

Élodie Dupey García and Elena Mazzetto, eds. *Mesoamerican Rituals and the Solar Cycle: New Perspectives on the Veintena Festivals*. New York: Peter Lang, 2021.

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Mesoamerican Rituals and the Solar Cycle: New Perspectives on the Veintena Festivals is the first volume in the Peter Lang series “Indigenous Cultures of Latin America: Past and Present.” The book originated in a 2016 conference held in honor of Michel Graulich at the Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, and it is a fitting tribute to Graulich, whose research on the *veintenas* formed the foundation for this volume and many others. As co-editors Élodie Dupey García and Elena Mazzetto note, Graulich’s dissertation, *Mythes et rituels du Mexique ancien préhispanique*, remains the only book-length study of the *veintena* cycle. While other scholars have studied discrete elements of Nahuatl ceremonial life, only Graulich took on the topic in its entirety.

As with many aspects of Mesoamerican cultures and their study, calendars are complex. In their introduction, co-editors Mazzetto and Dupey García share an overview of Mesoamerican timekeeping. They begin by differentiating the *tonalpohualli*, the 260-day “day count,” and the *xiuhpohualli*, the 365-day “year count.” The *tonalpohualli* “was formed by the association of twenty calendrical signs and thirteen successive numerals—1-Crocodile/Earth Monster, 2-Wind, 3-House, etc.—whose combination led to the division of the cycle in periods of 13 days” (p. 2). The *xiuhpohualli*, “was generally formed by eighteen periods of twenty days, plus a period of five days that was seen as unlucky [...]. At the time of contact, the Spaniards began calling the 20-day interval *veintena*, the Spanish translation of the Nahuatl word *cempohualli*, ‘twenty’” (p. 2). One of the questions pursued throughout the volume appears on this same page: the fixedness of the *xiuhpohualli*. In noting the various names given to the “year count,” Mazzetto and Dupey García explain that “in the eyes of the Spaniards, the religious events celebrated throughout this cycle of time always occurred on the same



dates during the year, while the ceremonies corresponding to the divinatory calendar were movable, for they followed the 260-day count” (p. 2). The co-editors and a few contributors take up the question of the fixedness of the 365-day *xiuhpohualli*, to which I shall return shortly.

The issue of the calendars’ annual cycles is only one of their complicating factors. The two Aztec calendars may seem as straightforward as, say, Muslims living in the United States for whom the Hijri, a lunar calendar, orients religious life and the Gregorian calendar organizes secular obligations. However, the *tonalpohualli* and the *xiuhpohualli* emerged within the same cultural context and functioned together. They operated simultaneously and also periodically coincided. Their most significant coincidence occurred every fifty-two years, a time when Aztecs observed the New Fire Ceremony, in which all fires were extinguished and the priests lit new fire in the chest cavity of a sacrificial victim. While the New Fire Ceremony was an especially consequential occasion, each of the calendar systems offered a “year” of ritual activity comprised of “monthly” activities that overlapped. The complications of the calendar systems make them fascinating subjects, albeit ones that can be difficult to untangle.

To be clear, the contributors in *Mesoamerican Rituals and the Solar Cycle* focus on the celebrations of the *xiuhpohualli*, the 365-day “year count,” and they approach the issues of the cycle and of individual *veintenas* with distinct methodologies. The diversity of the scholarly voices in the volume is one of its strengths. Another is the authors’ willingness to revisit long-standing interpretations from new perspectives, and the book’s organization, which is roughly chronological and thematic, leads readers from big-picture questions into the details of the celebrations and the terms used to describe them. This volume contributes to conversations about the discrete calendric systems and the festival periods in each while also considering the agency of actors, the nature of deity embodiment, and many other important questions. Certainly, each *veintena*—let alone each of the calendar systems—could merit its own book, as those recently written by Catherine DiCesare and John Schwaller demonstrate.

The issue of the temporal fixedness of the *xiuhpohualli* appears immediately in the book. This question arose in Graulich’s work because of the mismatch between the *xiuhpohualli*’s 365-day cycle and the time between two consecutive vernal equinoxes (365 days 5 hours 48 minutes and 46 seconds). Two complimentary essays explore this issue. In “Beyond Nature and Mythology: Relational Complexity in Contemporary and Ancient

Mesoamerican Rituals,” Johannes Neurath examines the question in the context of a lineage that interpreted cultures “close to nature” as especially invested in fertility rituals. These assumptions surface in the work of Eduard Seler, Konrad Theodor Preuss, Sir James Frazer, and more recently, Alfredo López Austin and Johanna Broda. As Neurath observes, “The existence of a direct correspondence between ritual and natural cycles, and the importance of this correspondence, are seldom put into question” (p. 103). In fieldwork with the Tuapuritari Huichols, Neurath found evidence that accorded with Nature-Mythology or cosmovision thought, and he also found evidence that was ambiguously and less obviously in line with those philosophies. For example, Neurath came to see that “relations to ancestral deities (or animals) are always ambiguous. Nobody desires to get in touch with those beings, but it is necessary as they are the source of life and authority” (p. 104). Contradictions like this one led him to explore the multiplicity of meanings and activities embedded in ritual activities and to propose that any strict correspondence of ideas and ritual actions in the *veintenas* may be misleading (or not). At the least, Neurath argues, ritual complexity opens the door to a greater number of interpretations of complicated ceremonies like those of the *xiuhpohualli*.

In the subsequent chapter, Gabrielle Vail takes up the question of the solar cycle’s seasonality (a question whose answer Neurath, perhaps predictably, left open) in the context of exploring the *haab’*, the Maya 365-day ceremonial calendar. In her examination of the *haab’*, Vail draws on the *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, a compilation of many sources gathered together in the mid-sixteenth century and attributed to Diego de Landa, and on Late Postclassic Maya codices, also compilations of multiple sources that date 100-150 years earlier than the *Relación*. In comparing the ethnohistoric texts alongside the pre-Contact codices, Vail explains that “*haab’* dates are rarely recorded in Maya codical almanacs; in most cases, therefore, the assignment of an almanac to a particular festival is based on iconographic and hieroglyphic evidence rather than calendrical information provided by the scribe” (p. 134). In other words, enough clues or cues may be present to tie a festival depicted in the almanacs to a specific *haab’* “month.” However, when the same ritual activity appears in the depictions of different “months,” as new fire ceremonies do, for example, it can complicate correlating the sources.

With respect to the question of the solar calendar’s fixedness, Vail notes differences among sources so that in the Late Classic sources the new year,

known as 1 Pop, began in January, while in the *Relación*, 1 Pop fell in July. This discrepancy prompts Vail to consider the fixedness of the *haab'*: “If [the festivals] were fossilized, there must have been substantial seasonal disparities between the festivals as originally practiced and those recorded in ethnohistoric sources” (p. 130). Vail goes on to cite work by Harvey and Victoria Bricker that indicates that “among the Postclassic Maya at least, corrections were not made to keep *haab'* rituals aligned with seasonal events” (p. 130). This, however, is not the focus of Vail’s chapter, nor is the question of the movement of the *haab'* or *xiuhpohualli* resolved in the volume.

Even when the volume’s contributions arrive at no clear answers to the questions they ask, they make useful and provocative contributions to thinking about calendrics. Several of the chapters focus or touch on the relationships between deities and the *veintenas*. Some of the most constructive contributions to the field include thinking about deities’ presence and function in the festivals, what the *veintenas* reveal about deity embodiment, and the connection of deities and the festivals to natural or agricultural cycles.

In what might be one of the more obvious areas in which a volume like *Mesoamerican Rituals and the Solar Cycle* could advance conversations, several contributors take up the question of deities’ relationship to individual (and multiple) *veintenas*. Understanding deities’ relationships to the festivals that honored them is complex because of the relative paucity of extant visual, material, and textual sources and the potential for those sources to record different (and even conflicting) information. Additionally, long-standing assumptions about the Aztec cosmovision and theories of religions, like those Neurath addresses, complicate studies of deities, myths, and rituals in Mesoamerica. New theories, fresh takes on data, and close readings of the sources offer insight into the *xiuhpohualli*.

In “Tezcatlipoca and the Maya Gods of Abundance,” Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos borrows the idea of “translation” from work by Guilhem Olivier and Roberto Martínez to clarify some of the confusion that surrounds deities’ relationship to and function in festivals like the *veintenas*. Deities, he explains, “translate” through physical movement and shifting meanings:

Foreign gods, their iconographic representations, and their associated rituals were transferred from one region to another either directly—through contact among individuals from both communities—or indirectly, through the mediation of indi-

viduals from other communities, through the transportation of books, effigies, or other materials that may have carried the information (p. 34).

Pre-Contact and postcontact sources from the Dresden Codex to colonial integrations of Christian deities into Indigenous religious traditions demonstrate the longevity and endurance of this tendency in Mesoamerican tradition. As Chinchilla Mazariegos argues,

Correspondences are significant, not because they signify the wholesale adoption of gods from one community by another, but because they reveal the diverse manners in which Mesoamerican religious concepts were manifested while retaining core features despite the bewildering variations that we perceive in iconographic forms and ritual practices (p. 36).

Chinchilla Mazariegos' study of the Maya Maize God in comparison to Tezcatlipoca in Toxcatl reveals a number of homologies between the figures (p. 50). While emphasizing that the differences between Maya and other Mesoamerican gods should not be overlooked, he concludes that "the homologies discussed in this chapter resulted from complex and enduring patterns of interaction that stretched across Mesoamerica through millennia" (p. 51). As Chinchilla Mazariegos demonstrates, "translation" frames the method through which deities traveled and transmitted, while acting as a methodology for scholars to trace movement and meaning across cultures and contexts. Other contributors take up related themes, including the diverse manifestations of the gods and their presence, absence, and multiplicity in the *veintenas*.

For example, Dupey García's "Quetzalcoatl in Nahua Myths and Rituals," explores the apparent absence of Quetzalcoatl, who occupies primary roles in myth and material culture, from *veintena* festivals. Quetzalcoatl-Ehecatl's prominent roles in myth aid Dupey García in determining that in specific *veintenas*, "Quetzalcoatl was evoked but through subtle allusions to places, objects and his enemies; he, himself, was absent" (p. 82). This fascinating observation and the data that support it offer one example of how sources about Aztec religious traditions can be read as complementary even when the information they provide seems unbalanced. Dupey García's discussion of the Wind God's embodiments and connections to other deities demonstrates one way to trace relationships among deities

through a close analysis of the sources, which may aid scholars in avoiding relying on theories of deity borrowed from foreign contexts.

Other close analyses of textual, visual, and material sources explore deity embodiment with reference both to Nahuatl and to Aztec culture. In “The Re-enactment of the Birth of the Gods in Mexico *Veintena* Celebrations,” Olivier notes the intimate relationship among Mesoamerican terms that denote “descent” and “birth” (p. 66). He introduces *tomo*, “to descend” and “to be born,” in the context of the gods’ arrival during the *veintena* Teotl Eco/Teteo Eco, “The God/Gods Arrive.” Later, he notes that the making of deity effigies, specifically the *tzoalli* (amaranth dough) figure of Huitzilopochtli during Panquetzaliztli, “was equated with birth” (p. 70): “The Nahuatl text uses the verb *tlacati*, which means ‘to be born’... At the same time, the verb *tlacatilia*—which has the same root as *tlacati*, ‘to be born’—means ‘to begin something,’ but also ‘to shape or reduce to a certain shape,’ which corresponds to the act of making the statue of a deity” (p. 70). This—only one of the many insights in this chapter—illuminates the progenitive nature of ritual activity during the *veintenas*.

In what is both a contribution to this volume and an accompaniment to his own book, Schwaller’s close reading of multiple texts that describe Toxcatl and Panquetzaliztli offers an intimate portrait of amaranth *teixiptlahuan* (deity embodiments) in these *veintenas*. From differentiating between *huauhtli* (amaranth) and *tzoalli* (amaranth dough) to introducing the life-size *tzoalli* figure of Huitzilopochtli in Toxcatl and the much smaller dough effigy in Panquetzaliztli, this chapter demonstrates the strength of research that combines a deep knowledge of one *veintena* with a careful exploration of another. Clear images of the *tzoalli teixiptlahuan* in both *veintenas* emerge in a compelling and accessible chapter.

The nature of deity embodiment arises in Elena Mazzetto’s “Maize and Flaying in Aztec Rituals,” too. Like Neurath, Mazzetto questions the ongoing usefulness of theories that interpret *veintenas* as “nature-cycle imitation ritual[s]” or as enacting “sacrifice as regeneration” despite the popularity of these approaches (p. 144). Mazzetto raises the question of how flaying could relate to multiple aspects of Aztec culture, including themes related to agriculture and war. In relation to the former, she explores how assumptions about agriculture based on European seasons, cycles, and practices led to misinterpretations of Mesoamerican ritual activities. Linguistic connections between flaying and husking and research on how the Aztec stored corn led Mazzetto to conclude, with Graulich, that in Mesoamerica husking

occurred at different points in harvesting maize. This insight opens interpretations that reliance on European methods precluded. In particular, her research reveals a connection between “this way of processing the human body [i.e., flaying] with the sowing and harvest cycles of maize, such that stripping away a victim’s skin was related to the act of husking corn ears before new planting” (p. 158). Significantly, Mazzetto’s research underscores Yolotl González Torres’ thesis that “the act of wearing skin [was] a highly polysemous ritual expression [...] related to five factors: the skin’s origins, the identity of the sacrificial victim, that of its wearer, the ceremony in which the rite was carried out and the skin’s final end” (p. 149). Many of the chapters in this volume contain fascinating insights like these.

In the final third of the volume, contributors turn to the *xiuhpohualli*’s festivals in the colonial context. The co-editors’ inclusion of chapters that explore dance in the *veintenas*, the *veintenas*’ interpretations by Franciscans, and the ways in which pre-Contact festivals may have surfaced in colonial Catholicism expand the scholarly conversation around calendrics. In “An Augustinian Political Theology in New Spain,” Sergio Botta explores the ways Dominican and Franciscan friars interpreted Indigenous calendrics. He posits that “Augustine provided a descriptive model that permitted the first step toward the ‘invention’ of a Mesoamerican polytheism” (p. 256). Sahagún “invented” Mesoamerican polytheism, Botta explains, by simultaneously discrediting Native beliefs as false and incorporating them into a comparative framework that included other multi-deity religious traditions, like the Romans. Botta points readers to Sahagún’s *Exclamaciones del autor* at the end of the appendix to Book I of the *Florentine Codex*. In it, he presented Indigenous religious concepts and practices, including the *veintenas* and their celebrations, as serious threats to Christianity in New Spain, and Botta urges readers to take Sahagún at his word: “Sahagún,” he writes, “aimed to obtain detailed information in order to promote the extirpation of idolatry” (p. 263). In exploring the interpretive frames writers like Sahagún used to “translate” Indigenous religion for outsiders, Botta makes an important contribution to the work of scholars studying early colonial friar/“ethnographers” and the traditions their texts describe.

In the book’s final chapter, Rossend Rovira Morgado explores the possible continuity of Atlcahualo, one of the *veintenas* related to the cult of Tlaloc, in Catholic ceremonies, like the October 4th celebration of Saint Francis of Assisi. Mid-sixteenth-century juridical documents attest to concerns that pre-Contact ritual attire and activities persisted under the guise

of Catholic observances. Rovira Morgado provides an overview of *veintenas* related to Tlaloc and summarizes their defining characteristics (p. 272). He details the roles children played in the ceremonies, emphasizes the importance of feathers, and explains the geographical and occupational relationship among communities and the ceremonies. In a fascinating analysis of a *pilcuicatl/piltoncuicatl*, “song of the [little] children” chanted during the festival of Saint Francis, Rovira Morgado demonstrates the interpenetration of pre-Contact thought and themes into the texts of the *Cantares Mexicanos*. In the example he explores, metaphorical children idealized as *huexotzincah*, “dwellers of the *huexotl*, the sacred willow that are linked to God’s beings,” “chant and weep painfully, but their tears and sorrows can be consoled by Saint Francis’s relief, which drives them up to the Heavenly father like *zaquan*, *tlauhquechol*, *xiuhquechol*, or *tzinitzcan* birds” (p. 279). As Rovira Morgado explains, songs like this one cast Catholic figures—here Saint Francis—in roles previously occupied by Indigenous deities. While many Franciscan friars were willing to tolerate Indigenous religious practices’ survival through Christianization, attitudes shifted after 1550. The lawsuit in which Rovira-Morago anchors the chapter attests to the cultural changes documented in alphabetic texts, like the *Cantares*, which “may be partially viewed as a final attempt to preserve a rich religious realm about to dissipate” (p. 285).

These final chapters of the book offer important perspectives on the persistence of Indigenous religiosity after Contact. Because each addresses Indigenous and Catholic histories and practices, readers need (or need to acquire) familiarity with the tradition-specific vocabularies of multiple religions. Without these chapters, however, the collection would be incomplete, because, as they demonstrate, the observances of the *veintenas* persisted in new forms despite colonial attempts to extirpate Indigenous religiosity. Like the chapters that come before them, these that focus on the way the *veintenas* surfaced after Contact offer readers many points of contact for further inquiry. As Danièle Dehove notes in the epilogue, readers cannot expect a single volume—even one that includes a diverse set of subjects explored by experts in the field—to settle every question about calendrics. She identifies three overarching contributions the volume makes to the study of the *xiuhpohualli*. First, several contributors seek to understand the rituals on emic/Nahua(tl) terms; second, many examine the structures of the *veintena* rituals; and third, they examine the relationship between myth and ritual.

For a subject as complex as calendrics, *Mesoamerican Rituals and the Solar Cycle* is quite readable. The richness of the Nahuatl language and its graphic representation can create barriers for students and scholars outside Mesoamerican studies, and the vast majority of contributors in this volume make their arguments accessible by glossing important terms and identifying significant persons and places. However, “Ritual and Religious Practices Described in the *Florentine Codex*” stands out in this regard. The chapter’s coauthors are collaborating on an ongoing project through which they are reconstructing the ceremonial culture of the Aztec world in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In their work, they use the International Phonetic Alphabet, which alters the orthography of Nahuatl terms. For instance, Tlacaxipehualiztli appears as *tlâkašipêwalistli* and Tozozontli as *Tôsoštôntli*, which may pose some challenges for readers. Entire sentences in Nahuatl, such as “*Aw sekîntin ik monehtoltiah in êwâtlâtiskeh*,” are likely unintelligible for readers without significant exposure to Nahuatl (p. 246). Setting aside this outlier, many of the book’s chapters would prompt rich advanced undergraduate or graduate-level conversations, including the co-editors’ introduction and the chapters written by Schwaller and Mazzetto. While the book does not answer all of the questions scholars have about Mesoamerican calendrics, it answers many. As significantly, it prompts reconsiderations of traditional theories and methods in the study of the *xiuhpohualli* and questions assumptions scholars have brought to the texts and images that describe solar cycle. Most importantly, it offers insights into subjects that pertain both to Mesoamerican calendrics and to Mesoamerican religious traditions, more broadly.

