

DIVERSITY READING LIST PRESENTS:

EXPLORATIONS INTO NAHUA AND MAYAN PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

A DRL READING GROUP BLUEPRINT BY M. JIMENA CLAVEL VÁZQUEZ
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LEVEL: INTERMEDIATE-HARD

INTRODUCTION

This blueprint aims at exploring the landscape of philosophical concepts and ideas present in ancient Nahua and Mayan thought. By Nahua thought we mean the intellectual legacy of the Nahuatl speaking people who inhabited the Mexican Central Plateau from roughly the fourteenth century until the first years of the colonial Mexico. Throughout the blueprint, we refer at times to this intellectual tradition as pertaining to the Aztecs, the Mexicas, or the Nahuas depending on the group of people to which the selected reading refers. By Mayan thought we mean, in turn, the legacy of the people who has inhabited the Maya region of Southern Mexico and a great part of Central America roughly from the Classical period to the eighteenth century. The Mesoamerican philosophical landscape is rich, but difficult to navigate due to important methodological challenges such as the scarcity of sources. Great progress has already been made, however, in the understanding of philosophical concerns by key scholarly figures. Based on their work, this blueprint explores philosophical concerns that we might associate now with philosophy of mind: the human soul, the relation between the soul and body, perception and the senses, time experience, and personhood. Our hope is that this blueprint contributes to displaying the richness of the Mesoamerican philosophical landscape.

The blueprint is divided into three sections, each composed of three proposed sessions. It begins with an introductory section that provides historical and cultural background, followed by two thematic sections: one that focuses on Nahuatl thought, and one that focuses on Mayan thought. To put together the blueprint, the selected readings range from philosophical, historical and anthropological texts to literature. In sections II and III, we have included primary sources that will help illustrate the philosophical ideas discussed in the selected readings. In these sections we have specified how the different readings fit together. When necessary, we have provided a bit of context in the introductory comments guiding the session.

CATEGORIES

- Indigenous Philosophy of the Americas
- Nahua Philosophy
- Mayan Philosophy
- Perception
- Time
- Persons

AVAILABLE ONLINE AT:

<https://diversityreadinglist.org/blueprint/nahua-and-mayan-philosophy-of-mind>

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

1. THE HISTORY OF THE MAYA AND THE AZTEC CIVILIZATIONS

RESTALL, MATTHEW. *THE MAYA: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION*

2020, Oxford University Press.

Difficulty: Easy

Fragment: Chapters 1 and 2.

Abstract: *The Maya: A Very Short Introduction* examines the history and evolution of Maya civilization, explaining Maya polities or city-states, artistic expression, and ways of understanding the universe. Study of the Maya has tended to focus on the 2,000 years of history prior to contact with Europeans, and romantic ideas of discovery and disappearance have shaped popular myths about the Maya. However, they neither disappeared at the close of the Classic era nor were completely conquered by Europeans. Independent Maya kingdoms continued until the seventeenth century, and while none exists today, it is still possible to talk about a Maya world and Maya civilization in the twenty-first century.

CARRASCO, DAVID. *THE AZTECS: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION*

2012, Oxford University Press.

Difficulty: Easy

Fragment: Chapters 1, 2, and 7.

Abstract: *The Aztecs: A Very Short Introduction* employs the disciplines of history, religious studies, and anthropology as it illuminates the complexities of Aztec life. This VSI looks beyond Spanish accounts that have coloured much of the Western narrative to let Aztec voices speak. It also discusses the arrival of the Spaniards, contrasts Aztec mythical traditions about the origins of their city with actual urban life in Mesoamerica, outlines the rise of the Aztec empire, explores Aztec religion, and sheds light on Aztec art. The VSI concludes by looking at how the Aztecs have been portrayed in Western thought, art, film, and literature as well as in Latino culture and arts

COMMENT:

Both of these two books are introductory to the broader historical context of Maya and Aztec civilizations. The selected chapters present some of the basic historical, geographical, and demographics facts/claims about the Maya and the Aztecs. These texts also introduce some relevant information about the language, writing systems, and foundational myths of both the Maya and the Aztecs. The purpose of this session is to discuss these topics to gain acquaintance with some of the peculiarities and problems of ancient Mesoamerican thought.

FURTHER READING:

CARRASCO, DAVID, LINDSAY JONES AND SCOTT SESSIONS. *MESOAMERICA'S CLASSIC HERITAGE: FROM TEOTIHUACAN TO THE AZTECS*

2000, University Press of Colorado.

Difficulty: Easy

Abstract: For more than a millennium the great Mesoamerican city of Teotihuacn (c. 150 b.c.a.d. 750) has been imagined and reimagined by a host of subsequent cultures including our own. Mesoamerica's Classic Heritage engages the subject of the unity and diversity of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica by focusing on the classic heritage of this ancient city. This new volume is the product of several years of research by members of Princeton University's Moses Mesoamerican Archive and Research Project and Mexico's Proyecto Teotihuacn. Offering a variety of disciplinary perspectives—including the history of religions, anthropology, archaeology, and art history—and a wealth of new data, *Mesoamerica's Classic Heritage* examines Teotihuacn's rippling influence across Mesoamerican time and space, including important patterns of continuity and change, and its relationships, both historical and symbolic, with Tenochtitlan, Cholula, and various Mayan communities.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Can you think of a particular theory within the Western philosophical canon whose relevance can be only properly understood if we take into account the historical context in which it was developed? (e.g., Hobbes' account of political authority and the English Civil War).
2. If there never was a Mayan empire or any particular society that called itself "the Mayas", what do we mean when we speak about the "Maya civilization"?
3. Which are the main sources of Mayan mythology? Regarding content and format, how do these compare to canonical sources of Greek mythology (Hesiod's Theogony, or Homer's Iliad and Odyssey)?
4. What is the place of Teotihuacan in the Aztec world view?
5. If the defeat of the Aztec empire was only possible with the collaboration of both native peoples and Spaniards, in what way can we conceive the victory of the latter as a colonialist conquest?

2. INTRODUCTION TO NAHUA THOUGHT

MAFFIE, JAMES. *PHILOSOPHY WITHOUT EUROPE*

2019, in *Latin American and Latinx Philosophy*, Robert Eli Sánchez (ed.). Routledge. **Difficulty:** Intermediate

Abstract: *Latin American and Latinx Philosophy: A Collaborative Introduction* is a beginner's guide to canonical texts in Latin American and Latinx philosophy, providing the non-specialist with necessary historical and philosophical context, and demonstrating their contemporary relevance. It is written in jargon-free prose for students and professors who are interested in the subject, but who don't know where to begin. Each of the twelve chapters, written by a leading scholar in the field, examines influential texts that are readily available in English and introduces the reader to a period, topic, movement, or school that taken together provide a broad overview of the history, nature, scope, and value of Latin American and Latinx philosophy. Although this volume is primarily intended for the reader without a background in the Latin American and Latinx tradition, specialists will also benefit from its many novelties, including an introduction to Aztec ethics; a critique of "the Latino threat" narrative; the legacy of Latin American philosophy in the Chicano movement; an overview of Mexican existentialism, Liberation philosophy, and Latin American and Latinx feminisms; a philosophical critique of indigenism; a study of Latinx contributions to the philosophy of immigration; and an examination of the intersection of race and gender in Latinx identity.

COMMENT:

In this chapter, Maffie compares the general framework of Western philosophy and that of Mexica or Aztec philosophy. The latter offers a genuine alternative to the former, for Mexica's philosophy, in general, is "path-seeking" rather than "truth-seeking". This means that the main purpose of philosophy consists in following and expanding a particular way of life. The author also introduces some important features of Mexica philosophy, namely, that there is no clear-cut distinction between philosophy, religion, and spirituality. Furthermore, in this chapter we can also find a brief account of some interesting philosophical views. Firstly, the relationship between living beings and Mexica Deities (i.e., Creator Beings). The latter are not transcendent, and they have no ontological priority over the former insofar as the existence of both are deeply intertwined. Secondly, the author discusses the moral obligations of human beings towards Creator Beings, non-human animals, and other human beings. Finally, it discusses the Mexica notion of "personhood" (i.e., admits degrees and can belong to inanimate objects, and both human and non-human animals).

FURTHER READING:

LEÓN-PORTILLA, MIGUEL. *AZTEC THOUGHT AND CULTURE: A STUDY OF THE ANCIENT NAHUATL MIND*

1963, University of Oklahoma Press.

Difficulty: Intermediate

Fragment: Chapter 1: 'The Birth of Philosophy among the Nahuas' pp. 3-24, and Appendices I-II pp. 184-221.

Publisher's note: For at least two millennia before the advent of the Spaniards in 1519, there was a flourishing civilization in central Mexico. During that long span of time a cultural evolution took place which saw a high development of the arts and literature, the formulation of complex religious doctrines, systems of education, and diverse political and social organization.

The rich documentation concerning these people, commonly called Aztecs, includes, in addition to a few codices written before the Conquest, thousands of folios in the Nahuatl or Aztec language written by natives after the Conquest. Adapting the Latin alphabet, which they had been taught by the missionary friars, to their native tongue, they recorded poems, chronicles, and traditions.

The fundamental concepts of ancient Mexico presented and examined in this book have been taken from more than ninety original Aztec documents. They concern the origin of the universe and of life, conjectures on the mystery of God, the possibility of comprehending things beyond the realm of experience, life after death, and the meaning of education, history, and art. The philosophy of the Nahuatl wise men, which probably stemmed from the ancient doctrines and traditions of the Teotihuacans and Toltecs, quite often reveals profound intuition and in some instances is remarkably "modern."

This English edition is not a direct translation of the original Spanish, but an adaptation and rewriting of the text for the English-speaking reader.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is the difference between "truth-seeking" philosophy and "path-seeking" philosophy?
2. If not truth, what is the foundation of Mexica's "path-seeking" philosophy?
3. Which are the main responsibilities of the Mexica philosopher?
4. What is the relationship between human beings and deities (i.e., Creator Beings) in Mexica philosophy/religion?
5. In which sense are Mexica ethics non-anthropocentric?
6. Can you describe the Mexica notion of "personhood"?

3. INTRODUCTION TO MAYAN THOUGHT

MCLEOD, ALEXUS. *PHILOSOPHY OF THE ANCIENT MAYA: LORDS OF TIME*

2018, Lexington Books.

Difficulty: Advanced

Fragment: Preface pp. vii-x, and Conclusion pp. 161-174.

Abstract: This book investigates some of the central topics of metaphysics in the philosophical thought of the Maya people of Mesoamerica, particularly from the Preclassic through Postclassic periods. This book covers the topics of time, change, identity, and truth, through comparative investigation integrating Maya texts and practices—such as Classic Period stelae, Postclassic Codices, and Colonial-era texts such as the *ŕ* and the books of *Chilam Balam*—and early Chinese philosophy.

COMMENT:

In these sections of the book, McLeod introduces some relevant methodological aspects that must be considered in order to understand Mayan philosophy. The first one, is that of the nature of the sources from which we can reconstruct Mayan philosophical thought that are available to use. Unlike the source of Ancient Mexica intellectual culture which are relatively abundant, the availability of Mayan sources is more limited. The second one, is about the nature of Mayan language: written Maya consists of pictograms which represent both ideograms or glyphs and syllabic sounds. The author also discusses the fact that some forms of Mayan languages and Mayan peoples are alive. Finally, this section of McLeod's book also discusses the philosophical concepts of truth and personhood.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why is it the case that Ancient Mayan Philosophy is not part of Latin American Philosophy?
2. Can you mention some of the challenges faced by scholars trying to reconstruct the history of Mayan Thought?
3. Why does the author use some concepts of Chinese philosophy to understand similar Mayan philosophical concepts?
4. Explain the Aztec concept of "truth" and how it compares to its Mayan counterpart.
5. How does the fact that both Mayan people and languages are still around affect the reconstruction of Mayan classical philosophy?

4. THE NAHUA CONCEPTION OF HUMAN BEINGS

UNKNOWN. *CANTARES MEXICANOS: SONGS OF THE AZTECS*.

1985, John Bierhorst (trans.). Stanford University Press.

Difficulty: Advanced

Fragment: folio 2v: 'A song of green places, an Otomi song, a plain one' p. 137, and folios 10v and 11 pp. 161-167.

Adapted from prologue: Since its rediscovery in the mid-nineteenth century the codex *Cantares Mexicanos* has come to be recognized as the chief source of Aztec poetry and one of the monuments of American Indian literature (...) Over the years a tradition has gradually been established that views the *Cantares* as a poet's miscellany, studded with lyrics composed by famous kings (...) [Bierhorst's edition] breaks with this tradition (...) The findings [of the present study] in brief are these: The ninety-one songs in the *Cantares*, without exception, belong to a single genre, which flourishes during the third quarter of the sixteenth century. *Netotiliztli* (or dance associated with worldly entertainment) is the native name that appears to have been applied to the genre in its entirety. But for lack of certainty on this point, and for the sake of convenience, I have chosen to designate it by the term "ghost songs." (...) the Aztec ghost song may be described as a musical performance in which warrior-singers summon the ghosts of ancestors in order to swell their ranks and overwhelm their enemies. (...) The *Cantares* itself (...) is limited to songs belonging to the city-state of Mexico, or to Mexico and its close ally, Azcapotzalco (...) Although it is possible that a few of the songs in the *Cantares* manuscripts were composed before the Conquest, by far the greater number belong to the post-Conquest period.

LEÓN-PORTILLA, MIGUEL. *AZTEC THOUGHT AND CULTURE: A STUDY OF THE ANCIENT NAHUATL MIND*

1963, University of Oklahoma Press.

Difficulty: Intermediate

Fragment: Chapter 4: 'The Approach to Man in Nahuatl Thought', pp. 104-132.

Publisher's note: For at least two millennia before the advent of the Spaniards in 1519, there was a flourishing civilization in central Mexico. During that long span of time a cultural evolution took place which saw a high development of the arts and literature, the formulation of complex religious doctrines, systems of education, and diverse political and social organization.

The rich documentation concerning these people, commonly called Aztecs, includes, in addition to a few codices written before the Conquest, thousands of folios in the Nahuatl or Aztec language written by natives after the Conquest. Adapting the Latin alphabet, which they had been taught by the missionary friars, to their native tongue, they recorded poems, chronicles, and traditions.

The fundamental concepts of ancient Mexico presented and examined in this book have been taken from more than ninety original Aztec documents. They concern the origin of the universe and of life, conjectures on the mystery of God, the possibility of comprehending things beyond the realm of experience, life after death, and the meaning of education, history, and art. The philosophy of the Nahuatl wise men, which probably stemmed from the ancient doctrines and traditions of the Teotihuacans and Toltecs, quite often reveals profound intuition and in some instances is remarkably "modern."

This English edition is not a direct translation of the original Spanish, but an adaptation and rewriting of the text for the English-speaking reader.

COMMENT:

How did Nahuatl thought conceive the nature of human beings? León-Portilla's chapter will serve as an introduction to this question. This chapter introduces key concepts in the Nahua conception of human beings. Firstly, it introduces the idea that human beings are created out of necessity by the gods, and the idea that they find themselves in a precarious situation. It also introduces the concepts of heart (yóllotl) and face (ix-tli) as the key concepts to understand human being's dynamic nature. While the face can be understood as that which makes each person an individual and that which needs to be developed (we can assimilate it to a notion of the self), the heart is taken to be the dynamic center of human being's psychological life. The chapter also focuses on the destiny of human beings on earth and in the afterlife, as well as to the notion of free will that is at play. In parallel to León-Portilla's text and as the primary sources for this week are two Nahua Cantares or "ghost songs" that talk about the precarious nature of human beings on earth. These cantares exemplify some of the ideas discussed by León-Portilla. As further reading, the sections "Psychological well-being or in ixtli – in yollotl", "Teachers of knowledge and face", "Illness and the community", and "Aztec healers or psychotherapists" provide a clear and helpful discussion on these concepts and, more generally, on Nahua psychology.

FURTHER READING:

PADILLA, AMADO AND V. NELLY SALGADO DE SNYDER. *PSYCHOLOGY IN PRE-COLUMBIAN MEXICO*

1988, *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 10 (1): 55-66.

Difficulty: Intermediate

Abstract: Aztec psychological thought is described in this paper. The Pre-Columbian world of the Aztecs was characterized by Spanish chroniclers as being as sophisticated in the sciences and medicine as anything found in Europe at the time of the conquest of Mexico. This knowledge included a belief structure about the development of personality and the way in which Aztec society socialized the person. Concepts of psychological equilibrium and well-being are also found within Aztec medicine. Psychological dysfunctions were identified by Aztec healers and "talking" therapies not unlike today's psychotherapeutic techniques could be found.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. In what sense are human beings in a precarious situation on earth?
2. León-Portilla introduces the narration of Quetzalcóatl's trip to Mictlan (the underworld) that relates to the origin of human beings, what is the moral of this narration regarding the human nature?
3. What is the Nahuatl understanding of "face" (ix-tli) and its development?
4. What is the Nahuatl understanding of "heart" (yollotl) and what could it mean to say that it is dynamic?
5. How did Nahuatl thought made compatible the idea that human beings have a certain predetermined fate and destiny with the idea that they can have some control over it?
6. What is the tlamatimine or sage's role in the development of human beings and in their understanding of the true of human being's origin and nature?
7. How is the idea that the value of life on earth is limited expressed in the Cantares "Beginning of the songs" and "A song of green places..."?
8. Read the cantar "Flower song" and think: what is the heart's desire and why cannot it be found on earth?

5. BODY AND VITAL FORCES

DE SAHAGÚN, BERNARDINO. *FLORENTINE CODEX: GENERAL HISTORY OF THE THINGS OF NEW SPAIN*

2012, Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (eds. and trans.). University of Utah Press.

Difficulty: Advanced

Fragment: Book 3 p. 49; Book 3 pp. 25 and 114-115.

Publisher's note: Two of the world's leading scholars of the Aztec language and culture have translated Sahagún's monumental and encyclopedic study of native life in Mexico at the time of the Spanish Conquest. This immense undertaking is the first complete translation into any language of Sahagún's Nahuatl text, and represents one of the most distinguished contributions in the fields of anthropology, ethnography, and linguistics.

Written between 1540 and 1585, the *Florentine Codex* (so named because the manuscript has been part of the Laurentian Library's collections since at least 1791) is the most authoritative statement we have of the Aztecs' lifeways and traditions—a rich and intimate yet panoramic view of a doomed people.

The *Florentine Codex* is divided by subject area into twelve books and includes over 2,000 illustrations drawn by Nahuatl artists in the sixteenth century.

LÓPEZ-AUSTIN, ALFREDO. *THE HUMAN BODY IN THE MEXICAN WORLDVIEW*

2017, in *The Oxford Handbook of the Aztecs*, Deborah L. Nichols and Enrique Rodríguez-Alegría (eds.). Oxford University Press.

Difficulty: Intermediate

Fragment: pp. 399 – 409.

Abstract: For the ancient Mexicas, the composition of the human body was similar to that of the cosmos, with both being composed of dense and light substances. The light substance of the human body was divine in nature and formed the different souls of each human being. Some souls were indispensable for human existence while others were unnecessary and often harmful. The dense part of the human body functioned through its union with the souls. Like the different souls, the dense parts of the human body also had specific functions dedicated to different activities. For example, human thought derived primarily from the heart. Souls could be damaged, which could cause them to malfunction and lead to illness and possibly death in the human being. As the souls were divine, each was a conscious being with its own personality; thus there could be disagreements between them. Disharmony could also lead to illness.

COMMENT:

Alfredo López Austin discusses the Aztec view of the body and the soul. According to him, the body was thought to be composed of two types of substances distinguished in virtue of their material features. Further, there was a substance that can be associated with the modern concept of souls. López Austin proposes that ancient Nahuatl thought of human psychological life as having a tripartite structure, distinguishing between three animistic entities: *tonalli*, *teyolia*, and *ihiyotl*. *Tonalli* is associated with warmth and the radiation of heat, and seen as a force that animates an individual. Although it is mainly located in the head, it is also distributed across the entire body. *Teyolia*, in turn, is the animistic entity or force that is thought to abandon the body after death. There is a strong association between *teyolia* and winged creatures, particularly birds, into which the human soul turned to travel to the afterlife world. This force is associated with the heart to which cognitive, affective, and volitive functions are attributed. Finally, *ihiyotl* is a force or gas thought to be located in the liver, but can also be introduced into the individual or occasionally emanate from them. This force is associated with some negative emotions and attitudes (e.g. greed

and anger). As in other respects, Nahuatl medicine emphasized the relevance of keeping this force and its emanations in balance.

The proposed passage of the *Florentine Codex* As further illustrates the association between passing away and transforming into a bird. The further passages from the *Florentine Codex* are related to pure life and the knowledge of an individual. These passages are typically seen as sources which illuminate the Nahuatl concept of the heart.

As further reading, we suggest the paper by Olko & Madaczak, in which they critically discuss López Austin's proposal. They suggest that we should consider *tonalli* as the animistic entity that was most likely to be present in pre-Hispanic thought.

FURTHER READING:

OLKO, JUSTYNA AND JULIA MADACZAK. *AN ANIMATING PRINCIPLE IN CONFRONTATION WITH CHRISTIANITY? DE(RE)CONSTRUCTING THE NAHUA 'SOUL'*

2019, *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 30: 75-88.

Difficulty: Advanced

Abstract: -Yolia is one of the principal indigenous terms present in Christian Nahua terminology in the first decades of European contact. It is employed for "soul" or "spirit" and often forms a doublet with *ánima* in Nahuatl texts of an ecclesiastical, devotional, or secular nature. the term -Yolia/teyolia has also lived a rich and fascinating life in scholarly literature. Its etymology ("the means for one's living") is strikingly similar to that of the Spanish word "*ánima*", or "soul." Taking into account the possibility that attestations of the seemingly pre-Hispanic -Yolia can be identified in some of the written sources, we have reviewed historical, linguistic, and anthropological evidence concerning this term in order to revisit the Nahua concept of the "soul." we also scrutinize the very origin of -Yolia in academic discourse. this analysis, based on broader historical and linguistic evidence referring to both pre-Conquest beliefs and Christianization in sixteenth-century central Mexico, is the point of departure for proposing and substantiating an alternative hypothesis about the origin of -yolia. Our precise focus has been to trace and pinpoint a pervasive Christian influence, manifest both in indigenous Colonial texts and conceptual frameworks of modern scholars interpreting them. we conclude that -Yolia is a neologism created in the early Colonial period.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are the substances that compose the body?
2. How does López Austin divide the different types of souls?
3. What is the relation between the body and the substances related to the soul? In what sense are they dynamic?
4. How do the questions about the origin of human beings and about the origin of *tonalli* relate to each other?
5. What are the main features and functions of *teyolía*? What its function? In what sense is *teyolía* collective? Considering López Austin's characterization of death, what's the relation between *teyolía* and its human host?
6. What are the features of *tonalli*? How do you make sense of the idea that one must care for their *tonalli*?
7. What are the features and functions of *ihíyotl*?
8. Why are the passages related to death and the transformation of a person into a bird taken in relation to the nature of the heart?
9. To which organs does the passage in page 25 of book 6 of the *Florentine Codex* associate the knowledge of the individual?
10. How is the pure life characterized in page 114 of book 6 of the *Florentine Codex*?

UNKNOWN. *THE MAPA DE CUAUHTINCHAN NO. 2*1300, Resource available at: <http://mesoamerica.info/mapa-de-cuautinchan-II>**Difficulty:** N/A

Description: The Mapa de Cuauhtinchan II is a historical-cartographical document from the early colonial period from the state of Puebla, which is likely a copy of an older document from the early post-classic period. This document was declared a historical monument on June 24th, 1963, by the Mexican National Institute of Anthropology and History. The number 2 was assigned to distinguish it from other maps [found in Cuauhtinchan]. To this day, there are four maps registered in this town that pertained to the sixteenth century. Together they constitute a set of sources intimately related in virtue of its pictographic style, as well as of its historic and cartographic content. The Mapa de Cuauhtinchan II is considered one among the historical-cartographical documents that served to state arguments and justifications in defense of political and territorial rights of the ethnic groups who authored them. Along with the oral tradition, they conform Mesoamerican historiography. The historical information they provide refers to the Chichimeca groups of people that left Chicomoztoc in the twelfth century as a response to the calling of the Tolteca-Chichimeca people to conquer the allies of the Olmeca Xicallanca people in Cholula, Puebla.

Translated from Mesoamerican Research Foundation (n.d.), Mapa de Cuauhtinchan II, available at <http://mesoamerica.info/mapa-de-cuautinchan-II>.

NEWMAN, SARAH E. *SENSORIAL EXPERIENCES IN MESOAMERICA: EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP AND POSSIBILITIES*2019, in *The Routledge Handbook of Sensory Archaeology*, Robin Skeates and Jo Day (eds.). Routledge.**Difficulty:** Intermediate**Fragment:** pp. 481 – 499.

Abstract: The cultural construction of experience and perception has been a topic of interest among scholars working in Mesoamerica for decades. Archaeological remains, art, ancient and historic textual sources, and ethnographic observations complement and inform one another in those investigations, many of which stress the particular conceptions of bodies, sensorial hierarchies, and lived experiences across the culturally and linguistically connected region extending geographically from northern Mexico to Costa Rica. This chapter provides an overview of sensorial studies in Mesoamerica that highlights the rich and diverse evidence available. It emphasizes a diachronic, comparative approach, common in Mesoamericanist archaeology, which forces scholars to go beyond the identification of specific stimuli on discrete senses and enables them to study contexts of heightened synaesthetic experience, as well as those contexts' affective and symbolic meanings. Finally, I suggest possibilities for considering an archaeology of the senses that extends beyond the limits of a singular human body in order to more fully embrace the conceptual nature of ancient Mesoamerican experience.

ISABEL, LAACK. *AZTEC PICTORIAL NARRATIVES: VISUAL STRATEGIES TO ACTIVATE EMBODIED MEANING AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF IDENTITY IN THE MAPA DE CUAUHTINCHAN NO. 2*

2020, in *Narrative Cultures and the Aesthetics of Religion*, Dirk Johannsen, Anja Kirsch and Jens Kreinath (eds.). Brill.

Difficulty: Intermediate

Fragment: pp. 155 – 184.

Abstract: In this chapter, Laack analyzes a migration account visually depicted in the Mexican early colonial pictorial manuscript known as the Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2. This pictographic map tells the story of a group of Aztecs leaving their primordial home, changing their social, cultural, and religious identity through migration and the passing of ordeals, and finally settling in the town of Cuauhtinchan. It is painted in the style of Aztec pictography, which used visual imagery to convey thoughts and meanings in contrast to alphabetical scripts using abstract signs for linguistic sounds. Drawing on the theories of embodied metaphors and embodied meaning by philosopher Mark L. Johnson and cognitive linguist George P. Lakoff, I argue that Aztec pictography offers efficient and effective means to communicate embodied metaphors on a visual level and evokes complex layers of embodied meaning. In doing so, I intend to change perspective on the narrative powers of religious stories by transcending textual patterns of analysis and theory building and opening up to non-linguistic modes of experience and their influence on narrative structures and strategies.

COMMENT:

What is the Nahua conception of perception? And how does this relate to pictorial expression? This is the theme that guides these readings. The proposed reading is the paper “Sensorial Experiences in Mesoamerica” by Sarah E. Newman. In this paper, Newman begins by discussing the methodological challenges of understanding the experiences of ancient cultures. One of the ideas she emphasizes from precious scholarship is the claim that perception is not seen as passive and was taken to be the centre of consciousness. Newman goes through each of the five senses, noting the relevance of multi-modality for Nahua understanding of perceptual experience.

To link this theme to that of understanding and communication, a paper on the senses in Mesoamerican cultures has been proposed as further reading. One of the guiding ideas of the paper by Houston & Taube (2000) is that the Mesoamerican conception of perception is synesthetic insofar as their material culture aimed at evoking multi-modal experiences. According to the authors, writing was meant to be accompanied by oral expression.

To explore this idea, it is suggested to read some sections of the paper “Aztec Pictorial Narratives” by Isabel Laack which analyses the embodied metaphors found in the pictorial manuscript Mapa de Cuauhtinchan no. 2 (the map of Cuauhtinchan number 2) based on the theory of embodied cognition proposed by Lakoff and Johnson. According to the latter, our concepts are grounded on embodied metaphors. Laack’s proposal is that Aztec pictographic manuscript exploits these kinds of concepts to enable the communication of non-propositional meaning.

FURTHER READING:

HOUSTON, STEPHEN AND KARL TAUBE. *AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE SENSES: PERCEPTION AND CULTURAL EXPRESSION IN ANCIENT MESOAMERICA*

2000, *Cambridge Archeological Journal*, 10 (2): 261 – 294.

Difficulty: Intermediate

Abstract: The ancient Maya and other Mesoamerican peoples showed an intense interest in invoking the senses, especially hearing, sight, and smell. The senses were flagged by graphic devices of synaesthetic or cross-sensory intent; writing and speech scrolls triggered sound, sightlines the acts and consequences of seeing, and flowery ornament indicated both scent and soul essence. As conceived anciently, the senses were projective and procreative, involving the notion of unity and shared essence in material and incorporeal realms. Among the Maya, spaces could be injected with moral and hierarchical valuation through visual fields known as *y-ichnal*. The inner mind extended to encompass outer worlds, in strong parallel to concepts of monism. From such evidence arises the possibility of reconstructing the phenomenology of ancient Mesoamericans.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are the methodological challenges faced by sensorial studies?
2. In what sense is sight active? How does the Nahua view of sight compare to that of Classical antiquity?
3. How would you articulate the features that make sound relevant?
4. What are the features of smell? What is the connection between the sense or smell and synesthetic experiences?
5. What does Newman mean by 'sensorial assemblages'? Why is it methodologically relevant for sensorial studies?
6. Why is it relevant to consider that Mesoamerican cultures do not conceive of personhood as bounded to an individual body to study perception?
7. What is the relation, in Aztec culture, between orality and literacy? Based on this, what is the role of Aztec pictographic writing system?
8. How is the discourse of the *Mapa* mostly expressed?
9. How does the *Mapa* achieve communicating non-propositional meaning?
10. In light of López-Austin's view of Nahuatl perception and the Houston & Taube's idea that communication is multi-modal, how would you articulate the expressive potential of Nahuatl pictographic communication?

SECTION 3: MAYAN PHILOSOPHY

THE MAYAN CONCEPTION OF THE SOUL

UNKNOWN. *POPOL VUH: THE MAYAN BOOK OF THE DAWN OF LIFE*

1996, Dennis Tedlock (trans.). Simon & Schuster.

Difficulty: Intermediate

Fragment: Part 1 pp. 73 – 74, and Part 4 pp. 145 – 151.

Adapted from the preface: The *Popol Vuh* tells the story of the emergence of light in the darkness, from primordial glimmers to brilliant dawns, and from rain– storms as black as night to days so clear the very ends of the earth can be seen. A revised edition of this translation of the *Popol Vuh* has become necessary because the world of Mayan studies is itself a constantly brightening one. Advances in the understanding of Mayan languages, literature, art, history, politics, and astronomy have required changes in the introduction, notes, commentaries, glossary, and illustrations. There are also changes in the translation itself, some of them subtle refinements and others that readers of the previous edition may find surprising. And finally, an index has been added.

HOUSTON, STEPHEN. *THE LIFE WITHIN: CLASSIC MAYA AND THE MATTER OF PERMANENCE*

2014, Yale University Press.

Difficulty: Intermediate

Fragment: pp. 81-84.

Publisher's note: For the Classic Maya, who flourished in and around the Yucatan peninsula in the first millennium AD, artistic materials were endowed with an internal life. Far from being inert substances, jade, flint, obsidian, and wood held a vital essence, agency, and even personality. To work with these materials was to coax their life into full expression and to engage in witty play. Writing, too, could shift from hieroglyphic signs into vibrant glyphs that sprouted torsos, hands, and feet. Appearing to sing, grapple, and feed, they effectively blurred the distinction between text and image. In this first full study of the nature of Maya materials and animism, renowned Mayanist scholar Stephen Houston provides startling insights into a Pre-Columbian worldview that dramatically contrasts with western perspectives. Illustrated with more than one hundred photographs, images, and drawings, this beautifully written book reveals the Maya quest for transcendence in the face of inevitable death and decay.

FREIDEL, DAVID, LINDA SCHELE, AND JOY PARKER. *MAYA COSMOS: THREE THOUSAND YEARS ON THE SHAMAN'S PATH*

1995, William Morrow.

Difficulty: Intermediate

Fragment: Chapter 2 (section 'Creation in the *Popol Vuh*') and Chapter 4, pp. 107-112 and 173-207.

Publisher's note (excerpt): The ancient Maya, through their shamans, kings, warriors, and scribes, created a legacy of power and enduring beauty. The landmark publication of *A Forest of Kings* presented the first accessible, dramatic history of this great civilization, written by experts in the translation of glyphs. Now, in *Maya Cosmos*, Freidel, Schele, and Parker examine Maya mythology and religion, unraveling the question of how these extraordinary people, five million strong, have managed to preserve their most sacred beliefs into modern times. In *Maya Cosmos*, the authors draw upon translations of sacred texts and histories spanning thousands of years to tell us a story of the Maya, not in our words but in theirs.

COMMENT:

What is the Mayan conception of human beings, their vital force, and their place in the universe? To address these topics, this session includes the reading of a section of the *Popol Vuh*, that tells the story of the Quiché people, a Mayan group in Guatemala, starting off from the creation. This story was kept through oral narration and was recorded in writing in the sixteenth century. The sections recommended for review focus on the creation of human beings, the several attempts at creating humans, how they were finally created perfect and

how they were later changed so as not to be as gods. To accompany the reading of the *Popol Vuh*, a section of chapter 2 of the book *Maya Cosmos* has also been recommended. Here, Freidel, Schele & Parker (1995) contextualize the creation of human beings in the wider context of the Quiché creation myth.

To further into the question about the Mayan conception of human beings, we have also recommended the first part of chapter 4 of *Maya Cosmos*. Here, the authors introduce the reader to the Mayan notion of k'ul (ch'ul), essence or vital force. As the authors note, k'ul is used to denote a sacred aspect of human that is not identical with their bodies but is inserted into them. According to some conceptions, however, this vital force, however, is not unique to human beings but has some kind of universality. The authors also discuss the notion of chanul (also kanul) which is a supernatural guardian that accompanies a person and shares with them their vital force. As a third concept of soul, the authors discuss the notion of the 'white flower' and the idea that the soul is created and abandons the body in the moment of death. Finally, to discuss the materiality of the soul, the authors introduce the K'awil, a god that "symbolizes the embodiment of spiritual force in material objects". It is also suggested to take a look at the suggested pages of Houston's *The Life Within* to see some pictorial representations of k'uh.

As further reading, the section 'Terms of embodiment' of the introduction to *Embodied Lives* by Meskell & Joyce has been suggested. In this section, the authors discuss the materiality of the Mayan conception of human beings.

FURTHER READING:

MESKELL, LYNN M. AND RESEMARY A. JOYCE. *EMBODIED LIVES: FIGURING ANCIENT MAYA AND EGYPTIAN EXPERIENCE*

2003, Routledge.

Difficulty: Advanced

Fragment: pp. 23-29.

Publisher's note: Examining a wide range of archaeological data, and using it to explore issues such as the sexual body, mind/body dualism, body modification, and magical practices, Lynn Meskell and Rosemary Joyce offer a new approach to the Ancient Egyptian and Mayan understanding of embodiment. Drawing on insights from feminist theory, art history, phenomenology, anthropology and psychoanalysis, the book takes bodily materiality as a crucial starting point to the understanding and formation of self in any society, and sheds new light on Ancient Egyptian and Maya cultures.

The book shows how a comparative project can open up new lines of inquiry by raising questions about accepted assumptions as the authors draw attention to the long-term histories and specificities of embodiment, and make the case for the importance of ancient materials for contemporary theorization of the body. For students new to the subject, and scholars already familiar with it, this will offer fresh and exciting insights into these ancient cultures.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Think of the different ways in which human creation failed, what was missing at each attempt?
2. What were the features of human beings when they were finally successfully made? What capacities did they have?
3. How were human beings changed and why?
4. What was the aim of the gods in creating humanity?
5. In what sense can it be said that objects have a sacred quality? And what role can they fulfil in the relation between human and gods?
6. What are the features of each of the notions of the soul discussed by Freidel, Schele & Parker?
7. Who is K'awil and in what other ways is the term k'awil (or similar) used?
8. What is the relation between k'awil and the vital force? How does this relate to sacrifices?
9. How would you articulate the Mayan view of the relation between the soul, understood as a vital force, and the body?

PERSONHOOD

MCLEOD, ALEXUS. *PHILOSOPHY OF THE ANCIENT MAYA: LORDS OF TIME*

2018, Lexington Books.

Difficulty: Advanced

Fragment: pp. 131-160.

Publisher's note: This book investigates some of the central topics of metaphysics in the philosophical thought of the Maya people of Mesoamerica, particularly from the Preclassic through Postclassic periods. This book covers the topics of time, change, identity, and truth, through comparative investigation integrating Maya texts and practices—such as Classic Period stelae, Postclassic Codices, and Colonial-era texts such as the *Popol Vuh* and the books of *Chilam Balam*—and early Chinese philosophy.

UNKNOWN. *POPOL VUH: THE MAYAN BOOK OF THE DAWN OF LIFE*.

1996, Dennis Tedlock (trans.). Simon & Schuster.

Difficulty: Easy

Fragment: pp. 18-19.

Adapted from the preface: The *Popol Vuh* tells the story of the emergence of light in the darkness, from primordial glimmers to brilliant dawns, and from rainstorms as black as night to days so clear the very ends of the earth can be seen. A revised edition of this translation of the *Popol Vuh* has become necessary because the world of Mayan studies is itself a constantly brightening one. Advances in the understanding of Mayan languages, literature, art, history, politics, and astronomy have required changes in the introduction, notes, commentaries, glossary, and illustrations. There are also changes in the translation itself, some of them subtle refinements and others that readers of the previous edition may find surprising. And finally, an index has been added.

COMMENT:

In this chapter, McLeod begins by asking whether, for ancient Mayans, the name of rulers or gods is a case of proper names or of function names, i.e. a description of a role. He is interested in a Mayan view discussed in previous chapters according to which the attributes of e.g. an exemplary ruler are attached to the role they fulfilled. For McLeod, the Mayan view is partly supported by their metaphysical views on the self. As preamble to his discussion of the Mayan notion of personhood, McLeod provides some comparison between the Mayan view of the self to that of other traditions. He refers, too, to the sacrality of objects discussed in the previous session. McLeod, then, moves on to discuss the ideas that Mayan personhood can be collective and that someone's essence can extend to material artifacts. The text also includes a discussion of the Mayan notion of substitution (*k'ex*), the act in which someone took the essence of a god.

In light of McLeod's remarks on the relevance of performance for Mayan understanding of personhood and substitution, it is worth considering here that the *Popol Vuh* was orally transmitted. It is also worth reading the prayer recommended by Andrés Xiloj Peruch to Dennis Tedlock when he was working on the translation of the *Popol Vuh*.

As further reading, it is also suggested to review the short paper by Evon Vogt where he discusses the concept of souls of the Mayan people from Zinacanteco, a municipality in Chiapas, Mexico. It might also be interesting to compare McLeod's view with Gillespie's.

FURTHER READINGS:

VOGT, EVON Z. ZINACANTECO 'SOULS'

1965, *Man*, 65: 33 – 35.

Difficulty: Intermediate

Summary: In this paper, Vogt describes the notion of the soul of the people from Zinacateco, Mexico, by drawing on Tzotzil concepts. He specifically focuses on two notions that can be associated with the soul, namely ch'ulel and chanul. He briefly discusses the social relevance of these notions.

GILLESPIE, SUSAN D. THE EXTENDED PERSON IN MAYA ONTOLOGY

2021, *Estudios Latinoamericanos*, 41: 105 – 127.

Difficulty: Advanced

Abstract: For the Maya reality is a unified whole within which every entity shares in the same fundamental animating principle. This is a relational ontology whereby no phenomenon is self-contained but emerges from relations with others, including humans and non-humans, in various fields of action. This ontology correlates with a more encompassing "process metaphysic" in which reality is in constant flux, continually "becoming." The process metaphysic envisioned by philosopher Alfred North Whitehead provides a technical language for analyzing the composition and extension of Maya persons, using the model of personhood developed by anthropologist Marcel Mauss. In life individual Maya persons assembled divergent components endowed by their maternal and paternal ancestors, which were subsequently disassembled upon their deaths. They also assembled non-corporeal components—souls and names—that linked them to existences beyond the physical boundaries and timelines of their bodies. Aspects of personhood were also shared by objects worn or manipulated by humans. Persons were thus extended in space and in time, outliving individual human beings. Maya belief and practice reveals the fundamental process known as k'ex, "replacement" or "substitution," accounts for much of the flux and duration of the universe as a Maya-specific mode of "becoming."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why would it be unintuitive for the Mayans to accept a view of the self as an entity distinct from its community and that retains its identity over time?
2. What is the Mayan understanding of an entity that contains another entity? What is the connection between this idea and the relevance of performance, ritual, and repetition in Mayan thought?
3. In what sense did material artifacts (e.g. stelae and monuments) contained the essence of the person they memorialized?
4. What is the way of an individual? How is it different from their ch'ul? In what sense is way collective?
5. How can someone's essence extend beyond the boundaries of their body?
6. What is, according to McLeod substitution (k'ex)? How is this exemplified in sacrifices? What does this tell us about individual and collective essences?
7. What is the relation between the self (baah) and the body?
8. How does the Mayan view of the soul compare to that of the Nahuas? In what sense is the notion of baah similar to that of tonalli, and that of ch'ul to that of teyolia?

UNKNOWN. *THE ANCIENT FUTURE OF THE ITZA: THE BOOK OF CHILAM BALAM OF TIZIMIN*

1982, Munro S. Edmonson (ed. and trans.). University of Texas Press.

Difficulty: Intermediate

Fragment: pp. xi – xiii and xvi – xx.

Publisher's note: The title of Edmonson's work refers to the Mayan custom of first predicting their history and then living it, and it may be that no other peoples have ever gone so far in this direction. The *Book of Chilam Balam* was a sacred text prepared by generations of Mayan priests to record the past and to predict the future. The official prophet of each twenty-year rule was the *Chilam Balam*, or Spokesman of the Jaguar—the Jaguar being the supreme authority charged with converting the prophet's words into fact.

This is a literal but poetic translation of one of fourteen known manuscripts in Yucatecan Maya on ritual and history. It pictures a world of all but incredible numerological order, slowly yielding to Christianity and Spanish political pressure but never surrendering. In fact, it demonstrates the surprising truth of a secret Mayan government during the Spanish rule, which continued to collect tribute in the names of the ruined Classic cities and preserved the essence of the Mayan calendar as a legacy for the tradition's modern inheritors.

The history of the Yucatecan Maya from the seventh to the nineteenth century is revealed. And this is history as the Maya saw it—of a people concerned with lords and priests, with the cosmology which justified their rule, and with the civil war which they perceived as the real dimension of the colonial period.

A work of both history and literature, the Tizimin presents a great deal of Mayan thought, some of which has been suspected but not previously documented. Edmonson's skillful reordering of the text not only makes perfect historical sense but also resolves the long-standing problem of correlating the two colonial Mayan calendars. The book includes both interpretative and literal translations, as well as the Maya parallel couplets and extensive annotations on each page. The beauty of the sacred text is illuminated by the literal translation, while both versions unveil the magnificent historical, philosophical, and social traditions of the most sophisticated native culture in the New World.

The prophetic history of the Tizimin creates a portrait of the continuity and vitality, of the ancient past and the foreordained future of the Maya.

EBERL, MARKUS. *'TO PUT IN ORDER': CLASSIC MAYA CONCEPTS OF TIME AND SPACE*

2015, in *The Measure and Meaning of Time in the Americas*, A. Aveni (ed.).
Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

Difficulty: Advanced

Fragment: pp. 79–104.

Summary adapted from the introduction: The ancient Maya shouldered the burden of time. J. Eric S. Thompson (1950) opens his *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing: An Introduction* with a collage of god-numbers who carry time units with their mecapal, or head strap. This iconic image has defined our understanding of classic Maya time as cyclical. (...) In the following, I shift the perspective from the “burden of time” to “burdened with time” in order to move from an abstract understanding of time to a study of its practice and bodily experience. I adapt Edmund Husserl's work to develop a cognitive model of time that I apply to classic Maya culture.

COMMENT:

What is the Mayan conception of time and of the experience of time? To illustrate the Mayan conception of time as cyclical, it is suggested to read some sections of the introduction the *Chilam Balam of Tizimin* edited and translated by Munro S. Edmonson. As explained here by Edmonson, the *Chilam Balam* constitute a set of books that have been shaped over centuries by Yucatecan Maya people. According to Edmonson, the *Chilam Balam of Tizimin* is the most historical of the books. It contains the history of Yucatan, Mexico, from the seventh to the nineteenth century, covering each katun (k'atun) or period of approx. 20 years. The task of recording each katun and predicting upcoming events fell on the shoulders of priests. As an introduction, Edmonson begins by explaining the Mayan view of history as cyclical and predictable. He also provides a summary of the history told by this book.

While it has been typically argued that the Mayan view of time is cyclical, the suggested paper by Markus Eberl puts pressure to this view. His aim is to change the focus from the conception of time to the experience of time. To this end, Eberl draws on the phenomenological views of Edmund Husserl and Merleau-Ponty to argue that Mayan perception of time is experienced spatially.

As further reading, it is suggested to review the sections 'Time as a construct of human-nature cooperation' and 'Calendars and ordering' in McLeod's *Philosophy of the Ancient Maya*. Here, McLeod discusses the sense in which time was, for Ancient Mayans, both a human and a natural phenomenon. He also discusses the idea that the ordering of time has a crucial political component.

FURTHER READING:

MCLEOD, ALEXUS. PHILOSOPHY OF THE ANCIENT MAYA. LORDS OF TIME

2018, Lexington Books.

Difficulty: Advanced

Fragment: Sections 'Time as a construct of human-nature cooperation' and 'Calendars and ordering'.

Publisher's note: This book investigates some of the central topics of metaphysics in the philosophical thought of the Maya people of Mesoamerica, particularly from the Preclassic through Postclassic periods. This book covers the topics of time, change, identity, and truth, through comparative investigation integrating Maya texts and practices—such as Classic Period stelae, Postclassic Codices, and Colonial-era texts such as the *Popol Vuh* and the books of *Chilam Balam*—and early Chinese philosophy.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. On Edmonson's account of the Mayan view of history, why and how can priests predict the fate of a katun?
2. What was the disagreement between the Itza and the Xiu about? What was the relation between katun cycles and ruling rights?
3. In what sense can the Mayan conception of time be thought of as a mechanical clock?
4. According to Eberl reconstruction of Husserl's position, what are retentions and protentions? What is the difference between reproduction and retention? Based on these notions, how would you articulate the idea that time is a feature of perceptual experience?
5. How do the inscriptions in Copan Altar Q. and Zoomorph P. illustrate the Husserlian view of the experience of time? In what sense do each of these narrations create a different cognitive image of the narrated events?
6. How does Eberl articulate the notion of tz'ak or time-ordering?
7. In what sense do tz'ak counts allow rulers to stake a future claim?
8. How does the ordering of time relate to the manipulation of space?
9. How do Mayan rulers "embody time"?