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ARTÍCULOS

Cut-Paper Figures and Nahua Conceptions of the Divine: Art and Revelation in Pantheistic Religion

Figuras de papel recortado y concepciones nahuas de lo divino: arte y revelación en la religión panteísta

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Abstract
Nahuas of the Huasteca Veracruzana, along with their Otomí (Ñähñu) and Tepehua (Hamasipiní) neighbors, evoke sacred spirit entities through the medium of cut-paper figures, which they arrange on altars and make the subject of elaborate ritual offerings, including the blood of chickens and turkeys. The cut-paper figures embody forces in the cosmos that are critically important for human well-being and reveal the pantheistic basis of Nahua religion and its foundations in ontological monism. Analysis of the Nahua system of semasiography as it is expressed in the ritual paper complex provides a new basis for understanding ancient and contemporary ritual practice, artistic production, and the wider Mesoamerican graphic communication system.

Keywords: ritual paper figures, Mesoamerican graphic communication, philosophical monism, pantheism, *el costumbre* religion

Resumen
Los nahuas de la Huasteca Veracruzana, junto con sus vecinos otomíes (ñähñu) y tepehuas (hamasipiní), evocan entidades espirituales sagradas por medio de figuras de papel cortado que colocan en altares y que son objeto de elaboradas ofrendas rituales que incluyen la sangre de pollos y pavos. Las figuras de papel cortado encarnan fuerzas en el cosmos que son de importancia crítica para el bienestar humano y revelan la base panteísta de la religión nahua y sus fundamentos en el monismo ontológico. El análisis del sistema de semasiografía nahua tal y como se expresa en el complejo del papel ritual proporciona una nueva base para comprender mejor la práctica ritual antigua y contemporánea, la producción artística y el sistema de comunicación gráfica mesoamericano.

Palabras clave: *figuras rituales de papel, comunicación gráfica mesoamericana, monismo filosófico, panteísmo, religión* el costumbre

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Introduction

Through what types of media do believers (and artists among them) reveal ineffable religious truths? Across time and space, people have chosen monumental architecture, stained glass, sculpture, painting, music, gesture, and even words in their attempt to express the inexpressible. Nahua ritual specialists of the Huasteca region in northern Veracruz, Mexico, reveal divinity through the ancient art of paper cutting. It is a technique and medium that has proved to be ritually potent for hundreds of years and perhaps millennia, enduring devastating conquest, colonial terror, war, epidemics, and official condemnation by the Catholic Church and Protestant evangelists. The Nahua are slash-and-burn farmers who engage in a near-constant round of ceremonial efforts to confront horticultural risk and human suffering. Their anthropomorphic paper figures (sometimes produced by the thousands for a single ritual event) are the central feature of offerings dedicated as part of curing, calendrical, and crop-fertility rites, which often entail arduous pilgrimages to the summits of sacred mountains to appeal for rain.

The ephemeral paper cuttings reveal tenets of a Nahua monistic philosophy and pantheistic religion, transcending symbolic, metaphoric, or metonymic dualisms by presenting the sacred directly to practitioners through ritual action. Rather than vehicles that point to meaning, the paper figures are meaningful in and of themselves as self-contained aspects of a living cosmos. The operant words to describe the relationship between these ritual art objects and the divine include *reveal, disclose, uncover, embody, unmask, manifest, divulge,* and *display*. Ritual specialists make the inexpressible incarnate through their paper cutting, and the resulting artifacts literally *unconceal* divinity to all those willing and able to see what is plainly presented before them. Study of the ritual paper complex promises to transform the way we comprehend Nahua art and artifact, deepening and expanding our cross-cultural understanding of religion and artistic expression.

Susan Gillespie (2007) clearly shows that we need to learn how to view Indigenous Mesoamerican art forms if we are to make sense of them. She argues, for example, that it is a mistake to interpret ancient bas-relief sculpture and inscribed or painted pictographs according to Western canons of perspective that we have learned as members of our particular cultures, involving factors such as intersecting planes, observer position, or dimen-

sionality. As she has shown, the remarkable ways that Mesoamerican artists have incorporated certain assumptions and esoteric cultural knowledge in their work suggests that we must view the contemporary practice of cutting ritual paper figures as something other than mere representations of spirit entities. To accomplish this goal, it is critical that we expand our own culturally conditioned ways of viewing the figures. Properly cut and arranged on an altar, the figures reveal essential truths about the cosmos to the Nahua. Given physical form and assembled by the ritual specialist, they are units of power to be directly experienced by the members of the religious community. To stand before an altar laden with the cut-paper figures is to embrace unmediated divinity.[1]

Because our discussion of *el costumbre* religion centers on philosophical monism as it relates to anthropomorphism, it would be logical to conclude that we will address the ontological turn that has been the focus of scholarly debate in anthropology over recent years. A key text initiating this theoretical development is Philippe Descola's *Beyond Nature and Culture* in which the author critiques anthropology for its culture-versus-nature dualism (2013 [2005], 85–88) and outlines four basic ontologies that characterize the world's cultures: *naturalism* (the Western dualist perspective rooted in the Enlightenment); *animism* ("the attribution by humans to nonhumans of an interiority identical to their own") (2013 [2005], 129); *totemism* (social systems where there exists "a moral and physical continuity between groups of humans and groups of nonhumans") (2013 [2005], 165–66); and *analogism* ("identification that divides up… existing beings into a multiplicity of essences, forms, and substances" that can be recomposed "into a dense network of analogies") (2013 [2005], 201). Another influential figure in the debate is Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998) who contributed the idea of "perspectivism" in which human and nonhuman subjects "apprehend reality from distinct points of view" (1998, 469). Viveiros, in expanding on the idea of animism, applied the concept originally to Amazonian cosmologies, but it has since been extended to Amerindian thought generally. Operating at the nexus of anthropology and philosophy, the argument over ontologies has become arcane and difficult

[1] These units of power are also units of meaning. As we argue, the Mesoamerican ritual paper complex constitutes an ontological–semasiographic system. We thank Jim Maffie for reading an early draft and the insights he generously shared with us (by email, November 27, 2021).

for nonspecialists to follow and may possibly involve extraneous factors such as national rivalries (e.g., Ingold 2016a, 2016b; Descola 2016).

That the concept of nature is a creation of Enlightenment thinkers not shared by a large segment of societies outside of the Western world seems commonplace knowledge within anthropology. Rather than directly engage in the debate surrounding this issue, we aim to contribute ethnographic evidence from Mesoamerica and to argue that philosophical monism lies at the heart of *el costumbre* world view and religious practice. By focusing on monism, we provide a better understanding of this little-understood, complex religion and perhaps, by extension, contribute to the resolution of wider arguments over the value of framing the inventory of the world's cultures in ontological terms. Based on our understanding of Descola's classification, Nahua ontology would fall into the analogous category, which among other things means that their ritual activities are oriented to achieving cosmic equilibrium in a world constantly in flux. But if the critique by Marshall Sahlins (2014) is correct, societies based on totemism and analogism are also animistic. We found that a type of animism does exist in Nahua religion, just as it does in virtually all the world's religions, but perhaps because the Nahua are a society classified with an analogist ontology, the people do not generally interact with nonhuman beings as if they shared human consciousness or "interiority," to use Descola's term. Instead, they see all beings and things as aspects or manifestations of a sacred living cosmos that can be engaged through ritual and induced to respond to human needs.

Systems of Graphic Communication

Our analysis takes off from a quiet revolution that is occurring among many scholars who analyze artistic production in Mesoamerica and elsewhere. Works that feature pictographs and other highly patterned presentations such as codices, figurines, pottery, textiles, baskets, and even the ancient Andean *quipu* recording devices are increasingly regarded by scholars as forming graphic communication systems designed by their Indigenous creators to share information unconstrained by time or place. These creations have traditionally been characterized as "primitive arts," or in the case of some Mexican codices, precursors to "real" writing systems. We usually think of writing or so-called glottographic means of communication as

ordered signs that reproduce language. But why define writing in such frankly ethnocentric terms? Ordered assemblages of graphs such as we find throughout the New World and beyond stand on their own and often surpass glottographic systems in their ability to communicate; for background to our discussion, we rely on Boone (1994), Mikulska (2015), Mikulska and Offner (2019), Laack (2019), and Severi (2019). When assembled as part of ritual displays, the Nahua paper figures are just such a native American graphic communication system, the study of which we believe can lead to the deeper appreciation of Indigenous philosophy and aesthetic achievement. When speaking Spanish, the Nahua call their religion *el costumbre*, replacing the orthodox article *la* with *el* to claim the meaning of the word as their own. *El costumbre* religious expression involves the construction of elaborate altars and the careful arrangement of rows upon rows of paper figures laid on top of and beneath the altar table. Ritual specialists anoint the paper figures with the blood of turkeys and chickens and then cover them with abundant coyol palm and marigold adornments. After arranging munificent offerings of food and drink atop the array, people stand before the laden altar and address the paper figures in chants and prayers.

Why cut paper? Part of the mystery of the ritual paper figures and their role in communicating deep religious and metaphysical concerns is illuminated by examining the historical record of Mesoamerica. We know from 16th-century chroniclers that handmade paper in the pre-Hispanic era was considered a sacred substance in its own right. The ancients expended enormous effort in its manufacture and politico-religious elites demanded millions of sheets of paper each year in tribute from communities throughout the region. Specialists who cut paper were important personnel in temples throughout Mesoamerica. We also know that ancestors of today's Indigenous peoples used paper for the manufacture of sacred books and priests' clothing, to decorate temples and wrap statues, and in sacrifices and divinations. The record confirms that paper was cut into strips for use in rituals, but we have little evidence that it was employed to make cutouts as actual likenesses of the pantheon of spirit entities such as people do today. Bernardino de Sahagún recorded that before Aztec merchants departed on a dangerous mission, they painted anthropomorphic images of the earth on paper with raw latex and dripped the blood of beheaded quails over them (Sahagún 1950–69 [1575–80], bk. 9: 9–11). We have some evidence that 16th-century specialists cut specific shapes from paper, although the information on this practice is sparse. From the records it

appears that for the most part ancient ritual specialists simply dripped liquid rubber or drew images on the paper (Sandstrom and Sandstrom 1986, 11–12). Unless preserved under favorable conditions, paper does not endure for long, and unfortunately few examples of the ancient bark paper (*amatl* in the Nahuatl language, borrowed into Spanish as *amate*) have survived to the present. But remarkably, some ancient specimens of paper did survive the ravages of time. José Álvaro Barrera Rivera and his coauthors (2001) describe the January 2000 discovery of Aztec paper in the excavation of cache 102 at the Templo Mayor. Affirming Sahagún's observations, archaeologists found a number of *amate* artifacts, including placards with a water-related *cara chueca* figure drawn on them.

The Spanish conquerors, recognizing the importance of paper for Native religious practice, forbade its manufacture and made it a crime for an Indigenous person to possess even a minor amount of it. The enormous preconquest trade in paper soon ceased, and papermaking in Mesoamerica came to an apparent end. Yet the use of paper for ritual purposes among Indigenous Mesoamericans was never completely eradicated. Court records from the colonial period tell of authorities surprising practitioners in the act of conducting rituals that involved paper, sometimes spattered with blood. Most of the incriminating paper was apparently cut into strips to serve as garments of the deities (Lenz 1973 [1948]; Sandstrom and Sandstrom 1986, 17–18). In 1900, University of Chicago anthropologist Frederick Starr was exploring the rugged Sierra Norte de Puebla northeast of Mexico City on horseback when he learned that papermaking had survived in certain remote Otomí villages in the region. He went in search of these craftspeople, becoming the first outsider to witness and report on *amate* paper production in three centuries (Starr 1978 [1908]). Starr saw that the paper was manufactured from the inner bark of fig trees (family Moraceae), although we now know that it was made from other plant sources as well (Sandstrom and Sandstrom 1986, 18–27).

Starr is also the first to describe Indigenous altars stacked high with paper images cut into anthropomorphic shapes. He learned that not only the craft of making paper survived but apparently so had some of the traditional rituals associated with the material. The Otomí paper figures observed by Starr had been cut using scissors just as the Nahua figures are produced today. We believe that pre-Hispanic specialists must have used obsidian blades as a cutting tool. Guy Stresser-Péan (2009, 222–25), an authority on the history and cultures of the Sierra Norte de Puebla and

of the Huasteca, speculates that the contemporary practice of cutting paper figures probably traces to the 18th century when metal scissors first became available to ritual specialists. The ritual paper complex today is shared mainly among Nahua, Otomí, and Tepehua people centered in the Sierra Norte de Puebla and southern Huasteca regions of Gulf Coast Mexico.[2]

Geography partly explains how *el costumbre* maintains its influence in the face of profound changes gripping Mexico. Living in small villages in the remote reaches of Gulf Coast Mexico, the Nahua, like their Otomí and Tepehua neighbors, are somewhat distanced from urban influences and the scrutiny of government and church officials. The hot, tropical lowland region of the southern Huasteca is a place of unparalleled beauty but at the same time covered with dense vegetation, subject to torrential rains, and crisscrossed by numerous streams and rivers. Venomous snakes remain a constant threat and people there complain of drug traffickers who apparently operate with near impunity. The ritual paper complex also flourishes in the adjacent Sierra Norte de Puebla, where the rough backcountry terrain of the Sierra Madre Oriental range is as inaccessible as the southern Huasteca. Over the centuries, as the colonial authorities stamped out the craft of papermaking and ritual uses of paper across other parts of Mesoamerica, they remained a viable tradition in these two areas. While some communities in the southern Huasteca continue to produce *amate* paper for religious observances, most *el costumbre* practitioners rely instead on mass-produced varieties for sale in regional markets.

Producing miniature figures for ritual use is ancient and widespread in Mesoamerica. Archaeologists working in the culture area have long known that small clay figurines, usually anthropomorphic, are found in abundance in their excavations. These miniatures probably played an important role in household rituals, but they have also been found in contexts apart from domestic dwellings (Marcus 1998, 2009; Brumfiel and Overholtzer 2009). Most analysts assume that they were arranged as components of altars to receive ritual treatment. The paper figures people employ in contemporary rituals may be a continuation of the uses made of clay figurines in ancient times. It is possible that ritual specialists at some point

[2] Classic works on the Huasteca and adjacent Sierra de Puebla pertinent to the study of Indigenous religious ideas and the practice of ritual paper cutting include Williams García (1963) on the Tepehua, Ichon (1973 [1969]) on the Totonac, and Dow (1986) and Galinier (1987) on the Otomí. The contributors to the volume edited by Faust and Richter (2015) offer an overview of the archaeology and history of the Huasteca region.

in history may have been motivated to substitute paper for clay as a way to hide their activities from the prying eyes of clerics and missionaries, since paper is easy to conceal and leaves no permanent trace. Even though the practice of Indigenous religion is perfectly legal in modern Mexico, we have observed a ritual specialist taking the precaution of hiding his paper figures in the house loft when a priest arrived on a rare visit to the community.

No account of Mexican handmade paper and the cut-paper figures would be complete without mentioning the Otomí community of San Pablito, Pahuatlán, in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, which has become world renowned for papermaking using the ancient techniques. Many years ago, entrepreneurs in San Pablito began selling sheets of the *amate* bark paper to Nahua artists in the distant state of Guerrero who used it to paint colorful decorative motifs originally adapted from their pottery designs (Good Eshelman 1988). These artworks have commanded an international audience among collectors and tourists. Observing the demand, craftspeople among the Otomí not only produce the bark paper sheets but some have offered examples of the ritual paper figures for sale as well. A few families in San Pablito innovated further, producing screen-fold, handwritten amate-paper books explaining in Spanish some of their religious beliefs and rituals. The paper figures and the handmade books have also become popular items in folk-art markets throughout the world (Sandstrom 1981; García Téllez 2018).

The importance of paper for pre-Hispanic peoples and its continued use today has led to an interesting speculation regarding transpacific contact between Asia and Mesoamerica. Many authorities agree that bark cloth and probably bark paper of the type used in Mesoamerica was first invented in southeast Asia. Paul Tolstoy (1963, 661) has written that the archaeological evidence points to the introduction of these materials into Mesoamerica from Asia sometime near the beginning of the first millennium B.C.E. Of equal interest is the continued use of cut paper in the religious rituals of contemporary Nung, a Tibeto-Burman people who live mainly in Vietnam and Guangxi, in southeastern China (Cauquelin 1996, cited in García Téllez 2018). Their figures strongly resemble those cut by Nahua, Otomí, and Tepehua ritual specialists, including the identical front-faced pose with the hands upraised. These similarities suggest an additional line of evidence linking east Asian cultures with peoples of the Americas. We will discuss this characteristic posture of the paper figures in more detail below.

Conceptions of Divinity

An expert practitioner or "person of knowledge" (*tlamatiquetl* in Nahuatl) can create paper images of just about any being or thing, including what people in the Euro-American tradition consider inanimate objects. Nahua, Otomí, and Tepehua ritual specialists portray most of their ritual paper figures as front-facing silhouettes of the human body with their arms raised up alongside the head and the hands and fingers clearly delineated. Frontal portrayal has a long history in Mesoamerican art, and it is nearly always associated in some way with the earthly realm according to Cecilia Klein (1976). Individual figures can be differentiated by their identifying head gear or by distinctive cuts within or along the sides of the body. Many are created with indications of clothing items that include not only their headdress (or crown, cap, or other hat-like headgear), but also pants, dresses, shoes, and frequently a rectangular *jorongo* or *huipil* embellished with pockets or fringe.

The paper figures we have selected to illustrate our arguments about pantheism and monism were cut between 1998 and 2007 by the master Nahua ritual specialist Encarnación Téllez Hernández, known widely by his nickname Cirilo. Probably in his eighties when he died in 2012, Cirilo passed on a lifetime of knowledge about *el costumbre* religion to his Nahua and Otomí followers. We observed how he spent substantial time and effort imparting ritual techniques and particularly the art of paper cutting to them. The paper figures that he and other Nahua ritual specialists produce most commonly include the hordes of dangerous, disease-causing winds cut as part of cleansing–curing procedures, including such entities as *tlacatecolotl* and *tlacatecolotl cihuatl* (man owl and man owl woman, or *hombre búho* and *hombre búho mujer*), *miquiliztli* (death or *muerte*), *miccatzitzin ehecatl* (corpses wind or *viento de cadáveres*), and all manner of harmful agents of disease, death, and misfortune. In *el costumbre* belief many of the disease-causing winds have direct counterparts among salutary spirit entities. However, ideas of absolute good and evil are absent in Nahua philosophical thought (Sandstrom and Sandstrom 2021). Rather than being evil in the Western sense, harmful spirit entities are threatening in the same way that a virus is malignant. Malevolent winds can be coaxed to save a life and normally beneficent entities may

withhold life-giving resources. Figure 1 illustrates a sample of paper figures created by Cirilo of disease-causing agents (see Figure 1).[3]

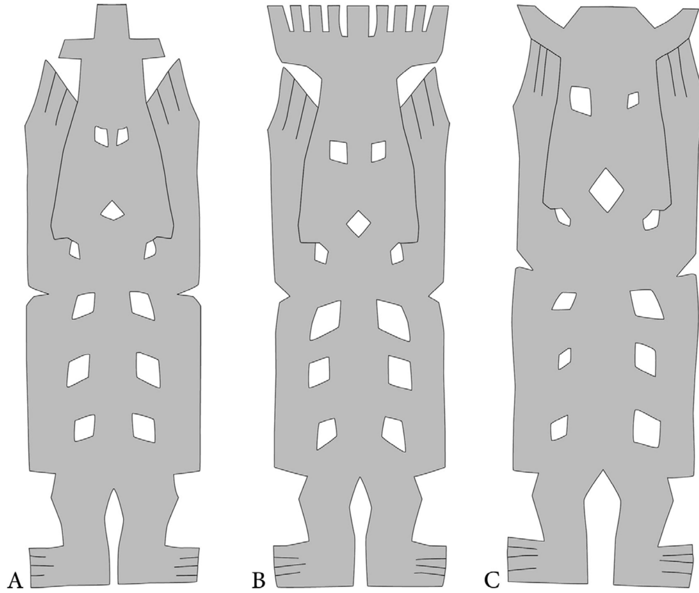

Figure 1. Disease-causing winds:
A) cross wind–*mal aire de la cruz*–*caruz ehecatl*; B) earth wind–*viento de la tierra*–*tlalli ehecatl*; C) water wind–*viento del agua*–*atl ehecatl*.
Drawings by Ana Laura Ávila-Myers

Also given form in paper are the numerous salutary spirit entities linked to crop fertility: water manifested in myriad forms, such as clouds, rain, dew, hail, and so forth; the full inventory of seeds, predominantly beans, chili, maize, or squash; physical, celestial, and meteorological phenomena such as earth, fire, sun (embodied as cross or flag), thunder, lightning, or beneficial winds that bring the rain. A sample of these entities is illustrated in Figure 2 (see Figure 2).

Added to the crop-fertility spirit pantheon are paper figures of witnesses and guardian stars, along with the living ritual implements that play

[3] Graphic artist Ana Laura Ávila-Myers created these vector drawings of the ritual paper figures for our forthcoming study of Nahua pilgrimage (Sandstrom and Sandstrom 2022).

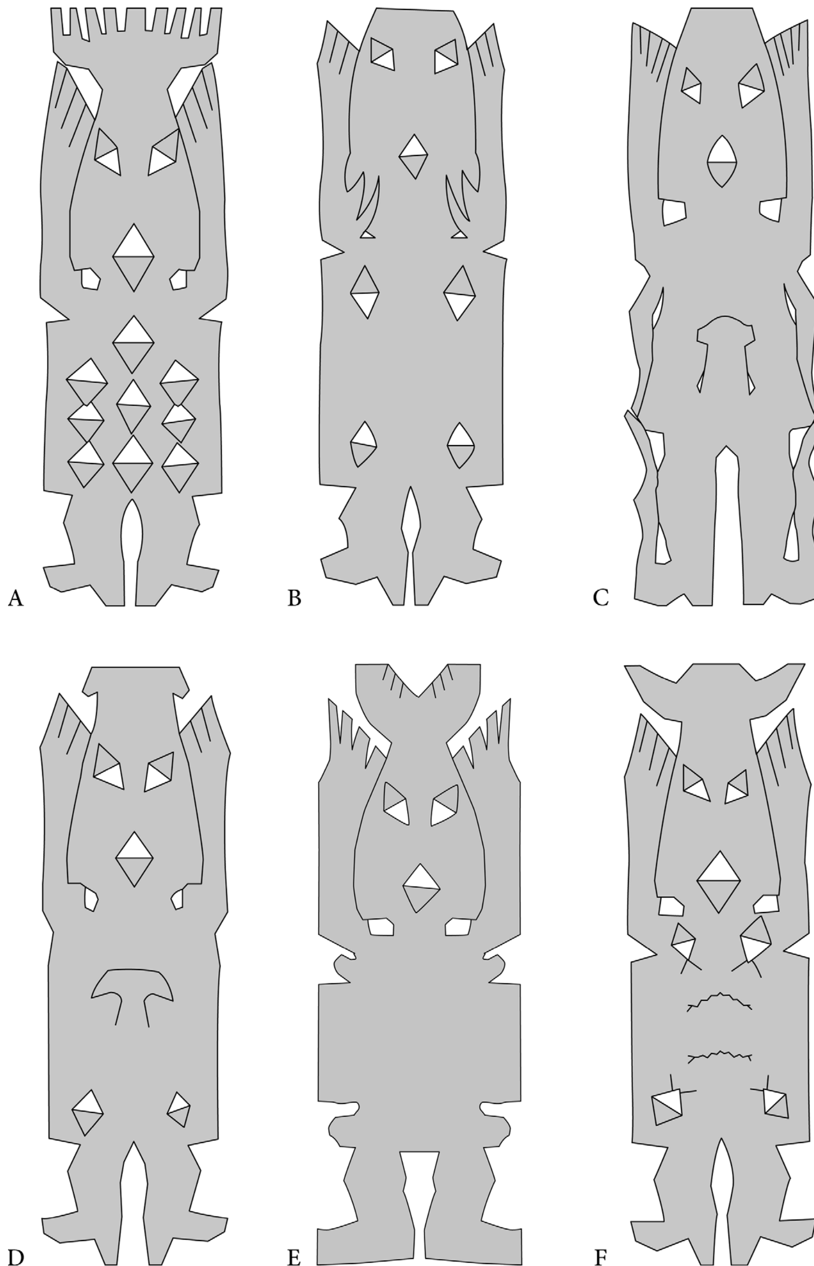

Figure 2. Spirit entities related to crop fertility: A) earth–*tierra*–*tlalli*; B) fire–*lumbre*–*tlixihuantzin*; C) lightning–*rayo* (*relámpago*)–*tlapetlani*; D) thunder–*trueno*–*tlatomoni*; E) cloud–*nube*–*mixtli*; F) water dweller (siren)–*agua* (*la sirena*)–*apanchaneh*

important roles in *el costumbre* offerings, including sacred walking sticks, the altar itself, bells, and keys (several of which are illustrated in Figure 3).

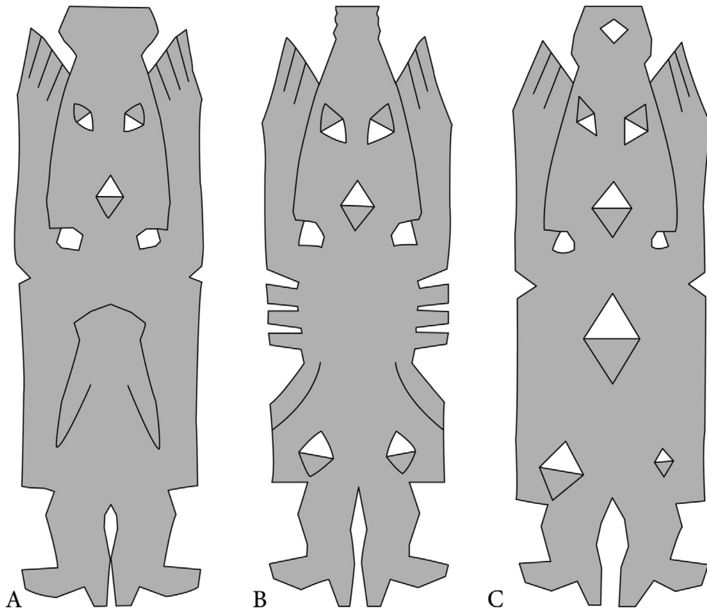

Figure 3. Ritual implements: A) walking stick–*bastón*–*tlanahuatilcuatopilli*; B) key–*llave*; C) witness–*testigo*–*tlamocuitlahuihquetl*

Numerous Catholic saints have also been added to the Nahua pantheon and inventory of paper figures. The identities of certain of these consecrated beings have been merged with those of named hills, mountains, and other geographic features prominent in the sacred landscape. Other saints are distinctly *not* hills, as Cirilo averred, but are "*dioses*" or "gods." Illustrated in Figure 4 is an example of one such saint, Santa Juanita, who is not associated with a hill, an example of a generalized sacred hill (what Cirilo called "*cualquier cerro*" or "any hill"), and one hill among the many that are associated with particular saints (see Figure 4).

In our limited space we do not address how ritual specialists use color to indicate the origin or direction from which spirit entities emanate, nor how they calculate the particular identities and numbers of figures required for different ritual occasions.[4] Nahua practitioners say that the paper figures

[4] See Gómez Martínez (2002) for information on these topics.

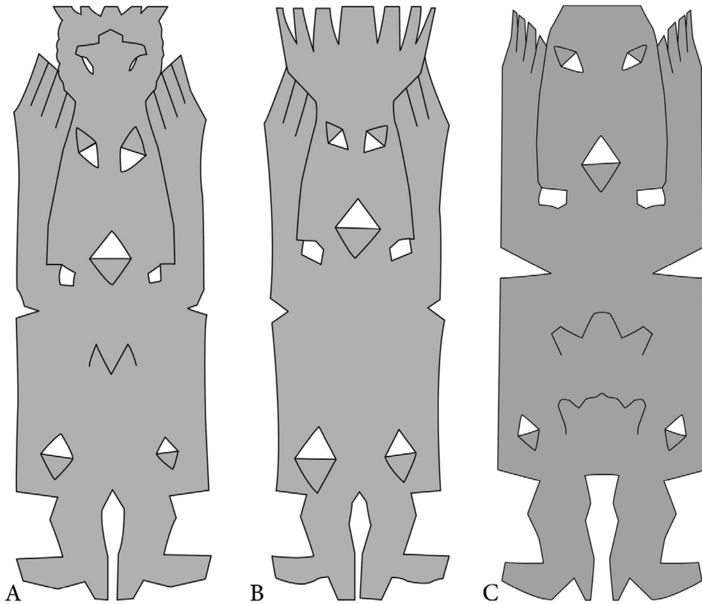

Figure 4. Catholic saints and hills: A) Santa Juanita; B) hill–*cerro*–*tepetl*; C) Santa Úrsula hill–*cerro* Santa Úrsula

are the essence or heat soul (*tonalli*) of the various entities they embody. The *tonalli* soul is linked to the sun (*tonatiuh*), which many Nahua believe imparts its life-giving heat and light energy to animate everything in the universe. The paper figures themselves may directly receive the offerings that people dedicate or they may act as intermediaries, transmitting them to other, more removed spirit entities. In either case, the paper figures reveal "the ubiquitous forces that rule the world" as León García Garagarza (2012, 196) writes. In Nahuatl, the paper figure itself is called *tlatectli* ("something cut") or sometimes *amatlatectli* ("paper cutting"), while the embodiment in paper of a particularly powerful spirit entity can also be termed *teoamatlatectli* ("sacred paper cutting"), according to Nahua anthropologist Arturo Gómez Martínez (2002, 75). When speaking Spanish, people call the figures *recortes* ("cutouts" or "cuttings") or *muñecos de papel* ("paper dolls").

Each figure has a name and plays a role in myths and stories recounted by the Nahua. The greatest time-consuming activity in preparing for a major ritual offering is producing the requisite number of these paper figures, requiring many days and nights of work for the ritual specialists who cut the paper and their assistants who fold the sheets and arrange the finished items for

ritual deployment. After the skilled ritual specialists create the cuttings, helpers carefully fold open the V–cuts that define the iconographic features of the figure's body, the mouth, and especially the eyes. When we asked why they do so, a respected ritual specialist responded, "So they can see." The dangerous winds have no such flaps to open; instead, the cuts demarking the eyes, mouth, and ribs of this class of spirit entities reveal lifeless beings associated with death.

Each figure is actually a pair of cuttings, formed of two layers of paper held together by the folded flaps. They are counted out precisely into sets of twenty typically identical cuttings, and the helpers then lay them out in two neat rows on a decorated rectangle of paper called a *petlatl* in Nahuatl, the same term for the woven-palm sleeping mat that has come into Spanish as *petate*. The paper figures cut by Cirilo measure about 5–6 x 17–18 cm on average, and the *petates* are about 24 x 35 cm. Helpers stack the finished assemblages one on top of another to form bundles of 4 or 24 *petates*. For rituals requiring travel over long distances (such as pilgrimages to sacred mountain peaks), the large stack of paper *petates* is wrapped securely in a fresh, new palm *petate* for transport. Over the course of the sacred journey, the pilgrims stop at selected locations, unwrap the bundle, and select out the requisite number of paper *petates* of particular paper figures so that each can receive ritual treatment. The identities of spirit entities required and the sequence in which they are deployed are revealed through dreams experienced by the lead ritual specialist.

Polytheism and Pantheism

The inventory and identities of ritual paper figures gives the strong impression that Nahua religion is polytheistic, based upon an organized hierarchy of spirit entities each with its own name, character, and domain of control. This impression is reinforced when people ascribe agency to entities such as *tonatiuh* (sun), *tlalli* (earth), *cintli* (maize), *zahhuan* (a regional variation of the Catholic saint San Juan Bautista, regarded as the owner of water), or *tlacatecolotl* (the figure of man owl, the fearsome entity that leads the souls of the dead). In the published literature, names for gods or deities such as earth, water, lightning, thunder, and so forth, seem to label what most Euro-Americans would regard as elements of the natural world. Spanish friars who first encountered Aztec society described the religion as polytheistic based on their familiarity with Greek and Roman religions and that

characterization has never been fully challenged (Pohl and Lyons 2010, 13–21; Olivier 2016). However, the polytheism label never fit the Aztec religion very well nor does it adequately describe contemporary Nahua beliefs and practices.

A distinctive feature of Nahua spirit entities not usually found in polytheistic religions is their unstable identities, which constantly shift and blend into one another. For example, in myths from Nahua oral tradition, *tonantzin* ("our sacred mother"), the earth-fertility figure who gave birth to the crop seeds and who is identified with the Virgin of Guadalupe, readily exchanges identity with that of *apanchaneh* ("water dweller"), who sprinkles the milpas with life-giving rain and gives humankind the gifts of salt and fish (Sandstrom 2019). Because their identities are not fixed, ritual specialists are able to envision in the medium of paper any number of spirit entities as combinations of existing figures or wholly new ones. Organized into a non-hierarchical scheme that reflects a flexible order and lacks absolute categories of good and evil, the spirit entities exist in infinite variety, and each combines beneficent and malevolent characteristics. On closer inspection, it becomes clear that the Nahua organize their spirit pantheon according to a very different set of principles and rules from that of polytheism.[5]

It is our contention that the way these spirit entities are embodied in paper provides clues to their nature and to core principles of Nahua philosophy and religion. Regardless of the figure's identity and with rare exception, the miniature human body is the central core of each cutting. The Nahua, like other Indigenous groups in Mesoamerica, employ the human body as a vehicle for conceptualizing reality in many different contexts and we know that the practice is ancient. Among the Olmecs (1400–400 B.C.E.), Karl Taube (2006, 302) has shown that "the human body served as a graphic model of the cosmos." Alfredo López Austin (1988 [1980]) in his comprehensive and influential treatment of the place of the body in Aztec thought has sensitized scholars to its importance among ancient and contemporary peoples.

Bodies are what make human beings alive and its near-universal appearance in the paper figure complex of *el costumbre* religion means that for the Nahua all aspects and manifestations of the world are living entities:

[5] We persist in using the term "pantheon" (following Hunt 1977) to describe the seemingly infinite configuration of spirit entities of *el costumbre* religion without implying that the system is polytheistic.

the cosmos itself is alive. People see every object and entity as animate and part of a larger whole interwoven at a fundamental level. This system of thought is incompatible with polytheism with its hierarchy of individual deities controlling specific realms. The Nahuatl name for the living cosmos is *totiotzin*, from the morphemes *to-* ("our") + *tio-* ("divinity" or "deity") + *-tzin* (the honorific), rendered "our honored divinity." The name is based on the word *teotl* (alternately spelled, *tiotl*), often translated as *dios* or God. But it is a very different conception of deity from that of a theistic religion such as Spanish Catholicism. In Nahua monistic philosophy all things, beings, or conditions—people, animals, plants, spirit entities, directions, rainstorms, realms of the cosmos, and so forth—are aspects of *totiotzin*, the supreme entity that is coterminous with existence itself. Simply put, *totiotzin* is everything there is. We have come to appreciate that for the Nahua this concept is not a deity in the Western sense of a supernatural being imbued with consciousness, will, agency, or judgmental powers. It is instead *nontheistic* (if by theistic we mean an entity that takes a direct interest and routinely intervenes in human affairs) and *non-anthropomorphic* (in that it transcends human attributes or characteristics). Yet, paradoxically, the manifestations or aspects of *totiotzin* embodied in the paper figures are anthropomorphic and their creators conceive of them as beings with human qualities who are interested in what people do, who share human tastes, and who judge human behavior according to a set of rules.[6] In paper form, they may act as intercessors or interlocutors between divinity and the world of human beings. They are simultaneously the messengers and the message, the parts that communicate with the whole of which they are themselves a part. Precisely how *totiotzin* connects to people through entities that possess human forms and human appetites constitutes a central mystery of Nahua religion.

Difficult to describe because nothing exists outside of its all-encompassing presence, *totiotzin* is everywhere and yet requires effort to approach or even recognize. We can affirm that although this entity does not seem to have human attributes, many Nahua believe *totiotzin* is capable of being disrupted or disturbed by the actions of human beings. It can also be calmed and brought into balance through the ritual work of dedicating offerings. Like the ecosystem we inhabit, *totiotzin* is impersonal, balanced in delicate equilibrium, outside of human consciousness, and critical to human sur-

[6] See the insightful treatise by Guthrie (1993) on anthropomorphism.

vival and well-being. We conclude that the Nahua regard *totiotzin* as a kind of energy or power source that surges throughout the cosmos. This energetic potential can be found in every particle and being, but it is concentrated in abundance at certain places: within impressive geographic features like caves, mountain tops, and crags; where water flows from springs and pools; in astral bodies and cyclical celestial phenomena; in the potent words of a chant; in the charismatic personality of a ritual specialist; in a beautifully decorated altar; in a finely wrought paper cutout; and in the vigor of the growing maize plant. But appearances are deceiving. What in human daily experience seems to be many is actually one: everything in the cosmos comes down to *totiotzin*. Yet because *totiotzin* is elusive, offerings of food, libation, music, and incense can be understood as an effort on the part of the Nahua to accommodate and interact with this universal force. While people may attempt to gain its attention and make contact with this presence in everyday life, *totiotzin* becomes especially accessible when sought in the context of ritual.

It is for such occasions that the ritual specialists conceive entirely new paper cuttings and reconfigure traditional ones. They innovate in order to address new uncertainties and master techniques for coping with change and ambiguity, and by so doing they reveal yet more of the concealed aspects of *totiotzin*. The human figure at the center illustrates in a concrete way that the spirit entities are temporary manifestations or aspects of a living cosmos. Embodied in paper, they are called forth as required from the great unity. The fate of most of the cut-paper figures following the ritual offering parallels that of the abstract concepts they incorporate. Once created out of a common medium to serve a specific need, they are either destroyed or left behind on altars to disintegrate, disappearing back into the vast singularity from which the ritual specialist extracted them.

Observing and asking about these characteristics of the spirit entities as well as studying the design elements of the paper cutouts have led us to conclude that Nahua religion is a form of pantheism—a belief system in which the living cosmos itself is the deity (Sandstrom and Sandstrom 1986, 275–80; Sandstrom 1991, 238–79). Ritual specialists cut the enormous variety of paper figures to express the distinct but mutable aspects of this single reality. Similar to the pantheistic religions of Buddhism and Hinduism, Nahua ontological monism and its corresponding pantheon explodes into innumerable avatars, incarnations, embodiments, and concrete manifestations. These all reflect specific significant aspects of reality that serve

to guide people as they maneuver through life. The view that Mesoamerican religions are pantheistic is not new but the idea has slowly gained traction. Pantheism was first suggested in a 1910 article by Hermann Beyer (1965 [1910], 398) and developed more fully by Eva Hunt, who brought it to our attention in her remarkable work *The Transformation of the Hummingbird: Cultural Roots of a Zinacantecan Mythical Poem* (1977). Miguel León-Portilla also previously entertained Beyer's hypothesis in his analysis of Ometeotl, the Aztec lord of duality, in his *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Aztec Mind* (1963). We continued to make the case for pantheism in our study of the Nahua, Otomí, and Tepehua paper figure complex in *Traditional Papermaking and Paper Cult Figures of Mexico* (1986). Subsequently, John Monaghan (2000) in a comprehensive review essay presented the mounting anthropological evidence for pantheism and its theological underpinnings in Mesoamerica. The idea is developed most thoroughly by philosopher James Maffie in *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion* (2014), and it is this masterful synthesis that frames our further discussion.

León-Portilla (1963, 99, 102–03), however, has raised three objections to characterizing Aztec religion (and by implication, contemporary Nahua religion) as pantheistic. In the first place, he finds the label imprecise and argues that "it clouds rather than clarifies" (1963, 96). On the contrary, we have found the highly abstract concept of *totiotzin* to be difficult to understand but the idea of pantheism to be a clear and straightforward way to conceive of this metaphysical unity (for background, see Levine 1994; Maffie 2014, 79–136). León-Portilla further objects when claiming that "pantheism would make little sense" (1963, 102) given the transcendent nature of the supreme deity that he called Ometeotl, the ancient equivalent to the contemporary *totiotzin*. According to León-Portilla, this divinity, although imperceptible, was thought by the Aztecs to be distinct from the world and material existence, and not identical to it. While contemporary Nahuas may talk about *totiotzin* as if it is self-contained and independent from material existence, that does not mean that they conceive of divinity as distinct from the world. In point of fact, they reinforce through word and deed that divinity and reality are isomorphic. In order to communicate, both language and graphic systems must sometimes extract and objectify divinity, but such an operation in no way implies that these expressions and properties of divinity are therefore distinct from the world.

Finally, León-Portilla (1963, 99, 102–03) writes that the pervasive organizing principle of duality in Aztec culture is incompatible with the monistic philosophy underlying pantheism.[7] The Nahua people of our study certainly divide experience into binaries of day–night, moist–dry, ordered–disordered, life–death, and male–female, among many other such examples. How can such dichotomies be reconciled with ontological monism? Engaging a concept he calls "dual-aspect monism," Maffie (2014, 13, 48, 137–40, 169–70) demonstrates how both anci2ent and contemporary Nahua process metaphysics is fundamentally monistic *precisely because of its apparent duality*. He makes the convincing case that what on the surface are opposing realities in fact derive from a common substrate. The Nahuatl verbs *namiqui* and *namictia* convey a broad range of meanings including to meet, to find, to join, to marry, or to even things up (2014, 143–48). Oppositional dualities are really clashing *inamic* pairs in a process Maffie terms "agonistic *inamic* unity," a mixed Nahuatl-English phrase that he defines as "the continual and continuous cyclical struggle (*agon*) of paired opposites, polarities, or dualities" (2014, 137). Although he was concerned with explaining Aztec philosophy and process metaphysics, he could have been writing about the Nahua today when he states:

> The cyclical back-and-forth tug-of-war between *inamic* partners combined with the alternating, temporary dominance of one *inamic* over its partner constitutes and hence explains the genesis, diversity, movement, and momentary ordering of the cosmos. Each moment in this back-and-forth, cosmic tug-of-war consists of the temporary dominance of one or the other *inamic* within a pair, and therefore represents a temporary imbalance between the two (Maffie 2014, 138, italics ours).

Thus, in Nahua philosophy, what appear to be fundamental and incompatible divisions of reality are polarities within the same state of being, striving for dominance in a world constantly in motion.

By way of summary, the apparent instability of both the ancient and contemporary Nahua pantheons has led religious studies scholar Isabel Laack to write that

> the best interpretation to make sense of this extremely complex and intricate pantheon characterized by fluidity and polysemy is to understand the deities as realiza-

[7] Compare Furst (2001, 344–45); Miller and Taube (2015 [1993], 81–82).

> tions and epitomes of particular forces, essences, or qualities moving through the cosmos. As such, the deities were different aspects of the same pantheist metaphysical essence—*teotl*, as Maffie argued—unfolding and manifesting in a kaleidoscope of facets. Particular qualities or specific clusters of energies were merely singled out and imagined as deity personae for ritual, iconographic, analytical, and pedagogical reasons (Laack 2019, 312).

Nahua anthropologist Abelardo de la Cruz also writes about how the pantheistic conception of reality extends not only to the world but to human beings as well:

> A Nahua person is just a single piece of the Nahua universe. Each element of nature is connected to all the others. In the Nahua universe, all elements of nature are intertwined, and therefore what exists in nature belongs to a homogeneous whole. Christian elements may also be included in Nahua religion, but what happens in many cases is that at the time they were incorporated, these elements were given a divergent use and meaning from that of their religion of origin (Cruz 2017, 272).

Ritual specialist Cirilo eloquently summarized the relationship of human beings to this convergence of elements making up the cosmos when he told us the following:

> God is one with the earth, one with the place where we were born in this dawn, where we came to alight in this dawn. Nobody came to be well born or privileged simply by chance on this earth. We always had to offer blood for this earth. So, with that, we also request something fair and just from God. With that we also dedicate an earth offering, so that we will thrive. With that we are given our earth, our roots, to be able to live. And for that reason, the earth and God have given us strength. God watches over us, Our Honored Father–Totahtzin–San José guards us, Our Honored Mother–Tonantzin–Guadalupe cares for us—all of them are witness-guardians in this dawn. It was long ago that the ancestors established the precedent of this ritual practice, and for this reason, the practice will never come to an end. All exists because of the sun—everything is because the sun is alive. Our lord God always wants to have a lighted candle, either on a Sunday or on a Wednesday. Let a candle be lit for our God, for our earth. That is how we live, how we were born, how we are working—as it should be.[8]

[8] The ritual specialist's statement was recorded in 1998 by videographer Benjamin Marín López of the Universidad Veracruzana. A downloadable audio recording, with Nahuatl tran-

Note how the ritual specialist asserts that “God watches over us” indirectly through intercessors such as the Virgin of Guadalupe and Saint Joseph. The aspects or manifestations of *totiotzin* embodied in the paper cuttings, however, do take an active interest in human affairs and it is to them that people dedicate the ritual offerings. The exchange underscores the idea that the cosmos itself is a nontheistic divinity, approachable through its specific but temporary manifestations. The ritual specialist addresses Totiotzin–Dios–God as synonymous with the sun, earth, and other natural phenomena that reveal the expanse of the sacred cosmos. While *totiotzin* is everywhere, it makes its presence felt most clearly through the unmediated experience of what in the West is called nature. The paper figures are instruments for revealing deeper truth, much as telescopes or microscopes allow us to experience the reality of distant galaxies and unseen biota.

Related Research Findings

Ideas about monism and pantheism have been anticipated in recent studies by anthropologists and other researchers who focus on the history and contemporary ethnography of Mesoamerica beyond the Huastec region. The following brief review covers only a sample of the work exhibiting this trajectory. Daniele Dehouve (2015, 53) sees metaphor and metonym as

scription and draft Spanish translation, has been deposited at the Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America, available after free registration at https://ailla.utexas.org/; see Sandstrom and Sandstrom (1998). The statement by Cirilo, delivered in Nahuatl with Spanish borrowings, was transcribed and translated by Abelardo de la Cruz and Alberta Martínez Cruz following the IDIEZ system of Huastecan Nahuatl orthography in Sullivan et al. (2016) and IDIEZ entries in the *Online Nahuatl Dictionary* at https://nahuatl.uoregon.edu/. The excerpt can be heard on Tape 1, counter 00:02:43–00:03:57 (AILLA resource ID: 284722): “Dios cetzin tlaltepactli, cetzin campa ticahuanqueh pan ni tlatlanextli, campa tihuetzicoh pan ni tlatlanextli. Axacah para cualli huetzico ipan ni tlaltepactli. Ziempreh titlaezhuihqueh pan ni tlaltepactli. Para nopanoh no timotlahtlaniah ce mahuiztli. Nopanoh no titemacah ce ofrendah pan tlalli para quehcatzan timozcaltiah. Nopanoh techmaca totlaltepactli, tonelhuayo, para queniuhcatzan tiitztozceh. Huan yeca techmacatoc huerzah tlaltepactli huan Dios. Dios techmocuitlahuia, techmocuitlahuia Totahtzin San José, huan techmocuitlahuia inin Tonantzin Guadalupe—nochi inihhuantin tlamocuitlahuianih ipan ni tlatlanextli. Antes quemman mochiuhqui inin tlamantli quemman inihhuantin quitlalihqueh ni la mueztrah, huan yeca la mueztrah axquemman tlami. Ca nochi ca tonatiuh oncah—nochi ca tonatiuh eltoc. Toteucco Dios ziempre monequi ce zerah ma tlatlato pan ce dia domingoh o ce dia miercolez. Ma tlatlato ce zerahtzin para nueztro Dios, para nueztra tierrah. Azi vivimoz, azi nacimoz, azi eztamoz trabahandoh—como ze debe zer.”

fundamental ways of thinking about the world and finds among contemporary Nahua of Guerrero that maize plants are simultaneously metaphors and metonyms of the human body. However, if Nahua philosophy is monistic, as we maintain, people may very well see the relationship of their bodies to their major crop not as metaphorical but rather one of identity at a fundamental level. Dehouve, although she uses the language of ontological dualism in her interpretation, recognizes that the Nahua see maize and human flesh as isomorphic and thereby anticipates what we have found in the Huasteca. Writing about 16th-century Aztecs, Alessia Frassani (2016) concludes from her discussion of the deity impersonator *teixiptla* that the songs, dances, and properly arrayed costume of the performer reach beyond symbolism and metaphor. She writes that from the Aztec perspective, these attributes, in fact, "are the god" (Frassani 2016, 443). The *teixiptla* performer does not stand for something else but rather manifests the deity itself. Perig Pitrou (2015, 2016, 2017), working with the contemporary Mixe, suggests that we overcome difficulties of studying religious ideology and behavior by seeing rituals as structured events between human and nonhuman persons. Ritual is best understood not by focusing directly on these agents but rather on the interactions among them. For the Mixe, personhood extends out to include what some would label in the West objects or processes of nature. The aim of these interchanges is to achieve pragmatic ends such as curing a disease or increasing crop yield. In short, just as for the Nahua of the Huasteca, the Mixe appear to embrace monism as the foundation of their ritual strategies. Pitrou translates the name of a major Mixe deity as "The One Who Makes Live" (2016, 467) or "He Who Makes Being Alive" (2017, 362), which appears to be an animating force similar to the Nahua concept of Our Honored Divinity–Totiotzin.

In their study of Maya sculpture, Stephen Houston and David Stuart (1998) state that the stone images are "more than inert, inanimate objects" and that they interact with human beings based on "shared ontological properties, in which sculpted stone attains a vitality commensurate with that of living actors" (Houston and Stuart 1998, 88). Still, the authors skirt monism in framing their explanation for the relationship between the Maya and their statues, falling back on the idea that statues are best seen as persons, that is, nonhuman entities with which humans interact. In a similar vein, Sarah Jackson (2019) takes a personhood approach in her study of Maya archaeological objects painted with human faces. She interprets these

artifacts as nonhuman persons in the Maya definition of the term rather than as aspects of a sacred cosmos sharing substance with human beings. Her goal is similar to Pitrou's, namely, to examine "how personhood operates between and among multiple entities" (Jackson 2019, 33). From our perspective, monism would appear in each of these cases to offer a more parsimonious explanation.

Allen Christenson (2008), in conducting research among the K'iche' Maya in Guatemala, recorded the words of a *nab'eysil* or ritual specialist as he made an appeal to an important spirit entity named Martín, "patron deity of life, maize, and sacred mountains" (Christenson 2008, 96). The ritual specialist, arrayed in Martín's clothing, performed a dance to renew the world and during the performance vanished into the darkness. Afterwards the ritual specialist informed the ethnographer, "I was not really here with you. I was in their world [i.e., "where the gods and sacred ancestors dwell"]. They filled my soul with their presence and guided my steps" (2008, 96). Christenson wrote of the incident that "the dance was not just a symbol of the rebirth of the world, but a genuine creative act in which time folded back on itself" (2008, 96). He concluded, "[i]t is not that the *nab'eysil* priest *became* his ancestors or danced *with* them. For him, the ancestors are an ever-present part of who he is because their blood is also his" (2008, 97, emphasis the author's). In sum, the ritual specialist apparently saw himself as sharing substance with his ancestors and from the perspective of monism, with everything in the cosmos. Like the Aztec *ixiptla*, by dressing and behaving properly, the ritual specialist was able to focus his being by entering into a specific relationship with his forebearers and thereby partake of the same essence and identity. We believe this behavior reflects a monistic view of reality very likely shared by people throughout Mesoamerica.

In discussing the links between Huichol ritual and art, Johannes Neurath (2013) identifies cases where different kinds of entities share a common essence or substance such as we might expect in a monistic philosophical system. He finds that art productions are alter egos of ritual specialists that in themselves have life and power (Neurath 2013, 25). He further states: "[r]itual objects do not simply 'represent,' but tend to 'present' powerful beings; that is to say, artistic creation, besides offering us figurations that many times can be read on a symbolic plane, engender creatures with life and will" (2013, 59; translation ours). As a further example, the author makes this point about Huichol masks: "[t]hese pieces are more

than images; they themselves are the gods that manifest themselves during ritual processes" (2013, 106; translation ours).

In her study of Nahua ritual art, Catharine Good finds that "[o]bjects have [the] capacity [to generate social relationships] because, in accord with local cultural logic, the vital force or energy of people is transmitted and flows, crystallizing in the objects that they are able to offer as gifts" (Good 2010, 26; translation ours). Indeed, she affirms (2010, 27–28) that Nahua people in Guerrero regard musical instruments, saints' images, and maize cobs as living beings, all of which accords with a monistic philosophy. In his study of Tepehuan (O'dam) sacred arrows, Antonio Reyes (2010, 151) finds that such examples of ritual art are both containers and personifications of human and nonhuman beings. For agricultural rituals, the arrows become the ritual specialists, founding ancestors, and fathers or mothers of families and the community (Reyes 2010, 157). Feathered staffs, far more than symbols of authority, are themselves considered to be deities (Reyes 2010, 159, 162). The author concludes that "O'dam arrows are objects strongly charged with 'agency,' mediating a large number of social relationships, and as such they participate in a system of action with the clear intention of changing the world" (Reyes 2010, 161; translation ours). In a recent study of Akatek Maya pilgrimages in Guatemala, Jan Kapusta concludes (without specifically referencing monism) that what Euro-Americans consider natural phenomena are for the Akatek "not mere physical objects or symbols… [but] are live body-like as well as social-like persons" (Kapusta 2022, 189).

Offering a final example of research findings that anticipate our own, David Lorente Fernández (2020) has significantly clarified for Western researchers ideas that Nahuas of Texcoco have regarding bodies, souls, and the animating principles that make human beings alive. Although a difficult topic for non-Indigenous investigators, Lorente Fernández has described an assortment of animating entities found within each person that may be organized and divided in different ways depending on the context and interests of the individual providing the information. People say the body itself is a container or envelope enclosing souls or life forces, and it is the body that gives shape to these entities that in turn create a human being. In other words, the soul reflects the contours and shape of the body, and not the reverse (Lorente Fernández 2020, 156). In our understanding of ontological monism, we would say that the body, as a physical object, is itself a manifestation of *totiotzin* and therefore an aspect of the sacred

cosmos. As part of the living universe it contains concentrations or distillations of *totiotzin* that provide the spirit mechanisms and energy sources generating human life and animation. Regarding the human soul, Lorente Fernández writes, "[i]n place of speaking of discrete entities, distinguishable by forms, attributes, and functions, it would perhaps be more correct to refer to a single animated system or circuit that puts into play a dynamic between the unity of the complex and the fragmentation and multiplicity of its components" (Lorente Fernández 2020, 132, translation ours). In sum, from the Nahua perspective a human being operates like the cosmos itself in miniature, radiating energy, vitality, and consciousness from a central, life-giving source.

The ethnographic and archaeological studies we briefly review document cases throughout Mesoamerica where objects and beings normally considered to be separate entities from the Western perspective in fact share substance, life force, and vitality, which is what allows people to interact with them. We now turn to the paper figures themselves in order to place these ritual objects in the larger context of pantheism that lies at the heart of Mesoamerican religious systems.

Scaling the Human Body

Many Indigenous Mesoamerican cultures fashion larger- or smaller-than-life renditions of "culturally perceived realities or categories" through a mechanism Evon Vogt (1976, 11) identified as scaling. The Nahua clearly engage in the practice and we believe that scaling provides insight into the nature of the paper figure complex. The Nahua altar (*mesa* in Spanish, *tlaixpamitl* in Nahuatl) is a simple wooden table or platform of sticks with an arch erected over it. The structure reflects a layered view of the cosmos with the arch reproducing the vault of the sky (*ilhuicactli*), the tabletop as the earth's surface (*tlaltepactli*), and the area beneath the altar incorporating both earth as an entity (*tlalli*) and the regions beneath the earth's surface (*tlaltzintlan*) including the underworld (*mictlan*, place of the dead). The altar is thus a scaled-down version of the layered cosmos itself. Such miniaturization can be found in another focal point of Nahua ritual life: the wooden box displayed on house altars in which *el costumbre* devotees safeguard an assemblage of dressed paper figures of the seeds. People say the earth mother *tonantzin* gave birth to the seeds in a cave near

the summit of a sacred mountain. The box (sometimes painted blue to associate it with water) is that cave in miniature, and its place of prominence recalls how ritual specialists from the distant past lured the seeds into the villages so they can support food production. As a further example of reduction scaling, ethnographers working in Nahua communities in the southern Huasteca and the Sierra Norte de Puebla have reported that people conceive of the traditional dwelling as replicating in miniature the expanse of the universe: the house beams and braces are named for constellations and the cooking fire within it embodies the sun (Lok 1987; Lupo 1995, 177). Of course, the paper figures themselves are miniature embodiments of much larger objects and processes. This type of scaling is ancient, judging from the ubiquity of prehistoric clay figurines noted earlier.

Scaling in the opposite direction is also common. People in many Mesoamerican cultures envision the earth as a gigantic human body that is highly attuned to peoples' activities (Monaghan 2000, 27). The head of the earth is the mountaintops, its body is the earth's surface, and its feet are anchored in earth's interior, while the soil constitutes the earth's flesh, the rocks its bones, and water its blood. Some people also believe that sacred mountains share sexual identities with humans (García Garagarza 2012, 199). Nahua men treat the earth respectfully as if it were a living being by dedicating offerings in compensation for burning and penetrating it with digging sticks during planting. At funeral rituals, amends are made for the times when the deceased scorched the earth by clearing fields or making cooking fires. In this view, the earth is sentient and requires offerings such as food and tobacco that people similarly enjoy.

People also conceive of the sky as a living being in the form of a human body, lying with its head in the west and feet extending to the east (Reyes García and Christensen 1976, 127). On a less-grand scale, they conceive of the maize plant as the template for the human form: the tassel its hair, the stalk its body, and the roots its feet (Sandstrom 2009 [1998]). In Nahua belief, human beings take their physical form from the consumption of maize. People say that the dried maize plant standing in the field ready to harvest is the *ilamatl*, an old lady carrying in her arms the infant ear of maize wrapped in its dried swaddling leaves. Much in Nahua religious ideology is linked to the human body in this way. By mapping the human body onto virtually everything, large and small, extensively and intensively, the Nahua are making explicit their recognition that the wider environment

itself is a living entity that must be kept in balance ritually if human beings are to survive and prosper.[9]

The Stance of the Paper Figures

One enduring anthropological puzzle we would like to address is the precise meaning of the upraised arms and hands that are such a ubiquitous feature of the ritual paper figures. Whenever we asked ritual specialists about this design element—seemingly a posture of reverence or greeting—they replied obliquely with some remark like *así es el costumbre* ("that's the custom"). Nor have researchers studying with *el costumbre* practitioners elsewhere in the region offered any more convincing explanations.[10] Perhaps the stance is a design element that once had explicit significance but is no longer known to people today. Yet, if the meaning has been truly lost, it seems unlikely that the design would be perpetuated with such consistency. It has always been our contention that the front-facing, hands-by-the-head stance of the paper figures provides an important insight into core elements of Nahua religion and philosophy. It must summarize something important about how the Nahua understand the structure and dynamics of the cosmos even if we were unsure of its meaning. Like *totiotzin* itself, the posture is so pervasive that it escapes most people's notice.

The solution occurred to us as we examined paper figures embodying the altar itself that ritual specialist Cirilo often cut. The spirit entity of altar (labeled A in Figure 5) is an unelaborate cutting in Cirilo's conception, with the familiar anthropomorphic core but no distinctive headdress. It is cut with a rectangular body shape suggesting that it is clothed in a *jorongo*-like garment. The body contains four V–cuts with their flaps folded open, likewise arranged in a rectangle. We know that four points inscribing a rectangle serve to replicate *tlaltepactli*, the earth's surface, a convention that traces to the pre-Hispanic period. Because Cirilo's figure embodies the altar, we conclude that this central feature of the paper cutting is homologous to the altar tabletop situated between the arch overhead and the offerings placed on the ground beneath.

[9] See Trejo Barrientos et al. (2014) for more on correspondences among cultures following *el costumbre* traditions.

[10] Galinier (2004 [1997], 81) offers a psychoanalytic interpretation of the Otomí paper figures' upraised arms as a posture that "evokes the discharge of sexual power."

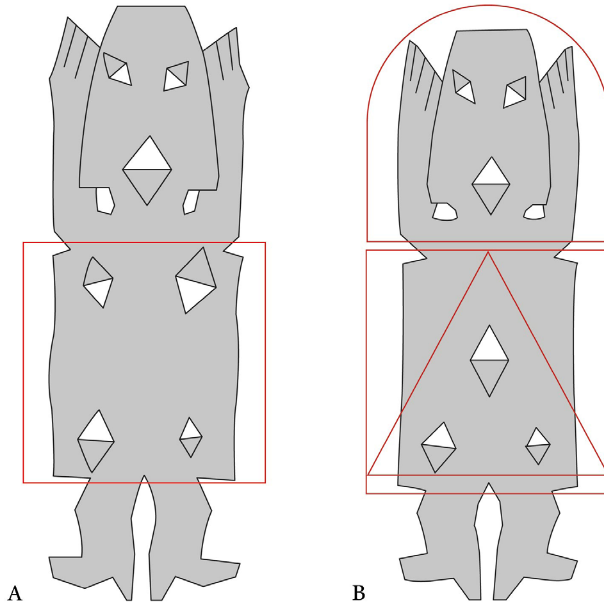

Figure 5. Aspects of the altar: A) altar–*mesa*–*tlaixpamitl*;
B) upper altar–*mesa de arriba*–*tlaixpamitl*

The ritual specialist cut another paper figure that he identified in Spanish as *mesa de arriba* or "upper altar" (labeled B). It closely resembles the standard image of altar, but instead of four openings it features three V–cuts arranged in an equilateral triangle. This pyramidal design replicates not the earth's surface but defines the arch structure erected above the altar table that embodies the celestial realm, *ilhuicactli*. Herein lay the answer to our question about the enigmatic posture of nearly all the ritual paper figures: the upraised arms and hands with the head at the midline mirror the arch of the sky's vault; the rectangular shape of the body corresponds to the earth's surface; and the legs and feet serve to ground the human form to the earth's interior. The anthropomorphic cut-paper creations are themselves scaled-down altars—replicas writ small of the structure of the cosmos. In sum, the hands-by-the-head arch, the body core, and the legs and feet of each paper figure are the layers of the cosmos that in turn provides the template for the Nahua altar. This interpretation offers further proof that the human body links the levels and differing scales of the universe into a coherent whole.

According to the logic of the paper figures, Nahua ritual specialists extract elements from the natural or social world as required by the purpose of the ritual by cutting the core form of a human body from paper and giving it adjunct components that embody its distinctive, identifying attributes. The practitioners spread animal blood on the paper cuttings to give them power (*chicahualiztli*). However, bodies do more than reveal divinity, they link people to the sacred: the body in itself constitutes an animate altar homologous to the structure of the living cosmos. The design of the paper figures acts as a highly condensed statement of Nahua pantheism and its foundational ontological monism. One could describe the Nahua cosmos as an animated construct of reduplicating human body units, a structure based on the anthropomorphic form that people perceive to unfold at progressively larger and smaller scales, whose power and beauty lies in the repeated patterns that tie together what may seem (falsely) to be discrete realms of experience. As mentioned, the cosmic ordering fits the modern conception of an ecosystem—that is, a web of relationships easier to perceive in its myriad details than its totality.

Making Manifest the Divine

If Nahua religion is indeed pantheistic (and its apparent duality a dynamic expression of dual-aspect monism), then the graphic communication system of the paper figures takes on a whole new level of complexity. As shown, the paper figures themselves are part of the omnipresent and divine totality of *totiotzin*. Through them, the deity unfolds itself to become visible (and legible) to the ritual participant–reader. Normally hidden from view, *totiotzin* is concentrated in an artfully cut paper figure. The figures are not metaphors for water, earth, altar, or cross-sun (nor even an artful figure of speech that suggests the idea of these sacred elements), but rather they directly reveal the living aspect of *totiotzin* embodied in them. In the Western dualistic world view the paper figures must symbolize or stand for something else: the signifier and signified are distinguishable realms of reality. By contrast, in Nahua monism the paper figures fully embody the sacred, being at once a portion of that seamless reality and also completely integral to it: the signifier and the signified are identical, merged into one.

The ontological status of the contemporary paper figures can perhaps best be understood by examining the ancient Aztec concept of *ixiptla*,

referred to earlier. As mentioned, an *ixiptla*, meaning "representative" (or *teixiptla*, combining *teo*-, to mean something akin to a "sacred" or "holy" image or likeness) was for the ancient Aztecs and Maya a physical embodiment of deity that included dressed statues and individuals costumed to performed as the deity during important rituals.[11] Such adorned statues and deity impersonators, once properly arrayed in ritual paraphernalia, actually became the sacred personage and no longer constituted simply a statue or a human being. Like their Nahuatl-speaking descendants who cut the ritual paper figures, the preconquest Aztecs did not regard their statues or costumed dancers as metaphors, an interpretation that would follow only from the viewpoint of Western dualism. Instead, the statues and ritual performers disclosed the sacred to those well acquainted with their religious philosophy and graphic communication system.

Although he employs the Aztec term *teotl* in place of the equivalent contemporary Nahuatl word *totiotzin*, Maffie explains this transformation more fully:

> An *ixiptla* consists of materials that are properly ordered so as to unconceal *teotl* or some aspect of *teotl*. The proper organization of the various elements composing an *ixiptla* along with the requisite accompanying ritual activities enable the assemblage to disclose specific clusters of *teotl*'s aspects.... The assemblage is thus able to serve as a medium through which ritual participants can focus upon and engage with specific aspects of *teotl*. What's more, the assemblage also becomes metaphysically (not just symbolically) potent itself since it becomes empowered with the concentration of the specific forces associated with and constituting the relevant cluster of *teotl* aspects. The assemblage ceases being an *ixiptla* and loses its potency upon disassembly. A non*ixiptla* is simply not properly arranged. That which becomes an *ixiptla* or *teixiptla*, in short, does so by virtue of becoming properly arranged and well-ordered as well as incorporated into relevant ritual activities. The Aztecs' ritual construction and use of an *ixiptla* and *teixiptla* appears cut from the same cloth as contemporary Nahuas', Otomís', and Tepehuas' ritual construction and use of cut-paper figures. In both cases, ritual specialists temporarily single out and abstract from the sacred whole various manageable segments for ritual attention. In both cases, there is no essential metaphysical distinction between ritual object and totality (2014, 113–14; italics ours).

[11] See Klein (2001) on deity impersonators.

Further, Inga Clendinnen (1991, 252) in her discussion of the *ixiptla* figure among the Aztecs, writes that it came in many different forms distinguished by three criteria: "An *ixiptla* was a made, constructed thing; it was formally 'named' for the particular sacred power, and adorned with some of its characteristic regalia; it was temporary, concocted for the occasion, made and unmade during the course of the action." The ritual paper figures employed by today's practitioners of *el costumbre* clearly fit these criteria.

Molly Bassett (2015) reaffirms Maffie's conclusions regarding ancient Aztecs' beliefs surrounding the embodiment of *teotl* in images and human impersonators. To augment her ethnohistorical focus on sacred bundles, she witnessed two Chicomexochitl (Seven Flower, maize spirit entity) rituals in northern Veracruz in 2006 and 2010. She writes of the experience that "[i]n communities where modern Nahuatl speakers maintain *costumbres* (traditional practices), ritual manufacture in ceremonies... brings about ontological transformations in ordinary materials that become highly animate entities" (Bassett 2015, 14). She goes on to say that "[d]uring the course of [rituals], the paper figures transform from inanimate... *amatl* (paper) into animate... *tlatecmeh* (paper figures of natural deities). By the ceremony's end, the sponsors recognize the [paper] effigies as living beings and family members" (Bassett 2015, 21). Like the pre-Hispanic constructs of *ixiptla*, the paper figures, after having been cut properly and laid out correctly in a ritual, become living embodiments of *totiotzin*. Ritual specialists feed and dress them, speak to them with the greatest respect, and in the case of disease-causing wind figures, treat them as infectious agents. Based on their behavior towards the paper figures, ritual specialists truly see them as living entities. The paper figures reveal a coherent view of the world that transcends dualism and provides a means for people to counteract the forces of disorder that threaten to overwhelm humankind. In this regard, Nahua conceptions and ritual practices would be of interest to scholars participating in the new material turn in religious studies (e.g., Bräunlein 2016). Distinct from what archaeologists have labeled "material religion" (e.g., McAnany and Wells 2008), contributors to the research specialty concentrate on the use people make in religious contexts of physical objects (or music, for that matter).

If the figures were symbols or metaphors, one would think that a single example would suffice for a ritual offering. Nahua rituals, however, typically require hundreds if not thousands of paper cuttings. A funda-

mental question is what leads the ritual specialists to deploy such an enormous number of paper figures in their offerings? We think the explanation lies in the fact that each image of a particular spirit entity reveals and reinforces a different aspect of *totiotzin* and provides a unique vehicle through which the sacred cosmos discloses itself. An altar laden with reduplicated paper figures expresses a greater portion of the deity and increases the value of the sacralized place of offerings. The greater the number and variety of ritual objects, the more *totiotzin* is concentrated: 10 000 paper figures are 10 000 expressions of the divine. It is precisely because of all of the objects placed on Nahua altars that they become the crucible where the powers of the cosmos converge: the properly arranged and laden altar becomes a place where humans can harness the sacred powers to their own benefit.

The complex relationship between the Nahua and their ritual objects is probably the most difficult feature of *el costumbre* practice for outsiders to understand. It is the unique knowledge of the ritual specialist coupled with the out-of-the-ordinary venue of the ritual itself that allow people to engage with ritual objects as a form of social activity. Imposing the Euro-American dualistic view on Nahua ritual objects threatens to reduce *el costumbre* religion to something akin to idol worship. Far from worshipers of idols, the Nahua see all things as part of the fabric of a living cosmos having the power under the right circumstances to affect states of being and the course of events. What we might call objects the Nahua see as subjects. Like a heavy rock perched on the edge of a cliff, Nahua objects store potential energy that ritual specialists activate through effort and skill.[12]

[12] A future line of research into the ontological–semasiographic system of ritual paper cutting (pitting monism against ingrained dualistic thinking) may fruitfully examine the usefulness of analytical constructs developed within Buddhist theological traditions as well as those associated with aesthetics, the philosophy of art. Reconciling abstraction, material expression, and pragmatic application in order to reveal the "true nature of things" implicates "suchness," as Mitchell (2002) explains, which entails experiencing "things 'such as they are,' without superimposing views about them. That is, while one ordinarily views things as independent entities, experiencing the suchness of things is to see the emptiness of the independence, to see things as they are dependently arisen" (Mitchell 2002, 100). The imperative to understand the relationships among works of art and the concepts they embody also implicates "thisness" or "haecceity," per Strayer (2007, 93-120), who explores the limits of abstraction in artistic production.

Reading the Paper Figures

The so-called pictographic systems of Mesoamerica underlying the Nahua paper figure complex are examples of a broader form of semasiography, a term coined by I. J. Gelb (1963 [1952], 11–13). As defined and expanded on by Elizabeth Boone, such "[s]emasiographic systems of communication convey ideas independently from language and on the same logical level as spoken language rather than being parasitic on them as ordinary scripts are. They are supralinguistic because they can function outside of language" (Boone 1994, 15). Semasiographic communication is found in all of the world's cultures and involves what we understand to be a kind of picture writing. In Western societies it can be found in everything from airport signs, computer icons, knobs and buttons in car interiors, to graphic novels. Semasiographic communication exists alongside glottographic (alphabetic) systems and is not simply an earlier stage in the evolution of the latter. Boone identifies two types of semasiographic systems: conventional and iconic. In conventional systems, meaning is encoded in arbitrary symbols. Examples in the European tradition include symbols representing chemical structures, mathematical symbols, and musical scores. In iconic systems, signs convey meaning directly because the signs resemble what they embody or represent, however, some cultural background may be necessary to read them. The paper figures (in this narrow technical sense) constitute an iconic semasiographic system.

In our view, the paper figures are comparable to the pictographs in Mesoamerican codices. They are signs that revealed divinity to the reader. In the Euro-American world reading is a process of decoding symbols to grasp the intent of the author; in the case of the Nahua (and by extension, Mesoamerican cultures, past and present), reading is inherently a ritual act that allows a person to experience the sacred.[13] Analysis of *el costumbre* ritual paper figures considerably expands our restricted Western definition of reading. As ethnographers, we are not in a position to specify the personal meanings each individual derives from gazing upon the altars with the multitudes of images. We can only clarify the ritual strategies that Nahua peoples use to comprehend (and thereby influence) the wider reality that impinges on their daily lives.

[13] Maffie (2021) has turned his attention to studying the divinatory *tonalamatl* in this light.

Anyone entering a Nahua shrine with an offering in full progress would observe that activities are directed toward the multitudes of cut-paper figures laid out on the altar in neat rows atop paper *petates*, and to the bundles of larger-sized paper figures swaddled in cloth outfits and packed tightly together in sisal carrying bags. The paper cuttings are clearly the very heart of the crop-fertility ritual complex (as well as cleansing-curing procedures), and as such they are the key expressive components of el costumbre for the Nahua and neighboring Otomí and Tepehua people. Each figure specifies an aspect of *totiotzin* that can be deciphered and linked to the sacred totality. For outsiders, comprehending the messages conveyed by the figures requires knowledge of the history of the Nahua, their encounter with Spanish culture, their current circumstances, as well as familiarity with the corpus of Nahua oral narrations.

Figures are cut in such a way that someone literate in the system can identify and name each spirit, although we doubt that everyone in attendance at a ritual could consistently identify the large number of different cuttings in the altar arrays. Only ritual specialists possess such detailed knowledge. However, people have seen the assembly of paper cuttings on many occasions throughout their lives and everyone knows it to be composed of spirit entities intimately related to rain and crop fertility (or in the case of cleansing–curing rites, life-threatening pathogens). Much as a magnifying glass concentrates sunlight, the array draws these beings from realms far and wide to a central place where they can be addressed and incorporated into the ritual. Individual figures are always part of a larger complex in which the fates of human beings and cosmic forces are intertwined.

As one example (see Figure 6), the paper embodiment of *pilcintzin* ("little maize," the honorific-diminutive form of the Nahuatl *cintli*, or maize in its young, developing stage) expresses something greater than the growing green plant or the doll-like human form with its profiles of ears of maize cut from the body (labeled A and B, the two cuttings are differentiated by their five- and seven-pronged headdresses). Maize, above all, is demonstrably the living link between the sun and humanity as a whole. The sun animates the universe by its heat and light, which the maize plant growing in the milpa captures. The energy (*chicahualiztli*) contained in the plant is transferred to people when they consume the grain. More than simply portraying the major staple crop, the cut-paper figure of maize constitutes an affirmation that the cosmos provides everything that makes life possible and worthwhile. It takes its place (along with all of the other paper figures)

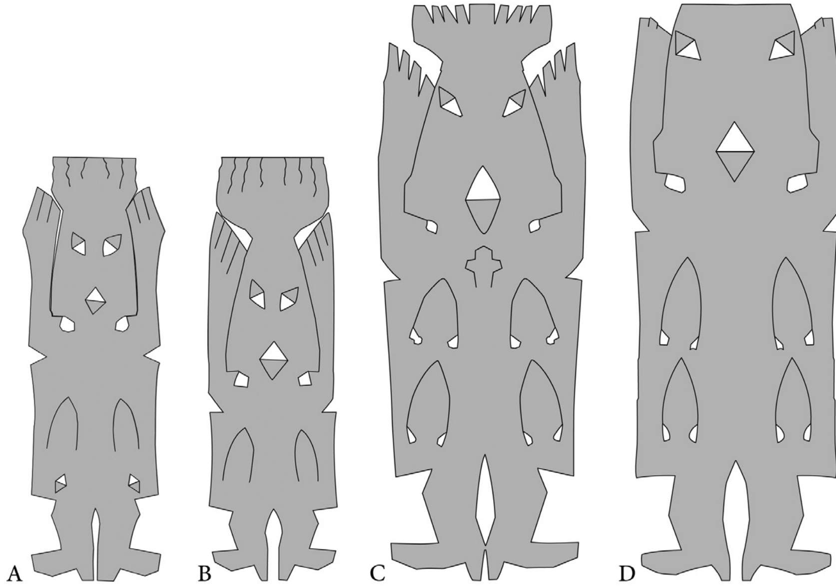

Figure 6. Aspects of maize [figures not drawn to scale]:
A) little maize–*maizito–pilcintzin*; B) little maize–*maizito–pilcintzin*;
C) little maize–*maizito–pilcintzin*; D) mature maize–*maíz–cintli*

in a broad, abstract system of thought and belief, providing empirical proof that the perpetual exchange between humans and the wider universe is in some kind of balance, at least for the time being.

While ritual specialists are free to innovate, they must also consider the constraints of the design vocabulary of their particular ethnic group. They commonly introduce iconographic components to distinguish among different aspects of a spirit entity, highlighting its stages of growth or states of change. Cirilo also produced a paper cutting of young maize (*pilcintzin*) with a nine-pronged headdress and a companion figure embodying mature maize (*cintli*), which he cut without a headdress (compare the cuttings labeled C and D).[14] Contrastive features such as the presence or absence of a headdress or distinguishing body iconography is straightforward, but the

[14] This pair of maize figures is similar to the components that make up the bundles of seed figures illustrated on the cover of this issue of *Estudios de Cultura Nahuatl*. Cirilo cut them larger (about 12 × 35 cm) than the figures designed to be laid out on *petates*. The paper figures are tied together onto an armature of folded paper "bones" along with one or two additional cuttings of squash, beans, or a bean-and-chili combination. Dressed in fancy cloth

ritual specialist may also employ more subtle design distinctions to reveal different facets of the entity. For example, cuttings labeled A and B in Figure 6 exhibit relatively naturalistic-looking headdresses suggestive of the corn-silk stage of maize growth, whereas the nine-pronged affair in the cutting labeled C is more stylized, perhaps indicating *pilcintzin* at a later stage with a greater amount of the strands of corn silk critical to plant pollination and development. This interpretation seems plausible, judging from the addition of another feature—a cross-shaped cut in the center of the body—that Cirilo identified as the spirit entity's heart. For many Nahuas the heart characterizes the essence of a being and the cross evokes the life-giving sun and the personage of Jesus Christ. The absence of a heart device in Cirilo's other embodiments of maize may emphasize that at this stage (a more fully developed phase based on the increasing prominence of the headdress), *pilcintzin* embodies greater vitality than either of its younger stages (with less elaborate headgear) or at its maturity (minus its headdress, when the corn silk has dried and the fully formed ear of maize in its husk is ready to harvest).

This complex property of *inamic* pairing is what Maffie (2014, 143–44) concludes is best translated as "its match" or "its complementary polarity." It is a fundamental artistic convention that illuminates the dynamic of process metaphysics that underlies Mesoamerican ontological monism. As Maffie defines such a reality (in the context of ancient Nahua culture), it "is characterized essentially by becoming—not by being or is-ness. Aztec metaphysics embraces flux, evanescence, expiry, and change by making them defining characteristics of reality—rather than marginalizing them as mere illusion and unreality" (Maffie 2014, 43). We see this view still in operation today as a pattern repeated throughout the ontological–semasiographic system of *el costumbre* paper cutting and its iconographic building blocks or components. The cut-paper figures both present *pilcintzin* and convey information about *pilcintzin*, and the design focuses one's attention on the vital property of plant growth, contrasting young–old through the devices of subtle changes in headdress and body design. The dynamic may be conveyed through purely iconographic means (as we saw with, the altar–upper altar pairing) or through gender binaries (e.g., man owl–man owl woman, grandmother earth–grandfather earth, and other such pairings). Other, more subtle, examples

outfits and adorned with jewelry and ribbons, they are preserved permanently on the ritual specialist's altar in a box of aromatic cedar wood.

that require greater cultural knowledge to decipher are evident in standard portrayals of earth paired with variations Cirilo that identified as "other earth," "earth over there," "earth of the altar," and so forth.[15]

One final example may serve to confirm the depth and flexibility of paper as a vehicle for revealing profound metaphysical truths based on close observations of nature. Particular aspects of the spirit entity that Cirilo identified as "flag" (using the Spanish word *bandera*) and also "sun" (*sol* in Spanish, *tonatiuh* in Nahuatl) are plainly evident (see Figure 7). The iconography is straightforward: its sunburst, fan-like headdresses of seven and five prongs (labeled A and B, respectively) invoke the rays of light emitted by the sun, differentiating what may be seasonal or daily shifts in solar power as the sun rises and sets. At first glance it closely resembles features of the sacred earth (recall Figure 2A) as well as the generalized hill (Figure 4B); the design of flag-sun could easily be mistaken for the others, but on close comparison, the distinctions are obvious. Like earth's portrayal in paper, the image of flag has nine V–cuts protruding from the body, aligned three-by-three in parallel columns, the central column higher than the outer ones, suggestive of a massif of sacred hills. Cirilo's corpus of flag-sun and earth cuttings taken as a whole (and together with cuttings of the various hills), portray an immensely rich sacred landscape dotted with mountains that link humans' earthly terrain to the celestial realm.

Nahua rituals vary from simple cleansings to complex ritual offerings lasting many days (and pilgrimages to distant locales may stretch over weeks). After the paper figures have been created and laid out with great reverence, an individual participant may take up a smoking incense brazier or a sacred walking stick and perform a gently swaying dance or chant quietly before the array. They do not appear to be reading the arranged paper cuttings in any systematic way but rather they gaze upon the altar in a rapt, almost trance-like state, fully taking in the experience. We have no evidence that a particular set of paper figures laid out on Nahua altars constitutes a fully formed narrative. As mentioned, selection is inspired by ritual specialists' dreams. As such, the figures hold deep meaning for people but the precise way they are laid out does not seem to reproduce a sequence of events such as we might find in myth and oral narrative.[16]

[15] As we earlier noted, these entities and a complete array of ritual paper figures created for major Nahua pilgrimages are analyzed in Sandstrom and Sandstrom (2022).

[16] Jim Maffie (in an email of November 27, 2021) pointed out that the contemporary ritual specialists (like their ancient counterparts in his ongoing study of the *tonalamatl* div-

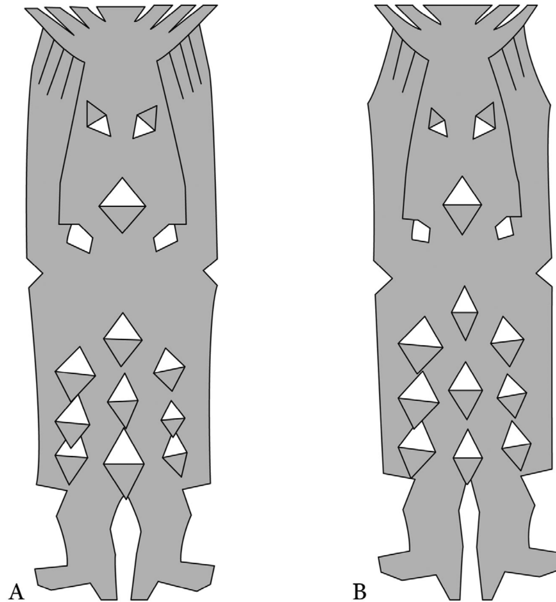

Figure 7. Aspects of the flag-sun:
A) and B) flag (sun)–*bandera* (*sol*)–*tonatiuh*

The seemingly idiosyncratic array of paper figures constitutes instead the spectrum of spirit entities originating from all of the realms, conditions, and existential circumstances of the cosmos. These embodiments (of water, earth, hills, thunder, lightning, the salutary wind, along with the disease-causing winds) are the forces of life that tie together the daily experiences of people who rely on the food they produce in their milpas. In cleansing–curings, the figures evoke chaos, disease, and death emanating from all quarters and realms that include the underworld and place of dead bodies. They are threats that affect people throughout their lives, and they appeal to widely shared fears. From the range of paper figures, participants undoubtedly create private narratives involving their horticultural activities or their children and extended families because every adult has had to confront unsettling events, disease, and death in their own personal experience. By observing the paper-figure array, people can look deeply into

inatory codices) are also undoubtably focused not on some fixed meaning of the overall constellation of spirit entities but rather on arriving at a fluid interpretation based on the immediate, pragmatic concerns of each ritual occasion.

the contingencies of life and address the fears and hopes born of their own history and imaginations. Herein lies the incredible power of the paper images. Laid out before them on the decorated altar, in a sacralized space redolent with copal incense smoke and filled with the sounds of ritual chanting, lilting guitar and violin music, and the murmur of neighbors and kin, these devoted practitioners of *el costumbre* capture the forces embodied in the paper figures and render them manageable.

Despite the numbers of paper figures, their multiple identities, and the apparent dualities they present, we remain convinced that Nahua philosophy is resolutely one of monism. There is no limit to the variety of figures a ritual specialist may choose to cut and yet they all reveal, in their own individual way, *totiotzin*. When asked why there are so many different types of figures cut for a ritual, Cirilo responded with words that initially puzzled us deeply: "They are all the same" (Sandstrom 1991, 239). The differences were in our heads, certainly not his. In a monistic world, humans, animals and objects have life because they are part of a living cosmos. But the life they have is based on shared sacred substance—not on a multiplicity of essences or forms (as claimed for "analogism," per Descola). And not, we surmise, a shared consciousness between humans and animals (as with "animism"), or a moral and physical continuity between humans and nonhumans (as with "totemism"). And it clearly does not reflect the ontological dualism brought by the Europeans. But such ontological categorizations may all be subsumed as variations on a profoundly monistic world view.

Through *el costumbre* rituals, a Nahua person can interact and enter into reciprocal relations with the water, the earth, and the maize plant, however, despite their shared substance, spirit entities are not identical with human beings nor do they partake of the same consciousness or perspective. It is through complex rituals and lavish offerings that people attempt to reestablish the connections between cosmic realms broken during primordial mythic times. In this sense, the ontological turn has surprisingly little to say about *el costumbre* religion. To refine our understanding we must turn to increasingly sophisticated and detailed ethnographic research.

The precise layout of these figures gives physical form to the inchoate hopes, fears, and emotional states of people who live in a world constantly threatened by the destabilizing forces of disorder and disequilibrium. They present a tangible reality that far surpasses anything that could be expressed through words alone. The paper figure complex is a graphic communication

system that encapsulates and concentrates meaning for the Nahua analogous to religious images embedded in the stained-glass panoramas that impressed the people of medieval Europe and still holds the power to transfix people today. The average person does not have to know the identity of every cut-paper figure to perceive the power they embody or appreciate the relevance of these entities to their own life, health, and safety. Of course, the ritual specialists can name each image they create because it is their intention to make manifest a specific range of elusive entities and to offer a mechanism for engaging them through ritual exchange. The Mesoamerican paper figures are the physical manifestations of forces that deeply affect human life. As pictographic embodiments of *totiotzin*, the religious art of *el costumbre* transcends verbal narrative and engages people simultaneously on intellectual, visceral, and expressive levels.

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