

ARACELI ROJAS

READING MAIZE: A NARRATIVE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH
TO THE STUDY OF DIVINATION IN MESOAMERICA

Araceli Rojas

Leiden University, Faculty of Archaeology, Leiden, The Netherlands.

Email: a.rojas@arch.leidenuniv.nl

Abstract: The casting of maize seeds is a tool used by contemporary daykeepers in the Ayöök (Mixe) area of Oaxaca, Mexico, which along with the prognostications and prescriptions of the 260-day calendar, helps to cure illnesses and afflictions. This divinatory practice was also employed by precolonial *tonalpouhque*, who were experts of reading the *tonalamatl*, the pictographic manuscripts with calendrical, ritual and oracular content, such as the now called Borgia Group codices. In this article maize divination will be described and analyzed, arguing that maize divination results in images that can be read in a similar way to these codices. The reading of maize is approached here by employing the concepts of signs and symbols as described by Carl Jung and the notions of chronotope and dialogical narratives by Mikhail Bakhtin. The Jungian understanding of divinatory practices as a means of gaining consciousness of oneself is also applied to argue in favor of the therapeutic capacity of reading maize, as it offers relief and triggers action.

Key Words: Maize divination; codices; Borgia Group; Mixe; Mesoamerica; divinatory signs; divinatory narratives.

The following article is derived from a recent investigation into the on-going use of a Mesoamerican calendar of 260 days among the Ayöök (Mixe) people of Oaxaca, Mexico¹. One of the most interesting revelations during this research was the strong bond between this calendar and divination, in this case with the technique of reading maize seeds. A common demonstration of this bond is when a daykeeper, determining possible “good” or “not good” days affecting illnesses, dreams, presages, or conflictive events, casts maize seeds to confirm a preliminary diagnosis, recover more information, and prescribe the most adequate remedy. These remedies consist of paying respect and ask for favors to divinities, such as It Naaxwin (Earth deity), God, the saints, and ancestors. This article focuses on this divinatory practice in an attempt to describe it and analyze it from two complementary perspectives: narrativity and psychology.

Maize divination represents a tool that helps daykeepers handle the predictions and prescriptions of the 260-day calendar, just as it was used in precolonial times along with other instruments. Among ancient Nahua people from the center of Mexico, there were medicine men and women who made use of divinatory techniques such as casting maize seeds, seeing the reflection of persons through a bowl with water, throwing or pulling ropes with knots, and ingesting hallucinogenic plants to help them cure and find answers to diverse problems². Among these healers there were the *tonalpouhque*, whose name literally means “those who read the days” and who used and read folded and colorful painted books called the *tonalamatl* or “books of the days”, which some survivals are now known as Borgia Group codices³. The latest research of these ancient codices has convincingly shown that their pictography is a true writing system composed of images and signs made and interpreted conventionally and read poetically⁴. This article argues that maize divination among the Ayöök people (and probable other Mesoamerican peoples as well), which is at a certain extent a survival of ancient divinatory and calendrical practices from precolonial times, can be read in a similar way as the codices, although still reflecting its own conventions. Hence the casting of maize provides images that can be read and narrated.

To demonstrate this, the following lines will describe how maize divination works and how its narrations⁵ are generated. To understand better the development of narratives from images, hereby reading maize seeds will be examined by using the theory of signs and symbols developed by Carl Jung⁶, in which the signs represent abbreviations of known things and symbols become always open and ambiguous. Notions from narrativity, in particular those of the chronotope and dialogical narratives developed by Mikhail Bakhtin⁷ will also be used to unveil some principles of divinatory speech and narrations. His ideas allow to understand the importance of time and space in building a logical narrative, in this case for the consultant’s life and afflictive situation, as

well as to define this type of narratives as a dialogical phenomenon. In addition, it will also be argued that Jung's psychological appreciation of esoteric practices as a means of individuation can also be applied in favor of a therapeutic component to divining with maize. Individuation is a Jungian approach to psychotherapy which refers to the achievement of a greater degree of consciousness of unconscious personal and collective factors that play a role, shape and affect one's life. Therapeutic qualities have already been suggested for the Borgia Group, the *tonalpouhque* and the Mesoamerican divinatory arts⁸. In the end of this paper, it will be proposed that maize reading, like other divinatory techniques, provides images (as signs) that can be read as a text (full of symbols), therefore providing a narrative built dialogically by the diviner and the consultant. This may well be considered a therapeutic tool that can ease affliction, bring awareness, and prompt action in critical situations.

Divinatory Signs and Symbols

In precolonial times, the Nahua priests like the *tlamacazqui*, the diviners like the *tlaolxiniani*, and the medicine men like the *ticitl*, used a special language during incantations, and prayers known as the *nahualtocaitl*⁹, also commonly named *nahuallatolli*¹⁰. This discourse, also employed in graphic form (*nahualcuilolli*) as shown in the Borgia Group codices, is a "disguised" language employed in a religious context as a bridge for communication with deities and ancestors¹¹. It makes use of diverse linguistic and rhetorical expressions (such as parallelism, diphrasisms, oppositions, and redundancy) to convey occult and mysterious meanings¹². This semantic universe of esoteric knowledge, present in speech, images of codices, dreams, and presages, is broad and open, full of metaphors, symbolic allusions and archaic terminology¹³. In particular, the nature of oracular language, like the found in the Borgia Group, maize reading, and even in other systems like Tarot cards, the I Ching texts and astrological charts, is also ambiguous and nebulous. However, while the messages and the significances derived from divination are arcane, they can be discerned¹⁴.

The study of alchemy by Jung¹⁵ brings some insight when discerning the "mysteriousness" behind secret language which is, as he stressed, deliberately expressed in written or graphic form in a vague manner. The grounding principles of hermetic languages are composed of signs and symbols, where one sign is the analogy or abbreviation of an identified thing and a symbol is the intermediate realm of "subtle reality [...], neither abstract nor concrete, neither rational nor irrational, neither real nor unreal, but always both"¹⁶. Unlike signs, symbols are ambiguous, full of partial meanings that cannot exhaustively be interpreted¹⁷. For instance, awe-inspiring religious images, overpowering temples housing splendid murals, exquisite vessels and tools of ritual paraphernalia, and sacred and

mystic writings are all symbols which contain the secrets of “the unknown,” and which make religious experiences available while fascinating, overwhelming and convincing “the believing hearts”¹⁸. Hence, an image has the power of bridging the visible and the invisible¹⁹.

According to Jung, psyche archetypes in the unconscious mind (collective and primal images in all humans) are also symbols which may appear during dreams or visions. They are shaped by culture and personal background and may also confront with the conscious mind if they are interpreted through language and according to oneself experience²⁰. Therefore, in this particular case of divination, hermetic images and its narrations brought about through reading maize may allow for the unconscious to meet consciousness, as it happens in psychoanalysis or in what Jung called individuation process, as it will be explained later.

Divinatory techniques are constituted of the performance and the tools that seek for and bring together signs and symbols: the “visible” and “the unknown” in Jung’s terms. This could be applied to the Borgia Group codices thus becoming a good illustration of Jung’s ideas. The images on these books show a codified (conventional) version of the spiritual world²¹. These represent the signs. The interpretations that the ancient Nahua *tonalpouhque* read in these images constitute the symbols, in combination with other sources of information like other paintings and symbols in the same book, dreams, presages, prognostications of time according to the days, and the situation and story of the client. The symbols constitute the concrete meanings which apply to a given situation. One same image can have different meanings depending on the circumstances of the consultant. However, the pictorial books do not contain a one-to-one correspondence of signs and symbols, and as such do not represent what we might call a wordbook. On the contrary, the pictographic signs offer multiple readings, themes or resources that the specialist was able to identify according to the situation²². The *tonalpouhque* in the past were responsible for finding a logical diagnosis through mediating between the human and spiritual worlds²³. In other words, within the codices lies a codified source of knowledge of the occult world, mainly in pictographic form, where the *tonalpouhque* could find answers or solutions, relying not only on the tools and ritual performance of consulting the book, but also on other contextual factors.

Divinatory Narration

As in the past, today’s daykeepers and diviners in the Ayöök area, while casting maize seeds and reading them, they make use of their experience, intuition and connection with the hidden spiritual realm (or the Other World) to create a logical narration. The theories of Bakhtin are here useful to analyze the nature of these divinatory narratives. Although

this was not a topic he addressed in particular, it is possible to find in his essays about narrativity concepts that help to define them.

For instance, Donald Hatfield²⁴, inspired by the work of Bakhtin, proposed that the narratives that arise as result of Taiwanese Chhiam divination were chronotopic in character. Chronotope, which literally means “time-space”, was a term coined by Bakhtin²⁵ as an attempt to comprehend different genres of the novel, which basically defined the intrinsic connection between time and space. It is a whole which makes narrative events concrete and permits the story only to be significantly constructed and a world created²⁶. The chronotope is a cognitive feature of any story and therefore convey how humans perceive and experience the world²⁷. In the case of divinatory narrations, the diviner has the main responsibility for identifying the points of chronotopic insertion²⁸.

Bakhtin's ideas on time could be complemented by those of Ricoeur, in particular with what he called the “fictive experience of time”. He defined this as “the temporal aspect of a virtual experience of being-in-the-world proposed by the text”²⁹. This concept allows the text and its narrator to project a real and feasible world and at the same time the reader or addressee (or in this case the consultant of divination) to find him or herself identified with what is being said. Ricoeur called this capacity of the literary work as the “immanent transcendence”. For him, time becomes human inasmuch as it can be narrated, and narratives acquire meaning only when they convey temporal experience. For Bakhtin³⁰ language also only means when something spoken, an utterance, *means* something to someone else, even if it is addressed to oneself. For Ricoeur³¹ all the arts of narrations (i.e. which for the most part are written) are imitations of narrative which derives from ordinary discourse.

An additional characteristic of the chronotope in narratives is its co-existence with different dialogues generated by the relations between the author, performer, reader or listener³². They all participate equally in the creation of the represented world and at the same time all these relationships are chronotopic³³.

Divinatory narratives are also a dialogical phenomenon. The client is not a passive actor of the interpretation made by the diviner. In a discursive relationship, the listener perceives and comprehends the meaning of the discourse, while at the same time taking an active posture of response: he or she agrees, totally or partially, complements, applies, and prepares for an action³⁴. Reciprocally, the speaker expects a reply, consent, participation, or objection, becoming as well an active listener, both creating a living discourse³⁵. Divination is composed of multivalent and multivocal actors, where the client is involved in creating the meanings of the diviner's discourse, and the diviner acts at the same time as a mediator of multiple factors³⁶.

Mook Pajk Wëjwë: The Signs and Symbols of Reading Maize

In Poxoyëm, the Ayöök town where the research for this current article was carried out, the act of divining with maize is called *mook pajk wëjwë*³⁷. *Mook* means maize, *pajk* is seed, and *wëjwë* (or *wëjpë*) is to divine.

Maize is a central aspect of the worldview and culture of Mesoamerican peoples. The Ayöök are no exception. Every one of the seeds, in each cob, is a product of It Naaxwin, the Earth. She is an omniscient and omnipresent entity that witnesses the development of our lives. She knows and hears all. She is everywhere, it could be said that maize is her favorite son, as our sacred nourishment and daily source of food. Therefore, as with It Naaxwin, maize deserves respect. As It Naaxwin, maize is alive, has a spirit, and it can see, listen and feel. If by mistake, a maize seed falls on the ground, it should be immediately picked up and given a kiss as a gesture of apology³⁸.

It is not strange that maize is a vehicle for divination. The seeds are capable of communicating what humans are not able to see or be aware of. We could say that humans are partly blind to the things that happen on Earth. Dreams, presages and maize divination are vehicles of communication which transmit information, most often about possible dangers to come, on behalf of It Naaxwin, the ancestors and the Adojk It, literally the "Other Side" or the Other World. The hills are extensions of the Earth and the altars and sacred places on them are also vehicles of communication, in this case from humans to It Naaxwin, ancestors, and other divinities. The diviner is a genuine mediator between them and the people of the community. Her or his work is not easy: she or he has a special gift of helping, healing and providing ease in moments of affliction.

The experts of the days and divination are called *xëë maywë machowë* (or *xëë maypë machopë*), literally "the one who divines and counts the days". Their maize can help ascertain the potential of a job, house, couple or baby and, according to the Ayöök calendar, when is it proper to ask It Naaxwin, God, the Virgin and the Saints for any of them. The maize can also reveal if family members will manage to pass the border of the United States and if they will get job opportunities. Divination can tell if a lost object or stolen money can be recovered, if a love interest will turn into marriage, if the matrimony will have the tendency to be good and fruitful (with children), if infidelity is or could be present, and if somebody has lied, betrayed or gossiped. In the past, people used to consult the *xëë maywë machowë* before going outside of the town in order to know if they would travel safely and find the solution to their problems (e.g., a doctor to be brought to Poxoyëm). The diviner, besides reading the hidden messages of maize divination, is able to decipher the language of dreams and presages that look incomprehensible to normal people but which

could be telling of possible dangers to come or the lack of fulfilment toward ethical, societal, community and religious values. Ancestors might appear as fundamental figures in a divinatory session because if left unattended they may be the cause of diseases, bad dreams, and bad luck.

Mook pajk wějwě always implies an act of hope and respect to It Naaxwin. Every consultation begins with the invocation of certain words and the pouring of mezcal (alcoholic beverage) for It Naaxwin. The deity's permission to be consulted is sought in order to help the patient or client, most of the times in distress. A prayer is also given for the well-being and health of the consultant while holding a lot of maize and making the sign of the cross³⁹. Every session, even if the outcome is good, will end with the advice of the diviner to carry out acts of respect to It Naaxwin in the proper time and place. These rituals are capable of mitigating or even inverting bad prognostications. They are also ways of easing affliction.

For a correct reading of maize, that is, a good identification of the signs as in Jung's model, a determined number of seeds is required, most commonly 16 or 18 kernels. An important level of conventions lies within the anatomy of the seed. The forepart of the seed, where the tip cap is, resembles a face with the nose and eyes of a person; the squarish end of the endosperm corresponds to the back of a person (Figure 1). On one side of the body, the surface has a concavity and on the reverse, the seed is flat.

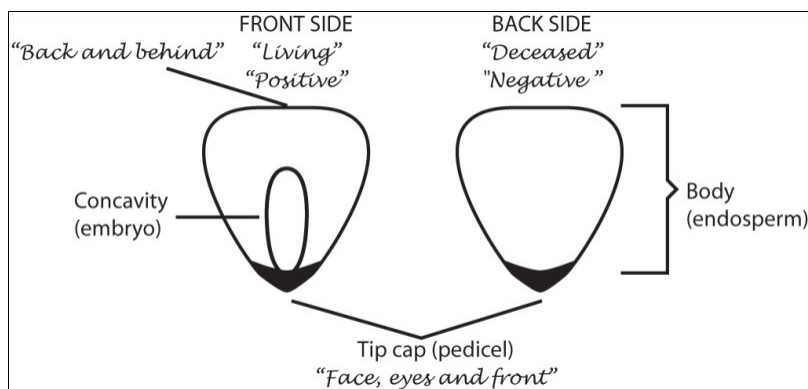


Figure 1. The maize seed and its signs

From the signs then, the seeds point toward the symbols, which vary depending on their position. When the concavity is on top, this indicates a living person and generally a positive answer. If the flat surface is on top, this signals a deceased individual or a negative outcome. It may be easier to recognize the seeds as agents, either alive or dead, such as relatives, friends or neighbors, as well as agencies that correspond to events or feelings such as love, abandonment, deception, treason, lies, gossips, problems, happiness, triumph, job, money, sickness, anguish, abortion, pregnancy, etc. These agents and agencies connect with time and space in

order to acquire significance in the narrative.

The maize is cast on top of a table or flat surface, most of the time on top of an embroidered *tortilla* napkin. This napkin offers a genuine spatial dimension while representing a known geographical space, which can be the house, the town itself, a region, a country or even the entire continent (Figure 2). This piece of cloth comprises the horizontal ground of the world⁴⁰. During the reading session it is common to hear diviners referring to geographical features, for example “your job is out of town”, “a person gossips in the place where the sun sets”, “your road is free of obstacles”, “the north is free (the way to the United States)”. This napkin is essential in bringing the chronotope alive during the divinatory narrative, especially significant for the space component.

The time component, in the case of Poxoyëm divination is clearly shown in the use of the calendar of 260-days. When being consulted the *xëë maywë machowë* will ask the patient when the bad dreams, sickness, presages (like encountering a serpent on the road or listening to the cry of an owl), or conflicts with others occurred. Time signals a prognostication of the situation and once the seeds have been thrown, the diviner will seek for agents and agencies shown in dreams, presages, sickness and conflicts, represented by the seeds and their positions⁴¹.

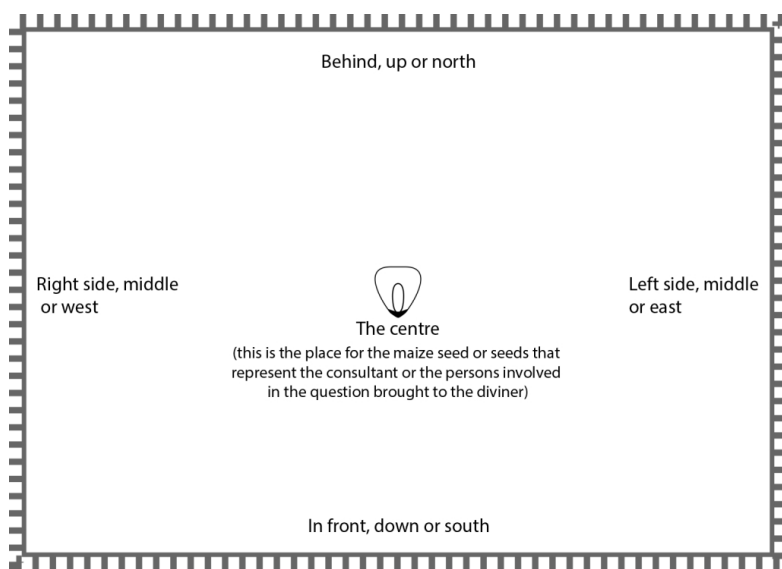


Figure 2. Spatial dimension in maize reading

(Here the position of cardinal points is given by the influence of maps based on the Western view of the world which does not mean that Ayöök people place themselves the same into this world)

There are two ways to cast the maize seeds. One consists of throwing the whole bunch of seeds smoothly with one hand, at once, on top of the napkin (like throwing dice). The second method starts by placing one seed

in the center of the napkin. Often, this seed represents the client, so it must be laid in the “living” position, with the concavity upside and “looking” downwards, toward the diviner (Figure 2). It can also be the case, for instance in marriage prognostications, that the diviner will place two “living” seeds parallel to each other. In other situations, regarding an inquiry that deals with more persons, the necessary amount of seeds would be placed on the napkin with a clear identification of the persons involved. Afterwards, the seeds inside one hand will be thrown one by one to the maize in the center, holding them in a “living” form. Once they fall, their position may change to “alive” or “dead”. With this method, little by little the seeds provide images on top of the table, or make the “client” or “people” in the center change place and move in different directions. The arrangement of seeds when the last seed is thrown brings a final diagnosis. The cast of seeds is performed several times for every question, with one or both methods, until the reading is clear. Three throws is an adequate number for each session.

There are multiple possibilities for configuration when throwing 16 or 18 seeds, either one at a time or all together, with the client or persons involved in the inquiry represented in the center of the napkin. Once visible on the table, certain grains only become significant when they comply with a known sign, a convention, which can be placed in logical time and space, therefore creating a logical chronotopic narrative. Complexity is added when different grains represent the client in different time and space situations in a single cast. That is, the client may be facing diverse persons (alive or deceased), circumstances and feelings at the same time. In all situations, however, the signs that the seeds show become resources for the symbols to be explained and expressed dialogically. Accordingly, the chronotopic narrative is made possible by creating a dialogue with the consultant. He or she offers extra information signaling when the seeds are to be adequately situated in time and space within the story.

In Jung’s terms, the positions of the seeds on top of a table constitute the signs as the starting point to an adequate interpretation, i.e., to reach the symbols. Once rolled, the arrangement of the kernels creates images that convey conventions and signs which can be orally expressed. In Bakhtin’s terms, the diviner identifies the chronotopes on top of the table, or in other words, the points of the story where time and space intersect. The problem brought by the consultant offers a timeframe and a context in which the seeds should be placed within the story. Time is given by the information offered by the calendar and its symbolisms as well as by the story that the consultant brought up to the diviner. Space is clearly indicated by the arrangement of seeds across the napkin. This chronotopic identification allows the creation of a logical narrative about the situation of the client created by the agents, feelings and situations represented by the seeds on the table. Following Ricoeur, the *xěə maywě*

would be the main responsible in creating a narration with virtual experience of being-in-the-world, therefore giving rise to the fictive experience of time.

The images that the seeds generate have not immediate or univocal significance. As in hermetic systems, ambiguity in divination (or an undetermined element as proposed by Hatfield⁴²) constitutes an essential feature providing a platform for narration. A space for open speech, however limited, is generated by signs and symbols brought on by dreams, presages, calendar-day significances, and the initial story of the client, whose role is not at all passive in the narrative creation.

Reading maize and codices

In order to better explain divinatory signs and symbols, hereafter two examples will be illustrated by comparing between the images of maize divination and the Codex Borgia.

For instance, when asking about the prospect of a relationship or marriage, after casting maize seeds two “living” seeds might end up lying side by side, in parallel direction. This image can represent two persons sharing the same open road together, indicating good fortune, with no obstacles in the future (Figure 3a). It might be even the case that other “living” seeds lie around the couple, perhaps representing children, money or symbols of abundance and prosperity. Due to the fact that these seeds land in front of their “faces”, this signals coming onward in time, “ahead of their road”. In this case, the combination of “living” seeds has generated a positive story.

Similarly, in Codex Borgia, on the section where certain deities are addressed according to calendar days that identify auspicious days for marriage, in the first scene of page 57, Tonacatecuhtli and Tonacacihuatl, lords of sustenance, appear in front of each other, seated below a shining sun (Figure 3b). Close to them, instruments for ritual appear: an inter-sected bone awl with a maguey spine (both blood-letting instruments), a pot with *pulque* (alcoholic beverage) or chocolate, and two *cuauhxicalli* or feather-rim vessels for blood offerings⁴³, one which holds a precious stone, a feather and plants. Tonacatecuhtli has a white monkey at his back, and Tonacacihuatl, a Quetzalcoatl god painted white and with a skirt (perhaps Quetzalcoatl in a feminine version), both of which are manifestations of the time of creation. This idea is reinforced by their white color which alludes to the primordial appearance of light⁴⁴. In the middle, a child is coming out of a decorated pot, which is placed on top of a box in the shape of throne, from which maize spikelets and cords of precious stones tipped with flowers also protrude. All together these are symbols of wealth and prosperity. The moral is clear in this image: the couple must fulfill the religious norms by making offerings to the gods in order to achieve good fortune.

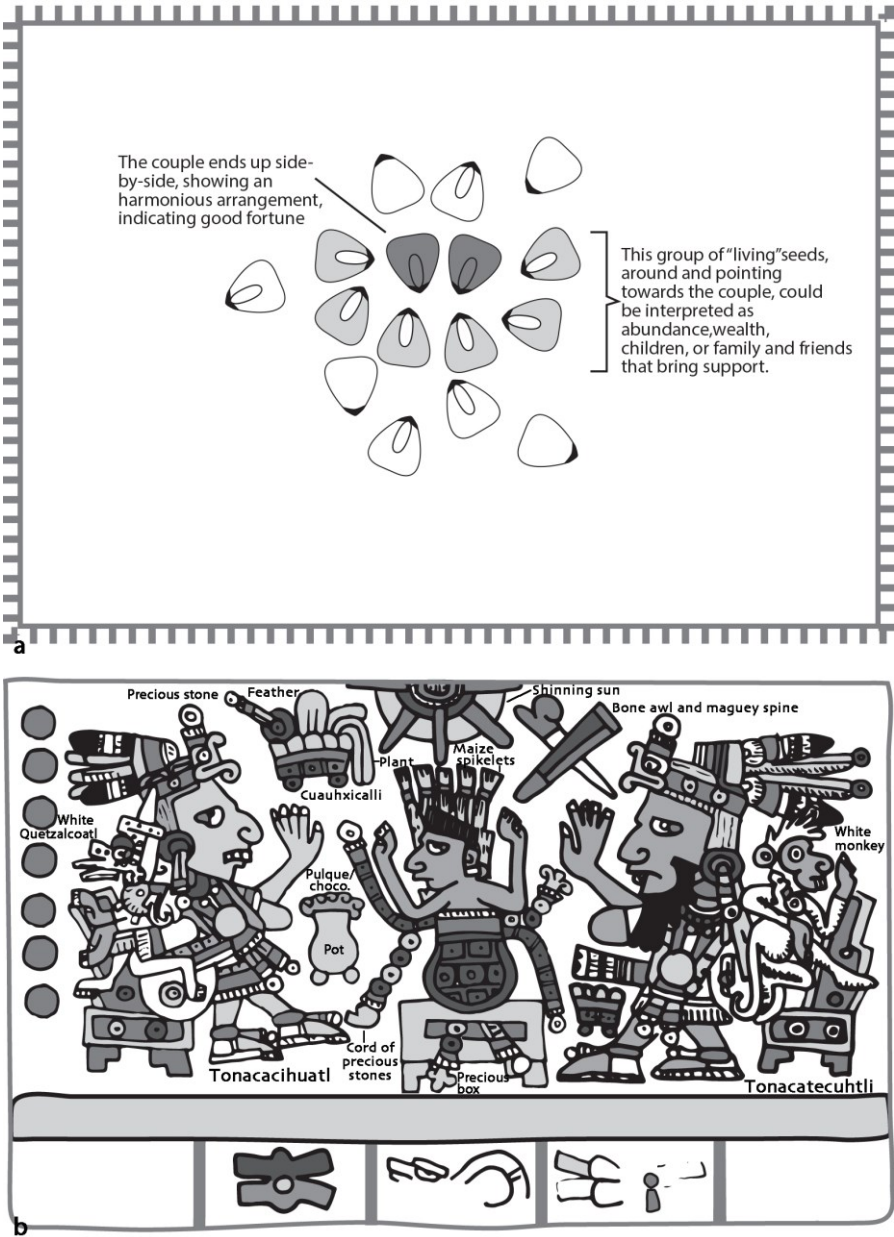


Figure 3. Signs and symbols read for good prognostications regarding marriage: a) Maize seeds; b) First scene of marriage prognostications⁴⁵

Returning to maize reading, there are also signs which can be read as negative stories. If two kernels, representing persons involved in the inquiry, lie with their fronts towards each other and touching directly, symbolizes conflict and discussion. If they have their backs to each other then this might represent a separation and the start of different paths. In

some cases, this may be accompanied by the encountering of another maize seed, therefore signaling infidelity (Figure 4a). If a seed falls on top of one of the couple, this commonly expresses a negative prognostication which could be interpreted as sadness, offense, deceit, gossip or anguish related to the relationship. If the seed that falls on top is in the “deceased” position, this confirms a serious threat to the marriage in the form of illnesses, problems, evil or bad luck sent by ancestors.

Along the same lines, the Codex Borgia outlining marriage prognostications also shows signs or images that can be read negatively. On page 59, where the prognostications for married couples according to the sum of the numbers of their respective calendrical names is found (e.g., 9 Serpent marrying 4 Death, sums 13), the prediction corresponding to number 24, shows one man flanked by two women (Figure 4b). The scene is explicit in itself. The woman on the right has a bird on her lap and a spine and a bone awl in front, indicating a wife who carries out the rituals for the gods. However, with her other hand she pulls the hair of the male in the middle. He is naked, with a twisted posture, and in the place of his genitals, the tail of a coral snake is shown. With one of his hands he holds the breast of the second lady, who is naked. Infidelity, bad luck and a conflict-filled marriage is also suggested by the depiction of a vessel with a coral snake beneath the scene (whose meaning could be read as: “danger gets inside the offerings, the house”), a half sun with darkness or an eclipsed sun on the top (alluding to the diphraism of “light, darkness”, which in this case could stand for “hazard”), and the known diphraism in Nahuatl and an example of *nahualicuilloli: in mitl, in chimalli*, literally “the spears, the shield”, which means “war”.

Conclusively, different signs in different oracular systems can be read in similar ways.

The Narratives of Destiny

Chronotopes open the possibility of creating a coherent narrative in time and space and at the same time generate opportunities for action⁴⁶. Therefore, divinatory narratives related to destiny are pragmatic instruments rather than paradigmatic vehicles⁴⁷. This statement applies to Mesoamerican divination and the prognostications of the 260-day calendar. Recent research has shown that the predictions according to the day of birth are never fixed nor absolute; they only define probabilities and tendencies⁴⁸. In fact, those who believe in destiny situate themselves against fatalism and perceive it as variable, controllable by conscious entities such as free will⁴⁹.

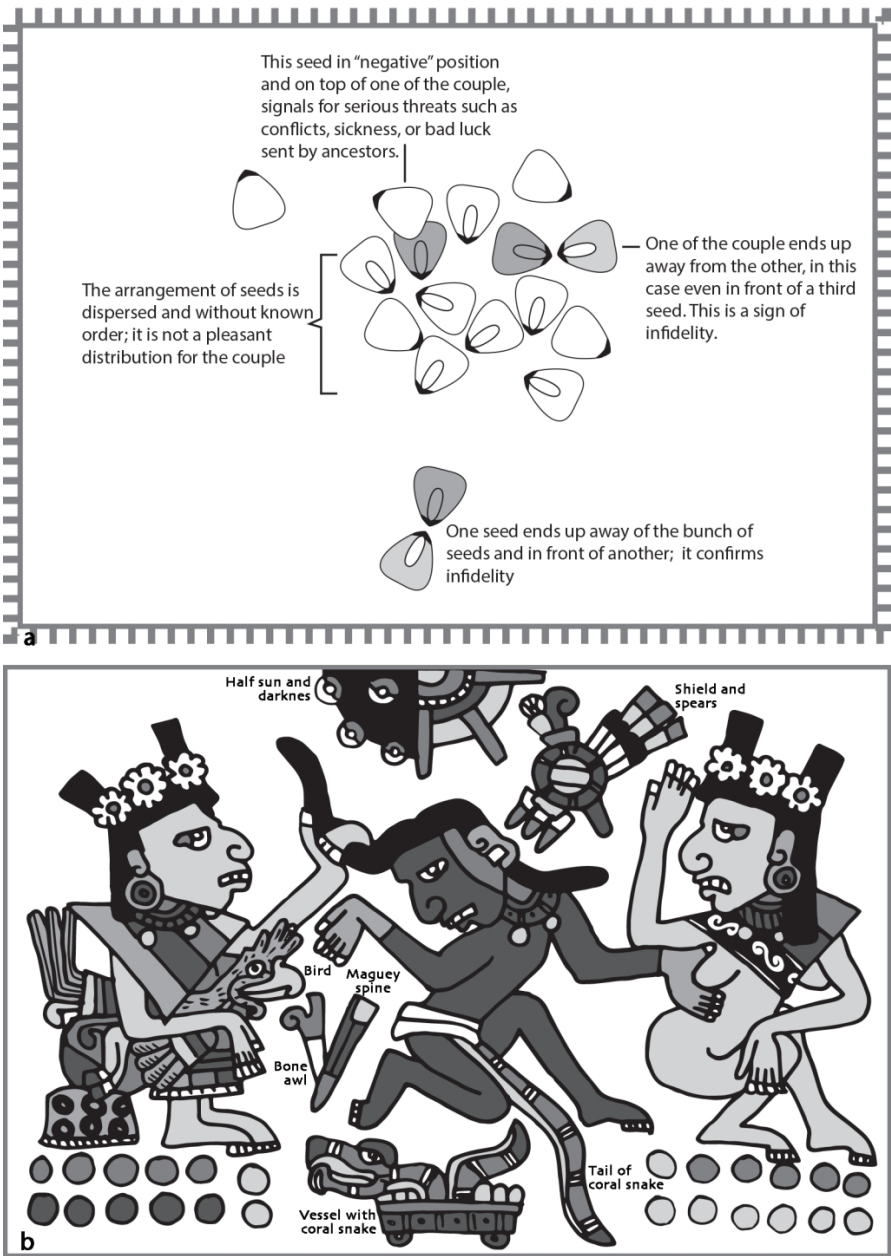


Figure 4. Signs and symbols read for bad prognostications regarding marriage: a) Maize seeds; b) Sum 24 of calendrical numbers in Codex Borgia⁵⁰

Among the Ayöök, someone consulting a daykeeper and diviner will say that he or she wants to know his or her *joo'nkjyën ixët*. This term is very close to what we understand as “destiny”. *Joo'nk* means life, *yën* refers to length, and *ixët* comes from the verb “*ixp*” which means “to see”.

All together, the phrase can be translated as “to see [the things] along the course of life”. *Joo’nkjyën ixët* highlights the capacity to see.

Among the K’iche’ in Guatemala, divination starts by placing the largest crystal of a bunch of small stones and seeds at the center of the table, called *ilol*, literally the “seer”⁵¹. In the *Popol Vuh* the divinatory and creator couple were considered the Seers, the ones who see with divine foresight⁵². The pictorial manuscripts of the Borgia group, were considered instruments for both counting (the days) and seeing⁵³. They were used to observe situations that were believed to be obscure, such as the cause of illnesses⁵⁴. Among the Aztecs, one of the names for diviners was the *tlachixqui*, literally “the one who looks at things”⁵⁵. The Nahua *tonalpouhque* were the “readers of the days”, a term which is derived from the verb “pouhque” meaning “to read”. Precolonial and contemporary diviners and daykeepers are able to count, see and read the signs that are probably not immediately comprehensible by normal people.

Consequently, to divine refers more to “seeing” rather guessing or foretelling⁵⁶. Accordingly, the etymology of the word “divination” is derived from the Latin *divinare*, means “to discover what is hidden”⁵⁷. As Hatfield⁵⁸ mentioned for Chhiam divinatory narratives, these are constructed by personal experience and molded according to alternations and encounters with (significant) points in time. *Joo’nkjyën ixët* could also be defined as a narration of oneself: an oral representation where time and space intersect (chronotope), where expectations and personal identifications within a social and historical context connect with other entities, not necessarily only persons but also feelings, events, and situations, among others. The narration of oneself both implies and requires the taking of experiences to a conscious level⁵⁹.

Divination as Psychological Therapy

As Bakhtin admits, the use of language implies the necessity to express and objectify oneself⁶⁰. For Jung, the obscure writings and pictures in alchemy, Tarot cards, I Ching, and mandalas are a reflection of the unconscious, whereas the methods of reading them constitute a path toward individuation (“illumination”): they are methods of finding a higher level of consciousness⁶¹. Individuation implies unveiling the unconscious mind shaped by personal experience, cultural background and the collective unconscious (where the archetypes live in)⁶². Many times these are the origin of affliction and anxiety which may be eased by achieving awareness of them. In fact, the transformation of the psyche in individuation is a liminal stage. In the Chinese philosophy contained in the I Ching, liminality is comprised of the expression *I*, which stands for change, *rite de passage*, the movement capable of inducing a confrontation within the darker parts of oneself⁶³. In the same way, some authors have

proposed that astrology and Tarot are self-knowing tools, useful for a personal integration of the unconscious and conscious⁶⁴.

Divinatory discourse while reading maize constitutes a form of knowing oneself since it implies a revelation of the situation in the present, and hardly ever of a future event. This notion links to *ch'obonic*, a word used among the K'iche' people for divination, and which literally means "to understand"⁶⁵. Understanding is one of the goals of clinical psychoanalysis, which aims to bring repressed fears, traumas or "dark sides" of the past into a conscious state, subsequently relieving anxiety.

As in psychotherapy, the person who consults maize divination (or other type of divination) is looking for answers and expects clarity in the middle of a present conflicting situation. A good diviner, as with a good psychologist, cannot offer help for future outcomes, which do indeed belong to the realm of fantasy. If clarity is obtained by bringing forth images, texts, chronotopic narrations, and dialogues that help construct one's experience, the client acquires an understanding that may trigger action affecting future events. The effectiveness of the divinatory discourse lies in it being a platform for prompting action⁶⁶. The outcome of a divinatory session is not definite. Free will is essential in the fabrication of one's destiny and life, here emphasizing the lack of a paradigmatic or fixed destiny.

Divinatory discourse also implies being reminded of the ethical principles of a society. The divinatory systems, as clearly expressed in the pages of marriage prognostications in the Codex Borgia, hardly predict the future but do advise the correct moral behavior⁶⁷. In the case of Mesoamerica, both in the past and in the present, the moral life of a community includes paying respect to not only other humans but also towards divinities and ancestors. In addition, the performance of rituals is also therapeutic⁶⁸. Mesoamerican diviners and daykeepers therefore must be considered true medicine men and women who heal physical and emotional sicknesses, owners of high knowledge in herbs, massages, steam baths, as well as psychological therapies. They are the voice of the social, religious and moral tradition, and at the same time they are mediators between humans and nature, deities and ancestors⁶⁹.

Conclusion

Reading maize, as in other divinatory techniques, constitutes a method for revealing a scenario that was previously uncertain or hidden to the client's eyes. Maize helps to clarify and comprehend problematic events or feelings. The kernels on the table in some cases allow a simulated confrontation with persons, emotions and ancestors with whom the client had previously not dared face or of whom he or she may not have even been aware. As Jung affirmed, everything is experienced in

image form⁷⁰. Casting maize seeds, like other divinatory techniques, provides images (as signs) that can be read as a text (full of symbols), therefore providing a narrative built dialogically by the diviner and the consultant. Both diviner and consultant are able to create stories by logically identifying and intersecting time and space components on top of the table, hence making chronotopes come alive. All together, the dialogues that come out of the divinatory session, help the client reflect on the situation, giving the chance of a second thought and acting as a catharsis. In this way it fulfils the same aim as psychotherapy. Ayöök destiny is open and flexible because it offers a platform upon which to behave according to one's own will. The recommendation of the *xëë maywë machowë* is always in accordance to social, ethical and religious norms.

The approach in this article, using the theories of signs and symbols of Jung and the chronotope and dialogic narratives of Bakhtin, have helped to examine maize reading divination among contemporary Ayöök people. Far from imposing a western view on indigenous knowledge or reproducing eurocentric distortions of native worldviews, the present paper expects to open an intercultural dialogue, arguing for a nourishing and complementary approach, as well as calling for attention to the valuable wisdom, medicine and therapeutic communication that Ayöök people have among themselves, with nature, divinities, and their ancestors.

Notes:

¹ Araceli Rojas, *Tiempo y sabiduría* (Oaxaca: CONACULTA, Gobierno del Estado de Oaxaca, Fundación Harp Helú, 2014). This paper was made possible by the funding of the European Research Council, through the project *Time in Intercultural Context: The Indigenous Calendars of Mexico and Guatemala* (ID number 103741). My profound gratitude to the town of Poxoyëm, specially to the old ladies *xëë maywë* who shared with me their invaluable knowledge, which I attempt to honor here.

² See fray Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e Islas de la Tierra Firme*, 2 vols. (Cd. de México: Porrúa, 1967): I:228; fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España* (Cd. de México: Porrúa, 2006): 881–882; Hernado Ruíz de Alarcón, “Tratado de las supersticiones de los naturales de esta nueva España,” in *Tratado de las supersticiones, dioses, ritos, hechicerías y otras costumbres gentílicas de las razas aborígenes de México*, vol. II, ed. Francisco del Paso y Troncoso (Cd. de México: Fuente Cultural Navarro, 1953): 43, 118; fray Juan de Torquemada, *Monarquía Indiana*, 3 vols (Cd. de México: Porrúa, 1986): 84.

³ Ferdinand Anders, Maarten Jansen, and Luis Reyes García, *El libro del Cihuacoatl: libro explicativo del llamado Códice Borbónico* (Cd. de México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1991); Elizabeth H. Boone *Cycles of Time and Meaning in the Mexican Books of Fate* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007).

⁴ Maarten Jansen, *Huisi tacu, estudio interpretativo de un libro mixteco antiguo: Codex Vindobonensis Mexicanus I* (Amsterdam: CEDLA, 1982): 42; Maarten Jansen and

Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez “*Iyadzehe añute: valor literario de los códices mixtecos*,” in *Etnicidad y pluralismo cultural: la dinámica étnica en Oaxaca*, ed. Miguel Bartolomé and Alicia Barabas (Cd. de México: INAH, 1986); Katarzyina Mikulska, *El lenguaje enmascarado: un acercamiento a las representaciones gráficas de deidades nahuas* (Cd. de México: UNAM, 2008); John Monaghan, “Performance and the Structure of the Mixtec Codices,” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 1 (1990).

⁵ In this article the words “narrations” and “narratives” will be used almost indistinctively. However, they will be used to fit best in the text according to their definition. The New Oxford American Dictionary (v. 2.2.3) defines “narration” as “the action or process of narrating a story”, and “narrative”, to “a spoken or written account of connected events; a story”. In other words, in this paper, “narration” is the act of telling a story and “narrative” is the story.

⁶ Carl Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, trans., R. F. C. Hull, vol. 12 of *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung* (London: Routledge, 1980); *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, vol. 9 (part 1) of *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung* (London: Routledge, 1991).

⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson, trans. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); “El problema de los géneros discursivos,” in *Estética de la creación verbal*, ed. S.G. Bocharov (Cd de México: Siglo XX, 1982).

⁸ Ferdinand Anders and Maarten Jansen, *Manual del adivino: libro explicativo del llamado Códice Vaticano B* (Cd. de México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993): 161; Karl Anton Nowotny, *Tlacuilloli*, trans. George A. Everett, Jr. and Edward B. Sisson (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005); Araceli Rojas, “Tiempo y sabiduría en Poxoyem: un calendario sagrado entre los Ayöök de Oaxaca” (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2012).

⁹ Ruíz de Alarcón, 128, 134; Díaz Balsera, “Nombres que conservan el mundo: los nahualtocaítl y el Tratado sobre idolatrías de Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 16, no 2 (2007).

¹⁰ Alfredo López Austin, “Cuarenta clases de magos del mundo náhuatl,” *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* 7 (1967).

¹¹ Mikulska, *El lenguaje enmascarado: un acercamiento a las representaciones gráficas de deidades nahuas*; “‘Secret Language’ in Oral and Graphic Form: Religious-Magic Discourse in Aztec Speeches and Manuscripts,” *Oral Tradition* 25, no. 2 (2010).

¹² Maarten Jansen, “Las lenguas divinas del México precolonial,” *Boletín de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe* 38 (1985); Mikulska, “‘Secret Language’ in Oral and Graphic Form: Religious-Magic Discourse in Aztec Speeches and Manuscripts.”

¹³ Anders and Jansen, 107.

¹⁴ David Zeitlyn, “Finding Meaning in the Text: The Process of Interpretation in Text-Based Divination,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 7, no. 2 (2001): 236.

¹⁵ See Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 244, 288.

¹⁶ Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 283.

¹⁷ Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 38.

¹⁸ Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 7.

¹⁹ Stephen Karcher, “Divination, Synchronicity and Fate,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 37, no. 3 (1998): 215.

²⁰ Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 5.

²¹ Anders and Jansen, 109)

²² Anders, Jansen, and Reyes García, 68.

²³ Boone, 32.

²⁴ Donald Hatfield, "Fate in the Narrativity and Experience of Selfhood: A Case from Taiwanese Chhiam Divination," *American Anthropologist* 29, no. 4 (2002): 857.

²⁵ Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel", 84–85.

²⁶ Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel", 252.

²⁷ Nele Bemong and Pieter Borghart, "Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope: Reflections, Applications, Perspectives," in *Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope: Reflections, Applications, Perspectives*, ed. Nele Bemong, Pieter Borghart, Michel de Dobbeleer, Krsitoffel Demoen, Koen de Temmerman, and Bart Keunen (Ghent: Academia Press, 2010): 8.

²⁸ Hatfield, 865.

²⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, volume II (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1984): 151.

³⁰ Bakhtin, "El problema de los géneros discursivos."

³¹ Ricoeur, 230.

³² Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel", 253.

³³ Bemong and Borghart, 7.

³⁴ Bakhtin, "El problema de los géneros discursivos.", 257.

³⁵ Bakhtin, "El problema de los géneros discursivos.", 258.

³⁶ Zeytlin, 236–237.

³⁷ Rojas, *Tiempo y sabiduría*.

³⁸ In the sixteenth century, Sahagún also stated that if somebody saw a maize seed on the floor, it was his or her obligation to pick it up because if not, it would be taken as an offense to the Maize God, which could result in hunger as a punishment. See Sahagún, 268.

³⁹ For the sacred discourses before casting maize among the Mixe, see Frank Lipp, *The Mixe of Oaxaca: Religion, Ritual, and Healing* (Austin: University of Texas, 1991): 166–167.

⁴⁰ López Austin, 104.

⁴¹ Rojas, *Tiempo y sabiduría*.

⁴² Hatfield, 862, 865.

⁴³ For support in the identification of a *cuauhxicalli*, see Rojas, "La iconografía e iconología relacionada con el sol en polícromos de Cholula," *Arqueología Segunda Época* 37 (2008).

⁴⁴ See Élodie Dupey García, "The Materiality of Color in the Body Ornamentation of Aztec Gods," (*RES* 65/66 (2014/2015): 75.

⁴⁵ Codex image redrawn from Ferdinand Anders, Maarten Jansen, and Luis Reyes García, *Los templos del cielo y de la oscuridad: oráculos y liturgia, libro explicativo del llamado Códice Borgia*, (Cd. de México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993): 58 (facsimile).

⁴⁶ Hatfield, 865.

⁴⁷ Hatfield, 869.

⁴⁸ See Rojas, *Tiempo y sabiduría*; "Time and wisdom: a sacred calendar among the Ayöök people of Oaxaca, Mexico," *Indiana* 30 (2013). However, other authors think the opposite, in particular for Aztecs in the past, i.e., that personalities, roles and offices in society were fixed, fasten and assigned according to the day they were born. For these opinions, see Boone, 2; Monaghan, "Los calendarios mesoamericanos como constituciones," in *Memoria de la primera mesa redonda de Monte Albán*,

ed. Nelly Robles García (Cd. de México: CONACULTA, INAH, 2001); Eloise Quiñones Keber, "Painting Divination in the Florentine Codex," in *Representing Aztec Ritual: Performance, Text, and Image in the Work of Sahagún*, ed. Eloise Quiñones Keber (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 2002): 253.

⁴⁹ Lisa Raphals, "Fate, Fortune, Chance, and Luck in Chinese and Greek: A Comparative Semantic History," *Philosophy East and West* 53, no. 4(2003): 537, 540.

⁵⁰ Codex image redrawn from Anders, Jansen, and Reyes García, *Los templos del cielo y de la oscuridad: oráculos y liturgia, libro explicativo del llamado Códice Borgia*, 59 (facsimile).

⁵¹ Barbara Tedlock, *Time and the Highland Maya* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982): 159.

⁵² Allen Christensen, *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003): 79.

⁵³ John Monaghan and Byron Hamann. "Reading as Social Practice and Cultural Construction," *Indiana Journal of Hispanic Literatures* 13 (1998): 135.

⁵⁴ Boone, 20.

⁵⁵ López Austin, 101.

⁵⁶ A science-based explanation of divination usually refers to it as being based in fantasy and falsehood. As some scholars explain, Enlightenment and Positivism movements rejected acquiring knowledge from any other means than scientific and provable methods. See Jung *Psychology and Alchemy*; Anders and Jansen, 159; Raphals, 537. Therefore hermetic knowledge such as alchemy, astrology or contact with ancestors was dismissed as charlatanry. This incredulity permeates into the social sciences and this is why a rather skeptical treatment tends to be given to oracular topics.

⁵⁷ Karcher, 215.

⁵⁸ Hatfield, 857.

⁵⁹ Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps, "Narrating the Self," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 25 (1996):21.

⁶⁰ Bakhtin, "El problema de los géneros discursivos," 256.

⁶¹ Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy; The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 38-39.

⁶² Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*.

⁶³ See Karcher, 226 for an analysis of these darker aspects in human psyche which he calls as "daimons", like "demons".

⁶⁴ See Miguel Andreux, *Astrología: un camino de autoconocimiento* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2009) and Sallie Nichols, *Jung and Tarot* (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 1980) for such type of approaches, respectively.

⁶⁵ Tedlock, 153.

⁶⁶ Hatfield, 863.

⁶⁷ Anders and Jansen, 157.

⁶⁸ Alicia Barabas, "Procesos rituales," in *Los pueblos indígenas de Oaxaca: atlas etnográfico*, ed. Alicia Barabas, Miguel Alberto Bartolomé, and Benjamín Maldonado (Oaxaca: INAH, Secretaría de Asuntos Indígenas del Gobierno de Oaxaca, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004): 68.

⁶⁹ Anders and Jansen, 159-160; Boone, 32.

⁷⁰ Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 39.

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