



The Baroque Paradise of Santa María Tonantzitla (Part II¹)

JULIO GLOCKNER

Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Meritorious Autonomous University of Puebla, Puebla
julioglockner@yahoo.com.mx

ABSTRACT

The baroque church of Santa María Tonantzitla is located in the Valley of Cholula in the Central Mexican Plateau and it was built during 16th-19th century. Its interior decoration shows an interesting symbolic fusion of Christian elements with Mesoamerican religious aspects of Nahua origin. Scholars of Mexican colonial art interpreted the Catholic iconography of Santa María Tonantzitla church as the Assumption of the Virgin Mary up to the celestial kingdom and her coronation by the holy Trinity. One of those scholars, Francisco de la Maza, proposed the idea that apart from that, the ornaments of the church evoke Tlalocan, paradise of the ancient deity of rain known as Tlaloc. Following this interpretation this study explores the relation between the Virgin Mary and the ancient Nahua deity of Earth and fertility called Tonatzin in order to show the profound syncretic bonds which exist between Christian and Mesoamerican traditions.

KEY WORDS: syncretism, altepetl, Tlalocan, Tamoanchan, Ometeotl, Nahua culture, Tonantzitla

¹ This text is a continuation of the article published in previous volume. In. *Ethnologia actualis*. Vol. 16, No. 1/2016, pp. 8-29.

The myth of the origin of corn

From the rest of the plants cultivated traditionally in the area, corn stands out, a plant divinized during the pre-Hispanic era with the name Centeotl. Many Mesoamerican cultures have discussed the origin of corn in their mythical narratives. Myths are holy stories that tell the origins of things. A Nahua origin myth tells how Quetzalcoatl descended to the World of the Dead in order to get the “precious bones” he delivered in Tamoanchan to the goddess Cihuacoatl, so she could grind them. Once the bones were pulverized and placed on a tray, Quetzalcoatl made his penis bleed over the primitive dust to fertilize it; thus humans were created. Then the gods wondered what these creatures would eat. It happened that a red ant went into the Tonacatepetl or Maintenance Hill to take corn when Quetzalcoatl found it and asked it about the origin of those grains. The ant refused to answer, but when it faced the god’s persistence, it finally pointed to the place. Then, Quetzalcoatl turned himself into a black ant and followed the red ant to the big warehouse. The two of them carried many grains of corn to Tamoanchan. That was how the gods tasted corn and put it in the mouths of the humans to feed them. However, the gods immediately wondered: What will we do with the Tonacatepetl? Oxomoco and Cipactonal, the first human couple, who were shamans, gave them the answer during an act of prediction for which they used corn seeds. The couple revealed that the wounded Nanahuatl would pound the Maintenance Hill with a stick. Then the gods of rain were warned (the blue, white, yellow and red *tlaloques*) about what was going to happen and Nanahuatl pounded the corn with a stick. The *tlaloques* picked up all the spread corn of these four colors, plus beans, amaranth and other food, as a consequence of having hit the Tonacatepetl with a stick.²

Jacinto de la Serna, a clergyman, wrote in the 17th century: “A thunderbolt hit the Tonacatepetl, that is to say, the Iztaccihuatl volcano, to take out from it the different types of corn, men’s food”.³

The reference to Iztaccihuatl as a mythical container of corn is very significant, because it forms part of the ritual landscape of the elder inhabitants of Tonantzintla and it is associated (in a feminine way) with Chalchiuhtlicue, goddess of the land and waters, Tlaloc’s partner, who at the same time is related to Popocatepetl.

² KIRSHOFF *et al.* 1989:163.

³ SERNA 1987.

In this myth we can witness the divine origin of corn and its appearance before humans in four colors, as well as the divine origin of its culinary preparation, because before the gods gave it to the humans they ground it in their mouths. The grinding and the cooking, the *metate* and the *comal*, are two indispensable steps in its preparation as food. The story also tells us about the ritual bond humans will maintain with the gods of rain, the *tlaloques*, as food suppliers, as well as the oracular function the corn seeds have in predictive and therapeutic rituals.

The Virgin on the bed of fruits

Some years ago, in a visit to the church of Tonantzintla during the Feast of Assumption, I was able to see the Virgin lying on a bed of apples, pears and peaches, while staring fixedly to the central vault of the temple, as a symbol of her assumption to the Kingdom of Heaven. An old peasant lady that covered her head with a shawl delicately touched the silver half-moon on which the Virgin was placed, to spread it on herself afterwards, in a meaningful gesture, on the left side of her chest, right where the heart is. This act of magic by contagion is repeated practically in all the patron saints' celebrations, in the sanctuaries, and before the relic bodies of men and women that have been beatified or sanctified. As it is known, the purpose of this simple gesture is to protect the body by transmitting to it the power attributed to the image or sacred object. The interesting thing about the gesture of the peasant lady is that she touched the moon, as she considered it part of a unity with the Virgin. With the moon, the third element appears, forming an interesting trinity along with the goddess and the snake.

Different to the sun, that remains always radiant and alike, the moon transforms itself permanently: it is born as a new moon and it slowly grows to become round and full with light, to then decrease little by little, until completely fading for three days, when the sky is left without moon or stars, only to reappear again. This cyclical characteristic makes the moon the symbolic celestial body that represents the rhythms of life. In most cultures the moon always takes us to an organic and cosmic reality that has to do with the future, the reproduction, with the appearance and disappearance of rain, water, vegetation and fertility. The most diverse phenomena are coordinated under its influence: from the tide to the harvest, to woodcutting, to haircutting and the menstrual cycle in women. In sum, what we have here is the confrontation of two complex symbols responding to different logics. On one hand there is a triad formed by a terrestrial goddess, associated with the snake and that performs the main function of fertility; and, on the other hand, there is a triad formed by an Immaculate Virgin, mother of Jesus

Christ, posed at the end of time over a moon, as conqueror of the snake-dragon. This last symbolism is the one on view in the temple and the one analyzed by many authors, when they refer to the Assumption of Mary and her crowning in the Kingdom of Heaven.⁴ The other triad is not as evident. Therefore, we must analyze it by referring to some symbolic evidence that appears in the temple.

During the celebration in which the Virgin is placed on her bed of fruits, her body remains located under the arch facing the altar, where a young naked child is represented descending headfirst from the heights. This interesting figure has been a motif in several interpretations that range from the Christ Child descending from Heaven to the Evil Spirit expelled from the Kingdom of God. Gordon Wasson, founder of ethnomycology, proposed that it was Piltzintecuhtli, “The Noble Child”, a young pre-Hispanic deity associated with Xochipilli, the Nahua god of flowers and sacred plants, which is the interpretation I find most correct.

The prince of the flowers and the noble child

Let us go through other mythical stories that will allow us to place some characters inside the church of Tonantzintla and to understand better their relationship with the symbolic environment surrounding them. The next myth tells the story of the origin of edible plants:

*The gods descended to a cave where a god named Piltzintecuhtli was lying with the goddess named Xochipilli, who gave birth to a god named Centeotl. He got himself underneath the earth and from his hair sprouted cotton, and from one ear a very fine seed [...] named huazontli, from the other, another seed. From the nose, another called chian that is good for drinking during summer time; from the fingers grew a turnip-like fruit named camotli, a very fine fruit. From its fingernails sprouted a sort of large corn that is the cereal they eat now; and from the rest of the body came many other fruits now planted and harvested by men.*⁵

The image of this vegetable face – that in Europe had a pictorial equivalent in the paintings dedicated to the four seasons by Archimboldo from Milan – connects the products of the Earth with the body of a deity like Centeotl, god of corn, intimately related to Xochipilli and Piltzintecuhtli, who appear like his parents. Who are these gods?

⁴ GLOCKNER 2011.

⁵ THEOGONY 1985.

In the middle of the 19th century, in Tlalmanalco, on the slopes of the Iztaccihuatl volcano, the impressive figure of Xochipilli carved in tezontle was unearthed. This deity of the flowers, dance and music is now in the Mexica Hall of the National Museum of Anthropology and History. It is a seated figure that has carved in its body several species of flowers. Gordon Wasson, Richard Evan Shultes, and Roger Heim argue that these carved designs are in fact psychoactive plants. Among these, there was a kind of fungi (*Psilocybe aztecorum*) unknown to science until then; a five-petal flower, known as *Nicotiana tabacum*, sculpted on the hip and on the forearm of the deity; and the flower named “wonder” (*Turbina corymbosa*), also known by the ancient Mexicans as *ololihqui*, which contains Lysergic Acid Diethylamide (LSD) as its active ingredient. Schultes also recognized the flower *sinicuichi* of the Mexican mountains (*Heimia salicifolia*), and at last, *poyomatli* or *Quararibea funebris*.

The deity of the flowers, Xochipilli, is closely related to a variety of gods, including the Sun; Centeotl, the young corn-god; Macuilxochitl, the deity of music, song and dance; Xipe Totec, the deification of spring; Xochiquetzal, the goddess of flowers and love; the child-god Piltzintecuhtli, and of course Tlaloc. Xochipilli is a deity intimately associated with the green of the countryside, the heat, the humidity, the fog and the rain of the region. Alfonso Caso argues that he is the representation of summer, that is to say, of the rainy season during which the fungus sprouts. The fungus-rain association is not just a meteorological cause-effect relationship; essentially, it is a cosmic relationship that allows the approximation between deities, spiritual beings, and humans by means of religious ecstasy. Generally, these spirits of water are represented as very small children called Piltzintli, that means “little boy” and it is also the name of the young god of the tender corn.

In the middle of 20th century a rainmaker from the Popocatepetl volcano recounted a scene that probably occurred frequently during the 17th and 18th centuries among people dedicated to provide fine weather:

A person that can request rain is born when he believes strongly in the job. The guide asks constantly if you truly believe in the requesting of water; if you say you do, the guide looks for some fungus in the water called spirits of the water and feeds them to you raw, or boiled, to take them in a fungus soup. After you eat or drink this soup, you fall asleep. Inside the dream you see many children, they are the spirits of the water... sometimes you see a lot of corn plants, a lot of zucchinis, a lot of flowers and lots of things, all green again. This means

*the farmers will produce; and it also reveals the present that has to be offered where the request of the rain takes place. It is what you give to the lords of the winds.*⁶

This type of visionary experience is what, undoubtedly, fed the collective imagination of those who worked for decades on the decoration of the temple of Tonantzintla. Within the interesting syncretism between the Mesoamerican cosmology and Christianity, many specialists on the magic handling of the weather in the region of Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl volcanoes, conceive nowadays the descent of the divine force from Heaven as fertilizer rain. Then, a genetic force emerges from within the earth in the form of a sacred fungus that, when ingested as part of a ritual, allows the participants to have a spiritual awakening with a series of visionary revelations that will open them to different kinds of problems, from diseases to the identification of “curses” obstructing the arrival of a good storm.⁷

However, there is a four-petal flower carved in Xochipilli’s body which Wasson and Schultes did not recognize but which Doris Heyden, a scholar of the Mesoamerican flora and its symbols, mentions in the iconography of Teotihuacan, where the Tlalocan is represented. Heyden said the flower could symbolize the four parts of the world and the center, therefore eternity. This means that it is a basic representation of the Mesoamerican cosmology that does not necessarily correspond to a particular plant. This four-petal flower also stands out in the stucco of the temple of Tonantzintla as part of the ambient to which Piltzintecuhtli-Xochipilli descends from Heaven. Let us see more details about this mythical habitat where Tlalocan and Tamoanchan converge.⁸

Tlalocan and Tamoanchan

Tlalocan and Tamoanchan are mythical places in the religious Mesoamerican tradition. They are conceived under the cyclic idea of time in which life and death are complementary opposites and not exclusive; an idea of time in which death is an extension of life, in a different existential sphere; and life is an extension of death because spirits with previous existences inhabit all living beings.

⁶ BARRIOS 1949.

⁷ GLOCKNER 2006:26-38.

⁸ HEYDEN 1985.

Different to the lineal conception of the Judeo-Christian culture that understands time in terms of origin (Genesis) and end (Apocalypse), within which human existence happens, the Mesoamerican culture conceives time as a circle in which all ends are new beginnings, a renewal of the previous existence. Under this perspective, the future is not something unknown but rather the reappearance, under new forms, of the past.

Tamoanchan, stated Alfredo Lopez Austin, is a place for creation. The supreme couple, Ometecuhli and Omecihuatl (“Lord-Two” and “Woman-Two”), sent from Tamoanchan the emotional seed of the child into the mother’s womb, and it was in Tamoanchan, at the beginning of time, where the gods placed the corn on the lips of men after having ground it with their own molars. On the other hand, Tlalocan is a place of death; it is a hollow mountain filled with fruits because inside there is an eternal productive season. Only men under the protection of the god of rain enter to it: the fallen due to lightning striking, the drowned, the ulcerous, and anyone who suffered any illness or disease related to water. Tamoanchan and Tlalocan have been mixed for a long time; however, things got more complicated when white people arrived. The Christians saw in the descriptions of the Tlalocan the undying flowers, the richness of the fruits, the delightful watercourses, and concluded that Tlalocan was the Paradise on Earth. They also learned that there was a tree in Tamoanchan where the original sin was performed, and that the guilty were expelled to Earth, therefore concluding that Tamoanchan was also the Paradise on Earth.⁹

Here we are entering in the symbolism of the temple of Tonantzintla. A temple that has two different visions related to the Virgin Mary in its interior: one alludes the crowning of the Virgin in the Kingdom of Heaven, and the other takes us to the Virgin’s condition as the Immaculate Conception, that is to say, like the Virgin that carried in her sacred womb the product of a divine conception.

If we consider that the decoration of the temple took place, according to the study performed by Pedro Rojas, during a second construction stage that went from the end of the 17th century to the beginning of the 18th, it is safe to say that there was a spiritual atmosphere where it was possible to express, on the baroque stuccos, not only the Christian message of the Assumption of the Virgin to the Kingdom of Heaven and the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation, but its development in an ambient of vegetable exuberance that evokes the Mesoamerican Tlalocan, as it is constantly mentioned in the work of

⁹ LOPEZ AUSTIN 1994.

Francisco de la Maza. This means that the evangelization the Franciscan friars did in Tonantzitla developed later, in the complete territory of New Spain, into a highly complex fusion of two cosmogonies, the Mesoamerican and the Christian, and that despite their big differences they also kept a deep resemblance. The gradual replacement of Tonantzin for the Immaculate Conception is yet another syncretic transit that has happened a thousand different ways in the spiritual world and in the ritual life of the native people and the mestizos in Mexico.

When two religions mix, each one with its own system of beliefs, rites, manners of organization and ethical standards, only three different things can happen: one, both religions are confused into a new religion, producing synthesis; two, both religions overlap maintaining their own identity, producing simple juxtaposition; and three, both religions integrate a new one, even when it is still possible to identify the precedence of each element to its previous religion, producing authentic syncretism.¹⁰ During the primitive times of colonization the second form prevailed: the juxtaposition of Christianity with the rich variety of cults practiced in the native religion. However, syncretism became more important after the consolidation of evangelization and colonization – already happening in the 17th and 18th centuries when the decoration of the temple took place. This means Tonantzitla is a Catholic temple in which we can identify elements of the former Mesoamerican religion, related to each other to give the spectator a hint of a different non-Christian symbolism, in a productive dialogue with the Catholic religion.

The game of interpretations aroused by the decoration of the temple in Tonantzitla tends to go in two opposite and altogether misleading directions: on the one hand, there is an exclusive colonial reading that emphasizes the Christian elements and ignores its native manufacture; and on the other hand, there is the conception that Catholic iconography is nothing more than a front cover for its “true” Mesoamerican nature. This is an old problem hermeneutics analyzed by studying the thought and the religious practices in countries like Mexico, where a fertile syncretism existed.

To choose one of these options while avoiding the other implies a false problem, as Serge Gruzinski accurately stated when he analyzed the frescos in Ixmiquilpan: “to attribute one detail to one world or the other would assume to ignore its compound and polysemous characteristic. The obsessive search of the pre-Colonial elements, wrote the scholar, can take us to excessive interpretations that end up impoverishing the work by depriving a whole

¹⁰ MARZAL 1988.

from its other dimensions. However, he adds, it is not less true that the frescos are full with pre-Hispanic reminiscences that take us to this cosmology: only the waving movement of the huge garland crossing the frieze from one point to the other could signify the rotation movement of the forces of the old universe.”¹¹ Gruzinski is right in his interpretation. Let us go over this waving movement and realize that there is a similar movement in Tonantzitla with the probable same significance: I am talking about the spiral movement that divides in eight slices the cupola of the temple.

Here is the description Antonio Rubial García makes of the cupola and the transept:

*The basic dogmas of Christianity and the exaltation of the Virgin Mary, to whom the temple is dedicated, are represented in the cupola and the transept. The first theme addressed is the basic dogma of the Catholic Church: the Holy Trinity. The eight frames that separate the slices of the cupola pull our gaze to a figure in which the angles converge; the dove that symbolizes the Holy Spirit. The bird is surrounded by a multitude of little heads crowned with feathery headband, some with wings, others coming out of flowers, or with blond hair, though mostly brunette. Their geometric distribution in concentric circles over the walls of the cupola shows the order of Paradise; and even though its symbolism is not traditional, these might represent the nine angelic voices: archangels, cherubs, seraphs, thrones, dominations, principalities, guardians, and virtues.*¹²

According to Rubial García the eight frames represent Christ; however, he fails to mention the four faces with golden hair placed above the Holy Spirit: two of them with blue and white feathers on the chest and on the sides of the neck, and the other two with red and yellow feathers. Could it be an exaggeration to state that these four faces evoke the supreme deities of the native pantheon of gods, Ometecuhtli and Omecihuatl (“Lord-Two” and “Woman-Two”)? According to friar Bernardino de Sahagún’s expression, those who “ruled over” the twelve heavens and the Earth “said that the existence of all things depended on the great lord, and that from his command came the influence and the heat with which children were conceived in the wombs of their mothers”, characteristics that relate him to the symbolic theme of the temple.

This “great lord” who Sahagún refers to is Ometeotl, the sacred duality, the supreme divinity, and basic principle of all that exists. He did not intervene in human matters, which

¹¹ GRUZINSKI 2000.

¹² RUBIAL 1991.

he passed onto his manifestations: Ometecuhtli and Omecihuatl. They inhabited a place called Omeyocan, the place of duality, and it was located in the superior part of the thirteen heavens, a place where the children to be born on Earth were created. If my statement was true we would have before us, in the main cupola of the church, a lucky conjunction of the Christian Paradise and its new angelic voices, led by the dove of the Holy Spirit, with the Omeyocan presided over by Ometecuhtli, himself unfolded into Ometecuhtli and Omecihuatl.

Let us continue with another principle element in this interpretation that takes into consideration what another prestigious historian of colonial art, Pedro Rojas, said:

On the highest part of the cupola we can see the Holy Spirit flying to the West, that is to say, to the entrance or the base of the temple. It seems like the divine grace descended there. And it is precisely in that direction, facing the Virgin, falling into the key of the arch – that unites the half orange with the nave – that one can see the figure of a boy descending; his naked feet, up to the heights and to the other side his face and wavy black hair. Was that how they represented the Assumption? One could believe so. However, we cannot ignore those who, flying with their imagination, suspiciously wanted to explain the great figure of the child as the reminiscence of the Nahua image of the crepuscular Sun god, delicately placed in the Christian ambient of the temple by the farmers who were descendants of the elder natives of the place. Is the West-Sun god a child?¹³

Pedro Rojas rejects what to his understanding is a simple occurrence, mere nonsense. Later we will realize how this interpretation actually has some grounds. He concludes:

However, it is possible to find in the relationship Mary-Holy Spirit-Child the expression about the Incarnation episode. Another fact favoring this interpretation is the royal crown placed under the arch, almost next to the head of the child... The dove of the Holy Spirit, the Child, and the Crown seem to state that Mary is the queen of Heaven and Earth by divine grace and Incarnation.¹⁴

This exclusively Christian understanding has as counterweight Gordon Wasson's own interpretation. When Wasson returned from Huautla de Jimenez, after his famous encounter with María Sabina, and having participated in a ceremony with a fungus called "holy children" in Mazateco language, he had the intuition – later vastly documented – that the

¹³ ROJAS 1978/2011.

¹⁴ Ibid.

childlike faces in the decoration of the church are not mere ornaments but allegories of the sacred fungus, Teonanacatl, “Flesh of God”, that is still being consumed in the towns close to the volcanoes, like he himself confirmed it with Mrs. Marina Rosas, a shaman of San Pedro Nexapa, in Estado de Mexico. These are his words:

In the parish of Tonantzintla the “little children” are piled up, resting all over, among flowers and fruits. These children are gesticulating to us; those over there try to give us an explanation and we almost can hear their voices; others climb over the walls, go through the arches, swim in the space, fly through the air, through the whole interior of the cupola, even on the columns surrounding the dome, in the heights and beyond the altar. The figure falling head first that concerned Pedro Rojas is for sure the captain of the band, of this children gang. Truthfully, this has no place in the Christian iconography. Nonetheless, in this splendid temple, is it really necessary to just limit oneself to Christian iconography? Is not this boy the “fresh father and the tender father”, the “fighting man, the man that thunders” from the spells of María Sabina, who the shaman, by a syncretic religious act, identified with Jesus Christ? We find ourselves before the Child Prince of the Nahuatl world, the Child God of Mesoamerica, the deity known to the Nahuas by several names: Piltzintecuhli, Topiltzin, Piltzinteotl or Piltzintli, each of who represent a different aspect of Xochipilli... The holy child is the Piltzintli Boy of the Mesoamerican pantheon of gods, surrounded everywhere by his entourage of four hundred joyful boys and girls, while he himself is the young god of the sun, the god of the spring, of the music, and the dance, and the song, the florid tree, yes, of the Ecstasy, the god of the miraculously entheogens, the patron of the Rebel Divines of Santa María Tonantzintla.

Wasson’s argument, though silenced by an academy filled with prejudice, does not lack grounds despite how uncomfortable many people might feel with the idea of a religious work being a result of the extension of conscience induced by the consumption of sacred plants. Surely this is the origin, along with the oneiric revelations about the figurative richness of the Mesoamerican pantheon of gods, or where do we think the faces and the bodies of the gods come from? In the region of the volcanoes, that supplied a large amount of psychoactive plants to the cities where public rituals were performed, according to the testimonies of Tezozomoc and friar Diego Durán, people still know the psychoactive fungus with the name Plitzintli, “little children”, because that is the form in which they manifest during dreams and ecstatic trances.¹⁵

¹⁵ WASSON 1983/2011.

The Incarnation and the Trinity

The second most important dedication in the temple is the one that associates the main cupola of the Holy Spirit with the side vaults where God the Father and God the Son are represented, therefore complementing the Trinity. On this matter, Pedro Rojas wrote:

*The sun incarnates in Mary by the grace of God represented with the Spirit coming from the Father. The line of this figures tell us, then, about the mystery of the Trinity and it crosses with the line of those figures about the mystery of Incarnation.*¹⁶

Pedro Rojas' reading of the Trinity seems evident and indisputable to me; his reading of the Incarnation, however, since it is not something exclusive to Christianity, is ambiguous and therefore subject to further interpretation. All religions are founded, in some way or another, on messages received from Heaven; and there are many deities that have been "incarnated" by descending from the heights in the most diverse ways. Coatlicue, for example, conceived divinely when a feather descended to her womb to procreate Huitzilopochtli.

The earthly goddesses associated with the fertility of the Earth and women, and with the birth of plants and children, are old too. One of these goddesses of the Mesoamerican pantheon of gods is precisely Tonantzin, the generic name with which people also referred to Cihuacoatl Quilaztli. This is a Mother Goddess related to the conception and birth of children. Her mythical story – writes Lopez Austin, based upon Sahagún, Durán and the Sun's Legends – has great importance because humanity was created in it. When Quetzalcoatl arrived in Tamoanchan, the home of the gods, with the bones he had extracted from Mictlan (the underworld or place of the dead), it was Quilaztli who ground and tossed them into the precious basin so Quetzalcoatl could bleed his penis into it. The name of the goddess is related to the vegetation and it means, according to Lopez Austin, "the obtaining of vegetables," coming from the noun *quilitl* (vegetable) and from the verb *aci* that means "to reach", "to get somewhere" or "to achieve something." "However, their action is not reduced, as one could argue, to vegetation; it also protects the conception and the birth of human beings, because the vegetable, animal, and human processes are parallel and cyclic, like the process of germination."¹⁷

The other feminine deity that I would like to point out here is Xochiquetzal, Tlaloc's partner before she was kidnapped by Tezcatlipoca. Diego Muñoz Camargo wrote about her:

¹⁶ ROJAS 1978/2011.

¹⁷ LOPEZ AUSTIN 1994:194-195.

These nations had a goddess they called the goddess of the lovers, like formerly the ancient people had goddess Venus, thus the natives of this land had this Xochiquetzal goddess, who, as people say, lived in highly delightful places, had many hobbies and was accompanied and under the care of many people; being served by other women like goddesses in great feasts and presents from fountains and rivers and flower fields of great recreations, she missed nothing...and under her service there were several little people and crouched rascals and coarse people that gave her comfort with great music, performances and dances; she trusted these people and they were fit to be her secretaries to go to any god she pointed with great tasks... these people called the Heaven this goddess inhabited Tamouan Ichan Xochitl Icacan Chichnauí Nepamichan Itzehcayan, which practically means "The place of Tamouan and the seat of the Florid Tree". About this Xochil Icacan tree people say that the person who reached its flower, or was touched by it, became a blessed and faithful lover where the trees are cold, delicate and frozen over the nine heavens.¹⁸

The place over the nine heavens, where future human life is conceived is, again, Tamoanchan: Tamouan Ichan. With this symbolic precedent as background, I would like to suggest that the cupola of the temple of Tonantzintla does not only represent the nine celestial stratum of Christianity, but also points to Tamoanchan as the place of origin of human beings, and the descending child is associated to this interpretation as Piltzintecuhtli-Centeotl-Xochipilli, precisely like Gordon Wasson proposed.

What does this mean? The "occurrence" of the local farmers that Pedro Rojas so disdainfully overlooked has a background this professor ignored. In *The Universe of the Aztecs*, Jacques Soustelle wrote that West is, among other things, the side for birth. The West is Cihuatlampa, the side of women, of the goddesses and the divinized women called Cihuateteo. Tamoanchan is also the mythical garden of the West. Soustelle says that one of the etymologies proposed for Tamoanchan is "Country of the Decline" or "Country of the Descent", alluding to the sunset and the birth of men.

Now, who descends from the arch of Tonantzintla? It would be interesting and exciting to say it is the child Jesus. Gordon Wasson formulated a hypothesis several years ago in which he unknowingly presented some interesting arguments on the former idea about the fallen child being the crepuscular sun. Wasson argues the figure is Piltzintecuhtli, the Child God of the Nahuas that is simultaneously a name for Centeotl, the god of corn, and of

¹⁸ MUÑOZ 1984.

Xochipilli, the young god of flowers and psychoactive plants known today as entheogens. It is the same one that appears as a descending solar deity in figure number 50 of the Borgia Codex and the same found on the western slopes of the Popocatepetl volcano, carved in stone and placed on a stool, with his body covered with sacred plants. Thus Wasson responds affirmatively to Rojas' skeptical question, "is the West-Sun god a child?"

I must mention that in the end both interpretations are talking about the same thing, that is to say, of the same descent of a divine force from the sacred heights of Heaven to incarnate in the life of a child, corn, or a flower. In this sense, one could take a different reading from Pedro Rojas' interpretation, though similar in its form. Then, the line of the mystery of the Incarnation is current, but with a rich polyvalent content.

The faces of Tlalocan

The last matter I would like to mention has to do with the line of the mystery of the Trinity. What Rojas and others after him exposed is in plain view: the Holy Trinity formed by the Holy Spirit in the center and to the sides the God Father and the God Son. However, Pedro Rojas does not allude to the deformed faces that prevail in these vaults of the transept, where you can find, I repeat, the Father and the Son. I believe these are deformed faces due to the illnesses of the "cold" that the mountains and the deities associated with the hills and water, diseases which were described in detail by friar Bernardino de Sahagún and which we may see, carved in stone, in the archeological area of Xochitecatl in Tlaxcala, a former place of the cult of the deities of water and of the care of women's and the Earth's fertility.

Friar Sahagún wrote:

All hills were important, especially those where clouds gathered to produce rain; they imagined those were gods, so they made an image of each... They also imagined that some illnesses, cold weather illnesses, came from the hills or that the hills had the power to cure them; therefore, those who were sick with these illnesses took a vow to make a feast for this or that hill, the closest, or for the one they respected most... The illnesses that made them take such vows were the gout on hands and feet, or in any other part of the body; and also the paralysis of a member of the body or in the entire body; as well as the stiffness in the neck or in other part of the body; the shrinking of a member, or rigid standing. Those who suffered from these illnesses took vows to reproduce the image of these gods: the god of air, the goddess of water, and the god of rain. To the image of the Popocatepetl volcano and the

*image of the Sierra Nevada Mountains ... or to the images of the hills that had their devotion.*¹⁹

It is noticeable that during the Passion Week in Tonantzintla, farmers take a long walk until they go into the forest of the Popocatepetl to gather branches of trees and to place them inside the church, with birds trapped in suspended cages. In this festivity, the image of the “Divine Jesus” is very important, because people believe it cures illnesses with its miraculous powers when there is oil placed in front of it.

In his study about the plants related to Tlaloc, Bernardo Ortiz de Montellano assumes that the reason why ulcer, swelling, and gout are related to the god of water is because these are illnesses with an excess of liquid in them.²⁰ Other scholars of traditional medicine place torticollis among the “cold” illnesses sent by Tlaloc, or the hills and mountains, as well as atrophy, hand and feet deformities, deviation of the corner of the mouth, facial paralysis and general deformation in those members, and tremors in the face or lips. In the diagnosis and treatment of these illnesses people used a variety of entheogen plants among which we find *teonanacatl* or *piltzintli*; *ololihqui* or Virgin cape; *hicuri* or *peyote*; *toloa tlapatl* or *toloache*, just to mention some.

Going back to Francisco de la Maza’s suggestion about Tonantzintla being Tlaloc’s Paradise mixed with the Christian Sanctoral, I believe we can find represented in this temple both the habitat, that is to say the Tlalocan gardens, and their inhabitants, meaning those who died because of the illnesses associated with water, the hills and their deities, and whose spirits were to inhabit the paradise of the god of the rain. In this way, the line of the mystery of the Trinity that is formed by the cupola and the lateral vaults, in its convergence with the Christian Incarnation that goes from the cupola of the Holy Spirit to the Descendant Child, holds simultaneously what we call the mystery of Tlalocan; the sacred place of the god of rain, lightning, and hail in its convergence with the mysteries of Omeyocan and Tamoanchan, the places of origin of all things created and, in particular, of humanity.

¹⁹ SAHAGÚN 1982, Book I, Chap. XXI.

²⁰ ORTIZ DE MONTELLANO 1980.

Conclusion

Tonantzitla is a garden which invites the imagination to play. The game can have certain rules and if one desires to apply them all they will reduce the possibilities of its fantasy in exchange for a certain logical order, albeit just as fascinating. However, the imagination will always let go of our hand whenever we enter the temple and it will run like a little girl freely over the golden paths where fruits mature, where the flowers have the smell of colors, and the children are two hundred years old. Angels with fiery wings hear the doves' flight stop on the bell tower to contemplate from their Heaven of stucco the passing of the daily light. Evangelists, the doctors of the church, saints of abominable purity with the suspended word on their lips foresee a sad Virgin posed over a moon. Deformed faces spit colorful spirals; wooden blooded Christs sleep by the clocks' pendulum. When the girl comes back to us with a mysterious smile we know she has been touched by Paradise. With silent steps she approaches to whisper in our ear a fragment of an old Nahua poem that says: "It may happen that no one tells the truth on Earth".

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