the pyramid it is standing on. He knew that there are other people who go to the Calvario for curing purposes and that people have made offerings at the Calvario for as long as can be remembered.

A man from Tlacolula whom I approached when he was enjoying the view from the adobe pyramid after he is done offering, said that people from Tlacolula often come to Mitla to give thanks to God, the cross and the souls. They come because the souls go to Mitla where they meet at the crossroads in the tomb at the ruins because it is *encantada*[107]. The Calvario is *encantada* too but not particularly like the caves and the ruins. The Calvario is an important place because the souls go there. When I ask him whether this maybe because of the pyramid, he agrees that it might be.

Many others also mention the cross as a reason to visit the Calvario like a couple from Santa Catarina Cuixtla, close to Miahuatlán, who visited the Calvario for the first time together with an older man that had been there before. They explained that they mainly came because of the cross but when I asked about the souls they agreed that they came for them as well.

The young man from San Marcial, according to whom the pilgrims from Miahuatlán came the first Sunday of October, whom I briefly spoke to while I was giving a tour of Mitla to a visiting teacher, also said that they came to say thanks to the cross and the souls. He added that he liked Mitla more than Juquila, because while the former is more milacrous there is more to do in Mitla.

An old blind man from Santa Lucia, near Miahuatlán, whom I helped climb off the stairs together with the man that accompanied him told me that the souls

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[106]Mezcal: a strong liquor made from a type of agave

[107]Encantada: Enchanted, a term often used to designate places that have a liminal character.

that come to the Calvario are *muy ancianos*[108]. And it is for them and for the cross that people have always gone to the Calvario.

Several accounts also combine various reasons for coming to the Calvario such as one told to me by an old couple from Santa Cruz Citta that I spoke with while the rest of their group, consisting of two more men and three more women were still busy with making offerings. They had come to give thanks to god and the souls as well as for the cross. Others also come to cure rheumatism or other pains. The souls live in the Calvario as well as in the church and a cave named *La Casa de las Ánimas*[109] where people also go to give their thanks to the souls. When I later treat the whole group to some drinks another man tells me about the same cave, but calling it *La Cocina de las Ánimas*[110].

Another big group coming from San Vincente, near Sola de Vega, consisting of two old women, a younger woman and a boy and a girl came especially to the Calvario to cure a clearly sick man that also accompanied them. One of the old ladies, a sweet lady who kept shaking my hand, told me that they went to the Calvario because at this old house of San Pablo, where he used to live before he went to the church, both the miraculous crosses and the even more miraculous San Pablo help with the curing. They also put down some offerings for the souls who according to tradition came to the Calvario because of the cross and who can be felt in the strong winds there. These souls however do not assist in the curing ritual.

The *curandero* from Miahuatlán that has already been mentioned several times now and that I had a lengthy conversation with in the shop after I helped him retrieve his hat that had been blown away, also had come because he was sick. Therefore he asked both the souls and the cross to take his sickness away. He calls the Calvario *La Casa de las Ánimas*, and says that it is the place where the male souls, the fathers and the grandfathers go to while the souls of the women go to *La Cocina de las Ánimas*! The souls come to the Calvario because of the cross and when I asked him about the pyramid he said that also plays a role. In addition to curing he said that some also come to make offerings to send someone a sickness through the wind, or ask someone to be killed or get an accident. You ask these questions to the souls as well. You can even pay special *hechiceros*[111] to do these maldades for you.

In a hasty conversation with a man from San Miguel, close to Miahuatlán, who came down from the Calvario just before the rest of his group consisting of two older men, a woman and a boy and a girl go down I learn of an even stronger connection between the Calvario and the souls. He tells me that when somebody dies that person has to go to the Calvario, the place where the Lord died, to *dar cuenta*[112] of his life. That is why they place their offerings there for *los abuelos* and ask a good life.

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[108]Muy ancianos: very ancient.
[109]Casa de las Ánimas: House of the Souls
[110]Cocina de las Ánimas: Kitchen of the Souls
[111]Hechicero: Wizard, used to designate witches.
[112]Dar cuenta: give reckoning

In a lengthier conversation with a man from San Marcial, near Pochutla, that was waiting outside while two older men were busy inside I get a similar account. The men have come to visit the souls that go there because the cross is miraculous. Some souls go to the Calvario, others go to church. When I ask about the ruins he adds that the souls go there sometimes to entertain themselves. The pyramid is not the reason why the souls go to the Calvario but the building itself because it is the place where Jesus died and that is why the souls come.

Summarizing we see that in all these explanations of why these pilgrims had come to the Calvario, the souls play an important role. When I asked about these souls people said that it concerned both *las ánimas solas* and specific souls. The focus however seemed to lay on the latter, especially souls of spouses, parents or grandparents. The majority also mentioned either God or the miraculous cross as a reason they came. Another purpose seems to be to do curing rituals, whether with or without help from the souls. Only one man, himself a *curandero* mentioned evil practices, and did relate them to the souls. Although the pyramid got mentioned as a reason for why souls would come to the Calvario this was only after I explicitly asked about it. A more spontaneously voiced idea was that the souls came because of the cross and the building as they represented the place where Jesus died.

4.3.3 Mitleños about the Calvario

Above we have seen various reasons why pilgrims coming from a wide area visit the Calvario, but what about the Mitleños themselves? Do they also still visit the chapel? What do they say about it? In 2004, even before I was properly installed in my room, Gloria of the hotel had already explained to me that Mitleños don't go to the Calvario, if they have business with the souls they go to the new graveyard, the *panteon*. A few might go, but certainly no more than 1%. The following year her mother added to that, that Mitleños only go to the Calvario during *Todos Santos*. When I ask Porfirio about this however he says that some Mitleños do go but only to burn a candle and ask God for something good like a job or food or a long life. A group of drunken old men sitting on the lowest step of the stairs to the Calvario say the same thing: people from Mitla don't go, those that do only burn a candle. Josefina, Porfirio's wife, even says that not only do no Mitleños go to the Calvario, they never did in the past either. I come across a similar attitude when I ask Abeldardo, of the Mictlan youth organisation, why they chose the Calvario as one of their destinations for their *Días de los Muertos*[113] festivities as I read in their folder. He explained that in the end they decided to stay in the church's atrio as the Calvario was not a place where Mitleños went. One of the reasons why Mitleños shun away from being associated with the Calvario may lie in what the two young men that came to me to ask for marijuana in 2004 had to say about it. They said that the Calvario was a place for

[113]Días de los Muertos: Days of the Dead, popular name for All Souls

witches and *naguales* who came *para pedir mal o bien*[114], and to kill people. According them it was used both by townspeople and those from other towns. This statement of course clearly echoes the stories about the Calvario we saw in Parsons' and Leslie's books. But is this image shared by many, or only by young men wanting to impress a gullible tourist?

Much can be learned about the opinion that Mitleños have of the Calvario from the explanations that they gave to me for why the pilgrims were going there. The most elaborate of these explanations of course came from the various members of the family I stayed with, not only because I kept asking them questions about it, but also because they had a more informed opinion about these matters since many of the pilgrims stopped by their shop to buy candles or soft drinks. The answer that Mari Elena and Josefina gave to me on my several visits in 2004 was that the pilgrims came because the middle cross was *milagroso*, like the one near Mátatlan, that it could heal people and that you could ask it for things you wanted and that it fulfilled these wishes. When I then continued asking they added that some people also came for doing *brujería*[115], for punishing wrongdoers or even killing them. When I asked about the souls Josefina told me that indeed these people also said they could speak with the dead, but she didn't understand how that could be possible? In a conversation the following year Porfirio, the grandfather, first said that it was God or Jesu Christo that people petioned to, but when I asked about the souls he agreed that many people said that as well. His son Rolando however, besides mentioning the cross and the chapel to be *milagroso* and that people came both for witchcraft and curing, had never heard about the souls being present at the Calvario. When his teen daughter later overheard me talking to her grandmother Josefina about pilgrims saying they were talking to the dead it became clear she hadn't heard about this either from the fact that she found the idea that there were souls hanging around in the chapel across the street extremely shocking. When I asked Mari Elena again the next year what she thought about it she admitted that she was confused. Some people, like the pilgrims, said that they only came to do good, while others said that it was only for evil. She didn't know what to believe especially as she had also seen people going into the Calvario at night, which she found suspect. On later occasions I too saw people going into the chapel before dark who I did not see come out again, and I also saw candles burning in the Calvario in the early morning while I had seen none burning at the beginning of the night. When I asked which people exactly were saying that it was all witchcraft she said it was mainly the tourists and the people in the street.

I too heard several of these witchcraft stories from various people. For example when I visited the new graveyard, just southwest of town, I had a conversation with a man repairing the walls that got very excited when I mentioned the Calvario. He immediately started describing that it was all *brujería* and *ehicería*, while making wild gestures of sticking pins in dolls and that these people wanted

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[114]Para pedir mal o bien: To ask for good or evil
[115]Brujería: witchcraft

to kill others, which he stressed by making a gun with his hand. On another occasion a drunk neighbour who saw that I wanted to talk with a pilgrim coming down the stairs from the Calvario immediately started pointing to him and telling me in a slurred voice that the man was a witch, that he went there to kill people with help of the devil! The three women from the hotel, Teresa, Gloria and her daughter, also said the same things about *brujería* and *maldar* when I paid them a visit in 2005. And one of the men that cleans the Calvario for the church told me that it was both witchcraft and curing that was done in there, but when he descended from the stairs he was greeted by a grinning Mitleña lady that was passing by with the words: "¡Hola Brujo![116]". In one Mitleño shop I even saw a small picture of the Calvario with a witch photoshopped into it under the glass plate of the counter, next to a picture of the main ruins with 'organizacion cultural Mictlan' written on it. When I talked to Abelardo from this organisation together with his wife and two younger members they too immediately mentioned *maldar* when seeing some black candles on my pictures of the offerings. His wife however added that they could be used for both evil and good curing rituals.

A more elaborate account about the relation between the Calvario and witchcraft was given to me by Gildardo, the *regidor de la cultura*, whose grandmother was a *curandera*. He explained that when the Spaniards came they built their own churches over the old temples out of pride and to destroy the old religion. This is why they built the Calvario. The Spaniards also introduced the concept of witchcraft and made the people belief that the old rituals they did on the pyramid beneath the Calvario had been *maldades*. In addition the people belief that the Calvario is a place for *maldades* because it is the place where Jesus died, and thus a place of torment. Gildardo also explained what purpose these ancient rituals that were now called *maldades* had served according to what his grandmother told him: In the past a woman could not life without her *metate*[117], with it she provided for her family and therefore her life revolved around it. If her *metate* was then stolen she had nothing left and would become very sad and angry. Therefore, when there was no other way of retrieving it, she went to the Calvario with 6 tapering candles of *cebo*[118] which was also used in curing. Because this was a very humble candle this would make the curse more effective. She would then burn these six candles in the Calvario, but with the wrong end, i.e. the thick end, up. She would place these candles in one of the ant nests, of which there were many in the Calvario, during the hottest part of day, i.e. noon. And then while the ants crawled into the candle and the sun was burning she started to orate her *maldición*[119]. And with her rebozo protecting her from the sun she would ask the devil to punish the one who stole her *metate*. This curse would come to its culmination during the last candle. Only women would do this ritual and he was very sure that it was never addressed to the souls, not even the *ánimas solas* or the souls of evil people. He however also told about

[116]Hola Brujo: Hello witch!
[117]Metate: flat stone to grind corn.
[118]Cebo: cow's grease.
[119]Maldición: curse

another ritual performed at the Calvario, even to this day, that does involve the souls. This one is done in case of a land dispute with a neighbour in which case the person would go to the Calvario to ask his deceased grandfather, who knew where the border was supposed to be, to punish the neighbour! This story of course has an interesting resemblance to the story of Miguel Mendes who went into a subterranean chamber with his mother except that here the soul is contacted at the Calvario. According to Gildardo however this is not because the souls life in the Calvario but because it is very high and your voice can thus be heard clearly by all the souls residing in Mitla. He adds that this grandmother told him that this has always been the purpose of the adobe pyramid that the Calvario was built on. It had been one of the two most important ritual locations of pre-colonial Mitla together with the other adobe mound of the same height called *el Mogote*. The *Mogote* is still called *'tch* in Zapotec which is related to the word for calling out. Today people can't hear you anymore when you speak from the *Mogote* because of all the cars but in the past the people all the way from Tlacochahuaya, behind Teotitlan, said that they could here Mitla's church bells! And while the *Mogote* was used solely for rituals concerning the living, the Calvario was used only for rituals concerning the souls. Because back then Mitla already was the 'Town of the Souls' as it is now.

That not all members of the local government have such an informed view on these matter became painfully clear one morning when I saw two local police officers running up to the Calvario, circle around it once and then start chasing away the pilgrims that were inside. Although I immediately started questioning Mari Elena's sister, who tells me that they come often, I quickly stopped talking when I saw that another police officer was keeping watch next to the shop. Meanwhile the other two officers came down with three pilgrims, were thanked by Mari Elena's sister and her husband, shook our hands and got in the car, leaving the pilgrims behind. While the man from Oaxaca got back inside to ask for forgiveness to his parents, I spoke with a couple from Santa Catarina Cuixtla who had only come to get to know the place. The lady immediately started telling that the police officer had said that it was forbidden to do evil rituals in the Calvario, but that they didn't have any evil intentions at all. Mari Elena later told me that the police do this daily because the town doesn't want pilgrims to make a mess and scare away tourists. According to her father, Porfirio however, it is not forbidden at all but they do keep an eye on things every day. My own suspicion at the time was that they came mainly because it was a Sunday, the day that most (Mexican) tourists come to town. The most drastic statement about the Calvario however I heard from the guide Bonifacio, who during a tour through town told me that the *Mogote* used to be an observatory for the ancients while the Group of the Adobes, like the fortress west of the town had served as guarding posts to look out for the Mixtecs during the war. To illustrate this last point he described an extensive scene from the popular Oaxacan myth about princess Donají. About the church and the Calvario he said that they were built to destroy the old religion and since the Calvario was used now only for evil purposes it should be closed again immediately!

Figure 12: La Guadalupana and Christ inside the Calvario (Picture by Arfman 2004).

In addition to the various witchcraft stories that are told the Calvario is also an important symbol of the part of town that it towers over. I first came across this when I asked my hostess, Mari Elena, who made the drawings of La Guadalupana and Christ inside the Calvario (Fig.12) and she told me that it were the boys of the neighbourhood soccer team. La Guadalupana was their patron saint. Still not completely understanding I asked why they would put these paintings in the Calvario. The answer was quite simple, the team was called Calvario because they always practiced on the small plaza between the four pyramids of the Adobe Group. There also were female clubs which were similarly named Calvario and tres Cruces. Although Mari Elena was not sure if the soccer team still existed, it became clear that it did when I talked to one of the young men from the neighbourhood about the several 'Calvario' graffiti tags I found close to the bridge that one crosses to enter this part of town as well as at the beginning of the street leading to the Calvario (Fig.13) He said that the Calvario was a symbol of the soccer team he was the captain of. He also explained that the name did not come from practicing behind the Calvario, but because the building was the most visible symbol of their *barrio*[120], of their streets. The graffiti was placed as a sign to the young people from other parts of Mitla to tell them to behave quietly, because this was their barrio. I saw these young people also hang around the Calvario sometimes, smoking dubious cigarettes, playing around with the offerings or making out. According to Abelardo this was the only interest that young people had in the Calvario, just a place to get drunk. The Calvario was

[120]Barrio: neighborhood

Figure 13: Calvario as a graffiti at the beginming of the road (Picture by Arfman 2004).

sometimes even used to sleep in by a friendly young man who was said to be crazy and did not want to sleep in his own house. That many also still regard the Calvario as a chapel however can be seen when they pass by the stairs leading up to it and solemnly cross themselves.

In reaction to the lack of interest in and knowledge of traditions and the past, such as I saw when Josefina had no idea that the adobe pyramid had been built so long ago by Zapotec speaking people or as can be gathered from the predominance of witchcraft stories, it has to be said that various projects are in development to counter this. Nelly Robles for example suggested a special school liaison for events in archaeological zone (Robles 2000:7.46) and the cultural youth organisation Mictlan organise their yearly festival through with which they hope to revalorize culture and stimulate economy. And Gildardo, the *regidor de la cultura*, has been developing projects using old music and songs found in Parsons' book. It is also important to note that about half of the Mitleños also still speak Zapotec and are very proud of this, even in the centre of town.

4.3.4 The ruins and the churchyard

If many pilgrims today go to the Calvario to do their offerings to the dead, then do people also still visit the ruins for this purpose? In the quote by Dürr in the introduction we already saw that at least while she was there, the ruins were still used during All Souls. But according to Gildardo these pilgrims that come to invite the souls of their relatives to their houses today only visit the church and the Calvario, not the ruins. Above several of the pilgrims however also mentioned the ruins. But while the old man from Oaxaca said that the ruins is where the souls entered the ground and the man from Tlacolula said that the souls meet at the crossroads in the tomb at the ruins, a man from San Marcial said that they only went there to entertain themselves. The *curandero* from Miahuatlán however was most explicit to me about the role of the ruins. He told me that people always used to go to the ruins to make offerings but that they stopped now because you have to pay. Gildardo agreed that in the past many people used to go to make offerings at the ruins but since so many things were forbidden there now, and because you have to pay to enter the archaeological zone people stopped doing that. However Eveline Dürr recently told me that during her stay people still tended to visit the ruins but during the night, either by sneaking around the guard or by bribing him (Dürr: personal communication). It is of course very well possible that this is still done today.

The other place that many pilgrims visited in Parsons' days, the old churchyard of which Robles could find no archaeological evidence, does not exist anymore. According to the man from Tlacolula these stones that people used to visit are still visible next to the church. According to Gildardo however these stones that can be found between the tiles of the atrio are not in their original place as the old graveyard was not beneath the atrio as most historians seem to think but beneath what is now the priest's quarters. The stones that can now be found in the atrio were simply placed there by some wealthy people when the old graveyard was removed and there are no bones beneath it, which would explain why Robles could not find any traces of them.

Concerning the new graveyard we already saw that Gloria of the hotel said that Mitleños went there instead of to the Calvario. The man working on the wall confirmed that people would indeed place flowers and mezcal on the graves not only during All Souls but also on other times during the year. The man riding the bike cab that took me there added to this that only Mitleños went to this graveyard and no pilgrims. Dürr also mentions several other moments through the year that the graveyard is visited in addition to the visits during All Souls and the days afterwards (Dürr 1996: 205;213). For example the procession with the Virgen de la Soledad on Saturday during Semana Santa lead to the graveyard instead of the Calvario as the latter was closed (Dürr 1996:194). And since the 1980's the procession of the feast for San Pablo also comes by the graveyard, to involve the souls in the feast! (Dürr 1996:182). But maybe the most fascinating account she gives is of marriage couples going to the graveyard before their marriage to place white flowers and inform the deceased relatives of their plans

and ask their blessing. After the feast they return with brightly coloured flowers to thank them, which marks the end of the festivities (Dürr 1996:249). Here it becomes very clear that even though the activities of the pilgrims are seen as somewhat dubious, the souls also still play an important role in the life of the Mitleños themselves.

4.3.5 The church and the souls

In addition to the lists of names that the pilgrims take to ruins Dürr also describes how the pilgrims go to the church in the period before All Souls. There they pray for their deceased relatives and pay masses so they will be able to leave purgatory sooner. In the church wreaths of candles are also placed, each candle representing one dead (Dürr 1996:201). Especially the pilgrims from Pochutla and from the Mixteca leave offerings and little notes with the names of the deceased in front of the *Ánimas de Purgatorio*[121] (Dürr 1996:202). This saint is especially placed on the main altar but regrettably Dürr gives no description of it so we don't know if we are dealing with the same double statue that Parsons described. Gildardo gave a very fascinating description of these prayers and offerings in front of the main altar, saying that when people pray there they are not praying upwards to San Pablo, but downwards towards the ancient temple where they know that the ancestors reside.

We also saw that several of the pilgrims also named the church as a place where the souls come to like the man from Oaxaca, the one from Santa Cruz Citta and the one from San Marcial. A vast majority of the pilgrims also went to the church either before going to the Calvario or afterwards. Some went *por promesa*[122], like the group from Santa Maria or the blind man from Santa Lucia, and the group from San Vincente even did an elaborate healing ritual inside the church the day after they had been to the Calvario for the same purpose. The man from Tlacolula, who said that the souls meet at the crossroads inside the tombs, said that he also just came from the church where they have a special office for pilgrims to pay for masses and *responsos*. Upon inspection I indeed saw this *casa del peregrino*[123], it was however empty each time I went to look. Concerning this practice Dürr does write how the priest complained to her that the Mitleños only paid for masses or responsos with funerals, unlike the pilgrims who came to pay for these things the whole year round (1996:202).

There is another important relation between the church and the Calvario, namely that the latter is interpreted as church property (Robles 2000: Ch.6). Therefore it is also considered church responsibility to keep the Calvario clean. In practice this mean that somewhere between once a week and once a month, two

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[121]Ánimas de Purgatorio: Souls of the purgatory.

[122]Por promesa: Out of promise. Usually this concerns a promise made to a saint that is asked for help, to visit its shrine afterwards. This is one of the main motivations to go on pilgrimages.

[123]Casa del peregrino: house of the pilgrim

Figure 14: The offerings collected and the candles seperated (Picture by Arfman 2005).

volunteers from the church come to take away and burn all the offerings present, except for the candles since they can be sold back to the manufacturer (Fig.14). I was present at one of these cleaning sessions and was thus witness to an interesting discussion between the two cleaners. One of them was clearly a veteran at this procedure, while for the other one it was clearly the first time and he was curious what all of it was. The veteran explained that pilgrims came to bring their offerings and ask for favours, some good and some evil in nature. He and another man had once been cleaning while a small whirlwind had picked up the offerings which scared them so that they simply ran away. But when from underneath some offerings a little wax puppet was retrieved with names written on both sides I was as surprised as they were! When they finally were packing everything up, they came to the conclusion that they could not take everything with them at once and so the veteran said that this was no surprise as it had been a busy week, he knew because the same pilgrims had been to the church. The new guy, clearly surprised, wanted to know why these people, coming to do curses, also went to the church. The veteran sighed and explained that these were their customs, their *creencias* and that the priest didn't mind. To which the other replied by stating "but God does!"

This ambivalent relation between the Calvario and the church is very similar to the relation between the church and the souls. While of course the cult for the

souls is a fundamental element of Catholicism, we already saw earlier how in Parsons' days the priest was opposed to the visible aspects of this cult. A similar situation can be found in Dürr's book when she describes how the angry priest refused to grant holy communion to all but two members of the church, because the rest had missed mass with Todos Santos since they considered their responsibility to the souls to be more important (Dürr 1996:213). I myself came across a very interesting mural in the atrio which depicts Jesus coming out of his tomb, with the strong admonition: *Mitla, Lugar de Los Muertos, la tumba no es final*[124]! A statement obviously directed at those that consider Mitla the final resting place of the souls.

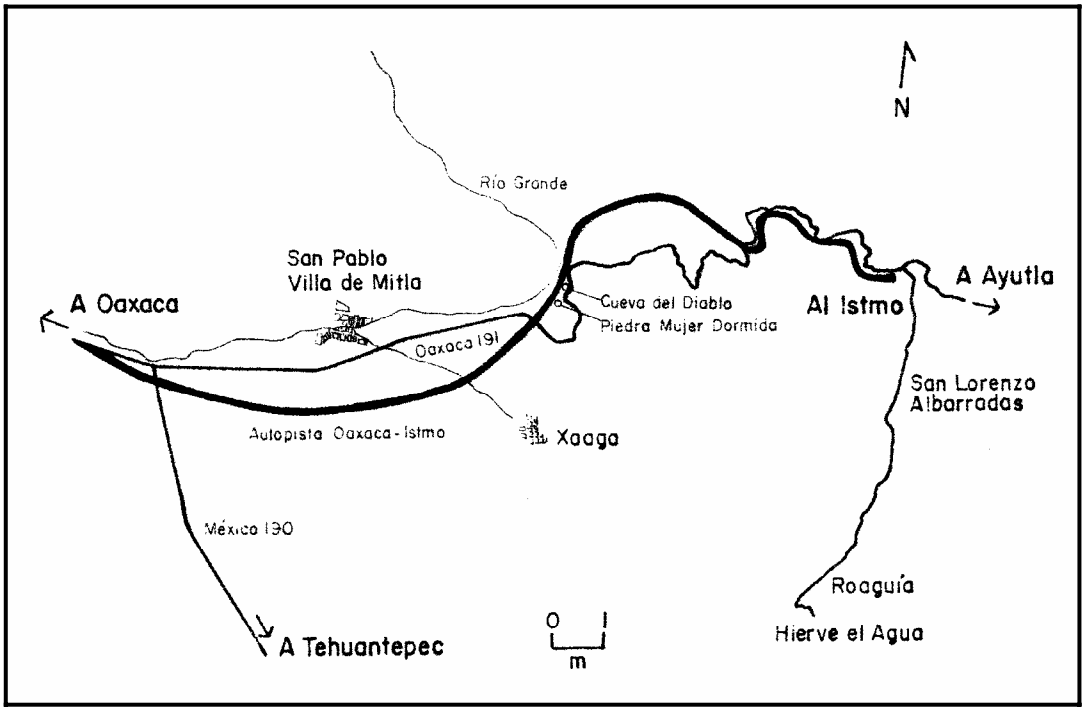
4.3.6 The Cave with the Big Mouth

Many Mitleños as well as pilgrims also named the abovementioned Cueva del Diablo, properly named Ro Viliaro in Zapotec, meaning Cave with the Big Mouth, as a popular place for pilgrims to go to. The young men looking for marijuana for example said that there was a cave that the witches went to in addition to the Calvario. The guide Bonifacio, who was so critical of the Calvario, indicated however that it was used by people that came for curing rituals and to offer to the spirit of the mountain. The people from the Mictlan organisation as well as the cleaners from the church said that the offerings at the Calvario were very similar to the ones at the cave, where people also went for both curing and cursing.

We already saw that the people coming from Santa Cruz Citta called the cave either *Casa de las Ánimas* or *Cocina de las Ánimas* while the curandero from Miahuatlán reserved the former for the Calvario and the latter for this cave. During my research presentation in class mt thesis supervisor Prof. Dr. Maarten Jansen pointed out that behind this somewhat sexist sounding story might be an interesting *difrasismo*[125] since the combination of house and kitchen could also be seen as an often used poetic reference to the household as a whole. In this way referring to the Calvario and the cave, two physical opposites, in these terms could also be a way to refer to Mitla as the 'household of the souls'. Expanding on this symbolical relation between these two features Jansen observed that Calvarios in European Catholicism are not nearly as important as they are in the syncretized indigenous Mexican version of Catholicism. His theory therefore was that Calvarios had taken over some aspects of the pre-colonial Sun Temples. This is interesting as the relation between a cave and a temple of the sun is an important one in Mesoamerican thinking, as we can see for example at

[124]Mitla, Lugar de los Muertos, la tumba no es final: Mitla, Town of the Dead, the tomb is not final.

[125]Difrasismo: a poetic device where a term is designated by referring to two or more of its constitutive elements or associated traits. Difrasismos are very popular in Mesoamerican narratives, and they are also used in pictographic documents to illustrate difficult-to-draw concepts by drawing its easy-to-draw physical manifestations such as a shield and a spear to indicate war.



Map 4: Map showing the new road and its proximity to the cave (Picture by Arfman 2005).

Teotihuacán. In this light it is also very interesting to notice that M. Martinez Gracida also referred to the Adobe Group as the Pyramid of the Sun.

Although I had planned to visit the cave myself together with Porfirio this turned out not to be possible because of heavy rainfall which combined with the construction activities belonging to the new highway made the area too slippery. Afterwards I started to doubt if it was a good idea to try again when Porfirio started warning me that the cave was very *encantada* like the ruins and very dangerous to visit because of the demon that lived there. When his wife Josefina got even more anxious and decided that we only could go if we prayed beforehand and the women would stay at the house praying as well, I decided to blow the whole thing of.

This new road (Map 4) that is being constructed passes a mere thirty meters from the mouth of the cave and only twenty meters from a nearby rock formation called *La Piedra de Mujer Dormida*[126] after its somewhat antropomorphical shape. Due to the rather destructive nature of this project a joined archaeological and ethnographical research was carried out by Marcus Winter and Alicia Barabas (Barabas & Winter 2005:21). In their article there are several pieces of information that are relevant here. The first is their archaeological research which showed the miniature vessels that Parsons also mentioned, to be miniature *sahumadores*[127] (Fig. 15) and the sherds as coming probably from *cajetes*[128]. The

[126]La piedra de Mujer Dormida: The Stone of the Sleeping Woman
[127]Sahumador: an incense burner
[128]Cajete: a type of bowl

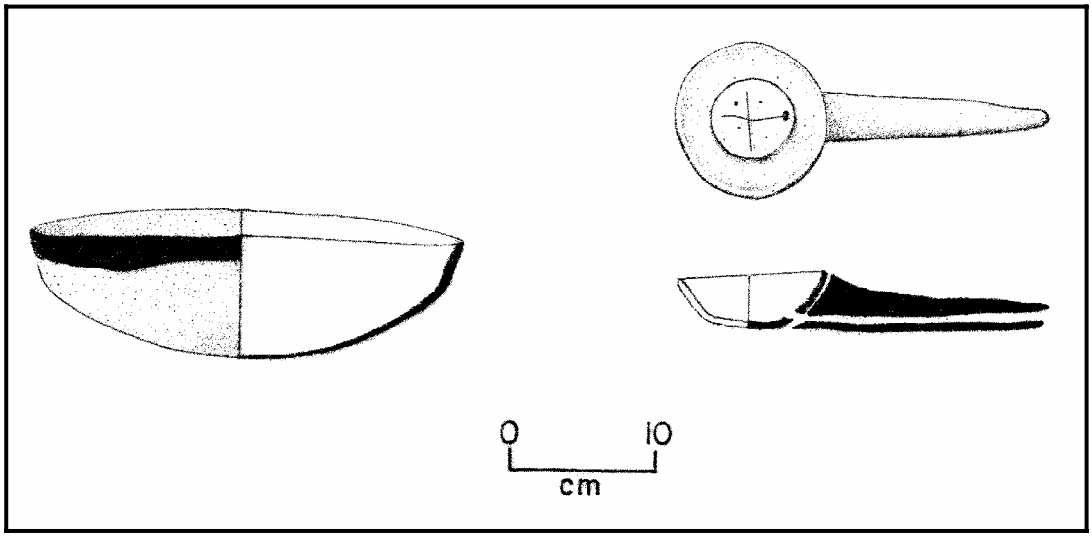


Figure 15: Cajete and Sahumadero (Barabas & Winter 2005: 25)

first was probably used to smoke *copal* and they theorize that the latter might be used for ritual meals such as are eaten at the site today (Barabas & Winter 2005:25). Both types of pottery stem from the post classic which suggests that this place has been visited for at least 500 years! The second piece of information is that 'La piedra de Mujer Dormida' is associated with the story we saw in chapter one of Sus Giber, Montezuma's cook who turned to stone and had her ranch, kitchen and spring on mount Girone. The well, being water trickling down a steep cliff into a natural basin, and the kitchen, being a slope full of round stones said to be her utensils turned to stone, were both pointed out to me by Porfirio when we were trying to visit the cave. At this stone of the cook people gather to do healing rituals against such illnesses as *susto*[129] before they go to the nearby cave (Barabas & Winter 2005:26-27). The fact that the cave is located so closely to this 'stone of the cook' might provide an interesting alternative to why the cave is sometimes called *La Cocina de las Ánimas*.

Another interesting issue that is addressed in the article (Barabas & Winter 2005:27-31) is to whom the requests are made in this cave that is considered to be *pesada*[130], *encantada* and *delicada*[131]. While at the Calvario people name the souls and the cross as the ones you address, at the cave people either ask the *Dueño de la Cueva*[132] or the *Dueño del Cerro*[133]. The former is associated with the

[129]Susto: literally fright, used as a term for a type of illness that results from shock, often described as a losing of the soul.

[130]Pesada: literally heavy, often used to designate places that are heavy in extra-human presence

[131]Delicada: literally delicate, a good alternative to the word sacred since it lies closer to the indigenous terms that indicate that these are places where you have to be careful and respectful towards the owner of the place.

[132]Dueño de la Cueva: literally Owner of the Cave. Often translated as the spirit of the place it designates the personified extra-human force of that place towards whom you should be respectful when there.

[133]Dueño del Cerro: Owner of the Mountain, see note 42.

devil and described as either a *catrín*[134] or a *gringo*[135] and when you want to get riches or want someone to become sick or die you ask him. When you want to see the souls of your deceased loved ones, you also go to the *Dueño de la Cueva* (Barabas & Winter 2005:27). This description seems to be very close to what the Yalaltecos say about asking permission to *una gente no material* before entering the world of the dead, of which this area was mentioned as one of the entry points (Fuente 1997:275). On the other hand when you want health or other good things, you asks the Dueño del Cerro, described as a powerful whirlwind (Barabas & Winter 2005:27). Barabas and Winter conclude that it almost seems as if due to association with the catholic devil, this traditional Mesoamerican image of the owner of a place, a beneficial being that one should treat with respect or suffer the consequences, has been split up into two parts: one evil and one good (Barabas & Winter 2005:28). Maybe originally Sus Giber herself was the *dueña* of this cave, given that she was the one Parsons' said you had to ask permission to and that in chapter one we saw that her kitchen, her spring and her third ranch were all located in this area. In that case permitting people to enter the world of the dead on New Year's Eve and possibly other occasions then was only one of the many functions referred to in chapter one, she and this cave served and serve.

The other destination that was mentioned above as being often visited on New Year's Eve, the Cruz de Milagros, has not lost any of its popularity either although Dürr does describe some modern influences on this practice such as using toys as pedimentos (Dürr 1996:173). She however does not describe any practice or story that relates these places to a market of the souls, nor do any of the pilgrims coming to the Calvario mention it.

4.4 Conclusion

Recapitulating the most important points made in this chapter within a timeframe we see that for the late Post classic/early Colonial period the only real indications of the importance of the locations under scrutiny are Burgoa's description of the entrance to the underworld, Martínez Gracida's statement that the 'Pyramid of the Sun' was the most visited places by the indigenous peoples and the post classic ceramics found at the Cave with the Big Mouth. The early ethnographers tell us that the subterranean chambers of the ruins were visited to ask a deceased spouse for advice and make offerings at the beginning of October and at the souls' market on New Year's Eve. These practices however started to become heavily effected by an increase in regulations concerning the ruins while to the Mitleños they began to lose meaning. Also associated with abovementioned market were the Cave and the Cross, the latter however increasingly without reference to the souls. And at the old churchyard both Mitleños and pilgrims were

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[134]Catrín: city person
[135]Gringo: derogatory name for US citizens.

placing flowers for the souls and associating a nearby stream as the river that these had to cross, while about the church stories were told of a woman speaking with her husband there and of a hidden entrance to the town of the dead behind the main altar. The Calvario chapel however was used for seeking revenge on enemies. Nowadays if the ruins are visited by pilgrims at all, this is done sneakily, because even though the subterranean chambers are still associated with the souls, they stay away because of the regulations and entrance fee. And though the old churchyard does not exist anymore, Mitleños do involve the souls of their relative in their lives at the new graveyard. Pilgrims do still go to church where they pay for masses and responsos, and maybe even pray down towards their ancestors. Some ambivalence from the church's side about these practices can still be felt however. Pilgrims also regularly go to the cave again for various reasons, among which seeing the dead. For this latter purpose, in addition to inviting them over for All Souls or asking them or the cross for favours, these pilgrims also go to the Calvario. Mitleños however still associate this chapel mainly with witchcraft, even though various projects are developed to revalorize certain aspects of indigenous culture. Interestingly both the idea of the Calvario as a place to curse as well as a place to contact the soul is strongly associated with the fact that it represents the place where Christ died.

Concerning the continuity of the Calvario as a ritual location however there is still an important issue that a mere summation of relevant points does not solve. Up to this point two seemingly contradictory views of the chapel's past use existed side by side. At the one end Martínez Gracida says the adobe pyramid was an often visited place, Gildardo states that it was always used to call out to the souls and pilgrims from Cardenas, Santa Lucia and Santa Maria ascertain that people always went to the Calvario for offering to the souls. At the other end Parsons and Leslie clearly state that the building was only used for cursing enemies. The same dilemma became apparent from two different conversations with Mari Elena. While first she told that a woman had told her that the Calvario was already visited for 400 years, she later told me that when she was young only tourists visited the building, and no pilgrims. Several solutions can be thought of to explain this apparent contradiction however. The most simple one would be to say that indeed the site has been used for the same purpose all along and witchcraft was never done in the Calvario. Firstly this would have made the adobe pyramid and the Calvario unique among the other places that are associated with the souls since it is not a place associated with entering the ground and burials like the ruins, the graveyard and the cave which is located near mountain tombs. It would also mean that both Leslie and Parsons severely misunderstood the rituals they discussed and completely missed out on another type of ritual performed in the chapel. The fact that a wax doll with names written in it was found by the cleaners also seems to suggest otherwise. Another solution would be to say that witchcraft and offerings to the souls are actually closely related since both deal with asking favours and both involve the souls. Gildardo's explanation of the traditional role of the cursing rituals as well as their demonisation by the Spaniards seems to fit well with this hypothesis. Concerning the role of the

solitary souls in cursing rituals it has to be said however that none of the sources talk about them being addressed for these purposes in the Calvario. But in the description of Agustina dealing with the pilgrim whose cows where stolen, burning a candle in the Calvario against an enemy is combined with burning a candle for the souls in the churchyard. This solution however still does not account for why Parsons and Leslie missed the other type of rituals being done in the Calvario. A final hypothesis could be that because the ruins became less accessible and the old graveyard disappeared the Calvario took over a large part of their function as place to contact the souls. This solution could even be combined with the previous one in stating that precisely because the two practices were so much alike, and maybe in pre-colonial times even were different aspects of a single practice, the Calvario was a prime candidate for taking over the ritual of contacting the souls. Everything considered this final combined hypothesis seems most likely. And as an answer to the question that this chapter deals with it could be interpreted in two ways. On the one had there is a continuity of the Calvario as a place to perform rituals on the other hand there is a continuity of contacting the souls in Mitla though one of the elements of its thematical unit changed.

Going back to the theoretical considerations of chapter two some additional observations can be made. When considering the Calvario to be an element in local worldview it has become very clear that it is indeed important to consider this element not only in relation to the other elements in its thematical units such as the rituals performed at other locations but also in relation to the other thematical units that it figures in such as the phenomenon of cursing and the fact that it represents Mount Golgotha. Because investigating the case this way made it possible to see how changing outward manifestations of the cult for the souls was possible precisely because of the role that this element played in other thematical units. In other words, because the Calvario represented the place where Christ died and was thus associated with death, it was a logical place to go to offer to the souls of your relatives when other places, that were associated to death because they were places of burial, became less convenient. And because the building remained a symbolical element of a ritual performance in which one communicated and created relationships with extrahuman forces such as Christ, the devil and the souls this lead to a considerable perceived time depth. Finally it is interesting to note that one of the reasons that this symbolical aspect of this pyramid and its chapel remained so important through time seems to be its very physicality. From a man-made mountain to the place where our Lord died to the towering symbol of a neighbourhood, to the place where the souls can be felt in the wind and your voice can be heard all over, to a place where tourists enjoy the spectacular view of the valley, the Calvario and the adobe pyramid are not easily ignored!

Chapter 5

Continuity of the offerings for the dead

In the previous two chapters the continuity of Mitla as a place associated with death and the veneration of ancestors and souls as well as how this worldview was localized in the Mitleño landscape has been discussed. In these discussions as well as in the introduction we already saw many examples of how this concept of Mitla as the Place of the Dead was not only thought about though, but was acted upon as well. From lords being brought to Mitla to be buried there to pilgrims coming to make offerings to the souls of their relatives it is clear that such rituals are an important component of the worldview of which the cultural continuity is studied. Therefore this chapter will focus on the various rituals that deal with gods of death, ancestors, the ancients and the souls. Special attention will be given to the material aspect of ritual performances such as the objects that are used and the offerings that are presented. In addition, the various purposes that these rituals had, and how these tie into what has already been said in the two preceding chapters will also be addressed. Mostly this chapter will have a chronological order, starting with data pertaining to the pre-colonial period such as found in various codices of the Borgia Group, going from there to the various early colonial sources such as the Villa Alta trials and the data found in the ethnographic works, to finally come to the explanations of offerings given by present day pilgrims. However to be able to explain a specific type of ritual discussed in the mentioned codices, i.e. that of the counted bundles, much later ethnographic material needs to be included in that segment. Lastly the answers to this chapter's two main questions: 'Are the same offerings used in pre-colonial cults for ancestors or the gods of death as today for the souls?' and 'Do these rituals and the offerings used in them still serve the same purpose?' will be formulated using the approach laid out in chapter two.

5.1 Late Post classic and Early Colonial Sources

5.1.1 Burgoa on rituals

Since unfortunately no primary sources are available that deal directly with ritual behaviour in pre-colonial Mitla we can only base our image thereof on the descriptions of ritual performances given by *Fray* Francisco de Burgoa. Using this source we have to remember though that it has been written down more than 150 years after the conquest and is of unclear origin. On the other hand it does not seem probable that all has been made up either, given for example the amount of detail used in trying to describe the High Priest's outfit. So probably the descriptions are based either on eyewitness accounts of earlier friars or more likely on statements given by indigenous informants to such friars. But since we can never be completely certain of Burgoa's sources and to what extent he reinterpreted them, all conclusions based on his writings remain highly tentative.

At the beginning of both chapter three and four short summaries were already given of the various rituals that Burgoa describes. For the purposes of this chapter however it will prove useful to study the actual text of what went on in that sanctuary or altar room:

> "*And for the more important feasts which they celebrated with sacrifices, or at the burial of a king or great lord, the high pries instructed the lesser priests or the subordinate temple officials who served him to prepare the chapel and his vestments and a large quantity of the incense used by them. And then he descended with a great retinue while none of the common people saw him or dared to look in his face, convinced that if they did so they would fall dead to the earth as a punishment for their boldness.* [...] *And when he had put on these garments he walked with solemn mien and measured step to the altar, bowed low before the idols, renewed the incense, and then in quite unintelligible murmurs (muy entre dientes) he began to converse with these images, these depositories of infernal spirits, and continued in this sort of prayer with hideous grimaces and writhings, uttering inarticulate sounds, which filled all present with fear and terror, till he came out of that diabolical trance and told those standing around the lies and fabrications which the spirit had imparted to him or which he had invented himself*[136]." (Burgoa 1674:123 translated by Seler 1904:250).

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[136][...] *y su gran sacerdote en las fiestas mayores que celebrabaon con sacrificios, o al entierro de algún rey o gran señor, avisaba a los sacerdotes menores, o ministros inferiores que le asistían pare que dispusiesen la capilla y sus vestiduras, y muchas sahumerios de que usaban y bajaba con grande acompañamient, sin que ningún plebeyo le viese, ni se atreviese jamás a verle la cara, persuadidos a que se habían de caer muertos por el atrevimiento*; [...] *y vestido llegaba con grande ceño, y mesura al altar, hacía grandes acatamientos a los ídolos, renovaba los sahumerios, y poníase luego a hablar muy entre dientes con aquellas figuras, depósitos de espíritus infernales, en este modo de oración perseveraba con visajes disformes, bramidos y movimientos, que tenía a todos los presentes llenos de temor y asombro, hasta que volvía de aquel rapto diabólico y decía a los circunstantes las ficciones y patrañas que el espíritu le persuadía,*

In addition to this description of what seems to be a ritual aimed at communication with images of deities or deified ancestors, possibly including Bezelao although he is not mentioned, Burgoa also describes a human sacrifice to them:

> "[...] *the assistants of the high priest stretched the victim out upon a large stone, baring his breast, which they tore open with a great stone knife, while the body writhed in fearful convulsions and they laid the heart bare, ripping it out, and with it the soul, which the devil took, while they carried the heart to the high priest that he might offer it to the idols by holding it to their mouths, among other ceremonies*[137]." (Burgoa 1674:123 translated by Seler 1904:250).

Although the description of this human sacrifice is probably exaggerated, it is still interesting to see how Burgoa includes a description of what seems like ritual feeding of the offerings to the images. An act that might have been used for other offerings as well. In conclusion of his descriptions of the ritual acts in the first of the underground chambers Burgoa also mentions the High Priests actions after the sacrifice took place:

> "*And if after the sacrifice he felt inclined to detain those who begged any favour he sent them word by the subordinate priests not to leave their house till their gods were appeased, and he commanded them to do penance meanwhile, to fast and to speak with no woman, so that, until this father of sin had interceded for the absolution of the penitents and had declared the gods appeased they did not dare to cross their thresholds*[138]." (Burgoa 1674:123 translated by Seler 1904:251).

Here it appears that the High Priest did not only communicate with the gods or ancestors with important feasts or burials but also on behalf of people asking favours. Although we do not know who these people were and what favours they asked it is clear however that a certain type of behaviour was expected of them in return which included fasting, staying indoors and avoiding contact with the other sex.

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o él inventaba, [...]

[137][...] *sus ministros, tendían la víctima sobre una gran losa y decubriéndole el pecho, con unos ravajones de pedernal, se los rasgaban, entre estremecimientos horribles del cuerpo, y les descubrían el corazón al gran sacerdote, para que lo ofreciese a los ídolos, con otras ceremonias llegándoselo a la boca* [...]

[138][...] *y si después del sacrifio se le antojaba detener a los que pedían o demandaban algún beneficio, les intimaba por los sacerdotes inferiores, no se fuesen a sus casas, hasta que sus dioses se aplacasen, mandándoles hacer penitencias, ayunando, y no hablando con mujer alguna, que hasta el Padre de los Vicios, pedía honestidad a los penitentes, para aplacarse, y hasta que decleraba estarlo, no se atrevían a apartarse de sus umbrales,* [...]

5.1.2 Codices and Counted Bundles

Though no primary pre-colonial sources are available dealing with rituals for Mitla, a wealth of information on this topic can be found in the various codices that make up the Borgia Group. Dealing with the ritual 260 day calendar and the various rituals and mantic or divinatory practices related to it, these various Late Postclassic pictographic documents give a fascinating insight into the ritual life of that period. Regrettably the origins of these codices are unknown although much research and speculation has been done in this area (Loo 1987:28-30). What can be said with certainty though is that all are drawn in the Mixteca-Puebla style that seems to have served as a type of lengua franca in the multilingual region encompassing large parts of present day Puebla, Tlaxcala, Veracruz and Oaxaca. Given that the murals discussed in chapter three were also made in this style and Mixteca Puebla ceramics have been found in nearby Yagul and Tlacolula (Hernández 2005:42) we can say with some certainty that Mitla was part of this cultural zone. Therefore a closer look at some relevant scenes from these codices might greatly enhance our image of what Late Postclassic ritual life might have looked like.

One such scene comes from the Codex Laud pages 45 and 46. Based on certain passages from Bernardino de Sahagún's work the esteemed iconographer Karl Anton Nowotny interpreted these depictions as a burial scene (Loo 1987:105). First on day 1 Water (Fig. 16) an offering was made of counted bundles, eggs, copal and blood and on the same day the body of the deceased was burned and according to Nowotny temporarily buried. Later on 8 Water, being precisely 20 days later another offering was made, this time of dog, turkey, jewels, and autosacrificial blood. And eventually on 8 deer, which is either 78 or 98 days later, the body is put in a permanent grave which is indicated by 2 footsteps, which might symbolize the journey of the soul after death (Loo 1987:105).

Also in the Codex Laud, found on pages 25 to 32, another relevant segment can be found though it does not deal with death, burial or the journey after death but with the influence that the God of Death *Mictlantecuhtli* has on daily life (Anders & Jansen 1994:160). It gives a series of prognostications related to certain periods where the god influences *brujos* and *sacerdotes*, children, parents, midwives, pregnancy, dead ancestors or governors (Anders & Jansen 1994:160). It also describes the offerings that should be given the gods of Death during these periods and gives mantic advice for such days associated with death and the afterlife (Anders & Jansen 1994:160). The depiction on page 25 (Fig. 17) is interpreted by Ferdinand Anders and Maarten Jansen as giving the days on which Mictlanteuctli, the lord of the *Reino de la Muerte*[139] comes and especially effects the *brujos*. Offerings should be made to lock up *tlacatecolotl*, the owl-man, in jail (Anders & Jansen 1994:161). In this context *tlacatecolotl* could refer to an evil spirit as well as to a hechicero. The Franciscan Friar Mendieta already

[139]Reino de la Muerte: Kingdom of Death

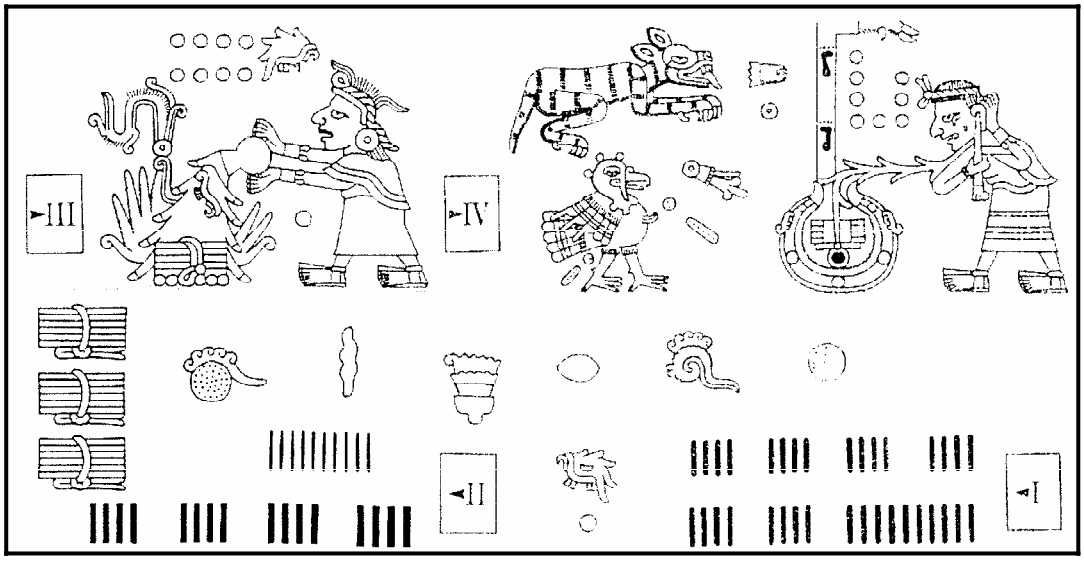

Figure 16: Codex Laud pages 45 and 46 (Anders & Jansen 1994: 215-216).

pointed out that as the devil these peoples didn't have one of their gods but an owl man, which name was used because like an owl, whose call we saw was a bad omen, he was of ill repute (Anders & Jansen 1994:161-162). Along the same vein the box where the owl man is depicted in might be the jail where owl is put in but could also be the House of Owl, a term that Mendieta suggested as a better translation for hell than Mictlan (Anders & Jansen 1994:162). On page 26 we see the days on which one should make offerings to the God of Death in his temple, the House of Bones. There one has to place fire in the brazier while the point of the piercer for auto sacrifice is broken, meaning that penitence would be ineffective these days (Anders & Jansen 1994:163). The days depicted on page 27 are interpreted as those on which Death comes to cut the thick cord that is protection to both mother and child, while on those depicted on page 28 Death affects parents and grabs a child, therefore *rajas de ocote*[140] are to be offered (Anders & Jansen 1994: 164-165). During the days mentioned on page 29 midwives are under the influence of Death as we see the primordial midwife Tlazolteotl giving souls to *la Diosa de la Muerte* (Anders & Jansen 1994:166). Page 30 gives those when Mictlanteuctli comes and gives instructions, affecting pregnancy and *rajas de ocote* should be offered while page 31 gives those when Death causes burials, as he deposits a mortuary bundle and monitors the grave in the jaws of the earth, again offerings are also depicted (Anders & Jansen 1994:167-168). Finally on page 32 Death affects the rulers, remembering them that their power is limited: symbolized by a naked king that sits humbly before Death, who is sitting in his roofless house: another omen of ruin. Again *rajas de ocote* should be offered and probably also a turkey, though this might also symbolize the god Tezcatlipoca (Anders & Jansen 1994:169).

[140]Rajas de ocote: ... of pine

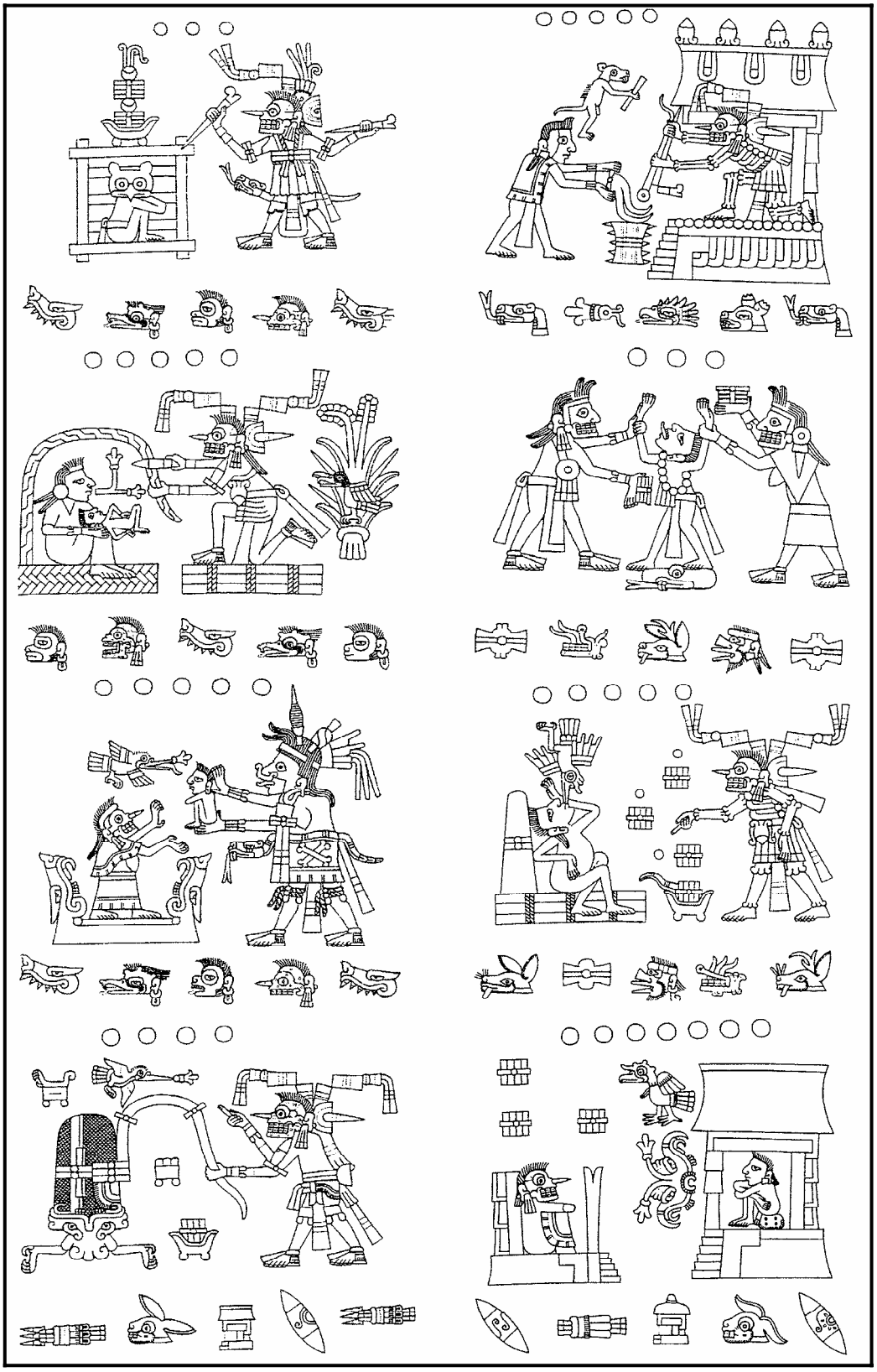

Figure 17: Codex Laud pages 25 – 32 (Anders & Jansen 1994: 161-169).

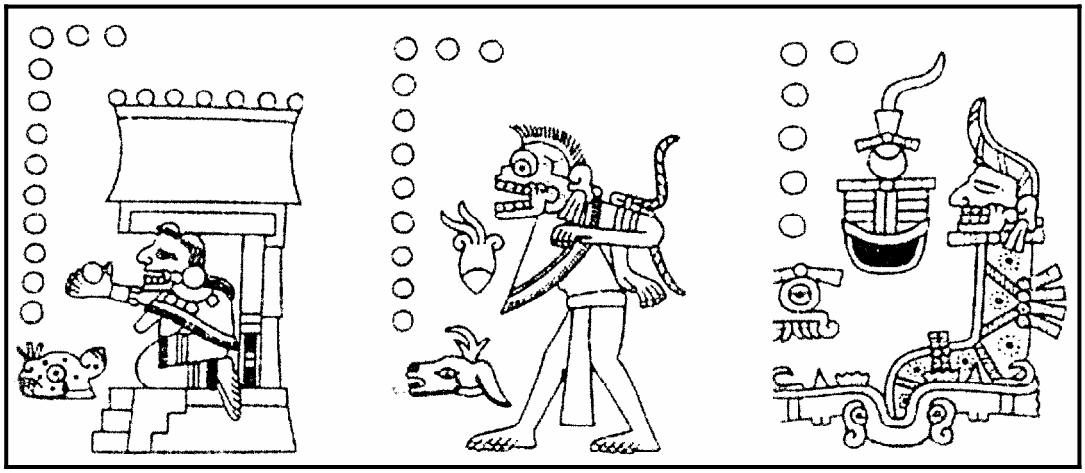

Figure 18: Three scenes from Codex Laud pages 43-44 (Anders & Jansen 1994: 209).

Three of the five scenes depicted on page 43 and 44 of Codex Laud (Fig. 18)deal with death and burial again, but then in connection to the ritual calendar. The scenes total 52 days each and refer to columns of five day signs, together making a complete 260 day round (Anders & Jansen 1994:207). While the first is interpreted by Anders and Jansen as a living man in a temple where rituals are failing due to sexual vice and the second shows another living man walking the street consecrated to the god Xipe, the third clearly shows a woman dedicated to Death in a temple holding a precious stone (Anders & Jansen 1994:208-209). The fourth again shows a walking man albeit this time dead and bound, with his heart sacrificed. Finally the fifth image shows the earth jaws devouring a mortuary bundle with offerings of *rajas de ocote* and a burning rubber ball present, a clear reference to burial (Anders & Jansen 1994:209).

Looking at this last representation of a burial as well as scenes from the Codex Nuttall where one can see a the cult to the bones of a deceased and from the Codex Magliabechi where a mortuary bundle is shown with a hole to put it in, it seems strange that Nowotny interpreted the scenes on page 45 and 46 as a burial even though there are no bones, skeletons or mortuary bundles depicted (Anders & Jansen 1994:213). Because of this and the dates that are given Anders and Jansen suspect that in this scene we are not dealing with a one time thing such as a burial but an annual rite. In the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, on pages 8 and 17 we also see a ritual being performed on the day 1 Grass as well as on 1 Dog with offerings of dogs and a turkey (Anders & Jansen 1994:213). Though on page 17 this is accompanied with a mortuary bundle on page 8 offerings are made to Chalchiuhtlicue, the Goddess of Water. (Anders & Jansen 1994:213). Thus Anders and Jansen conclude that we are probably dealing with a special ceremony on specific days in the ritual calendar where memory of the dead was combined with offerings to the goddess of Water (Anders & Jansen 1994:214). Interpreted this way the scene should be read in the following way: On 1 Water an offering table is set up with offerings of counted bundles, egg and tobacco ashes while on a second table counted bundles, three rajas de ocote, a flower

adornment, a cut out tongue, smoke and tobacco ash are placed. Twenty days later on 8 Water a woman puts out the fire made on 1 Water with water from her jar as vapour goes up. Three trecenas or 78 days later, on 8 Deer an old lady sacrifices blood from her ear on rajas de ocote and rubber in a hole dedicated to the dead, out of which comes a path. Finally on day 1 Dog, 201 days after 8 Water and 17 trecenas after 1 Water, Coyote and Turkey come, being manifestations of Tezcatlipoca, giving a beflowered jewel (Anders & Jansen 1994: 215-216).

In the description of pages 45 and 46 of the Codex Laud mention has already been made of *manojos contados* or counted bundles which are depicted on the offering table set up on 1 Water. According to van der Loo these are of great interest from a perspective of continuity, as they are found in the Codex Laud, the Codex Cospi as well as the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer (Loo 1987:106). A general model can be reconstructed from these various scenes: a depiction of a god with a calendrical name or date in the upper part of the page and numbers, represented as bars and dots, in the lower part (Loo 1987:106). There are some exceptions to this such as the scene from Codex Laud mentioned above where no god is depicted but a rain ritual. (Loo 1987:106). The first theory on these scenes was by Seler and revolved around astronomical calculations. Although Seler himself was not entirely convinced, others like Thompson and Caso followed it without following his doubts (Loo 1987:107). Finding that there were no pre-colonial or historical sources that explained these units representing gods, offerings and lined up numerical values, Van der Loo did recognize similarities with the bundles or *cadenas*[141] of certain materials which were counted in many contemporary indigenous traditions (Loo 1987:107). Nowotny had described such ritual for the Tlapanecs of Puebla as well as the Chontales of Oaxaca, while Loo himself also witnessed it among the Mixe (Loo 1987:191). Among the Tlapanecs Van der Loo himself did research into this phenomenon in the 1980's. There this ritual was used to protect against *males* and diseases, for weddings, to cure sickness such as *espanto*, cure the *nahual*, obtain good health for the livestock, expel or send harm, by hunters to *el Viejo del Cerro*[142] and to secure good harvest in an annual ritual to the God of Rain (Loo 1987:191; Anders, Jansen & Loo 1994:268). To these ends bundles were made of pine needles when the ritual was performed in the house and of reed for in the mountains. In both cases they were accompanied by *cadenas de flores*[143] of leaves or flowers on a string always in the same number as the bundles although sometimes additional flower chains were added that did not correspond to bundles (Loo 1987:191). In a typical ritual 4 bundles of 6 needles where placed in a square in front of the fire so harm would be averted, then 4 of 9 for the souls without faith were also placed in a square on top of the latter (Loo 1987:191,193). The rest of the bundles, often of increasing numbers to complete the table of offerings or to make up a ladder to take offerings to a certain

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[141]Cadenas: chains

[142]Viejo del Cerro: old man of the mountain, probably the dueño.

[143]Cadenas de flores: flower chains, although by the Tlapanecs also used to refer to chains of leaves

god such as the *Viejo del Cerro*, where then placed vertically on this square. That of 7 however which serve to finish the words of the accompanying prayer and correct errors that might have been made are placed horizontally. Finally the flower chains are placed on top of all this, while the additional ones are placed in a circle around it (Loo 1987:192,193). The bundles of 6, 7 and 9 always have this same placement and function, while the other numbers can have different placement and meaning depending on the *maestro* performing the ritual (Loo 1987:193). In addition to the bundles and flower chains, copal is always used as well as candles of prescribed quantities and colours. Depending on the ritual eggs, chickens, liquor, turkey, goat or even a cow can also serve as offerings (Anders, Jansen & Loo 1994:268). Always present as well is *Lumbre*[144], who is the intermediary between the *maestro* and the deity addressed. In house he is there as the fire and in caves or mountain as candles (Anders, Jansen & Loo 1994:269).

Giving much more detail than can be gathered for the general model, Van der Loo also gives thorough descriptions of a specific ritual for the *nahual*. Performed in front of a fire on a patio with the person with the sick *nahual* on the other side, the ritual starts when the *maestro* four times repeats *oraciones* said in Tlapanec although they start with *María Santísima*[145] (Anders, Jansen & Loo 1994:271,272). Then four bundles of 6 and 9 are placed in a square directed at the cardinal points to repel forces of harm and for *las ánimas sin fe*[146], which are those that died without being baptized or without a proper burial (Anders, Jansen & Loo 1994:271). With the bundles of 13 and 14 the soul of a dead rich person who was happy and prosperous in life and is now asked for aid is addressed. While the bundles of 16 to 22 serve as 'ladder' to come to *Lumbre* and his wife who will then take it to Viejo de Cerro (Anders, Jansen & Loo 1994:272). Before placement each bundle is passed from the left hand to the right and then placed with the tip against fire so it slowly burns up. During placement the *maestro* counts the bundles out loud in Tlapanec and Spanish, twice he even stands up and prays in Tlapanec to *Lumbre*, asking him to be the intercessor, strengthen the *nahual* and keep it safe (Anders, Jansen & Loo 1994:273-276). When all are placed, six candles are lighted and placed next to the heap of bundles three by three. Then copal is thrown in the fire and the sick person holds a chicken while the *maestro* cuts its throat. Next its tongue is cut out as well as a feather of each wing, one toe of each foot and finally a tail feather. These are thrown in the fire so *Lumbre* can take the chicken in spirit to *el Viejo del Cierro*. When the ritual is done, the *maestro* stays to make sure the bundles burn up properly. In the evening the chicken is eaten communally (Anders, Jansen & Loo 1994:274).

In the descriptions of two other rituals involving counted bundles some interesting aspects can also be seen. First in the prayer accompanying a ritual by a *maestro* for a hunter to compensate for the animals that he killed the *ánimas sin fe* with their hot hands and feet, figure as the punishers for *el Viejo del Cerro* if offerings of bundles, flowers, good copal and hot blood would not be offered to

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[144]Lumbre: literally fire, here used as the name for an extrahuman force residing in fire
[145]María Santísima: Holiest Mary
[146]Ánimas sin fe: souls without faith.

their feet (Anders, Jansen & Loo 1994:286-287). Here again we seem to deal with souls that much like the *ánimas solas* make up a separate group of extrahuman forces that are capable of punishment and should thus be appeased. The other ritual of relevance is the communal ritual for *Huiku* or San Marcos to petition for rain on the 24th of April, four bundles of 6 were placed to keep away harm and for the souls of the dead, four of 7 for the souls of the living, four of 8 to ask for grace, four of 9 for the souls without faith, and four of 12, 13 and 14 for the espíritu *bueno*[147] (Anders, Jansen & Loo 1994:281-282). Given the combination of several references to the souls with a ritual for the rain, this communal ritual might very well be like the ritual depicted on page 45 and 46 of Codex Laud.

Going back to the scenes in the codices Loo concludes that there are many similarities to the Tlapanec rituals as both consist of patterned and counted groups of material offered to a god (Loo 1987:193). He considers direct comparison not possible however, firstly because too much undocumented time has passed, secondly because one can not suppose that meaning of numbers here is the same as in the codex's unknown region and thirdly these numbers also change between maestros (Loo 1987:193). Still he observed that some interesting comparisons can be made. For example pages 9, 15 and 16 of the Fejérváry-Mayer Codex have increasing numbers which might symbolize the completion of offerings or taking them to a deity. Pages 21 to 31 of Codex Cospi has groups in four corners: like the bundles of 6 and 9 which might be to keep out harm. In Cospi the numbers that are used in the four corners do change though. Finally page 15 of the Fejérváry-Mayer Codex shows a cross of two numbered groups, which Van der Loo interprets as crossed bundles which are similar to the bundles of 7 placed horizontally in the Tlapanec ritual where this stands for completing the *oracion* and correcting errors (Loo 1987:194).

That the descriptions that van der Loo has given of the Tlapanec counted bundle rituals can be useful for interpreting codex scenes is evident from several scenes in the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer. On such scene can be found on page 15 (Fig.19) and concerns one of the exceptions were the offerings are not placed in front of a god, but in this case of a heart and two dogs which should probably be interpreted as guides for the souls as we saw earlier (Anders, Jansen & Pérez 1994:220). Again based on Sahagún, Seler interpreted this scene as representing one of the locations that a soul passes on the road to Mictlan, namely *Teyollocualoyan*: the place where the hearts of people are eaten (Anders, Jansen & Pérez 1994:220). But given the nature of the Borgia codices it is much more likely that this scene represents a ritual act than worldview related narratives. It might for example describe a request made to the dogs to recline from the life-force of the deceased or the dogs could be offerings themselves (Anders, Jansen & Pérez 1994:220). Interestingly the tongue of the upper dog is red in what is an almost colourless scene, while from the mouth of the lower dog jade emerges, signifying great worth. Given these details the dogs might have a function similar to the chicken sacrificed by the Tlapanecs, i.e. being the messenger and advocate before

[147]Espíritu bueno: good spirit.

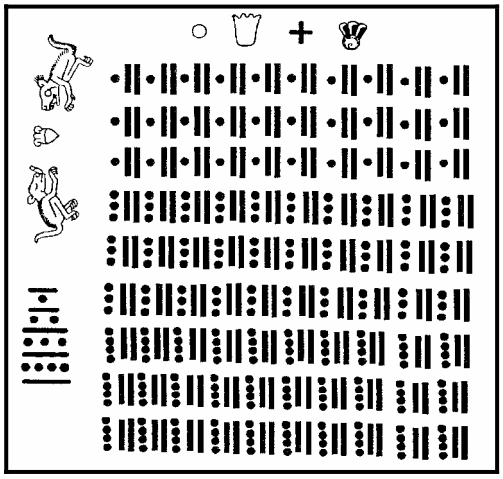

Figure 19: Codex Feyérváry-Mayer page 15 (Anders, Jansen & Pérez 1994: 220).

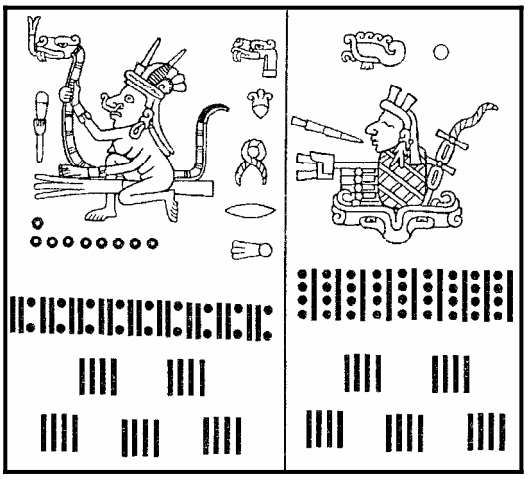

Figure 20: Codex Feyérváry-Mayer page 17 (Anders, Jansen & Pérez 1994: 223).

the deity that the ritual is aimed at. There we saw how the tongue was even cut out and thrown into the fire (Anders, Jansen & Pérez 1994:221). Below the dogs and the heart there is also a clear reference to an increasing amount of counted bundles starting with 6 and ending with 9. Though Anders, Jansen and Pérez (1994:220-221) translate this as serving to pacify the souls of the dead and keep out the spirits of harm it probable that it also refers to the completion of the table or the 'ladder' that takes the message and the offerings to the deity. The latter also corresponds closely to the idea that the dogs are offerings of communication like the chickens that are taken to *Lumbre* in the Tlapanec ritual.

As was already pointed out above, one scene of the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer appears to be very similar to that on page 45 and 46 of the Codex Laud, namely that on the right-hand side of page 17 (Fig. 20). Dedicated to the day 1 Water, being one of the days mentioned for the supposed ceremony for commemoration for the dead and asking for rain, it shows a mortuary bundle in earth jaws (Anders, Jansen & Pérez 1994:223). Placed in the jaw or grave with it are paper decorations probably representing the dead such as are also mentioned in inquisition files, an arrow just as in Codex Magliabechi funerary depictions and a *bastón-sonaja*[148], the staff of the dios de la Muerte in Borgia 56.73 (Anders, Jansen & Pérez 1994:223). In front of the grave are 5 bundles of 20: the latter signifying completeness and human beings as these have ten toes and ten fingers. In addition 9 times 9 bundles are placed, probably specifically for the souls without faith, though the number 9 is of course also associated with death in general in the whole of Mesoamerica (Anders, Jansen & Pérez 1994:223).

[148]Bastón-sonaja: rattle-stick

5.1.3 Archaeological and Historical Sources

Another primary source dealing with pre-colonial ritual life concerning the dead are the Zapotec tombs discussed in the work by Javier Urcid that was also mentioned in chapter three. One of the interesting aspects of these tombs is that they have a combination of articulated and disarticulated bones which was interpreted by Alfonso Caso as evidence of double burials where exhumed dried remains were painted red an reburied together with a human sacrifice, the *totiia penitooga* mentioned in chapter four (Urcid 2005:35). According to Urcid however these combinations of bones are better explained by successive use of the tombs of which there is also other evidence such as the reopening of them. This successive use also fits with theories of ancestor commemoration, just as the red paint which is an integral part thereof. This red paint was not only used on the corpse though, but also on the crypts and the offerings (Urcid 2005:36-37). Also there is no evidence from the bones that any might belong to sacrificial victims. However sacrificed dogs, also mentioned by Sahagún, were found in all the interments, while sacrificed birds seemed to correlate to more high status graves (Urcid 2005:41-42). Also information can be gained from the decorations accompanying the burials such as that of Tomb 104 at Monte Albán where Lord 10 Serpent gives custody of what is apparently a sacred box to his grandson 1 Ñ (Urcid 2005:57). This box seems to be related to similar boxes mentioned in the 1544 and 1546 trials in Yanhuitlan in the Mixtec region. There a certain Don Domingo had 20 boxes, each with a calendrical name, so apparently each represented a specific named ancestor. The boxes contained green stone, anthropomorphic figurines, balls of rubber, copal, bundles of feathers and paraphernalia for auto sacrifice. The boxes were given from person to person for safekeeping. In the trial several people were accused of using the boxes in domestic settings and in the sacred landscape to invoke the ancestor of Don Domingo to petition for rain, good harvests and health on behalf of the community. These rituals involved human and animal, such as dogs and birds, sacrifice (Urcid 2005:58-59). Tomb 104 also shows how the heirloom box is prominently present in rituals where ancestors are conjured and offered to and the Rain God is personified by enactors using ritual paraphernalia from the box such as sacrificial birds, balls of rubber, incense bags and small anthropomorphic trinkets (Urcid 2005:153). These mortuary programs of Tomb 104 as well as Tomb 105 show enactors entrusted with divine meditation embodying earth, maize, lightning, rain and establishing links between ancestors, land tenure and the continuity of noble/royal houses (Urcid 2005:153-154). In other words these genealogical records legitimized privileged usufruct of resources by proving origins from powerful ancestors that had the ability to mediate between human and divine realms. And these specialized offices held by heads of high ranking groups to ensure divine favours entailed conjuring ancestors and personifying deities (Urcid 2005:152).

Named boxes with inherited ritual paraphernalia are not only mentioned in Yanhuitlan or Monte Albán but also for the town of Teticpac, close to Mitla and

called the second entrance to the underworld by Burgoa. Michel Oudijk discusses two investigations involving such boxes in his book on Zapotec Historiography (Oudijk 2000). The first investigation in 1560 was the result of one Bartolomé who did not want to return to his village San Dioniso, close to Teticpac, because as a Christian he resented the sacrifices being performed there. Based on his statements four men were arrested who had done rituals in a cave near town, involving painted bundles, feathers, *chalchihuites,* a pot and 2 boxes of wood. As punishment they were tied to poles for 2 days to receive 100 strokes with a stick per day. On the second day the ritual paraphernalia were burned as well and the wind took hold of the flames and two of the men burned to death. (Oudijk 2000:137-138). In the 1574 case four men had been sacrificing to *petacas*[149]. The contents of the box of Diego Bazques was described as consisting of a stone figure in the shape of an *ídolo* as big as a finger and yellow and a round stone without figure. Diego Guyebelachi had a *sepoltura*[150] with *ídolos*, stones, golden jewellery an it was named *coquytao*. Francisco Tixe guarded another *sepoltura* with the same things, it was named *pecheçopalache* (Oudijk 2000:163). According to Oudijk these boxes are clearly related to nobility and probably used to legitimize power through descent of a deified primordial founder. The names of the *sepolturas* maybe the names of founders of their lineages especially since *cocuytao* means Great *Coqui* or Lord (Oudijk 2000:163).

Pertaining to roughly the same period as these trials in Teticpac, the *Relaciones Geográficas* do not only give a wealth of information on which deities were worshipped as we saw in chapter three or what tributes were given such as the 13 pesos, 15 turkeys and 3.000 cacao beans, which were still currency, paid to Cuilapan (Starr 1987:371), but also on the offerings that were made and the rituals that were performed. In Mitla for example they are said to have danced with musical instruments in front of the idols while getting drunk. Also children, men, dogs, chicken, quail, and doves were sacrificed (Acuña 1984b:260). In Ocelotepeque they similarly talk of offering quail, deer, other creatures and war captives. Also auto sacrifice was performed by extracting blood from the ears, nose, tongue and other 'members' (Acuña 1984:88-90). In Tehuantepec one offered chickens, dogs, animals, birds, their own blood and much copal (Acuña 1984b:114). In Teozalcualco as well as Teticpac dogs were also offered and in Huitzo they offered dogs, parrot feathers and much copal (Acuña 1984b:143,171; Acuña 1984:214). In Tecuicuilco coloured feathers and *chalchihuites*, both green and blue, were offered to the idols (Acuña 1984b:91). For its partido Zoquiapa a more elaborate description is given of a ritual for when people came to ask for favours like they also did according to Burgoa. When someone came to a priest in Zoquiapa for this purpose he cut the throat of a quail or a dove behind the altar and gave it back to he who had asked the favour. That person was to give a part to the *Cacique* and then had to invite all to his house to give a big feast (Acuña 1984:88-92).

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[149]Petacas: from the Nahuatl petlacalli: box or heart

[150]Sepoltura: literally grave, probably here used either to refer to the coffin or box or the hole it was kept in.

Concerning early colonial Zapotec funerary customs much information can be gained from studying the works of Gonzalo de Balsalobre, the Catholic priest of San Miguel Sola. From it we can learn that there were two aspects to the funerary customs, i.e. the laying out of the corpse and the cult to the gods afterwards (Berlin 1988:44). The rituals started directly after the last breath when the body was carefully washed, and if it concerned a woman her hair was also combed and braided. Then the person was laid out in her newest clothing to eventually be buried in a shroud on a pile of extra clothing. Stones that had been used in the divination and treatment of any illness were put in this shroud, bound in cloth. Also put in the shroud were pieces of chicken and meat wrapped in tortillas. Then relatives asked the *letrado*[151] about the state of the soul of the deceased and which penitence would be needed. The *letrado* told the number of days that relatives were not to receive or give anything with their hands and had to bathe in the river early every morning at the appearance of the morningstar (Berlin 1988:44). This of course was just the general model, in other cases the body and head were washed in cold water and the lady's hair was braided with a white cord or the hair was washed with amole and braided with a cotton cord while some miniature tortillas and pieces of cacao were put in the shroud. In another instance some tortillas and pieces of cacao of unknown number were put in the shroud while in yet another the body was washed with hot water, the hair with soap and 9 small tortillas and 9 cacaos were put into the shroud (Berlin 1988:45). With regards to the cult to the gods after the burial more details can be learned from the statements by Diego Luis, Balsalobre's main informant, from when his son came to him to ask what penitence he should do after his child had died so to prevent the return of sickness and death to their house. To find the answer Luis cast *suertes*[152], and determined that he should fast 9 for days and take a bath each morning in the river. From the night before the last day to the night of the last day he and Luis should vast as well while they should prepare a chicken and copal. The last night in the room where the boy died, they had to place a fire, burn copal, and decapitate a chicken and sacrifice this to *el dios del infierno*, who would stop the sickness and death from returning (Berlin 1988:45-46). In other cases nine baths were prescribed with one day of fasting, or eight and one, eight and two, nine and two, nine and three, only eight or nine baths, and only three, four or ten baths. Sometimes sexual abstinence was also part of the penitence (Berlin 1988:46). And in one case only a ritual bath was enough because the road needn't to be cleared of sickness and death since the person had died far away in Teosaqualco and would thus not bother townspeople (Berlin 1988:54). According to Berlin it seems to be that nine baths corresponded to men, while eight corresponded to women. On the other hand as we saw nine was also a significant number related to death (Berlin 1988:46). In one case the *letrado* told a widow to bath 9 days and get a chicken that was to be sacrificed to Coquetaa. When her

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151 Letrado: someone who can read, used here to designate the ritual specialists that could make use of calendrical books.

152 suertes: literally fates, here used to refer to a process where a letrado interprets thrown maize kernels or drawn playing cards to determine what should be done.

second husband died later, Luis cast *suertes* after three days and read in his book, after four days he came by to bury a chicken and copal in the field for Leraahuila, as well as for the soul of the deceased, to take the anger away from the god and prevent sickness. She bathed nine days and fasted one (Berlin 1988:47). That these rituals do not have to be done immediately after death becomes apparent when in one instance a man asked about the 'success' of his father's death 20 years after the fact. Again the *letrado* read his book, cast *suertes* and answered that the god Leraahuila *hacía justicia contra el*[153]. After bathing nine days and fasting one he should sacrifice two chickens and copal to this god, to take his anger away. These were to be killed and buried in three holes outside town next to the river *Quecoquasa*, the road to hell that we already discussed in chapter three. The copal was also burned there while Luis spoke some words in an un-understandable low tone. Next this was all offered to the god so he would stop the return of sickness to the house of the deceased. Later chicken was also sacrificed at home for Leraahuila (Berlin 1988:47). In several other cases the 'success' of someone's death was also asked and Lerahuila said to have spoken justice over the deceased in a way that seems very similar to the statement of the man from San Miguel who said the souls came to the Calvario to *dar cuenta* of their lives before Christ. From another account where chickens were to be sacrificed in a ravine behind the church we can gather some interesting details regarding the ritual itself such as that one hole was used per chicken, first copal was put in it, then the chicken was decapitated, his blood dripped over the copal, which was then lighted, finally the chicken was added and the hole closed up (Berlin 1988:51-53). Sometimes dog was also sacrificed in addition to chickens and copal (Berlin 1988:112). According to Berlin the number of chickens was related to the number of gods, which might be a result of the *suertes* that were cast or something that was found in the book. Offering candles was probably not part of the indigenous funerary ritual as they are seldomly named. In what seems to Berlin to be a more Catholic idea, the offerings are also sometimes said to be *por el descanso del alma del difunto*[154]. Also the priest was asked for *responsos* even though the indigenous nine day cycle was still adhered too as well. (Berlin 1988:54).

Like in Monte Alban, Yanhuitlan and Teiticpac, boxes with ritual paraphernalia are also mentioned in the documents of the Villa Alta testimonies of 1704. Here they speak about the worship of a box that contained the root or trunk of their descent. It did not have a fixed location but went from person to person just as in Teitipac. One contained two piles of leaves which were bled on, probably in auto sacrifice, in another among other things seeds and maize were kept while in another there were stones, feathers and a little shell and a final box contained four idols (Franch 1993:116). According to Oudijk offerings were made to these boxes from Villa Alta in times of necessity after consult of the *maestro* (Oudijk 2000:165-166). Franch also created an overview of the different types of

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[153]*Hacía justicia contra el*: spoke justice over him.
[154]Por el descanso del difunto: so the deceased can rest.

offerings that were described for various locations in the Villa Alta region. From this list we can learn that in 26 of the 38 locations roosters were sacrificed, in 18 feathers, in 14 candles of animal fat, in less than 7 locations turkeys, young roosters, birds from Chiapas, dogs, deer, cow, children, pulque and precious stones and plants, in 5 maize, in 4 cacao and in only 3 copal (Franch 1993:125-126). This means that apparently candles were already early in use though they were mostly used in church while the rest of the offering was made elsewhere (Franch 1993:129). Because while the men were out offering, women and children went to church to burn candles (Franch 1993:134). From another list giving the various feasts celebrated in 42 towns we can see that 34 of these have a celebration with new year, this being the most widely celebrated feast. In addition six celebrated All Souls, making this the most mentioned Catholic feast (Franch 1993:137-138). In a third list Franch makes an analysis of 52 offerings that are mentioned in the documents. Of these 13 bring offerings to the earth of which seven place a piece of chicken on the floor, two a piece of tamale, one a piece of turkey, another a piece of turkey to the mountain, one pours liquid on the ground and a final one blood. In Yacneri they offered chicken in the house of the *alcalde*, after having abstained from sex and having bathed. There a piece was also put on the ground *para los difuntos* (Franch 1993:142-150). Sexual abstinence and fasting for a number of days and sometimes bathing is done after a burial in the Villa Alta region just as it was in San Miguel Sola. Offerings of chicken and sometimes also tamales and mamelas of a specific amount are also made and these sometimes also serve as a meal. Like in San Miguel Sola the corpse is washed, and 7 tortillas are put with it in the grave as well as 10 cacao beans. In another case four tortillas are given and the offered chicken. The food prepared for in the grave of the dead is also for the *cantores*[155] so they will sing *responsos*. The offering to the deceased also serve to convince the dead to not take revenge (Franch 1993:165-166).

5.2 Early Ethnographers

5.2.1 The helpful dead

Reviewing the various types of ritual related to ancestors, gods of death and the dead themselves in the late Post classic and early colonial period it can be said that these can be roughly divided in two categories: those pertaining to funerary rituals and those that have a calendrical nature. In the ethnographical literature of the early twentieth century two celebrations can be found that also were calendrical in nature and also pertained to the ancestors or the souls. Throughout the previous chapters we saw how on New Year's Eve the Yalaltecos and other mountain pilgrims knelt before the old graves and placed marigolds there as well as behind the column, how Rosa Hernandez placed candles for the

[155]Cantores: singers, most towns had such specially trained ritual singers.

solitary souls behind the door of the church, how Montezuma could be seen returning from Mexico city and how in Yalalag rituals used to be performed for the *gwláse*. Also from Yalalag comes another interesting story about New Year and the souls. There it is said that if you were present while someone died you can go to Mitla on that night and if you see that person's soul coming out of the church after the mass they organized, you can successfully ask the location of his/her treasure as long as you do not do it from the front, because then you will soon die (Fuente 1977:275). The most conspicuous ritual behaviour on New Year's Eve however was of course the *pedimentos* that were built at the Cross. However in addition to these prayer images orange candles and copal were also burned there, which together with certain crops were touched to the cross as well (Parsons 1936:236). Also people prayed, touched the cross, passed flowers over it which could later be used against sickness and pictures of cross were rubbed against it to gain power, these were later put on the altar (Parsons 1936:236).

Of course the most important yearly celebration for the souls has already been mentioned several times as well, namely All Souls, when the souls go from Mitla to their former houses. There on the house altars food, drink, flowers, candles, copal, ornaments and toys are laid out for them (Parsons 1936:281-282). On the cemetery bread is crumbled on the graves while chocolate is poured on it, also fruit, flowers and candles were placed there. The most important of the *flores de muerto*[156] were the white orchid, also called *mojitos* or *gitsörl*, a cluster of white and pink blooms known as *gilak'* and the yellow marigold like bloom called *gitohhgol* or flower of the ancient dead (Parsons 1936:281-282). In Yalalag also a communal procession was made to the graveyard with music, fireworks and a speech in Zapotec. In it the souls were addressed and gratitude expressed to them on behalf of their relatives for the favours that had been done and for the love and appreciation that they felt. Also promises were made that they would be honoured as they should be and they were petioned for their pardon and clemency and asked that their help would be continued (Fuente 1977:289). The offerings made on the altars for the souls in Yalalag were much like in Mitla, consisting of copal, flower, candles, food such as *pan de muerto*, moles, calabaza sweets, fruit, dry fish, mezcal, catalán and water (Fuente 1977:290). The altar was also decorated not only with the offerings but also with cane, the *zempasúchil*[157] and the *flor de muerto*. A certain correlation was expected between the offerings and that year's harvest as these gifts were also to give thanks to your ancestors who left you good lands and helped. In case of a bad harvest the souls apparently didn't want to help because the living owed them too much. In such years the little offerings that could then be given were compensated by genuine sadness and pleads (Fuente 1997:290). Offerings not only depended on wealth, but also on taste and faith. Everybody though bought *velas*[158], *veladoras*[159] and lamps, while a minority also

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156Flores de muerto: flowers of the dead
157Zempasúchil: marigold
158Velas: candles
159Veladoras: candles in glass or plastic container

bought large quantities of bread, cholate, mole, etc. The *rústicos*[160] had *chicharrón*[161], salted meat, lard, cider, orange leaves and boiled *chapulines*[162]. Some people also made offerings to the souls of unrelated persons that used to live in the same house while others went to places that their ancestors lived (Fuente 1977:291).

Like the pre- and early-colonial sources the ethnographic writings also tell about the rites that accompany a burial. In the 1930's already when someone was dying a blessed candle was placed in the person's hand while a saint picture was placed on the breast. When deceased the corpse was newly clothed and laid on a lime cross on the floor, covered in flowers, until the burial (Parsons 1936:141). During the wake people visited the house of the deceased with candles, flowers and alms, in return they got chocolate and two bread rolls. The burial was the next day when a *cantor*, *rezador*[163] and four musicians came to the house. People were buried with the head to the west, but before being interred the deceased was given a small cotton cloth bag with holy water, 13 little tortillas and two broken up cacao beans representing money or the ancient currency (Parsons 1936:142-143,146, 64). Information about this *bolsita*[164] for the dead was closely guarded though (Parsons 1936:514). At the death of an *angelito* people would dance and sing, else he or she would not go straight to heaven, therefore no food, water or cacao was given either (Parsons 1936:148-149). The day after the burial the grave was visited with candles and flowers and during the procession people carried a copal censer and a holy palm, which was used as an aspergillum (Parsons 1936:144). At the close of the 9 day period of mourning, also called a *novena*, the lime cross was gathered up and buried in the grave as well (Parsons 1936:141). According to Leslie this quicklime cross served to make the body less heavy with sin (Leslie 1960:50). During the period of his research the small cloth bag with water and food was also still connected to the shroud (Parsons 1936:53-54). In the 1940's in Yalalag candles were burned for the deceased, including the children, and a traditional *limpia*[165], without washing was performed (Fuente 1977:203). No tortillas, money, clothing or expensive jewels were given anymore though. People did still know that this food was shared with a dog to pass a river though, therefore most didn't put the deceased leather clothing on because dogs resented that smell. A minority however had start to doubts these beliefs and stopped practicing them as well (Fuente 1977:203).

Maybe also related to burials, but a least to the earth they are put in, libations to the earth were sometimes still made in the 1930's just as they were in the Villa Alta region around 1704. Parsons even considered these pouring of liquids at formal drinking occasions to be a survival of the ancient cult for the dead (Parsons 1936:509). A very good example is the drinking ritual at Huilá, close to

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[160]Rústicos: hicks, a derogatory term used by Franch to refer to those with more traditional or rural lifestyles
[161]Chicharrón: fried pork fat
[162]Chapulines: grasshoppers, an Oaxacan delicacy
[163]Rezador: a prayer maker, someone trained to pray at household celebrations
[164]Bolsita: little bag
[165]Limpia: ritual cleansing.

Mitla. Here the *mayordomos* when they received their deputies poured mezcal on the ground while saying in Zapotec: 'Earth thou givest strength, give (long) life! Souls! Take some! (Parsons 1936:203-204). In the small town of San Miguel mezcal was also poured on the ground but here they prayed to *Dios* (Parsons 1936:238). Julio de la Fuente explained that the rationale behind this ritual is that because earth gives food, the head of the family first gives some crumbs or drops to earth. In Yalalag this was then accompanied by an incomplete our father directed to God (Fuente 1977:307-308). Especially in the prayer from Huilá a close connection can be seen between the land and the souls or ancestors. A similar connection was already mentioned above by Javier Urcid when he said that genealogical records legitimized privileged usufruct of resources by proving origins from powerful ancestors. Apparently this does not only hold true for powerful ancestors, but ancestors and the land inherited from them in general. It might be this idea that is at the very heart of why people did not pray for the dead in purgatory as Parsons pointed out in chapter three but to the dead for what they wanted. In other words for why the dead were seen as helpful spirits after death (Parsons 1936:523-524). Leslie also makes this point when he says that the dead take on a divine qualities after their life, death and transition and that therefore adult dead kinsmen are prayed to for aid (Leslie 1960:53). As a result, the usual attitude of townspeople to dead is worshipful such as for example in the respectful prayer by a trader to his deceased grandparents after he prepared an offering to them. In it he asked help for his upcoming trading trip and promised a candle and a *responso* when he would return (Leslie 1960:57). Leslie even concludes that the believe in souls is more personal, divine and moral than that in God or the saints as the duty to the souls and reliance on their help is stronger due to kinship ties (Leslie 1960:61-65). Julio de la Fuente came to more or less the same conclusions for Yalalag. He states that the power of the souls is big due to the possessions that have been left by them to their relatives because these possessions make a good life possible. Also the souls guard over and help relatives so these will not forget them and will value what they received. Therefore they will punish those who do not value them correctly (Fuente 1977:268). Also such faults against souls could lead to a sickness called *zgia ke ánim* which would lead to malaria, diarrhoea, dysentery, wounds, economical problems or a bad harvest. In these cases diagnosis had to be made by an *adivinador*[166] and treated by ritually resuming the neglected relationship (Fuente 1977:319). To prevent these things from occurring the souls thus receive with All Souls what they liked in live, also because they are entitled to a share of the year's yield. In addition the souls of the village protect it and this another reason why they must be honoured upon their annual return. In other words people pray and make offerings to keep the souls satisfied, however at the same time these also serve to drive them away again because their direct presence is unwanted (Fuente 1977:268).

[166]Adivinador: a diviner.

Like was said in chapter three the *gwláse* or the ancients that were turned to stone used to be helpful spirits as well in a way that is very similar to how the souls are seen. De la Fuente describes how stone idols being seen as the *gwláse* were buried when sowing or where fed special things for a good harvest (Fuente 1977:266). It was also said that at secret places large idols were buried that large groups supervised by an *hechicero* used to visit to petition for things (Fuente 1977:267). Until some decades before de la Fuente's research in the 1940's a special ceremony was even held for the *gwláse* on the last day of the year. The owner of an idol or of the field that it was found in offered blood of a rooster or a young dog to the idol asking for a good harvest. At home meat was then eaten with relatives and afterwards he returned to give a part of this to the idol, because it was considered better to feed this *santo de piedra*[167] so it wouldn't get mad. This same ritual was sometimes also done before sowing on a day determined by the *adivinador* (Fuente 1977:306-307). In the forties some still gave *tamales de frijol*[168], *pozontle*[169] or *mezcal* to the *gwláse* on unspecified days or even insulted it, so it would pay attention. Some believed that even just burying an idol in a field already helped. Also candles were still burned for *gwláz* in the mountain for a better hunt or at home for money (Fuente 1977:306-307).

5.2.2 Parsons on rituals

Besides information on rituals for the dead and the souls, Elsie Clews Parsons' work also has much information on other ritual behaviour and offerings that is relevant here. First of all there is the information about curing rituals. For example when divining the cause of sickness through *espanto* copal was burned in water then an offering was made at the place of fright to return one's spirit. There water was spurted on the ground, a cross was made on the ground as well and cigarettes, aguardiente, pieces of copal, 13 mini tortillas and one egg were then placed next to it. A chicken was sacrificed, with the place of the head signifying the chances of recovery. Finally everything was buried and aguardiente poured over it. Also sometimes a cross was made at the house, where the four corners were addressed and the spirit was called back. To the participants it was however completely unknown to whom all these offerings were made, though from comparison with many other sources we can learn that it is most likely the *dueño del lugar* that had to be appeased (Parsons 1936:120-121). For the curing of several sicknesses the egg treatment was employed. In this case a *curandera* passed an egg over the sick person's body, then a cross was made with it over a bowl, in which it was broken to divine the nature of the disease, afterwards the egg was buried or burned (Parsons 1936:136). One such *curandera* was Agustina who learned the trade for her father who was a *curandero*, the Spanish prayers

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[167]Santo de piedra: saint of stone

[168]Tamales de frijol: Tamales with bean filling. A tamale consists of maize dough with a filling that is wrapped in a corn husk and then boiled or steamed.

[169]Pozontle: a Oaxacan drink made of maize, cacao and sugar.

she used however came from her uncle who was a priest (Parsons 1936:129). Parsons also gives a lengthy description of a ritual performed by Rosa Hernandez, the *curandera* from San Baltazar, at the famous Cross of Mitla. Since several aspects are of interest a short summary will be given here. First Rosa lighted a small white candle which she placed at the foot of the Cross. Standing before it she drew air into her mouth with her hands moving towards her mouth, made the sign of the cross and said a prayer. Then she kissed the top of its base and pressed her right temple against it, then her left. In an anti-clockwise circuit she repeated the drawing in of air and crossing herself. Next on the east side she repeated the inward gesture towards the east, north, west and south. Then she placed water and chocolate on the pediment and bread on the west side. Each offering was first motioned into the four directions. Next she lighted two censers, first making a cross over them with a coal then motioning them around on each side of the Cross. Next she climbed upon the base, put her arms around the Cross, kissed it and put her temples against it. Then she took some flowers from a vase, motioned them in the four directions and against the Cross and put them back. From the garland on the Cross she took two marigold blossoms which she touched to the Cross and put in her gourd bowl as well as a few pebbles from the base where she also left the gourd. When she received a cigarette from Parsons she lighted it at the candle and carried it to the rear of the base. On return she collected her drink, food and gourd, only leaving the candle (Parsons 1936:285-286). When Parsons asked to whom she was praying Rosa answered "*to Dios, to La Cruz de la Pasión, to San Pablo and to Las Ruinas, since they were enchanted.*" (Parsons 1936:286).

Parsons also made a list of what she considered the most important aspects of Mitleño rituals: this being prayer, either by formula, chanted, in gesture or as a prayer-image, orientation to the four directions, using images or holy pictures and holy water, making vows and pilgrimages, doing processions and dances, making music and feasting, doing impersonations and dramatizations, using the motif of much from little[170] and finally making the sign of the cross (Parsons 1936:298, 302). She also gives a list of the many different types of offerings made in Mitla naming candles, copal, flowers, food, turkey, chicken, their blood, liquor and cigarettes (Parsons 1936:298). Of the candles different types existed. First there were the candles of the natural brownish orange for the saints and the dead, which were made in four different sizes, the little ones being for house altars, the larger ones for church or wakes and the two largest only for *mayordomias*. Secondly there were the white candles which were always made of beeswax and only used for the feast for San Pablo and household purposes. Thirdly candle ends were reused to make a dark brown candle which was a substitute for the white one. Fourthly orange candles that can be made from paraffin as well a beeswax and lastly candles from animal fat that were applied to cuts and the umbilical cord (Parsons 1936:59). On the house altar bottles were often used as

[170]Motif of much from little: a tactic often employed in rituals where something in miniature is used to represent something bigger which is wanted.

candlesticks (Parsons 1936:27). According to Parsons' friend Angélica people sometimes also wrote stories of recent events on a paper they wrapped around candle as a message to the dead. The only female specialists in town were the candle maker, the curanderas, midwives, and a ritual cigarette roller (Parsons 1936:63-64). These cigarettes were among other things used by go-betweens in the invitation to a bride's family (Parsons 1936:96) While the tobacco from these *cigarros de la ópera* or ritual tobacco were also used in some cures (Parsons 1936:127). The only person in Mitla that believed that someone could be cursed by sticking pins or nails in a *muñec*'[171], an idea popular amongst mestizos, was Eligio, though such a doll was also found in another Mitleño's yard, making him sick (Parsons 1936:141). Eligio also believed that witches made a *mono*[172] of wax or rags to stick thorns in it and bury it at the edge of a river, an idea which was unfamiliar to most other Mitleños (Parsons 1936:425). Therefore Parsons considers these dolls for cursing to be of Spanish origin (Parsons 1936:493).

5.3 Present day sources

5.3.1 Present day ethnographers

Based on the observations made by Eveline Dürr in the early nineties it can be said that regarding to calendrical celebrations concerning the souls not much has changed although in the case of New Year no mention is made anymore of the souls being involved. People do still visit the *cueva* that night to place cacao beans, copal, flowers and candles there, while at the cave close to the Cross flowers, copal and candles are also placed. At the Cross itself *pedimentos* continue to be made, while the Cross itself is still touched and flowers and copal are also still placed. At the *ruinas* flowers and candles are offered in the period leading up to New Year. (Dürr 1996:172-176). Concerning All Souls we have already seen that people from Miahuatlan come the second Sunday of October to invite the souls at the Calvario and place cacao beans, flowers and candles there then. In this same period before *Todos Santos* pilgrims from Pochutla and Mixteca come to place notes with the names of their related deceased for the *Santo Ánimas de Purgatorio* and offer fruit, copal and cacao beans to them as well (Dürr 1996:202). And we saw that with similar lists of names people come to the ruins to ask Death to allow souls to return home for the festivities. With All Souls itself Mitleños continue to pour a welcoming drink of mezcal on the ground at the cemetery, while cigarettes are lit and copal is smoked (Dürr 1996:205). When people leave the cemetery mezcal and copal are offered to the souls again (Dürr 1996:212). The altars also still have the famous Mitleño bread and all the things that the deceased liked in life (Dürr 1996:207). From the Stubblefield dictionary we can see that the names of the yellow marigold or *guitogool* as well as the white

[171]Muñec: from muñeca, meaning doll
[172]Mono: literally monkey, often used as a term for a doll or small image

and pink blooms or guilajgw are also still mentioned as *flores de muerto* (Stubblefield & Stubblefield 1991:298,290).

The funerary rituals that Dürr discusses also bear many similarities to the descriptions of Parsons. The corpse is still placed in front of the altar and a wake with a *rezador* is still held during which people come to bring candles, flowers and mezcal. Next day there is the trip to the cemetery with copal being burned and plenty of mezcal being drunk by the mourners (Dürr 1996:261). To make the journey after death somewhat lighter red flowers are placed on the grave after a few days and in the grave the image of a saint is placed as well as holy water, 13 tortillas in a bag and 13 cacao beans which are still said to be money for in the afterlife. Sometimes the cacao beans will even be crushed because there is a shortage in change in the afterlife just as there is everywhere in Mexico (Dürr 1996:267). On the third day there is a get together with candles, flowers, mezcal and money being given, that day a lot of alcohol is drunk as well. During the *novena* every day a *rezador* comes and a sand cross with the deceased's name is made and flowers are put on the grave. The night before the end of the novena there is another get together during which people pray before the ground cross and eat a meal in mourning. After this midnight meal the *levantada de la cruz*[173] is performed with five praying padrinos spooning up the cross. On its place five candles are put. The sand of the cross itself is saved. On the ninth day of the *novena* a mass is held *para los difuntos* and the cemetery is visited again. There a white flower wreath is placed and mezcal is drunk. After an hour of praying the ground cross is then buried next to the grave (Dürr 1996:261). On the 20th day there is another *misa de luto*[174] and another *levantada*. And on the 40th day there is again a mass and flowers are put on the grave and candles on the altar. After one year the last mass is held (Dürr 1996:265). For the child there is no *novena* or *levantada* but a *misa de gloria*[175] as he or she goes straight to heaven (Dürr 1996:265).

Regarding present day curing rituals some interesting features are discussed in Alicia Barabas and Marcus Winter's article on the *Cueva* and the *Mujer Dormida* (Fig.21). Of the later it is said that she is infertile and thus sees visitors as her children and therefore she wants to cure them of any sicknesses (Barabas & Winter 2005:26). As a result candles, flowers, eggshells, pottery and black feathers are found in holes around her body and head. These are from the offerings placed there during the *convivio*[176]. People come to the Sleeping Woman with a *curandero* to be cured of *susto*, *espanto* or *daño*[177]. The *curandero* consults a deck of cards to determine the offering that is wanted (Barabas & Winter 2005:26-27). In case of a *limpia* this can be copal, a wren, an egg, basil, mezcal, water, tea, or alcohol. For the *convivio* it could be *frijol molido*, *tasajo*, *pepitas*,

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[173]Levantada de la cruz: lifting up the cross.
[174]Misa de luto: mass of mourning.
[175]Misa de gloria: mass of celebration.
[176]Convivio: literally 'a living together'. Used to indicate a situation where food and drink is ritually shared not only amongst each other but also with the extrahuman forces pertaining to that location.
[177]Daño: harm, in this case that which is send to the victim through witchcraft.

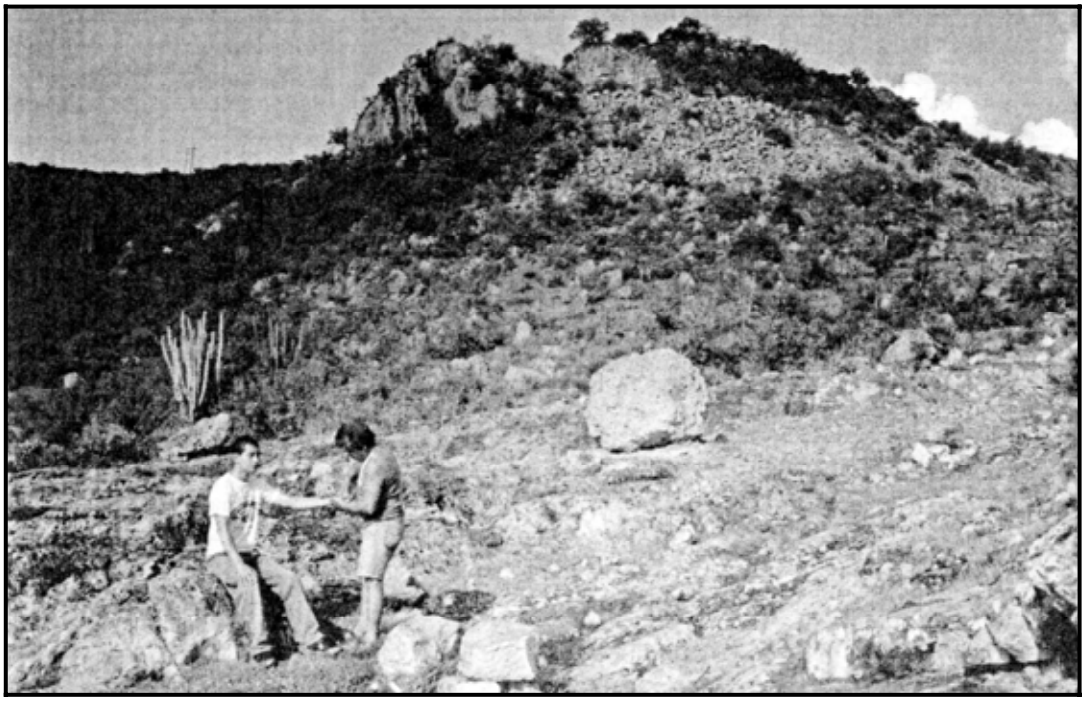

Figure 21: A lady curing a young man at La Mujer Dormida (Barabas & Winter 2005: 26).

mezcal or soda. He uses a hole in the chest of the *Mujer Dormida* to burn copal on a plate of water so the coal indicates the type of sickness. The sick person is present so smoke helps him or her remember where he or she got *susto* or who wants harm. Next the *curandero* and the family of the sick person blow hot water over his or her body, the specialist prays and ask God to help. Then the patient sits on the *piedra de curación* [178] and the *curandero* concludes with basil, alcohol and eggs. These are then put in a hole and are covered with rocks. These holes also contain crosses of reed and *tamales de copal*[179]. The later symbolising the smoke that communicates between the petitioners and the *dueño*. During the healing the family already start cooking, so that when this first part is done they can eat and listen to some music. As this meal is a *convivio* with the *dueño*, part of the food is buried in the holes as well (Barabas & Winter 2005:26-27). After this meal people also go to the *cueva* where they pray and place more offerings such as yellow candles, *veladoras*, a black chicken or rooster which is buried or let loose, *tamales de copal*, *cempasúchil*, cacao and maize. Then another *convivio* is held which is seen as a *cariño*[180] to the *dueños* (Barabas & Winter 2005:29). Afterwards requests are made to these *dueños* of the cave through notes and by placing offerings such as black candles, cacao, copal and black feathers (Barabas & Winter 2005:27). In the ritual to see the dead one places bread, chocolate,

[178]Piedra de curación: Stone of healing

[179]Tamales de copal: a term used by Barabas and Winter to describe intact square plates of copal of roughly 5 by 10 centimetres named so because like tamales they are often wrapped in banana- or maize leaves (Fig.24).

[180]Cariño: a token of affections, often used to describe the offerings to deceased relatives.

mole[181], tortillas and soda for a *convivio*. And as an offering flowers are placed to form a cross with yellow candles, cacao and copal for a *buen descanso*[182] for the dead (Barabas & Winter 2005:30). When asking for money or animals to the 'devil' one makes an offering of copal, cacao, egg and tortillas, which represent the paying of service to him as well as the wealth that has been obtained (Barabas & Winter 2005:30). Concerning the various offerings they observed in the cave Barabas and Winter make some observations and give some explanations which are of special interest here. For example the *cempasúchil* spread out or placed in a vase serves to please the *dueño* while the cacao beans that are spread or placed in heaps around the holes is money as payment for received services. The black candles are said to be placed as a request for someone's death out of jealousy. The yellow candles on the other hand serve as a request to see a deceased adult or heal one, while the white ones are to see a dead child, or heal a child (Barabas & Winter 2005:31). On their first visit they also observed a big offering of four heaps with each 20 black candles and seven *tamales de copal*. This they analysed as referring to the four cardinal directions, the 20 layers of the upper world, and the 7 layers of the underworld (Barabas & Winter 2005:31). Whether this hypothesis actually concurs with present day local worldview though is unclear. They also found another big offering consisting of five circles of flowers lighted with *veladoras* and yellow candles. In the holes they also found partially burned notes for seeing the dead, as well as one for sending *daño* and one to send sickness (Barabas & Winter 2005:31).

5.3.2 The offerings explained

In previous chapters we read how pilgrims described that they came to the Calvario because there they could offer to God, the miraculous cross and most importantly the souls that had come to Mitla after death. In trying to understand what purpose these offerings served I first asked the members of the family I stayed with. The grandmother Josefina I explained to me that these people came for example when money was stolen or for *maldar*. Her husband Porfirio on the other hand told me of various more benevolent goals such as asking for rain, something to eat such as beans or maize, for a long life or a job. As I said earlier their daughter Mari Elena wasn't completely sure whether people came for good or for bad purposes. According to her the building hadn't been closed because of evil being done there however but because it was so dirty inside due to the open candles, broken eggs and slaughtered chickens. Therefore when it reopened people started using *veladoras* and more cacao beans. She also explained that pilgrims did not come on special days, during special periods or on specific hours. The only time they didn't come was when the weather wasn't any good. When I

[181]Mole: from the Nahuatl mōlli meaning sauce. Today refers to a group of sauces or dishes based on these sauces and made of many ingredients among which chocolate, peanuts and chilli peppers.

[182]Buen descanso: a good rest

talked about the offerings with the ladies of the hotel they were especially excited about all the black candles and the dolls where needles were stuck in, Teresa however did also mention that the cacao that could be found was money for the dead.

As said in chapter 1, given the fact that pilgrims only made very short visits to Mitla and I only got the chance to speak to them after they had performed their offerings, I did not have the opportunity to document the offering rituals in their entirety. I was however able to witness certain elements of these rituals from the shop I waited in. From there I could for example see how members from the large group from San Miguel were taking things out of large bags they had put on the high doorstep of the Calvario or some of the ladies from the group coming from Santa Cruz Citta tying the bundles of flowers together before entering. Another time I saw a middle aged man unpacking his bag pack on the threshold to then go inside where he made a short bow to the middle, then the left and finally the right cross. Following this he went outside again to get white packets and at least one candle, talking them out of sight to the left cross, returning after some time to get new offerings which he took to the right , not much later coming back to get more. The following day two young guys also placed their bags in front of the entrance, one threw some clear liquid from a bottle to the inside, then the other took some sips, then poured some on the ground four times, on or just next to the stairs. Next the first took the bottle again, went inside where I heard the breaking of glass, then they went away. On another occasion when I wasn't able to talk to an older man who left at the side of the pyramid I also saw him pouring a lot of liquid on the threshold. Going up later I could clearly smell it had been mezcal or another strong alcoholic drink. And I saw the same libation being made by the lady of the old couple from Mixtepec. She had a cola bottle out of which she poured a liquid on or near the threshold four times, then she took some bread of which she threw some pieces in front of the middle cross, meanwhile drinking the cola. Before this I had also seen her kneeling in front of that same cross, which she tried to touch from the left but wasn't able to. Others such as the two ladies from San Sebastian de las Grutas I also saw kneeling some time in front of the cross while on another occasion two men stood before it for 15 minutes, not doing anything else. Another couple did combine the kneeling with going behind the cross, probably to place some offerings. The touching of the middle cross I also observed on other occasions most notably in the curing ritual performed by the group from San Vincente. This family group had come to cure a middle-aged man of the *susto* he had gotten from witnessing a car accident. This man did not only touch the cross, he even stood on its pedestal to be able to touch the crossbeam. The little bundles of white flowers that they rubbed over the body of the man as well as that of his son for the limpia they also placed on the base of the cross. For this same purpose they also used the branches of the piropt tree which grows next to the pyramid that the Calvario stands on. The next day a similar ritual was performed in the church by the man and his mother who according to her grandson is a *curandera*. There they first knelt at the main altar and then made a round from saint to saint. At each statue they stopped and made the sign of the

cross, the lady then took a flower which she first passed over the statue and then over the body of her son, next both kissed the flower which was placed back in the vase next to the statue afterwards. One of the ladies told me that both in the Calvario and in the church they repeat 'In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit'. No other Spanish prayers were used though. The man from Santa Cruz Citta however told me that they did say various Spanish prayers while in the Calvario. And an old man from San Marcial similarly explained that he had just said the Our Father, Hail Mary as well as one addressed to Jesus, God, Mary and the Souls. He also said that Zapotec prayers were never said. According to the curandero from Miahuatlan though these *oraciones* might be said in Spanish today, but in the past they were said only in *idioma*.

In addition to witnessing certain aspects of the offerings taking place I also observed, photographed, and made notes about the offerings that were left behind. Most prominent amongst these offerings were the candles. As said these came in two types, the *velas* and the *veladoras*. Of the latter there were both small and larger versions and they could be contained in glass, hard plastic or soft plastic. The normal candles were mostly yellow or black, but also in some cases orange, white, red or blue. Both long and smaller variations are used and they are either put upright to be burned or laid down, sometimes bound or melted together or placed in a half circle. Candles are mostly burned out of view and as a result more molten candle wax is attached to the backsides of the pedestals. Of the black candles wax can only be found on such places out of sight, though black candles are placed lying down in more visible places. The veladoras and the candles are mostly bought at the shop of the family I stayed with. Just as eye-catching as the candles are the various sorts of flowers which are put upright against the crosses, as a garland around the middle one, put in rows or circles on the ground, either loose or in small bundles. Many different species can be seen, among which the white orchid and the yellow marigold which were mentioned as *flores de muerto* by Parsons. The clusters of white and pink blooms she said were called *gilak'* I did not see however. Concerning colour especially white, orange and yellow are predominant although purple, pink and red flowers could on occasions also be seen. In addition to flowers different sorts of leaves were also used as well as some split stems of plants and little bundles of wood. Also several fruits and other crops were used as offerings such as onion, turnip, lemon, lime, banana, and orange. Additionally pieces of bread or biscuits were strewn over the floor. The most dominant food product however were cacao beans. These were either left in their bag or strewn over the floor or the pedestals of the crosses and sometimes they were placed in the shape of a cross. Several times eggs were also placed either intact on the ground or on one of the pedestals or they were broken in a vase or hollow stone. Apart from this plastic vase there were several other types of containers such as a tin can, a tripod, a candleholder, glasses and many beer or soda bottles. The latter were not only used to hold candles but sometimes contained liquids as well, of which little pools could also sometimes be seen. After candles the most visible non-food offerings was copal. Either placed on the pedestals in little pieces or as *tamales de copal* as Barabas and Winter called

Figure 22: Arrangement of flowers and the pamphlet (Picture by Arfman 2005).

Figure 23: Arrangement of veladoras, candles and copal (Picture by Arfman 2005).

them. The latter being intact square plates of roughly 10 by 5 centimetres, wrapped in banana leaves, newspapers or lined school paper and bound with (plastic) cord. Ashes were also found though these were probably either from the tobacco or cigarettes of which some are still in their packages while many others are left to burn among the other offerings. The ashes could however also result from the burning of notes of which the ones that were readable most were school related and expressed requests concerning grades and diplomas. Besides these various categories of offerings there are also some more unique ones such as the wax doll with names written on it that was mentioned in chapter four, or even more striking a broken mobile phone! Very interesting from a religious standpoint were the pamphlets entitled *¿Quién es Jesús?*[183]. Written and translated into many languages by the radical, female-only, angel worshipping, protestant movement 'The End Time Handmaidens' these pamphlets give a short summary of Christ's life and are clearly missionary in intent. Most probably the one who left these as an offering in the Calvario was not aware of the controversies surrounding their origin.

Of the offerings some were placed on of the two tiers of the pedestals of the three crosses while others were placed on the ground. In the latter case many were placed in such a way that together they made up arrangements that ranged from fairly simple to rather elaborate. The basis of most of these arrangements is either a circle of flowers, a cross made of flowers, rows of flower bundles, rows of leaves or circles of leaves. On or between these, *veladoras* and black or yellow candles are then placed as well as cacao, *tamales de copal* or cigarettes (Fig.22). In another type of arrangement a big glass *veladora* is placed next to the pedestal with five small *veladoras* before it and before that eleven *tamales de copal*. While on one day such an arrangement had been made in front of the centre cross, two weeks later similar ones were made on the left side of the left cross and on the right side of the right cross in almost perfect mirror image (Fig.23). Another interesting arrangement is the one where leaves are used to square off the floor next to one side of a cross while in this area small *veladoras*, black candles and cacao are placed (Fig.24). One day two arrangements were made which seem to be somewhat similar to the crosses made of flowers with cacao, copal and yellow candles that Barabas and Winter describe for the ritual to see the dead, only here no copal was used and the candles were black (Fig.25).

The problem with observation alone is that it does not bring one any closer to understanding that which is observed. Luckily several pilgrims were willing to discuss the intentions behind the offerings. In some cases these explanations dealt with the general reason for coming to the Calvario an making offerings such as the man from San Marcial who told me that many from his village come to the Calvario to ask the souls and the cross for some food or a job. Similarly the pilgrims from Santa Cruz Citta also came for the cross and to thank God and the souls and request of them that nothing bad would happen and for something to eat or work. A man from San Miguel had come to place candles and flowers for *los*

[183]¿Quién es Jesús?: Who is Jesus?

Figure 24: Arrangment of leaves, veladoras and cacao (Picture by Arfman 2005).

Figure 25: An arrangement of a flower cross with cacao beans and black candles as well as several other offerings such as fruit and soda (Picture by Arfman 2005).

abuelos and to ask them for *una buena vida*[184]. Finally the old blind man from Santa Lucia explained that all of these were *pedimentos muy ancianos*[185] for *ánimas muy ancianos*[186]. Other pilgrims described to me the purpose of specific types of offerings. The man from San Marcial for example said that cacao is money for the dead. He remembered how when he was nine and his mother died they also gave her 13 cacao beans in her grave so she would have money. When given in the Calvario cacao is a *cariño* for the dead, just like the other offerings are. These are also to ask them that nothing bad will happen. The cheerful lady from San Vincente said she had placed some things for her parents, such as a *veladora* and a cigarette which her father really liked. In conclusion she had poured mezcal on the ground so the souls had something to drink. Above we also saw how this group from San Vincente used flower bundles in their *limpia*. The group from Santa Cruz Citta also explained that such small flower bundles were taken over painful areas and then placed before the cross. The same could be done with candles. The bundles for copal where not used in this way, they were used when asking for favours. According to a man from Tlacolula the copal, much like the cacao, is a cariño for the dead while mezcal and cigarettes are given to those who liked it in life. Apart from being money for the dead, cacao is also left by merchants who thereby ask for a good sale. The arrangement of leaves, *veladoras* and black candles on the other is from farmers to ask for a good harvest. On the notes people write something if they want a good education for their children. He did not however know about any difference between black and yellow candles and like all the others I asked knew nothing of significant numbers either. According to a man from Santa Maria yellow and black candles are used because these are special colours for the dead. The *curandero* from Miahuatlan on the other hand explained that the black candles as well as the white grease candles and the black and red *veladoras* were used for *maldad*. The notes could also be used for this end because you could write the intended victim's name on them. Copal, flower, cigarettes, drinks and fruit however are *cariños* for the dead, like on the altar with All Souls. Mezcal and soda are poured on the ground four times for the four directions.

Besides the above explanations by the pilgrims much was made clear to me by Gildardo, the *regidor de la cultura*. He too told me that cacao is like money for the souls just as it had been in pre-Spanish times. Therefore with a burial 13 small tortillas, 13 dark maize kernels and 13 cacao beans, of which seven whole ones and six broken, are put into the grave for the journey as well as a bottle of holy water closed with beeswax. The maize, tortillas and water are food for the journey while the cacao is money to pay for favours. As a result cacao is used as an offering either when people think a soul is not there yet and needs more favours or when economical wellbeing is asked for. Of the black candles he thinks they are probably for maldar, as substitutes by outsiders for the traditional grease candles. About the yellow candles he is sure they are to provide light on the way

[184]Una buena vida: a good/prosperous life
[185]Pedimentos muy ancianos: very ancient pedimentos, or offerings used as requests.
[186]Ánimas muy ancianos: very ancient souls

to the afterlife. Copal is always burned in a *convivio* with a saint or a soul. It lifts the words that are spoken up, making them important. The banana leave is nothing more than packaging of the copal, in Mitla maize leave is used for this as bananas do not grow in the valley like they do in the mountains. In the past with a *limpia* blood of a black chicken was also offered to feed nature. Eggs are offered now as a *pedimento* for more chickens or used in *limpias* in which case it is taken over one's body to capture harm. Some say that therefore you shouldn't break it, but *curanderos* can break it without releasing the harm and can then read the egg to divine cause and treatment. Mezcal is also used at the end of a *limpia* as an offer to nature and the *dueño*. It is however offered to the souls as a symbol of *alegría*[187] and *convivio* as well. According to Gildardo every feast needs maize as food, and tobacco and mezcal for the *convivio*. The cigarette in this case symbolizes an invitation. It is smoked together while talking when invitations are made, the smoke take the words upwards thereby making them more profound and into a pact. For example with *Todos Santos* on the cemetery when people invite the souls they talk to them in Zapoteco and a burning cigarette is placed at the grave of each of those that are invited.

5.4 Conclusion

Before answering the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter, a summary of the most important points in a chronological overview is in place. First of all for the pre-colonial period we have seen that the God of Death had a special influence on certain days and as a result offerings to him had to be made such as *rajas de ocote*, a rubber ball, a turkey or fire in a brazier. Apparently there was also a special celebration for requesting rain that also involved honouring the dead. For this occasion eggs, *rajas de ocote*, tobacco ashes, flowers, a tongue, a rubber ball, autosacrificial blood and counted bundles were offered. These counted bundles of e.g. pine or reed and their accompanying flower chains were possibly used in rituals for asking rain, a good harvest, and permission to hunt or to cure certain sicknesses. They served to repel harmful forces, appease the souls without faith, complement the prayers and take the offerings to the gods of whom favours were being asked. One such type of offering might have been dogs. In Mitla itself the high priest burned copal for his idols with whom he communicated in an unintelligible and quite fearful manner during special celebrations or important burials. The advice he gained from them he shared with bystanders. When human sacrifice was also performed, the heart was taken out and ritually fed to the idols. After these rituals people could come to the High Priest to ask favours, he then would appease the gods for them while they had to stay indoors, fast and not speak with women. During such celebrations dogs, chickens, quail and doves were also given as offerings while people got drunk and danced to musical instruments. Similar offerings, as well as deer,

[187]Alegría: happiness

autosacrificial blood, feathers and precious stones were presented in other Zapotecan towns. In Zoquiapa people also came to the priests to ask favours in which case a quail or dove was slaughtered and communally eaten. From studies of Zapotecan tombs we can learn that while secondary burial with human sacrifice was probably not performed, graves were repeatedly used and dogs or birds were sacrificed and placed into the graves. From the murals in these tombs we can learn that boxes with ritual paraphernalia for deity impersonation such as balls of rubber, incense bags and small anthropomorphic figures were inherited. Similar boxes are mentioned for the town of Teticpac in the early colonial period. Here they contained idols, precious stones, golden jewellery, feathers and painted bundles. These boxes were named after important ancestors and probably used to legitimize power and control over land through descent. In Villa Alta the same type of boxes were said to contain the root or trunk of their owner's descent, this being idols, precious stones, feathers and piles of leaves which were bled on. These boxes were also used in offerings in times of need to ask for favours. From San Miguel Sola we learned that in the 17th century with burials the body was carefully washed and put in a shroud with nine miniature tortillas or tortillas with chicken meat and nine cacao beans. Afterwards relatives sometimes came to ask about the success of the deceased's death and had to fast and bathe for nine days at the end of which chicken and copal were offered to the gods of death so they would be appeased and would not allow the deceased to come back to the house. From Villa Alta in the early 18th century not only information is available about the use of heirloom boxes but also concerning the offerings made at various locations. Of these the roosters were most popular, followed by feathers, candles of animal fat, turkeys, young roosters, birds from Chiapas, dogs, deer, cow, precious stones and plants, maize, cacao and copal. Of the discussed offerings one quarter involved offerings made to the earth such as turkey, chicken, blood and another liquid. In one town it was explicitly said these were for the souls as well. From the calendrical feast New Year's was the most celebrated, with *Todos Santos* being the most popular Catholic celebration.

In the first half of the twentieth century New Year's Eve was still an important celebration in Mitla as various offerings were made to the souls, the ancients and the Cross that night. And during All Souls the altars were made up with copal, special flowers for the dead, candles and various foodstuffs. After someone's death that person was reclothed and laid on a lime cross. With burial the next day the deceased was given a small cotton cloth bag for the journey to the afterlife with holy water, 13 little tortillas and two broken up cacao beans which represented money. After the nine day mourning period or *novena* the lime cross was buried in the grave as well. That after death the souls came to be seen as helpful spirits is evident from prayers directed to them, for example with a libation being made to the earth. Here the souls together with the earth itself are asked to grand a long life. One has to honour the souls because it is their land you inherited and their helping hand that makes a good life possible. Interestingly in Yalalag the small figurines which are the ancient people that turned to stone with the first sunrise used to be similarly seen as strengthening the land they

were put in and thus received a rooster or small dog as an offering. According to Parsons the most important aspects of a ritual were prayer, addressing the four directions, using images, holy pictures and holy water, making vows and pilgrimages, doing processions and dances, making music and feasting, doing impersonations and dramatizations, using the motif of much from little and making the sign of the cross. From the ritual performed by Agustina the touching or rubbing something against a miraculous cross can also be added to this list. During these rituals candles, copal, flowers, food, turkey, chicken, their blood, liquor or cigarettes could be used as offerings.

Presently with New Year cacao beans, copal, flowers, candles and pedimentos are used as offerings. With All Souls the same things are put on the altars as in the 1930's and pilgrims offer cacao beans, flowers, candles and fruit while presenting lists with the names of deceased. At the cemetery mezcal is poured on the ground and copal is burned and cigarettes are lit. With burials the *novena* and the *levantada de la cruz* are still adhered to, and a saint is put in the grave, together with holy water, 13 tortillas, 13 maize kernels and 13 cacao beans which are still regarded money. At the *Mujer Dormida* curing rituals are performed in which a *convivio* with various foodstuffs is held, afterwards at the cave requests are made to the *dueños*. When one wants to the see the dead another convivio is held and flowers that form a cross with yellow candles, cacao and copal are offered. When it concerns a child, white candles are used while the black ones serve to bring someone harm. When asking for livestock or money from the *dueño* copal, cacao, egg and tortillas are presented in return. To communicate with the *dueños*, *tamales de copal* that symbolize smoke are given. At the Calvario pilgrims come to make similar offerings to the souls to ask for good health, some work or food and so that nothing bad might happen. Copal for example is given when wealth or a good sale is asked for, arrangements of leaves, veladoras and black candles are used to ask for a good harvest as are probably the various crops. Mezcal is either given as a present to those who loved to drink in life or poured over the ground as a libation. Similarly cigarettes can be gifts to former smokers while also indicating the rising up and strengthening the words that are spoken. The same holds for the *tamales de copal* which are also both *cariño* and symbols of copal smoke lifting up the words. Both yellow and black candles are said to be special to the souls. The former because they light the way to the underworld while the latter are also said to be used when wishing someone harm. Similarly ambiguous are the notes which can contain the names of intended victims as well as requests for good grades or diplomas. The wax doll with names inscribed in it is less ambivalent. Of many offerings however, especially the elaborate arrangements with circles or rows of (bundled) flowers or leaves, the purpose is still unclear to us.

In answering the two questions that this chapter deals with: 'Are the same offerings used in pre-colonial cults for ancestors or the gods of death as today for the souls?' and 'Do these rituals and the offerings used in them still serve the same purpose?' it could be said that the first question refers to the outward manifestations while the latter refers to the worldview behind these thematical

units. The answer to the first question is of course different from one offering to the other. Some like cacao, copal, eggs, miniature tortillas, feathers and flowers are used in all the time periods under scrutiny here. Though in the case of the flowers it is not clear which sorts were used in pre-colonial periods. And of cacao it is known that it was used as money in pre-colonial times although the first mention of it being given as money to the souls is early colonial. The same goes for the miniature tortillas of which we know the normal ones were eaten but do not know if they were given to the dead. On the other hand many offerings are not in use anymore because the items are not readily available any longer such as precious stones, massive rubber balls, painted bundles or deer. Or because of objections that were most probably made by the Catholic friars such as with human sacrifice, autosacrificial blood and idols of pre-colonial gods or ancestors. Likewise priests probably objected against dogs being sacrificed in the burials they presided over. In some cases offerings were replaced by others such as cigarettes replacing tobacco and chickens already early on being used instead of the much more expensive turkeys which are still given to the souls with *Todos Santos* though. In the case of chickens and feathers it must also be noted that they are still offered in the *cueva* but not any more at the Calvario, apparently after complaints of the mess this made. At least at the Calvario, but also in the case of the *curandera* Agustina, it seems to be that many Zapotec prayers were replaced by Spanish ones. It is very unlikely though that this holds true for all Zapotec prayers, even at the Calvario. Besides replacements also new additions can be seen that are clearly of Catholic origin such as holy water and images of saints. In the case of candles, which we saw were adopted early on, it could also be however that they served as replacements of fires such as with the Tlapanec counted bundle rituals. Regarding these bundles it could be that the rows of little flower bundles or alternatively those of *tamales de copal* have their origin in these counted bundles. If this is the case though, this origin is either completely forgotten or carefully hidden away as no pilgrim could tell me of any significant numbers and no consistency in the number of bundles could be identified. In the case of the elaborate arrangements being made it is clear that they are similar to the depictions of ritual offering 'tables' in the codices, even though no one to one comparison is possible regarding their structure and content. As we saw above, Parsons regarded the dolls used in witchcraft as being Spanish in origin which seems a likely assumption. About the notes not enough is known regrettably about their background to draw any conclusions.

Now the answer to the first question seems to be that some of the elements of this thematical unit stayed the same while other disappeared, were replaced or were added it is important to consider how this relates to any changes in underlying worldview. In other words is there any consistency in the ideas behind these various rituals. Of course one element that has very clearly changed was already discussed in chapter three, namely that of the extrahuman forces involved. However there it was also concluded that the gods of death, the ancestors, the ancients and the souls had much in common. Simply put all of them are extrahuman forces which are strongly tied into the land and are looked

upon for favours related to this. The gods of death have their realm in the earth where the ancestors and the souls also reside while the ancients fled into it and can still be found in it. It is no wonder then that they are sought out in times of need to help when a good harvest or in extension food, a job or *una buena vida* is desired. The same can be said for resolving land disputes, finding hidden treasure or helping locate someone who has stolen something as vital to survival as a *metate*. In fact the punishing of such wrongdoers is probably nothing but an extension of these services, not a separate category of evil magic. Another link with 'witchcraft' lies in that these customs were probably misunderstood by the Spaniards who equated it with devil worship, a misunderstanding that started leading a life of its own. A similar misunderstanding could result from another recurring theme that ties the ancestors, the ancients, the souls and the devil together, i.e. a market. The unfortunates entering the underground cavern at the monuments were said to be looking for the market of their ancestors, the ancients were said to have had one, as had the souls on New Years' Eve when another market was also held at the Cross. At the devil's cave there was one every Wednesday and the cross that used to stand at the ruins was also considered one. Thinking about markets from our western perspective we could conclude that therefore the relation with these extrahuman forces is an economical one, dealing with making profit. If one studies traditional Mexican markets however one comes to the conclusion that although the relations seem to be purely economical, there are strong underlying reciprocal relationships. In other words there is an obligation to give, to receive and to give in return not with the intention to make a profit but to uphold a mutual beneficial relationship. Going back to the theoretical considerations of chapter two it becomes clear that the rituals we have been discussing serve to 'maintain and create relationships with supernatural powers' which are precisely of this reciprocal nature. The ancestors or souls have left you land and continue to help you benefit from it as well as help you out in other situations and in return one is expected to honour their services by making offerings to them. And these relations are made experienceable and thus real because they are maintained ritually, i.e. by communicating such messages of respect by giving objects that have thereby attained affecting presence in performances that are perceived to have a certain time-depth.

All in all it can be said that even though certain elements of the thematical unit dealing with rituals for the ancestors, the ancients and the souls have disappeared, changed or have been added many also have stayed the same just as the intentions and ideas behind them. In other words regarding these offerings one can definitely speak of cultural continuity.

Conclusions and Discussion

In the three main chapters of this thesis a range of sources have been studied to address three sub-topics of our overarching question: To what extent are the present day offertory practices and the present day stories about Mitla as Place of the Dead a continuation of Postclassic Zapotec practices and beliefs? In order to answer this overarching question the answers to these smaller questions need to be brought together and reconsidered. Regarding Mitla as the Place of the Dead in the Postclassic we saw that probably due to some geographical aspects, most notably the many caves at the enclosed end of this valley, it had become an important burial place for the Zapotec elite. Here it is important to note that after burial people were considered to make an extensive and arduous journey to the underground realm of the God and the Goddess of the Dead. A journey for which, at least in the early colonial period, the deceased was well prepared. Presiding over these burials, there was an esteemed High Priest that had his seat in Mitla where he communicated with a couple of married idols of whom the man, Lord Bezelao, was probably either an important ancestor named after the God of the Underworld or a deified ancestor whose name was used to designate such a god. From the codices we can learn that this God of the Dead had a negative influence on certain days and periods and was therefore offered to, probably also at Mitla. In another ritual, for asking rain, there was apparently a similar need to address the dead. Ancestry was an important issue in such rituals as well as others as can be seen from the role that ídolos, of which several represented ancestors, and heirloom boxes played in such affairs. Given that the burial of ancestors-to-be and their subsequent trip to the underground realm of Mictlan is strongly tied into the concept of earth it comes of no surprise that certain locations in Mitla came to be especially connected to these ideas such as the subterranean vaults and certain caves.

Since then many things changed completely. The old priesthood and the old gods were replaced by new priests and a new God and his saints. Likewise the old temples were destroyed and new ones were literally build over and on them. And the ancient rituals, as well as the objects involved in them were traded in for those of the new religion. When one looks more closely however it becomes apparent that things are not as simple as this. The dead are still prepared for a journey to an underground *pueblo* of which Mitla is still considered an important entry point by people coming from roughly the same region as those that revered Bezelao. Concerning the supplanting of old gods by a new God it is important to realize that the Zapotec gods were to a large extent identified with or represented by deified ancestors. And the role that those played concerning the ties that

people had with the land they inherited and lived from seems to have been continued by that of the souls of relatives and to a lesser extent souls in general and the ancients. Because even though many aspects of the pre-colonial rituals disappeared or were replaced, many stayed the same as did the underlying intentions of upholding reciprocal relationships with beneficial ancestral extrahuman forces. In this light it is also interesting to see that not only the original locations of importance such as the subterranean vaults of the monuments and the cave of the 'devil' continue to be visited but that many of the 'supplanting' religion have been incorporated as well, such as the graveyard, the church, the Cross and of course the Calvario.

Rephrasing the above as an answer to the overarching question it is clear that we are not dealing with a simple, straightforward or static continuity of Postclassic practices or beliefs. Much has changed over the past 500 years in Mitla as it has in the rest of the world and it would be a terrible fault to conclude that the people involved live in a sort of time-capsule. What we do see however is that even though not all the elements that make up this thematical unit of ancestor worship live on to this day, the general ideas that underlie them do. It is these important concepts pertaining to such things as the afterlife and the continued influence of the dead that have survived for 500 years. Is this to say that these aspects of worldview have remained static? Surely this can not be possible if so much of the outward manifestation of these ideas did change. Going even further, how is it even possible that this aspect of worldview stayed the same when the elements through which people experienced these have sometimes changed drastically? To answer these questions we first have to realize that what has been presented here is a simplified image gotten through collecting various snapshots of the past, leaving long intermittent periods blank and having little room for the complexity of reality. In reality worldview is something that is both expressed and experienced on an every day basis through such things as telling stories, making offerings, making, seeing and using representations of extrahuman forces and so on. These actions are not only reactions to the world as it is perceived but also contribute to this worldview. In other words being the outward manifestations of how the world is viewed, these elements are the arena where interaction takes place between how people see their world and how the world is in reality. In some cases these elements disappear or are replaced in a way that an aspect of the worldview is able to adapt to a changed situation, in other cases these changes also affect how the world is seen. Of course these changes, disappearances, replacements and adaptations are the results of the thousands upon thousands of actions of all the people involved. Many of these actions not being intended to change anything and of those that are many do not do so in the intended manner. We are only able to see the results of this intricate network and on the basis thereof make educated guesses about the processes which caused them. In this case the result is that in some cases there is continuity in the stories and practices related to Mitla as the Place of the Dead such as it still being regarded as the place where the souls go to. Regarding others, such as being the seat of a priesthood dealing with burial and a God of

the Dead, it however is not. However the most striking continuity is in the underlying ideas and concepts regarding afterlife in an underground town of the souls and the role that these souls still play in everyday life.

In conclusion some comments should be given regarding two lines of information that have been largely underrepresented in this thesis due to constraints of both time and space as these might elucidate some of the difficulties encountered in dealing with these subjects. The first of these is information from other Mesoamerican sources, whether they are pre-colonial, early colonial, historical or ethnographic. Throughout this thesis the erroneous image might have emerged that what is said here is exclusively true for Mitla or the Zapotec region while in fact this might be the case in some instances, mostly it is not. In fact throughout the Mesoamerican region there are great similarities in worldview and the ways it is expressed an experienced. Studying the issues discussed in this thesis in these other parts of Mesoamerica might well enhance our understanding, especially of the more fundamental concepts. The second line of information deserving of more attention is the one dealing with 16th century Catholicism. If one wants to understand how syncretism works, one has to have knowledge of both religions involved. In Mesoamerican studies however, knowledge of the worldview of the colonizers and especially of the priests and friars is poorly substituted by general information about Roman Catholicism. This underlying assumption that 16th century Catholicism is more or less like that of the present or the Dark Ages however does no justice to the variety through time nor to the variety in the 16th century. Here a better understanding of the various ideas the Spaniards had regarding death, the afterlife and the associated rituals would help prevent things being called indigenous while they are actually also Catholic.

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In the centre of the Mexican town of Mitla stands a run-down chapel on an overgrown pre-colonial pyramid. The chapel, housing three crosses, is the town's Calvario, the local representation of the hill on which Christ died. Although busses full of tourists on their way to Chiapas or on daytrips from Oaxaca City swarm the town every day almost none of them ever visit the Calvario. Instead they stick to the tourist zone to marvel at the famous mosaic friezes of the pre-colonial temples and shop for traditional souvenirs in the tourist market. If they would climb the steep steps to the chapel they would discover that despite appearances the building still sees extensive use as pilgrims from the wide Zapotec region visit it to bring offerings to and ask favours of the souls of their dearly departed. And as these offerings consist of elaborate arrangements of flowers, fruits, black candles, cacao beans and bundles of copal incense, such tourists might well start to wonder where the origins of these practices lie.

It is this question to which an answer will be sought in this research master thesis. To achieve this, current theories on cultural continuity, syncretism, the materiality of religion and ritual theory are combined with a study of archaeological, historical, iconographical and anthropological sources. In addition ethnographic fieldwork has been conducted to come to a better understanding of the offerings made in the Calvario today. Divided in three segments, the thesis first addresses the history of Mitla as 'The Place of the Dead', then of the Calvario as a ritual location and finally of the offerings for the dead. By then combining these three lines of research an interesting image is formed of the continuity of ancestor veneration in this busy tourist town.

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