

Sometimes these compounds coincide with specific plant or animal names, which, in ghost songs, nevertheless denote the warrior:

- heart flower, *yolloxochitl* (*Talauma mexicana*)
- jaguar flower, *oceloxochitl* (*Tigridia pavonia*)
- hand flower, *macpalxochitl* (*Chiranthodendron pentadactylon*)
- butterfly fish, *papalomichin* (*Sparus* sp.?)

### The Supreme Spirit

"Supreme spirit," as here used, is a term of convenience, not meant to imply that Aztec religion was monotheistic in the Hebraic sense. Sometimes the god Tezcatlipoca was preeminent in Aztec cultic activities, sometimes the sun; and in the city of Mexico the tribal god Huitzilopochtli was often recognized as first among equals. In pre-Conquest ghost songs any of these three, and others as well, could have been acknowledged as the dispenser of divine favor. Or so it would seem from the evidence. But by the middle of the sixteenth century, although the names of the old gods survived, the concept of the divine dispenser had become at least partially assimilated to the Christian "God" (Dios), with an occasional nod to the son (Jesucristo) or the Holy Ghost (Espíritu Santo).

The name Tezcatlipoca does not appear in surviving ghost-song texts. Yet a number of the epithets that are applied to this god in the prayers preserved in Book Six of the *Florentine Codex* recur unchanged in the *Cantares mexicanos*:<sup>2</sup>

- |                           |                                 |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Life Giver, Ipalnemohuani | Warrior, Yaotl                  |
| Master, Tlacatl           | Our Lord, Totecuiyo             |
| Mocker, Moquequeloa       | Ever Present, Ever Near, Tloque |
| Spirit, Teotl             | Nahuaque                        |
| World Owner, Tlalticpaque |                                 |

Other epithets are merely similar, not identical, to names used in the *Florentine Codex* prayers:

- |                        |                         |
|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Life Giver, Ipalnemini | Self Maker, Mochiuhtoc, |
| Ever Near, Nahuaque    | Mochiuhtica             |

Necoc ("on both sides"), Necoc

A few names that might possibly have referred to Tezcatlipoca have no counterparts in the *Florentine Codex* prayers:

- |                            |                           |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Master(?), Chane           | Enduring One(?), Maman    |
| Heart of Heaven, Ilhuicatl | One Movement, Ce Olintzin |
| Iyollo                     |                           |

Looking back over the above lists, one feels that such terms as Mocker and Warrior are unassimilable to the Christian concept of God. But most of the others, though they may once have meant Tezcatlipoca, clearly meant God in the sixteenth century—as did the following:

### Ghost-Song Vocabulary

- |   |                                     |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| Only Spirit, Icelteotl  | Jesucristo, Jesucristo              |
| Everlasting, Cemiac Chane   | Espíritu Santo, Espíritu Santo      |
| (see DICT: cemihcac)  | Our Father, Tota (see DICT: tahtli) |
| Clerical titles may also denote God: Bishop Lord, Obispo Teuctli; Padre(?), Pale. Obviously borrowed from Spanish, such epithets are perhaps merely an extension of the indigenous concept whereby the supreme spirit was identified with mundane authority. Here are a few unaccoluted examples: |                                     |
| Lord, Teuctli   | Arbiter, Tlailodaqui                |
| Lord, Tlatoani (DICT: tlahoani)   | Executioner, Tezacoacatl            |
| Lord Arbiter, Tlailotlac Teuctli  | Water-Palace Dweller, Atecpanecatl  |

In certain ghost songs the supreme spirit is evidently the sun:

- |                                   |                               |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Sun, Tonatiuh                     | Eagle-Going-Down, Cuauh-temoc |
| Eagle, Cuauhtli                   | Cave Dweller, Oztomecatl      |
| White Eagle, Cuauhtli Izta        | Turquoise Prince, Xippilli    |
| Ascending Eagle, Cuauh-tlehuanitl |                               |

He may also be a bird:

- |                               |                            |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| quetzal, <i>quetzaltototl</i> | trogon, <i>tzimitzcan</i>  |
| "swan," <i>quechol</i>        | cotinga, <i>xiuhtototl</i> |
| hummingbird, <i>huitzilin</i> |                            |

Or he may be identified with Huitzilopochtli: Blue Sky, Ilhuicaxoxohuic; Blue Javelin, Xoxohuic Tlacohtli.

In at least one case the name of another Aztec god appears either as the muse or as the supreme spirit: Macuilxochitl (song 65, stanza 1).

Finally, the supreme spirit may be the queen of heaven or the celestial judge: Santa María (song 56, canto A); San Francisco (song 87, stanza 9).

### The Two Locations

Stationed beside the drum, the ghost singer reshapes the world around him and envisions the world beyond. The latter, seen only in the mind's eye, may be referred to as:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| heaven, <i>ilhuicatlitic</i>                  | the shore, <i>atempán</i>                     |
| place of good song, <i>yectli cuicatlan</i>   | the eternal shore, <i>cemanahuac</i>          |
| land of flowers, <i>xochitlalpan</i>          | Nonoalco, Nonoalco                            |
| land of plenty, <i>tonacatlalpan</i>          | water's midst, <i>atlitic</i> (DICT: atlitic) |
| Life Giver's home, <i>ichan Ipalnemohuani</i> | in the plume water, <i>quetzalatlitic</i>     |
|   | green places, <i>xopan</i>                    |

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

our home, *tochan*  
 our place, *topan*  
 our palace, *totlatocan* (see  
 DICT: *tlahtohcān*)  
 dawn (or dawn's house),  
*tlahuizcalli*  
 Tlapallan, Tlapallan  
 house of colors, *tlapapalcalli*  
 land of fire, *tlatlayan*  
 land of smoke, *poctlan*  
 land of spirit becoming,  
*teotihuacan*  
 spirit land, *teopan*

The preceding list is only a sampling of the many names that suggest brilliance, pleasure, or transcendental life. Other, fewer names are more somber:

dead land, *mictlan*  
 place where all are shorn, *ximohuayan*  
 place unknown, *quenonamican*

Certain names actually denote the underworld:

dead land ("going-down  
 place"), *temohuayan*  
 rattlesnake place, *chiappan*

As ghosts arrive from the other world, the place beside the drum becomes a replica of paradise. Hence the large number of terms that may refer either to paradise or to the dance floor:

mat, *petlatl*  
 picture mat, *amoxpetlapan*  
 cavern house, *oztocalli*  
 place of rain, *quiappan*  
 jade house, *chalchiuhcalli*  
 plume house, *quetzalcalli*  
 Names applied especially to the dance floor include:  
 beside the drum, *huehuetitlan*  
 mixcoacalli, *mixcoacalli*  
 place of song, *cuitatlan*  
 flower court, *xochithualli*  
 flower mat, *xochipetlatl*  
 flower house, *xochicalli*

Often the dance floor is synonymous with the (Venice-like) city of Mexico, called:

Mexico, Mexico  
 Huexotzinco, Huexotzinco  
 Tenochtitlan, Tenochtitlan  
 dark-water place, *ttilapan*  
 water's navel, *atl ixiquitic*  
 water's midst, *atlilic* (DICT:  
*ātlilhtic*)

Or the entire country:

Anahuac, *Anahuac*  
 the new land (i. e., America), *yancuic tllali*

Ghost-Song Vocabulary

Or the earth:  
 earth, *tlatlilicpac*  
 the ground, *tlatlapan*  
 the world, *ceமானahuaac*

As a symbolic battlefield the dance floor may be called by one of the following terms, at least some of which may be used to denote that other symbolic battlefield, the warriors' paradise:

battlefield, *yaopan*  
 blaze land, *tlachinoltepec*  
 flood's edge, *atl itempan*  
 jaguar meadow, *ocelozacatl*  
*ipan*  
 the field, *ixtlahual*  
 the circle, *yahualihucan*

place of fear, *mahuizpan*  
 place of danger, *ohuican* (DICT:  
*ohuicān*)  
 the gorge, *atlahuhtli*  
 reed's edge, *acatempan*  
 among bulwark plumes, *quetzal*  
*tenantlcpac*

## Poetics

There is no reliable evidence that Aztec "poetry" was ever recited apart from music or ever committed to writing for the enjoyment of the silent reader. Sahagún's informants speak of "a kind of book" (*amox-xotl*) that the singers used to "follow" and mention "song sheets" (*cuitcaimatl*) owned by their remote ancestors,<sup>1</sup> but these could only have been mnemonic aids, not actual texts. Sixteenth-century manuscripts like the *Cantares mexicanos* preserve not the writings of poets, but the transcripts of ethnographers who recorded what they heard. The term poetics, therefore, must be understood as referring to the craft of the singer, or chanter.

### Structure

The basic unit of every ghost song is the more or less connected string of phrases that I have tentatively labeled the stanza. In the *Cantares* manuscript and in the closely related *Romances de los señores de la Nueva España*, this unit almost always begins at the margin of the page, with the runover evenly indented beneath.<sup>2</sup> The modern eye sees what appears to be a rather long "line" of poetry, as might be found in certain pieces by Walt Whitman. But with a little study the typical unit can be broken into three clearly defined parts: verse, refrain, and litany.

Often, but by no means always, stanzas occur in pairs, in which case the second member of the pair has a new verse followed by the same refrain and litany as in the first. Two or more pairs typically constitute what I have called a canto, and one or more cantos make up the song. Within a canto each stanza has the same litany. Thus a hypothetical song of two cantos, each with four stanzas, would have the form:

	verse <sub>1</sub> , refrain <sub>1</sub> , litany <sub>1</sub>	verse <sub>5</sub> , refrain <sub>3</sub> , litany <sub>2</sub>
	verse <sub>2</sub> , refrain <sub>1</sub> , litany <sub>1</sub>	verse <sub>6</sub> , refrain <sub>3</sub> , litany <sub>2</sub>
<i>Canto 1</i>	verse <sub>3</sub> , refrain <sub>2</sub> , litany <sub>1</sub>	<i>Canto 2</i>
	verse <sub>4</sub> , refrain <sub>2</sub> , litany <sub>1</sub>	verse <sub>7</sub> , refrain <sub>4</sub> , litany <sub>2</sub>
		verse <sub>8</sub> , refrain <sub>4</sub> , litany <sub>2</sub>

## Poetics

As one would expect, the thread of the argument is carried mainly in the verses. The refrain, which has lyric value, may be unnecessary or even interruptive so far as the argument is concerned, especially the second time around. The litany amounts to no more than a short phrase or two, invariably interruptive, and almost always reduced to a meaningless vocable or group of vocables such as *ohuaya* or *yehuaya huee*. (These do not appear in the English translation.)

But the stanza as I have described it—verse, refrain, litany—is typical only in the abstract. Many stanzas have no refrain at all; and without the refrain there can be no pairing. The ideal song form, perhaps, is the canto of eight stanzas, all arranged in pairs.<sup>3</sup> But often a canto will have four, five, six, seven, nine, or more stanzas, some paired, some not. In fact, very few cantos are completely lacking in unpaired stanzas. The gargantuan songs 17 and 18 have more than fifty stanzas each, undivided into cantos and with many stanzas unpaired.

In short, ghost songs are heteromorphic. Partly adapted to the dance, they continue to be strongly shaped by the irregular patterns of speech. To students of American Indian music this should come as no surprise. Yet to certain Mexicanists, who have been inclined to measure Aztec lore against European rather than Amerind norms, the *Cantares mexicanos* has seemed a potpourri of fragments, badly preserved and in need of reconstruction. Whatever the merit of this view in particular instances, it is by and large unnecessary if not mistaken.

For a perfect example of "typical" stanzas paired fourfold to make a one-canto song of eight stanzas, see song 26. Here the litany, untranslatable, is merely the doubled vocable *ohuaya ohuaya*, so common in ghost songs that it is frequently indicated in the manuscript by an "et cetera." The et cetera may, in addition, subsume a repeated refrain.

For unusually well-developed, but not perfect, examples of litany, see the heteromorphic songs 66 and 68. Examples of heteromorphy, generally speaking, can be located at random.

### Prosody

Ghost songs appear to be heterometric. That is, they have no regularly recurring rhythm, at least not in the form in which they have been preserved. Theoretically it is possible that the melodic lines (which were never recorded) exhibited some kind of repeated pattern, such as 4/4 or 6/8, to which the Nahuatl words were artificially fitted as in modern ditties. For example, note how the heterogeneous "Happy birthday, dear Mrs. A." becomes a perfectly metrical 3/4 when squeezed into the familiar tune—with the help of a lightning-quick triplet on "dear Mrs." Today, Mexican folk music exhibits just this kind of regularity, even in remote Indian communities. It is not to be taken for granted, however, that the

same process would have been applied to a sixteenth-century Nahuatl text as richly verbal as the *Cantares*, or to any richly verbal Amerind text.

Except for the settings of relatively simple texts, including many that are made up exclusively of vocables, the general rule in native American music is heterogeneity.<sup>4</sup> In Western music nothing quite like it survives. But rough approximations are to be found in operatic recitative (which is actually metrical) and in the plainchant of the church (which is nonmetrical). Interestingly, the word plainchant (*canto llano*) was translated into sixteenth-century Nahuatl by the term *melahuauc cuicat!* (plain, straight, or direct song), which mysteriously appears in several of the song headings in the *Cantares*. Was this a generic term, applicable to any ghost song? The question will be asked again, and discussed further, in Chapter Ten. In addition, we have the testimony of Francisco Hernández, who states flatly that the songs were in "prose."<sup>5</sup> With greater subtlety, Motolinía speaks of the old-style composers as putting the songs "into meter in their own way" (*a su modo en metro*),<sup>6</sup> or "a kind of meter in their own way" (*a su modo a manera de metro*).<sup>7</sup>

Frequent vocable affixes and infixes, not to mention the numerous free-standing vocables, produce obvious and presumably pleasing rhythmic distortions in ghost-song texts, no doubt contributing to the effect observed by Motolinía. But again, to imagine that these texts could have been artificially crammed or stretched into metric melodic lines, though by no means impossible, is at least unnecessary, given the scanty information that has come down to us. Even more dubious is the notion that Aztec songs exhibit naturally occurring meter as defined by the rules of Greek and Latin prosody. Yet, strange as it seems, this is precisely the line of inquiry that Mexicanists have been pursuing since the first half of the eighteenth century. "Sus versos observaban el metro y la cadencia," wrote Clavijero, and Boturini actually saw iambs.<sup>8</sup> A hundred years after Clavijero, Brinton found iambs again and other "feet" as well.<sup>9</sup> By 1930, J. H. Cornyn could apparently see nothing but trochee.<sup>10</sup> However, a generation later, Garibay was finding trochee, caesura, and dactyls.<sup>11</sup>

Though not without interest, such conjectures must be made in a near total void, since the chants themselves can no longer be heard. But one point, perhaps, deserves special mention. As we examine the *Cantares* manuscript we find that at least some of the songs may be accompanied by a drum cadence that was almost certainly metrical. Is it possible to sing a heterometric chant while beating out an unrelated regular accompaniment? Listeners attuned to Western music might think not. Yet this very phenomenon—provided the cadence is relatively simple, and especially if it is a mere metronomic tapping—has been recorded again and again by ethnomusicologists working with American Indian materials.<sup>12</sup> In performance the chant has a recitative-like quality, to which the metrical drum-

beat gives an accompanying texture, not a counterpoint. If we absolutely must set up a working hypothesis on what Aztec music sounded like, then this, I believe, is where we might start. (As will be discussed in Chapter Eight, the more complicated Aztec cadences were probably beaten out not by the singer himself but by an accompanist.)

Eventually we might conclude—at least—that the texts were fitted to a steady beat. It must be understood, however, that there is no surviving notation for even so much as a single phrase of Aztec vocal music, and though there may be good reason for locating it within the mainstream of North American song,<sup>13</sup> there can be little hope of bringing it back to life.

## Diction

Paired terms were illustrated in the opening paragraphs of Chapter Two; and in Chapter Three, some Aztec "kennings" were listed. Further space might be given to similes, zeugmas, parataxis, litotes, and other European rhetorical devices that seem to occur in Nahuatl. But the following few paragraphs, rather than attempting a catalogue of available curiosities, will concentrate on only so much as is necessary in order to get the modern reader of ghost songs from one sentence to the next without losing the thread of the argument.

*The dramatic monologue.* I here refer not to the dramatic monologue of the poet Browning, which is merely a one-sided conversation, but to a two- or even three-way conversation, sometimes interspersed with bits of soliloquy and an occasional aside to the audience—all recited by a single chanter. The technique is common in American Indian storytelling and equally common in song texts. Here, for example, is the translated text of a wheat-cutting song from Santo Domingo Pueblo, New Mexico:

(EXPLANATORY:) The wheat is getting excited.

(THE WHEAT SPEAKS:) There they come.

(EXPLANATORY:) The heads move from side to side. The men say, "It looks like the water in the tide." No man will ever miss one head of wheat.

(THE WHEAT SPEAKS:) We are glad to go from this Mother Earth.

(EXPLANATORY:) This song is very wonderful. These are sacred songs, as we know.

(THE SPIRITS SPEAK:) They pray to us and they work hard, etc.<sup>14</sup>

The following lines, also performed by a single (male) singer, are from a modern Nahuatl song collected in Amatlán de los Reyes, Veracruz:<sup>15</sup>

kampa tonyoh malintsen  
nepa nonyoh notienda  
tlen tikonkwiten mo-  
tienda  
nikonkwiten moliston

"Where are you going, Malintzin?"

"I'm going over to my shop."

"What are you going to get in your shop?"

"I'm going to get a string."

tlen tikonchiwiles noliston  
 nikonkichilpes nomiston  
 tlen okonchih momiston  
 okonmimiloh nchokolat

"What will you do with the string?"

"Tie my cat by the neck."

"What did your cat do?"

"Spilled the chocolate."

For similar passages in the *Cantares*, see song 66, canto A, and song 86, canto B—to mention only two. The reason for quoting the above examples is to demonstrate that dramatic diction need not imply theater. Certain forms of protodrama resembling European masque probably did exist in pre-Conquest Mexico, and it is no doubt true that at least the satirical pieces in the *Cantares* were accompanied by mime.<sup>16</sup> But one need not assume that different actors played the different roles called for in the texts.

*Ejaculation.* Short imperative or optative phrases, interjections, and vocatives are highly characteristic of ghost-song diction. Even the indicative mode may carry optative force.<sup>17</sup> In a sense, ghost songs are prayers, uttered for the purpose of producing revenants.

*Rhetorical questions.* Declarations are often phrased in the form of a question. Because the "obvious" answer is not always obvious to the modern reader, this feature of Aztec diction may cause confusion. Some examples: "Will we destroy pleasure when we die?" (song 38, stanza 12); "Can Rush-Capes—can the gorge—be here, be Chalco?" (song 51, stanza 11); "Could our babes then perish?" (song 68, stanza 48). The answers to these three questions would appear to be no, yes, and no, respectively.

*Mixed metaphors.* It has already been pointed out that ghost warriors, figuratively speaking, may be flowers, birds, or musical instruments. When two or more such images are mixed in a single sentence, the effect may be jarring to the modern ear. Note the following example from song 82, stanza 26: "This multitude stands leafing out as eagles. They're the trogon-sprouting drums—of yours, O God—with which our princes give you pleasure."

*Decomposition.* Ancestral figures mentioned in ghost songs tend to be abstract entities, which may be decomposed into two or more related personalities. Thus the hero Tlachuepan is often replaced by one of his brothers, especially Ixtlilcuechahuac or Matlacuatzin. Or two of them may be coupled in a single phrase (see below). If an editor were to strike out these couplings and replacements and insert the name Tlachuepan, the meaning would perhaps be unchanged—and might be much clearer for the modern reader.

*Coupling and tripling.* The tendency toward paired and tripled phrasing, highly developed in Aztec oratory, is less pronounced in Aztec songs—which nevertheless exhibit such pairs as "I crave your flowers, I crave your songs" or "O Nezahualcoyotl! O Montezuma," or an occasional triplet

like "fame, glory, kings!" (song 56, stanza 7). Pairs and triplets in the Mayan literatures often appear to create a verse form of themselves.<sup>18</sup> Consider, for example, this excerpt from a Kekchi Maya prayer.<sup>19</sup>

Now I will sleep beneath your feet,  
 beneath your hands,  
 O lord of the mountains  
 and valleys,  
 O lord of the trees,  
 O lord of the creeping vines;  
 O lord of the creeping vines;  
 Again tomorrow there will be day,  
 Again tomorrow there will be light;  
 I know not where I will be.

But in the case of Aztec ghost songs, at least, it is doubtful that pairs and triplets should be viewed as elements of versification. In any event, the poetic form is determined by other means, as discussed above in the section entitled "Structure."

*Missionary Nahuatl.* I propose the term missionary Nahuatl to cover the various sixteenth-century writings that translate into Spanish (or English) with suspicious ease. Several of the songs in the first six folios of the *Cantares* manuscript fall into this category, specifically songs 1-4, 6-9, and 12-13. Though evidently correct, the diction is not noticeably idiomatic. The subject matter is in keeping with other ghost songs, but is somewhat deritualized, betraying a superficial understanding of the genre. One suspects that these pieces were composed by a bilingual Indian, whose repertoire was filled out with three songs (5, 10, and 11) that he had picked up from unacculturated singers. His model for his own compositions might have been Sahagún, whose *Psalmody christiana* has the same texture. Certainly these songs were not taken from the Otomi, as the glossator seems to be saying on folio 6.

*Hypertrophism.* Florid polynomials, absent from other texts, are one of the notable features of the *Cantares mexicanos*. Jawbreakers like *tiquetzalzacuanxiuhquecholhuihuicomacan* ("let's make troupial-and-turquoise-swans plumes swirl" or "let's make plume-troupials and turquoise-swans swirl" or "let's make plume-troupial-turquoise-swans swirl") create such problems for the translator and give the unwary reader such a keen sense of what is surely the height of poesy, that it is easy to nod in agreement when the seventeenth-century grammarian Carochi claims an "ancient" origin for this sort of rhetoric.<sup>20</sup> But its exclusive occurrence in texts either probably or definitely composed between 1550 and 1585 suggests that we are dealing with what ought to become a textbook case of hypertrophism—classic Aztec diction in a last wild burst of energy.<sup>21</sup>

## Metaphysics

The singer who produces ghost warriors is conscious that his creations are merely borrowed from the other world. "Blazing flower-words . . . are but a moment and a day" (song 66, stanza 8). "On earth they are loaned: the delicious flowers are loaned" (song 45, stanza 4). Already on the war-path, the "flowers" will be returning to paradise after what seems to be no more than a moment on earth (song 30). Their departure so soon after arrival is keenly felt; it frustrates the desire for reunion.

Alternatively, the singer may feel that he and his fellow mortals will themselves be required to make the "payment," in which case the ghosts will be left behind (song 45, stanzas 14 and 16). Either way, the reunion will be too brief.

As the blissful moment rushes by, the singer urges his listeners to take advantage of it: "Be joyful! Be pleased! These are not forever here: we must go to His home" (song 45, stanza 4). Or again: "Let me take this multitude of flowers as my necklace. Let me have them in my hand. Let them be my flower crown. We're to go away and leave them here on earth. We merely borrow them, and we're off to His home" (song 82, stanza 19).

Struck by the brevity of life on earth, ghost singers utter such typical, even formulaic expressions as: "Who knows today if we'll be here tomorrow or the next day?" (song 38, stanza 14); "not forever on earth" (song 39, stanza 2); "not twice" (song 20, stanza 9). In a similar vein the anonymous Nahuatl chronicle paraphrased by Durán in his *Historia* has it that the councilor Tlacaélel summoned King Tizoc to dance with fellow nobles on the day after his coronation, advising him that "his days were few and he should wish to spend them in contentment and gladness, since in the other world there was neither dancing nor singing nor enjoyment of roses and smokes [tobacco-filled smoking tubes], and that lords who had passed away were deprived of these things."<sup>1</sup>

## Metaphysics

Thus far, the material appears to be indigenous. But as we proceed in this vein it would be well to keep in mind the possibility of missionary influence.

## "No one can remain"

As noted above, ghost songs present equally painful alternatives. Either ghost warriors must depart, leaving mortals behind, or mortals must depart, leaving ghosts behind. As if to solve the dilemma, the singer may insist that "no one's home is earth. No one can remain" (song 82, stanza 22). The question then becomes: Will we be together in the other world, or will we merely be destroyed?

The answer is sometimes a skeptical "Ah, who here knows where we're to go or where His home is? It's only here on earth that we're alive" (song 40, stanza 4). More receptive to conversion is the singer who worries: "Earth is but a moment. Is the Place Unknown the same? Is there happiness and friendship? Is it not just here on earth that acquaintances are made?" (Song 17, stanza 16.)

In song 3, stanza 5, we learn that life does continue: "Where are we to go? Indeed, we only came to be born, indeed, our home is beyond, where all are shorn, where life is infinite, where things never end." Song 68, stanza 94, mentions "everlasting joy," and in song 58, stanza 20, the listener is provided with an unmistakable explanation: "Through Santa María he came to take his precious incarnation. Through his precious death he came to save us, and he gave us everlasting life."

There can be no doubt that we have passed into the realm of Christian thought. But at precisely what point did we cross the boundary? Because of the parallels between Aztec religion and Christianity, the question is difficult to answer. Although from a somewhat different angle, the problem has already been approached in Chapter Two (section entitled "Purpose"). The subject will be taken up again in Chapter Seven.

## "We merely come to dream"

Closely related to the mysteries of death and afterlife is the distinction between the "dream" (*temicatl*) and that which is "real" (*neliti*). In a passage of undeniable charm, the singer says, "We merely come to stand sleeping, we merely come to dream. It is not true, not true that we come to live on earth" (song 18, stanza 39). And elsewhere: "But can what I say be real, O Life Giver? We merely sleep, we were merely born to dream, and though I say it here on earth it falls on no one's ears" (song 11, stanza 8; compare song 18, stanza 13).

This interesting topic, unfortunately, is not well enough developed to permit an interpretation. Readers tempted to make connections are warned that the *néant* of Sartre and even the Calderonian *sueño* are no more relevant, perhaps less so, than the irrealidad doctrine of the nineteenth-century Pawnee Lance Society.<sup>2</sup> It might be inferred that the singer is deliberately placing a low value on earthly life in order to strengthen the warrior ethic. If so, this would steer speculation away from comparisons with Western philosophy.

## Aztec History

Ghost songs by their very nature re-create the past. Sometimes only a single king will be invoked, sometimes an entire episode, bristling with details. As preparation the reader should have at least an informal acquaintance with pre-Conquest history, familiarity with the bare outlines of the Spanish Conquest itself, and, in addition, some awareness of the post-Conquest status of the old Aztec kingdoms.<sup>1</sup>

### The Early Period

Sixteenth-century chroniclers, working with ancient picture books now mostly lost, have established a remarkably rich, if varied, record of Aztec and pre-Aztec events reaching back to A. D. 1000 and earlier. As the record approaches the year 1400, apocryphal elements become less troubling; and the virtual agreement of many sources concerning such dates as the downfall of Azcapotzalco (ca. 1428) or the death of Nezahualcoyotl (ca. 1472) produces an aura of reliability satisfying to the modern historian. The earlier material, however, is shrouded in myth.

A few of the sources mention a place called Aztlan, far to the north, whose people, the Azteca, or Aztecs, migrated south and changed their name to Mexica.<sup>2</sup> It is not clear that this Aztlan actually existed. Perhaps it was merely the invention of later Mexica historians. In any case, it seems unlikely that the Mexica who greeted Cortés in 1519 identified themselves as Aztecs. The term cannot be found in the *Cantares mexicanos* or in most of the other sixteenth-century writings. Not until the nineteenth century did it become entrenched as a name for the Mexica. Still later, in the early twentieth century, some (but not all) writers took it to mean the language spoken by the Mexica and their neighbors, and some even used it as a name for the Aztec- or Nahuatl-speaking peoples themselves. Aztec will

here be used in this broad sense, saving the term Mexican for the Mexico only.

Returning to our chronicles, we find that various Aztec peoples shared a common legend about their origin, telling of an ancestral home in the deserts of the north, migration southward to the opulent city of Tollan, and a subsequent dispersal and settlement either in the Valley of Mexico or the Tlaxcala-Puebla region just over the mountains to the east. As a result of the Tollan stopover, Aztecs could claim descent from the highly civilized Toltecs while still boasting of their warlike Chichimec (or barbarian) heritage associated with the northern wastes. A single song in the *Cantares* (44) recalls the long-vanished grandeur of Tollan and the flight of its last ruler, known variously as Naxtli, Topiltzin, or Quetzalcoatl. But the southward migration, at least of the Mexicans and especially with regard to their encampment at Chapultepec shortly before the founding of Mexico City, figures prominently in several songs, notably 54-D, 54-E, 68, and 69.

Mexico, the youngest of the Aztec capitals, appears to have been established no later than 1370.<sup>3</sup> By this time Aztec culture and Aztec settlement patterns had solidified, with Tepanecs holding the western slopes of the great valley, Acolhuans the eastern slopes, and the fledgling metropolis, Mexico, perched on its island in the middle of the lake. Just south of Mexico lay Colhuacan and its dependencies; and beyond, to the south and east, the Chalcan towns, shadowed by Mount Iztaccihuatl still farther to the east. On the opposite side of Iztaccihuatl lay Huexotzinco and, to the north of Huexotzinco, the four cities of Tlaxcala. This, in brief, was the Aztec world. And this, as we shall see, is the territory encompassed by the *Cantares mexicanos*.

## National Histories

Amid the perpetual warfare and shifting allegiances of the Aztec nations two phenomena emerge: (1) the formation of a three-nation league, or "triple alliance," between the Mexicans, the Acolhuans, and the Tepanecs; and (2) the rapid rise of Mexico to a position of dominance throughout the Aztec world. When the ghost singer cries, "O Montezuma, O Nezahualcoyotl, O Totoquihuaztli" (as in song 29), he is in effect reviving the triple alliance in the persons of its most famous triumvirate. Note that Montezuma, king of Mexico, is named first.

*The Mexicans.* The rough tribesmen who founded the twin communities of Tlatelolco and Tenochtitlan were obliged to import their first rulers from Tepanec territory (in the case of Tlatelolco) and Colhuacan (in the case of Tenochtitlan). Although the two Mexican governments managed to cooperate through the first half of the fifteenth century, the grow-

ing superiority of Tenochtitlan and the proud resistance of Tlatelolco eventually led to civil war and the total submission of Tlatelolco in about 1473. By this time the triple alliance, already forty years old, was entering the period of Mexican dominance under the leadership of the king of Tenochtitlan (who even from the beginning had spoken for both parts of Mexico). When we speak of the Mexican succession, therefore, we mean the kings of Tenochtitlan.

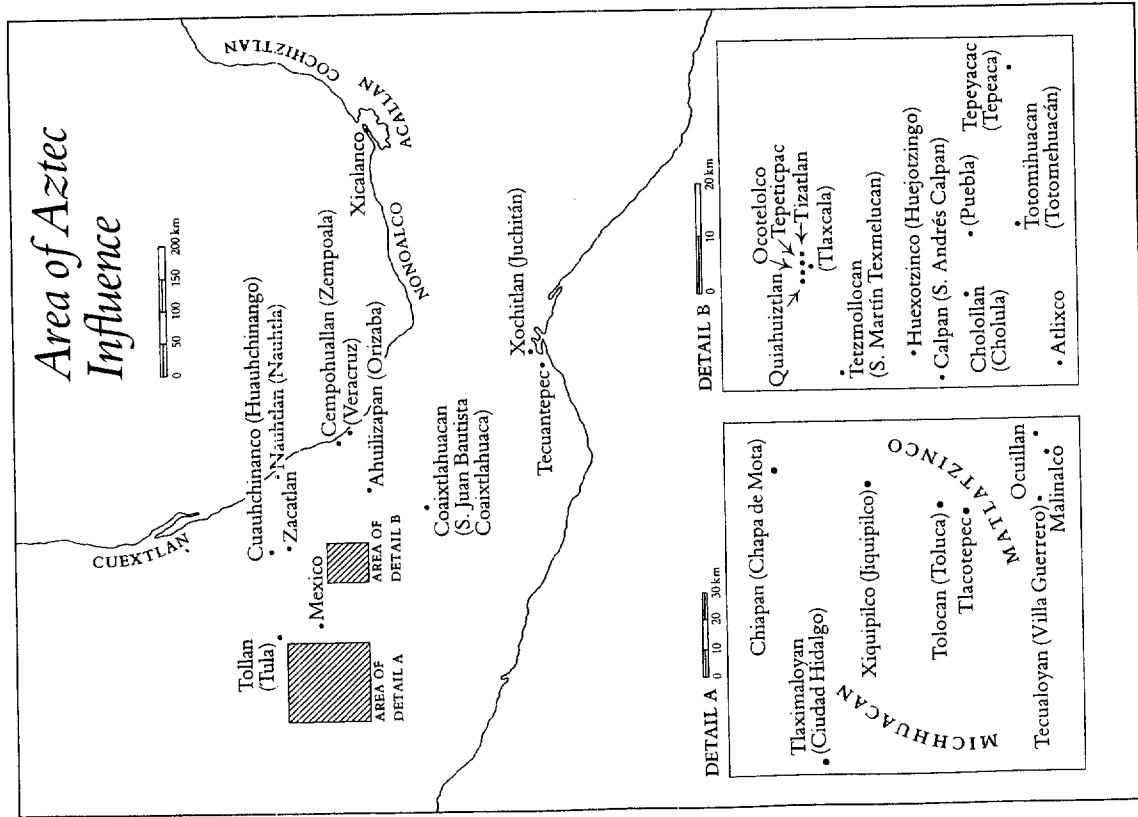
Under the first of these rulers—Acamapichtli, Huitzilihuitl, and Chimalpopoca—the empire grew fitfully if at all. Not until the fourth ruler, Itzcoatl, did the tide of events turn decisively in Mexico's favor—with the submission of the powerful Tepanecs in 1428 and the subsequent founding of the triple alliance. Under the fifth ruler, Montezuma I (1440–68), Mexico embarked on an era of glorious expansion. The reign of Axayacatl (1468–81), though shorter, was nonetheless memorable, counting among its triumphs the great Matlatzincan campaign, celebrated in song 65. Notable for his victories, Axayacatl must also be credited with having sired one of Mexico's favorite heroes, the exemplary warrior Tlacahuepan, who together with his brother Ixtlicuechahuac, is frequently summoned by ghost singers. The sixth ruler, Tizoc (1481–86), is never mentioned in ghost songs, possibly because, as Durán reports, "his custom was to remain in seclusion, without demonstrating any verve, but much pusillanimity and cowardice."<sup>4</sup> The sixth, Ahuitzotl (1486–1502), is fondly remembered; and of course the seventh, Montezuma II (1502–20), who capitulated to Cortés. The eighth, Cuitlahuac, resisted the Spanish intrusion but ruled for only three months; it was his successor, Cuauhtemoc, who commanded Mexico during the decisive siege of 1521. Both Cuitlahuac and Cuauhtemoc are mentioned in ghost songs. Yet for reasons not entirely clear it is "Montezuma" who became—and remains—the most familiar symbol of native Mexico.

*The Colhuans.* When Cortés arrived in the Valley of Mexico he found that the countryside in the immediate vicinity of Mexico, including Mexico itself, was known as the Colhua region.<sup>5</sup> It will be recalled that Tenochtitlan had imported its first ruler from Colhuacan in the fourteenth century—this after suffering a generation of hardship under Colhuan tyranny (see song 69). By 1400 Colhuacan had been conquered and brought firmly under Mexican control. Yet Mexican rulers, down through Montezuma II, continued to style themselves kings of Mexico and the Colhuans,<sup>6</sup> and in the *Cantares*, Mexicans are occasionally called Colhuans.

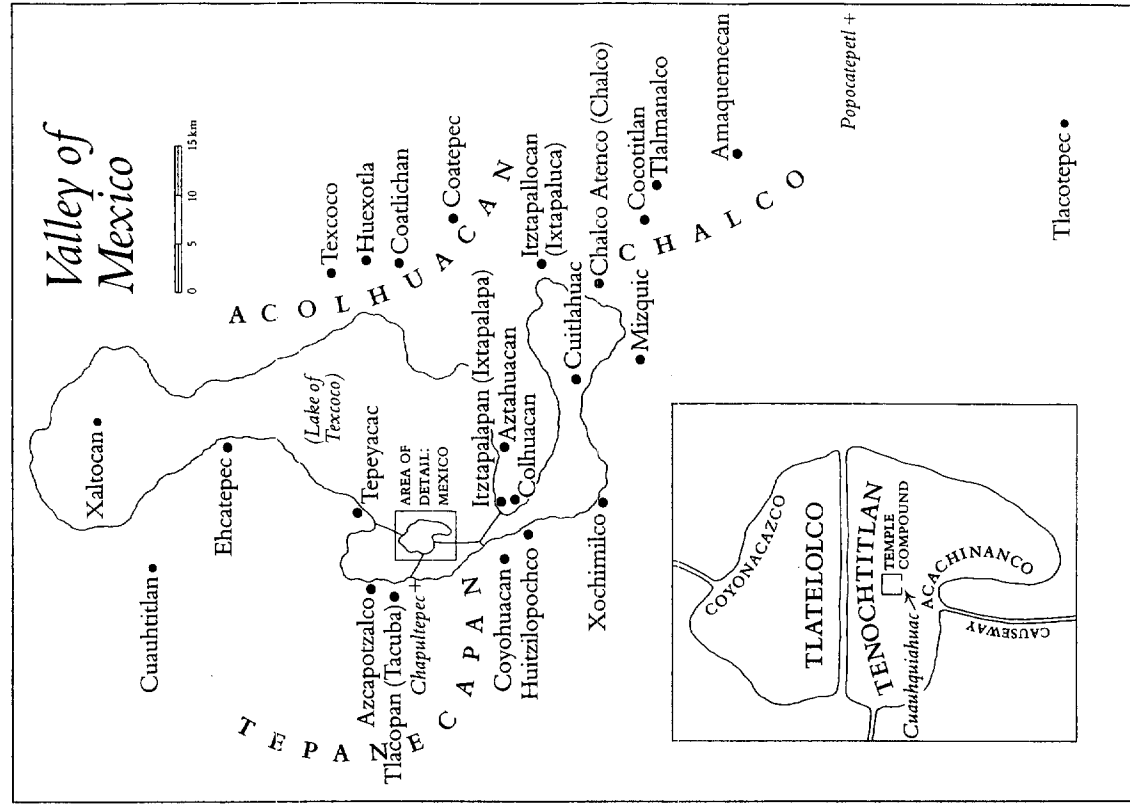
*The Acolhuans.* From their capital, Texcoco, the fourteenth-century Acolhuan kings exercised direct control over all towns in the northeastern part of the valley and exacted varying degrees of fealty from Mexicans and



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hualcoyotl was formally installed as king of the Acolhuans and principal chief in the newly formed triple alliance.

As glimpsed in the old chronicles, especially in the writings of Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, Nezahualcoyotl strikes the Western eye as a kind of Cyrus or Alexander, with the added qualities of a Lorenzo the Magnifi-

towns: Tepeticpac, Ocotelolco, Quiahuixtlan, and Tizatlan (none of which corresponds to the modern town called Tlaxcala).<sup>11</sup> A Xayacamachan, ostensibly of Tizatlan, is mentioned in song 17 of the *Cantares*. But since Mexican ghost singers seem to have confused Tlaxcalan and Huexotzinco genealogies, extreme caution must be exercised in identifying any specific Tlaxcalan ghost.

*The Huexotzincoans.* Huexotzinco references in the *Cantares* are perplexing, partly because the political structure of this nation was as complex as that of Tlaxcala or perhaps even Chalco and partly because there is no surviving Huexotzinco chronicle against which to check the data. The singers' tendency to confuse Huexotzinco with Tlaxcala, on the one hand, and to identify Huexotzinco with Mexico,<sup>12</sup> on the other, only serves to compound the problem. In my opinion there are no ghost songs that treat pre-Conquest Huexotzinco or Tlaxcalan events. The various songs that name these nations and summon the ghosts of their kings do so in order to chasten them for their collaboration with Cortés in the siege of Mexico. The *Cantares* glossator supposed that song 45 had to do with the Huexotzinco embassy to Montezuma (ca. 1515); and he imagined that song 67 re-created Nezahualpilli's pre-1515 campaign against the Huexotzinco king Huehuetzin. But these conjectures, I believe, are incorrect. The glossator's suggestion that songs 14-18 were lauds for the rulers of Huexotzinco is misleading to say the least.

## The Spanish Conquest

Cortés landed at the site of present-day Veracruz on April 21, 1519. Lured by tales of Mexican opulence, he began his march inland in mid-August, reaching Tlaxcala after about two weeks. At first hostile, the Tlaxcalans joined ranks with the Spaniards when it became evident that a victory over Mexico might be achieved. Huexotzinco followed suit, with the result that Cortés was accompanied by an impressive contingent of Indian allies when he finally arrived in Mexico on November 8.

Amid curious protestations of friendship on both sides, Montezuma was quietly taken captive almost immediately and used as a mouthpiece by the Spaniards as they attempted to dictate Mexican policy. During the uneasy months that followed, several Aztec leaders were executed. Then suddenly, on May 21, 1520, hundreds of Aztecs were killed during a religious exercise in the main plaza of the city. No longer heeding the commands of the immobilized Montezuma, Mexicans mustered their forces and ejected the Spaniards on the now-famous night—the *noche triste*—of June 30.

By this time Montezuma himself had been killed, and the Mexicans promptly elected his brother, Cuitlahuac, to fill his place. When Cuitlahuac died of smallpox just three months later, he was succeeded by Cuauh-

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cent. Distorted as the picture may be, there is little doubt that his forty-one-year reign was an exalted one. In the *Cantares* he is invoked more frequently than any other king except the ubiquitous Montezuma. This is not altogether surprising, since Nezahualcoyotl could be claimed by Mexicans as well as Acolhuans. He and Montezuma I were first cousins,<sup>7</sup> and during his years of exile he resided in a specially constructed palace in Tenochtitlan. Nezahualcoyotl's son and successor, Nezahualpilli, is also remembered in Mexican ghost songs—but with less affection. Following his death in 1515, Mexico took advantage of Acolhuacan's waning influence and dictated the succession. The result was an Acolhuacan split into pro- and anti-Mexican factions, which was to have unhappy consequences for Mexico upon the arrival of Cortés.

*The Tepanecs.* Tepanec glory reached its apogee under King Tezozomoc I of Azcapotzalco. Following his death and the subsequent defeat of the Tepanecs, in 1428, Tepanec power (somewhat reduced) shifted from Azcapotzalco to Tlacopan. Totoquihuaztli I, king of Tlacopan in the time of Nezahualcoyotl and Montezuma I, is frequently invoked in the *Cantares*—as is Tezozomoc I, whose bloodlines find their way into the royal houses of both Tlacopan and Tlatelolco. An interesting treatment of Tezozomoc's role in the overthrow of Acolhuacan is to be found in song 15.

*The Chalchans.* The pre-Conquest political geography of Chalco may be tentatively reconstructed from the annals of Chimalpain. According to this source, it appears that the province, or nation, of Chalco was dominated by two principal cities, Tlalmanalco and Amaquemecan. Within the city of Tlalmanalco were at least two boroughs, Acxotlan and Itzcahuacan, while beyond in the countryside were several dependent cities, including Opochuacan, also known as Chalco Atenco (site of the modern town called simply Chalco). Amaquemecan, likewise, had its intracity boroughs and outlying dependencies.<sup>8</sup> All Chalco, apparently, looked to the borough of Acxotlan as the seat of its national government. During the reign of Acxotlan's best-known king, Tototzin (r. 1400?–1465), the Chalchans were defeated by Mexico, and Tototzin himself taken prisoner; occasionally rebellious thereafter, Chalco remained under Mexican control until the arrival of Cortés. The war in which Tototzin was captured is recalled in song 51 of the *Cantares*.

*The Tlaxcalans.* Though neither rich nor exceptionally powerful, Tlaxcala succeeded in remaining independent up to the time of Cortés. The triple alliance might easily have crushed Tlaxcala but preferred to keep it as an active foe, so it is said, in order to have a field of combat close at hand.<sup>9</sup> Thus Mexico and Tlaxcala engaged in periodic tournaments, or "flower wars," for the purpose of exchanging captives to feed their gods.<sup>10</sup> Decentralized, the government of Tlaxcala was shared among four principal

temoc, another member of the royal family. Meanwhile the Spaniards, who had retreated to Tlaxcala, were on the watch for signs of additional support. When they finally commenced the actual siege of Mexico, on May 31, 1521, their ranks had been swollen not only by Tlaxcalans and Huexotzincans, but by Chalcan and even Acolhuans. After a desperate battle lasting seventy-four days, Cuauhtemoc surrendered and was taken prisoner. Four and a half years later, Cortés hanged Cuauhtemoc and other Aztec leaders on charges of plotting an insurrection.

Turning now to the *Cantares*, we find the events of 1519-21 abundantly recalled in the great "Water-pouring song" (68), the longest piece in the manuscript. The siege of Mexico and its aftermath form the subject of songs 13 and 66; on the hanging of Cuauhtemoc, see song 60, canto B. Other songs, such as 69 and 83, contain obvious references to the Conquest; and some, such as 15, 17, and 67, may be read as veiled threats to the Indian nations that collaborated with Cortés, mainly Tlaxcala and Huexotzinco, but even Acolhuacan.

## Post-Conquest Developments

An important point to keep in mind is that Aztec settlement patterns and the outward forms of Aztec government survived the Conquest more or less intact. Allowing for considerable attrition due to plagues of European origin, the old cities retained their native populations and, with occasional deference to a patron saint, their native names. Thus Tlatelolco became Santiago Tlatelolco or simply Santiago. As for the native rulers, they were permitted for many years to style themselves king (*tlatoani*), to succeed one another, and to preserve a modicum of pomp. Since the *tlatoani* were able to collect tribute from their subjects and command labor with an effectiveness that no Spaniard could hope to excel, their services were valued. However, their authority was limited to that of an overseer class. In fact they were native governors, not kings, and the title *gobernador* was applied with increasing frequency.

As the century progressed, Spanish authorities attempted to sever the lines of dynastic succession, eventually replacing *tlatoani* with nonnoble *gobernadores*.<sup>13</sup> Indians, noble and nonnoble alike, came to be known by their baptismal names. Indian names fell into disuse; and though the Spanish title *don* might properly have been reserved for *tlatoani*, it was applied to nondynastic *gobernadores* as well.<sup>14</sup> Even if the nobility held on longer in the smaller towns, such was the situation in Mexico and in other important centers.

For the singer of 1550 or 1575 the recollection of now-deceased *tlatoani* of the first few decades of the colonial period might be cherished as readily as the memory of older kings. The ghosts of post-Conquest rulers are in

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fact summoned in songs 56, 59, 60, and 61, and in various other pieces in the second half of the *Cantares* manuscript. The only nonnoble *gobernador* summoned in any surviving ghost song is Andrés de Tapia Motelchiuh, owing, presumably, to his heroic role in the siege of 1521. But the singers pointedly deny him the title *don*, even when he is coupled with his predecessor, "Don Juan [Velázquez Tlacotzin]."<sup>15</sup>

Rapidly losing what little authority had been left to it, jealous of every mark of status, the Aztec princely class at mid-century had reached a turning point. The manner in which it responded, or appears to have responded, is the subject of the next chapter.

## Revitalization

As a result of the plagues of 1520, 1531, and especially 1545-48, the Aztec population by mid-century had fallen to half what it had been at the time of Cortés' arrival.<sup>1</sup> Faced with general disintegration and past the point of insurrection, Aztec society was ripe for what modern anthropological theory has termed nativism, the crisis cult, or the revitalization movement.<sup>2</sup> That no such activity has heretofore been identified owes much to the fact that it was so compatible with Spanish Catholicism, on the one hand, and so covert, on the other, that local authorities either failed to perceive its significance or were not threatened enough to insist on sanctions. Sahagún, who probably understood the native cultures better than any other European in New Spain and who has been called the first New World anthropologist, proved to be the only articulate objector to both these phenomena: the emergence of syncretic cults, such as the worship of the Virgin of Guadalupe, to which several of the most important Hispanic authors do not even allude, and the Cantares activity as revealed in the manuscript under discussion. In both cases the earliest reliable documentation must be dated between 1550 and 1555.

For our purposes, revitalization may be defined as the process wherein a culture in danger of being supplanted asserts itself in a modified form, challenging its oppressor insofar as it dares. Ecstatic rituals, the anticipated return of ancestors, and the promise of a mystical deliverance are among the recurring—though not universal—elements. Tamer aspects include adaptation to the culture of the oppressor and an emphasis on personal, rather than tribal, salvation; self-blame may be part of the doctrine. Examples most frequently cited are the Melanesian cargo cults and the Ghost Dance of the North American Plains Indians, both of which stress the imminent return of the dead and the creation of a paradise on earth.<sup>3</sup> But such diverse movements as Irish nationalism, the Native American Peyote Reli-

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gion, the Maya Cult of the Speaking Cross,<sup>4</sup> or the revival of Islamic fundamentalism may also fit the general scheme.

During the early 1560's, when the Cantares activity in Mexico was still at its height, a similar crisis cult, known as the Taqui Onqoy, was gathering momentum among the Indians of Peru.<sup>5</sup> Inspired by the belief that the Spanish Dios had been conquered by the old Inca gods, lately resurrected, adherents of the Taqui Onqoy envisioned the death of all Spaniards and an era of prosperity for Indians. Ecstatic singing and dancing were important features of the movement, and it was even held that the old gods, or huacas, were entering the bodies of the faithful and speaking with their voices. A fundamental difference is that the Taqui Onqoy was a popular groundswell, whereas the Cantares activity was an expression of the native elite.

## The Guadalupe Cult

Although the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe—the best known of the syncretic shrine cults—was undoubtedly orchestrated by Hispanics and quickly gained both Spanish and creole adherents, its significance for native Mexicans was that it breathed new life into the worship of the old earth goddess, Tonantzin. Thus Guadalupe contributed to what Sahagún recognized as a general, mid-sixteenth-century revival of native custom.<sup>6</sup>

According to the famous legend published in 1649 by Luis Lasso de la Vega, the Virgin had appeared to a poor Indian named Juan Diego in December of 1531, informing him that she had cured his uncle of the plague and mysteriously providing him with a portrait of herself to hang in the church that was to be built in her honor.<sup>7</sup> Although composed in Nahuatl, the account is clearly the invention of a European mind and may even have been put together by Lasso de la Vega himself.<sup>8</sup> Yet the underlying cult had been well established by the mid-1550's and can be traced in both clerical and native writings. The church itself was erected in 1555 or 1556,<sup>9</sup> at which time the Virgin's portrait and her reputation for cures became a matter of record.<sup>10</sup> Her identification with the old Aztec goddess Tonantzin (Our Mother) was recognized by Sahagún, who denounced the cult in 1576, pointing out, ominously, that the shrine at Tepeyacac, just north of Mexico City, was attracting Indian pilgrims from as far away as "more than twenty leagues."<sup>11</sup> A cryptic phrase in the Nahuatl *Anales de Juan Bautista*, a manuscript completed no earlier than 1582, states merely that the Virgin of Guadalupe "appeared" in 1535.<sup>12</sup> This probably harks back to the building of the church, and could mean either that some sort of apparition was believed to have occurred or simply that an image of the Virgin had been carried in a procession.<sup>13</sup> In the same manner, the native historian Chimalpain records that the Virgin "appeared" in 1556.<sup>14</sup>

Although the story presented by Lasso de la Vega, in which the miracle takes place in 1531, can hardly be treated as historical evidence, it is not impossible that a chapel of the Virgin at this particular spot had been set up by enterprising missionaries as early as the 1530's in order to preempt a long-established shrine of Tonantzin. During the second half of the century, Guadalupe became the focus of a religious movement of unstoppable power, which continued to gather momentum through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Interestingly, there have been repeated attempts to connect Guadalupe with the *Cantares mexicanos*.<sup>15</sup> One senses a link, even if none can be established. Lasso de la Vega himself may have drawn from the *Cantares* in his description of the Virgin's flowery surroundings filled with bird music,<sup>16</sup> and folk observances associated with the cult tend to reinforce certain elements in the *Cantares* imagery. The following account, written by a traveler as late as 1841, comes from Tacuba:

From the steeple of the church to the top of the gateway, five ropes were stretched, and a large flower made of silk, in the shape of a pomegranate, was ascending and descending on each of them, drawn up and let down by men stationed on the azoéa of the edifice. Among these flowers was an image of Juan Diego . . . jerked up and down on the rope by the Indians, who varied their task by an occasional pull at the bells. . . . The huge flowers . . . were pulled open by a secret spring, and a shower of rose leaves fell from them over the passing priests and images. Juan Diego's knees were bent by some equally secret machinery, and he continued on his slack-rope pilgrimage through the air.<sup>17</sup>

However, one looks in vain for a sixteenth-century ghost song in which the humble Juan Diego is produced as a descending "flower," or revenant. Nor is it likely that the Santa María of the *Cantares mexicanos* is meant to represent the *guadalupeana*. That ghost songs were performed at the church of Guadalupe in the third quarter of the sixteenth century is almost certain.<sup>18</sup> But the ghost-song ritual and the cult of Santa María/Tonantzin, though they share a peculiarly Aztec symbology, are best considered parallel, not integrated, phenomena.

### The Cantares Activity

The numerous reports of dangerous musical activity, usually referred to as "cantares" or "areitos," or especially "areitos de noche," are perplexing inasmuch as it is impossible to tell what exactly is meant. In some cases, the reports probably have reference to pre-Conquest festival chants that were being secretly perpetuated behind closed doors at night.<sup>19</sup> But ghost songs could also be indicated, for though they were openly performed in plazas and in churches, even public performances of this sort were regarded with

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suspicion, and the songs had to be "reviewed and examined" before they could be staged.<sup>20</sup>

Censors were eager to proscribe sacrilege and "indecentry." The possibility of political subversion, recognized by Sahagún,<sup>21</sup> was no doubt equally troubling. What the censors were looking for is in fact to be found in the *Cantares*, yet in such subtle doses and couched in such arcane language that few, if any, could have been expected to uncover it. As discussed earlier, the *Cantares* is by and large devoted to the elaboration of a ghost cult, emphasizing the return of ancestor kings, the glorious revival of the warrior ethic, and the re-creation of a paradisaical Mexico. Censors and other Hispanic observers uncritically accepted this material as a fossil bed of pre-Conquest lauds and chanted histories. As preserved in the *Cantares*, however, the material appears to be nativistic, not merely native. It is not certain that any of it was composed before the Conquest, and it is most likely indeed that it is political in content even where it least appears so. Certainly, ghost songs were not fabricated out of whole cloth in the 1550's; they were built on a long-established tradition. To what extent this tradition was reshaped and in what form it existed prior to 1519 are questions to be discussed in later chapters. At least a few of the songs, such as 65, may well be fossils. But even these, restaged during the post-Conquest period, could have taken on a nativistic significance without changing a single phrase.

Many ghost songs, in other words, are passively subversive. They merely predict a state of bliss without alluding to culprits or injustices. In many of these, if not most, the supreme spirit is identified with the Christian Dios; and in a few there are outward signs of accommodation, not only with Christian doctrine, but with Hispanic authority. Some, on the other hand, are pointedly, if cautiously, seditious. Since these are of particular interest, they will be noted first.

### Elements of Rebellion

The arrival of armed Mexican ghost warriors is in itself threatening to Mexico's enemies. But actual hostility, if expressed at all, is usually directed against the Tlaxcalans, the Huexotzincans, or one of the other nations that sided with Cortés in the Conquest. Song 66, canto C, however, has the Spaniards themselves under attack in a surprisingly bold (and fantastic) re-creation of the siege of 1521:

It seems he's come to take a lance from the Spaniards. It seems this lord lays hold of dried-up egret-plume flower shields, lays hold of withered strippers, here before your eyes, Tlaxcalans. Hey! Huexotzincans, hey! Motelchuh is the one who thrusts his shield, and it's a time of lords! Yes

even so he sallies forth, having appeared. And when they've captured the conquistadores' guns, then Rabbit says, "Let there be dancing!" Tlaxcalans, hey! Huexotzincans, hey!

Observe that the "dried-up," "withered" captives are "stripers" (painted for sacrifice). A milder suggestion along the same lines is implicit in song 90, canto E, in which the Marquis (i.e., Cortés), Archbishop Montúfar, and even Fray Pedro de Gante are bid farewell; they are allowed to die natural deaths, and they receive praise, but one has the impression, nevertheless, that they serve as payment for the Aztec revenants who come jubilantly to earth in canto F.

It will be recalled that Cuauhtemoc and other Aztec leaders were hanged by Cortés in 1525. The scene is conjured up in song 60, stanza 9. In song 63, however, we find the daring, if decidedly ambiguous, intimation that Cortés himself deserves hanging.

Expressions of disenchantment regarding labor and tribute can be read in song 68, cantos C and D. Song 9 seems concerned with the unequal status of the Indian generally speaking. A plea for Aztec traditions, coupled with a glancing attack on Jesus, comes in canto D of song 83, and the song ends with a vision of a biracial New Spain that may be construed as a call for political equality—foreshadowing the overtly expressed dream of the twentieth-century Republic.

### Accommodation

One of the more poignant themes in ghost songs derives from the willingness of the singer to give his own life in exchange for ghost warriors. The accompanying attitude is poetically expressed in the final phrases of the "Fish song," song 60, and may be paraphrased as follows: our lives shall be hard, but our race shall be immortal. In song 1, stanza 6, guilt is suggested as a justification for the hardship; and in song 58 the theme of original sin is fully developed. Compensation lies in the knowledge that Mexico will endure, on the one hand, and in the promise of personal salvation on the other:

How can I not weep here on earth? Ah, beyond is the place where we live! I deceive myself in saying "Perhaps things come to an end here on earth, and the soul dies." O Ever Present, O Ever Near, please let this be: Oh let me sing for you in company with your sky dwellers. My heart arises. There beyond, near you and in your presence, I see! O Life Giver! (Song 2, stanza 5)

We have here traced only one of several similar lines of argument to be found in ghost songs. This one, obviously, has more European than Aztec essence, and though it provides for a continuation of Mexico, it accepts the palliative of a Christian afterlife.

### Revitalization

A more serious, perhaps complete break with native tradition is urged by the composer of song 3, who discredits the warlike ghost-song ritual and counsels peaceful union with God. Song 7 does the same, branding the war cult old-fashioned and ruinous. Yet song 12, probably by the same composer, attempts to reconcile the war cult with the cult of Dios. Clearly we have an Aztec-Christian conflict, which may have penetrated more than a few songs in the *Cantares*. Did pre-Conquest warriors have doubts about making war? If not, then we must look for an even heavier European influence than would at first seem apparent in such songs as 17 and 18.

A bizarre accommodation to the Spanish idea of racial superiority forms the subject of song 66, canto E. In these stanzas the Mexican singer taunts his Tlaxcalan enemies by making a virtue out of the misfortune of the Mexican warriors, whose wives become the mistresses of Cortés and his men. The point is that the blood of the overlords has been mingled with the blood of Mexicans, not Tlaxcalans.

### The Unbeliever

Strict allegiance to the doctrine is not easily obtained in most revitalization movements. Often the doctrine remains in flux, absorbing the criticism of new and potential adherents. At times it may be more caught up in refuting the doubter than in affirming its professed goals.<sup>22</sup> In the *Cantares*, where the voice of the unbeliever intrudes on more than a few occasions, especially in the first twenty-six folios of the manuscript, such problems are sufficiently important to deserve notice.

On examination, the *Cantares* skeptic emerges as a post-Conquest Indian male no longer inspired by the war ethic and as yet uncertain of Christian salvation. The ghost singer seeks to convince him that death on the battlefield will produce ghost warriors as in the old days, while guaranteeing immortality in God's heaven. This fusion of Aztec and Christian beliefs is achieved, partly, in song 12 after a series of pieces that actually denigrate Aztec values. The details are worked out in two great harangues, songs 17 and 18, in which the unbeliever's questions are gradually resolved in favor of the doctrine. Note that both song 30 and song 31 have pro and anti cantos.

A typical protest, put in the mouth of a fretful Huexotzincan ghost, runs as follows:

Though my heart desires shield flowers, Life Giver's flowers, what might happen to this heart of mine? Alas, it's for nothing that we've come to be born here on earth.  
I'm to pass away like a ruined flower. My fame will be nothing, my renown here on earth will be nothing. There may be flowers, there may be songs,

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

but what might happen to this heart of mine? Alas, it's for nothing that we've come to be born here on earth. (Song 17, stanzas 13-14)

The stanza that comes next, in which the unhappy ghost doubts the existence of heaven, has already been quoted in Chapter Five, in the section entitled "No one can remain." But in the song's final stanza (56), the Mexican singer assures his audience that the doubters have been converted.

That such arguments as these could have been formulated in pre-Conquest times and reshaped in mid-sixteenth-century ghost songs seems improbable. No such bickering is to be found in the unacculturated ethnography. From the vantage point now reached, the material presented in Chapter Five should be reexamined for traces of sixteenth-century ferment.

Of particular interest in this connection is the verb *neltoca* (to believe), adapted by Christian missionaries for their own purposes but used in the *Cantares* to signify adherence to the ghost-song doctrine. See especially the closing stanza of song 17.

## The Dance of the *Voladores*

Any discussion of Aztec revitalization should be kept within narrow bounds until certain documents, still untranslated, can be made available to scholarship.<sup>23</sup> But the few remarks here offered would not be complete without at least a brief description of the mysterious *volador* dance, popular in the sixteenth century and still being reported from various parts of Mexico and Guatemala. Allowing for minor variations and despite the fact that present-day practitioners seem to have forgotten its original meaning, the dance remains essentially unchanged and remarkably uniform throughout the vast area of its distribution.

Wearing bird costumes, the *voladores*, or "fliers," cluster on a small platform near the top of a pole. Ropes wound around the pole pass through grooves in the platform and are tied to the dancers' bodies. On signal they fling themselves backward into the air, and the platform begins to rotate. As the ropes unwind, the dancers come whirling downward in continually widening circles until they reach the ground (Figs. 4 and 5). In some cases they hang upside down and spread their arms. While the "birds" are in flight, a performer standing at the top of the pole plays a trumpet or some other instrument.<sup>24</sup>

Readers acquainted with the *Cantares* will not fail to be reminded of phrases such as the following (identified by folio and line number):

I blow my conch for turquoise swans (26: 19)

And they shall appear (26: 21)

Let's have these turquoise-swanlike flowers! These are trogons that are spinning (25: 17)

For a moment they come whirling, they the eagles (65: 6)

Roseate swans, cornsilk flowers, are whirling (70: 31)

## Revitalization

Montezuma spreads his arms! (15v: 12)

These princes are bright as trogons. They're flying along like cotingas (82v: 15)

And they come, come, and come dancing (47v: 20)

A quetzal has descended, a cotinga arrives (39: 11)

God's creation has descended to earth (37v: 15)

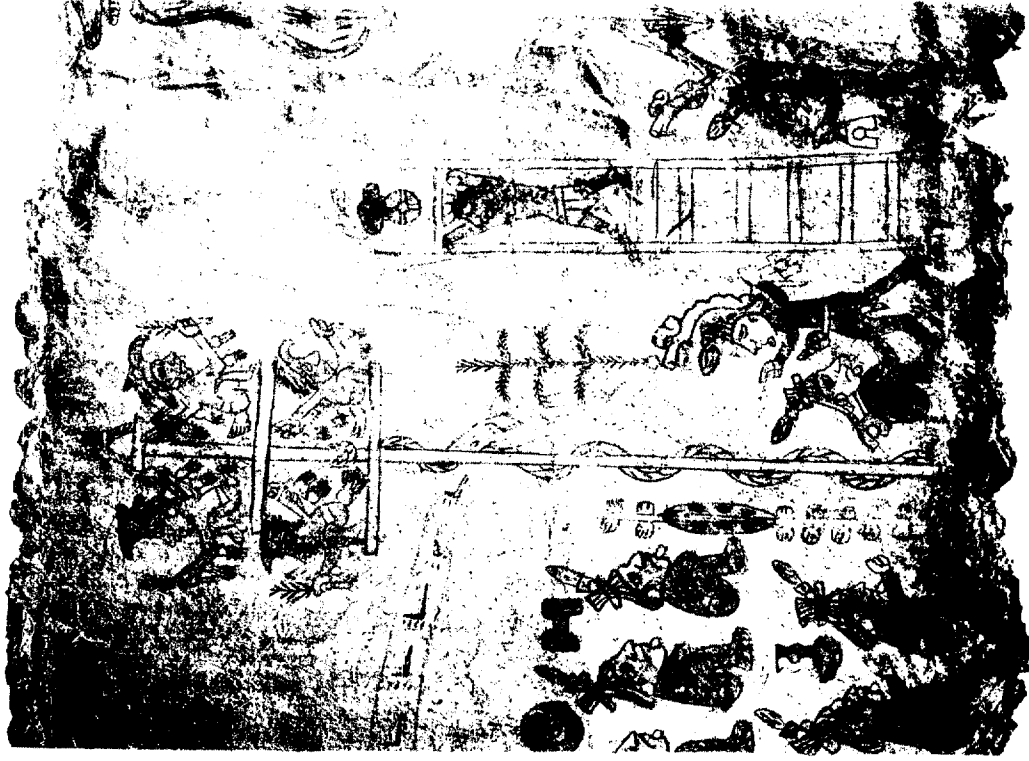


Fig. 4. *Volador*, pre-Conquest (after Peñafiel, *Códice Fernández Loal*, plate 5)

## Revitalization

cal explanation passed along by Sahagún and Torquemada. But from time to time suspicions were aroused, and on more than one occasion the *volador* was actually banned.<sup>30</sup> Whatever the dance's political or cultural significance before the Conquest, we may reasonably surmise that during the sixteenth century it became an instrument of revitalization.

Whether any surviving ghost-song text has the flier dance as its program or indeed whether ghost songs were performed simultaneously with such dances is not known. More likely the two rituals were performed in sequence, as suggested by Pérez de Ribas. Despite this connection, it is hardly surprising that the intricately cerebral song recitals died out, while the athletic *volador* still flourishes in scattered locations throughout the length and breadth of the old empire—from Mexico City east to Veracruz and south to Guatemala. Probably these provincial *voladores* were never accompanied by texts even remotely resembling the *Cantares*. In fact, they appear to stem from a much older prototype in which the descending ghosts were destined for sacrifice as part of an agrarian ritual.<sup>31</sup> In the *Cantares*, nevertheless, we have the supreme literary expression of a far-flung ghost cult, which, though its symbolism may have varied over the centuries, continues to serve as a reminder of Mexico's past and as at least one means of keeping alive, if not revitalizing, its native heritage.

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

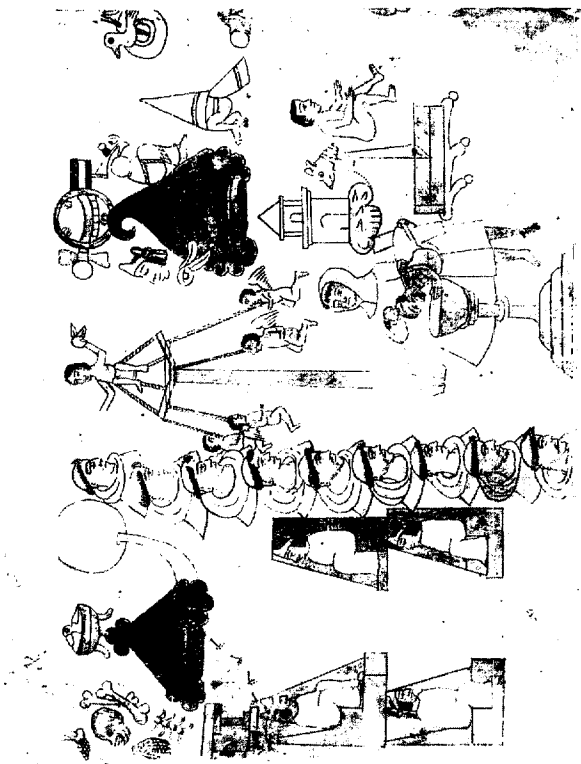


Fig. 5. *Volador*, post-Conquest (after Barlow, "El Códice Azcatlan," plate 27)

In fact, the connection between ghost songs and *volador* dances is reasonably well attested. According to the *Anales de Juan Bautista*, a "water flower—people piece" (*axochitlacayotl*) was sung and danced in 1566 in a refinery in Mexico City and repeated outdoors with a *volador*.<sup>25</sup> Chimalpain reports that a "fish song" (*michauicatl*) was performed in 1593 in the Plaza del Volador, and the chronicler Pérez de Ribas notes that the *volador*, or *volatines*, was performed together with the *tocontin*, a seventeenth-century successor to the ghost-song ritual.<sup>26</sup>

In a much-quoted passage borrowed from Sahagún, the historian Torquemada attempts to explain the *volador* as a calendrical ritual in which the unwinding of the ropes produces exactly fifty-two revolutions, representing the fifty-two years of the Aztec calendar round.<sup>27</sup> But whether or not this was a feature of certain sixteenth-century *volador* performances, it hardly serves as a sufficient explanation. More encompassing is the early-twentieth-century analysis of Walter Krickeberg, who (without any reference to or apparent study of the *Cantares mexicanos*) saw the descending *voladores* as ghosts returning to earth from their celestial paradise.<sup>28</sup>

Evidently of pre-Columbian origin,<sup>29</sup> the *volador* survived the Conquest as a bravura piece that required no further justification in the eyes of Spanish officials. Some, perhaps, were satisfied by the innocuous calendri-



## Ghost Songs in Performance

Eyewitness accounts of Aztec music and dance are by no means lacking in sixteenth-century writings. Unfortunately, not one of the songs in the *Cantares mexicanos* can be definitely connected with any of the surviving reports, nor do these accounts permit a clear distinction between ghost songs and other genres. Whatever is to be said concerning ghost-song performance must be at least partly conjectural, based on clues in the manuscript and lamentably inadequate descriptions elsewhere.

That ghost songs were accompanied by drumming seems a safe assumption. It should be clear, moreover, that these songs were not the outpourings of lone ramblers or closeted poets. Rather they were public or semipublic rituals requiring a number of participants, including instrumentalists and dancers as well as at least one singer.

### Procedure and Apparatus

The performance might be conducted in a plaza or, in pre-Conquest times, a palace forecourt (*quiahuaé*); or it might be held in an inner court (*itihualli*) of the king's palace or of the house of a nobleman.<sup>1</sup> Usually, if not always, a mat (*petlatl*) was spread as a kind of dais or stage.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes the church (*iglesia*) was used,<sup>3</sup> and it is probable that the huge, walled forecourt—the principal distinguishing feature of sixteenth-century Mexican churches<sup>4</sup>—also accommodated ghost-song performances. The mise-en-scène may be referred to as the “enclosure” (*chinamitl*). In addition to one or two large, stationary drums, to be described below, the “enclosure” was often decorated with artificial “flower trees” (*xochicahuaitl*) or “arbors” (*petlacotl*).<sup>5</sup> The rattle (*ayacachtli*), the rasp or rattle stick (*omichichahuaztli*), the turtle drum (*ayotl*), the gourd-rattle sistrum (*ayochichahuaztli*), the conch (*teuciztli*), the conch or snail horn (*quiquiztli*, DICT: quiquiztli), the snail horn (*cuechtli*), the flute (*huilacapitztli*), the gong (*teizilacatl*), and various bells or

### Ghost Songs in Performance

jingles (*coyolli*, *oyohualli*, *tzitziltin*) are among the instruments mentioned in the song texts, but it cannot be assumed that all of these were actually used in ghost-song performances. The fan (*ecatehuaztli*, DICT: ehcācēhuaztli) and the crook (*chiuacollli*) were evidently carried as ornaments. The only non-Aztec musical instrument mentioned in any of the songs is the *mecahuehueltl* (guitar or harp).

According to Morolín's famous description in Part Two, Chapter Twenty-Six of his *Memoriales* (which may or may not be applicable to ghost songs), the costumed performers would emerge from behind the walls of the house or palace. As the drumming began and the dancers got into position, two “choir directors” would lead off the singing. Then “three or four Indians” would whistle sharply, signaling the start of the dance, in this case evidently a round dance joined by an enormous number of performers and continuing for many hours.<sup>6</sup>

In the *Cantares* texts such phrases as “I, the singer, begin” or “I strike up the song” seemingly allude to such preliminaries. Note the introductory stanza to song 32: “At flower plaza, where the flower court lies, the singer shouts, he sounds the dance cry [of the round dancer].” But if the singer is actually sounding a dance cry (or whistle call?) and a conventional round dance is actually about to begin, then the text seems supererogatory. In fact the singer is summoning ghost warriors, and we must allow for the possibility that he is standing in church, not in an old-style plaza. Moreover, the “singer” is not the singer himself, at least not in the usual sense, but rather his muse. (The muse, or sky singer, is similarly summoned in the opening phrase of song 17: “Where are you, singer?”)

What we have, therefore, is a dance within a dance, or a dance fantasy about dancing. Further evidence, provided by Durán, strengthens the impression that ghost songs were representational:

The dance they enjoyed most was the one they did with adornments of roses, with which they crowned themselves and encircled themselves. For this dance they made a house of roses at the principal altar [*momoztli*] at the temple of their great god Huitzilopochtli, and they made artificial trees, all filled with fragrant flowers, and there they made the goddess Xochiquetzal sit. While they danced, some boys descended dressed as birds and others [dressed] as butterflies, well adorned with rich plumes, green and blue and red and yellow. They climbed up in these trees and went from branch to branch sucking the dew of those roses.

Then the gods came out, each in their costumes, the way they were in the altars—Indians, dressed up in the same way. And with their blowguns in hand they went and shot at the make-believe birds that were moving around in the trees, whereupon the goddess of roses, who was Xochiquetzal, came out to receive them and took them by the hand and made them sit beside her, paying them much honor and respect, as such gods were due. There she gave them roses and smokes and made her representatives come and entertain them. This was the most impressive dance that this nation had, and occasionally nowadays I see it danced anew, though very seldom.<sup>7</sup>

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Tovar's version, seemingly from the same (unidentified) source, reads as follows:

They also mimicked many butterflies and birds of various colors, bringing out the temple boys, dressed in these guises, who climbed up in a grove of trees that they planted there; and the temple priests shot at them with blowguns, whereupon there were witty words in favor of some and against others, with which they greatly entertained the onlookers, followed by a great *mitote*, or dance, of all these personages, which concluded the fiesta, and this they used to do in all the important fiestas.<sup>8</sup>

No song in the *Cantares* has precisely this combination of elements as its program, but the birds, the butterflies, the descending, the artificial trees, the sucking, the combat, the witty words, and the dancing amply suggest that Durán and Tovar were describing one type of ghost song or proto-ghost song.

## Drumming

Two drums were used: the horizontal log drum, or teponaztli, and the all-important huehuetl, an upright skin drum played with bare hands, capable of producing two tones a fifth apart, depending on whether the head was struck in the center or near the rim.<sup>9</sup> Beaten with rubber-tipped mallets on the tongues of an H-shaped slit, the teponaztli also produced two tones, yielding a fifth, a fourth, or some smaller interval, according to the individual instrument. Copious references to the huehuetl in the *Cantares* suggest that this instrument may have been used by itself to accompany the typical ghost song.<sup>10</sup> The fact that a few pieces are specifically designated *teponaztlicaitl* (teponaztli songs) implies that the log drum was either used exclusively in these cases or added to the huehuetl. In any event, as we learn from sixteenth-century reports, the two drums were played together at most Aztec musical events (see Fig. 6). Acosta believes that they were "both tuned to harmonize with each other."<sup>11</sup> But whereas the huehuetl was evidently tuned by varying the tension in the head,<sup>12</sup> it would not appear that the log drum could be easily adjusted, if at all. Motolinía states that the huehuetl served as the tenor and the teponaztli as the bass (*contrabajo*). If so, the teponaztli he had in mind must have been somewhat larger than today's museum specimens, which are in the alto and soprano range.<sup>13</sup>

Alone among sixteenth-century documents, the *Cantares* gives extensive notation for two-tone drumming and even some hints of how the drumming fits in with the singing. Attempts to read this notation have not met with much acceptance, however.<sup>14</sup> And it must be granted that no entirely satisfactory analysis is likely to be invented. What follows, therefore, must be taken as tentative.

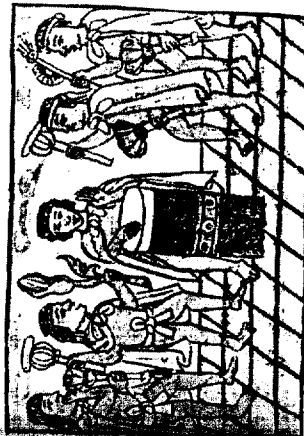
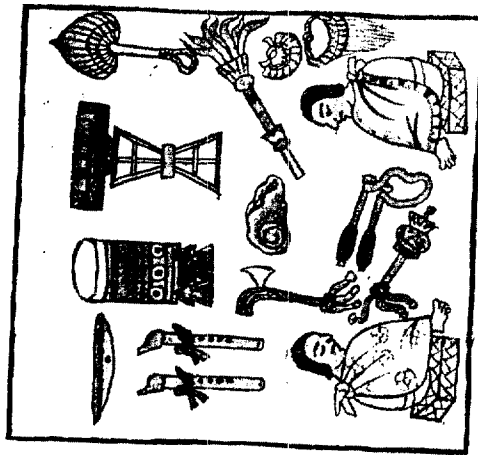


Fig. 6. Aztec musicians: (a) top left, huehuetl and teponaztli players at a feast for a newborn child; (b) top right, youths dancing at the warriors' academy; (c) bottom left, dancing at a merchant's banquet; (d) middle right, musicians with instruments and regalia; (e) bottom right, war dance. After Sahagún, *Códice florentino*: (a) Book 4, fol. 70, vol. 1; (b) Book 8, fol. 28, vol. 2; (c) Book 9, fol. 30v, vol. 2; (d) Book 8, fol. 30, vol. 2; (e) Book 8, fol. 41, vol. 2.

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

As is well known, the *Cantares* drum notation is made up of four different syllables—*ti*, *to*, *qui*, and *co*—with typical groupings like these:

toto tiquiti tiquiti (song 46, canto D)  
 tocotico tocoti (song 46, canto E)

Presumably such items are cadences, meant to be reiterated, as implied by an occasional “et cetera” in the text: “titocoti tocoti tocoti etc.” (song 48).

But it is sometimes unclear whether the whole figure is to be repeated or only the last part. Rarely a syllable will be topped off by a glottal stop, *h*, or a nasal indicator, *n*: “toco toco toco tihiti” (song 86, canto D); “tococontin” (song 89, canto A). Since *h* and *n* appear as intrusive characters throughout the *Cantares* manuscript, there is no reason to assume that they indicate anything other than minor differences in orthography or, at most, pronunciation. As such, they have no bearing on the drummer’s cadence, and I have not retained them in the translation.

For the purpose of solving the notation, two propositions may be set forth as axiomatic: (1) the syllables *ti*, *to*, *co*, and *qui* form a kind of *sofège*, or vocalise, that corresponds to the cadence of the drum; and (2) this vocalise must account for both pitch and rhythm. Since the chronicler Pérez de Ribas explicitly states that the syllables correspond to the notes of the two-toned *teponaztli*,<sup>15</sup> it may be postulated that the vowels *i* and *o* represent these two pitches. Hence the consonants are available to convey, or help convey, the rhythm.

As a hypothesis to be tested, let us suppose that the rhythm is indicated by a system akin to the familiar single-, double-, and triple-tonguing used by modern woodwind players. In other words, reiteration in moderate tempo is denoted by a succession of *t*-sounds, regardless of the intervening vowel; alternation of *t*- and *k*-denotes quick tempo in multiples of two; triplets are *t-k-t*; *k*- is a weak beat only; and *k-k*- is disallowed. Let us suppose, in addition, that an introductory weak beat, or upbeat, is signified by the *k*-sound. This departs from actual woodwind practice (since players prefer to attack with a *t*-).

For convenience, let it be imagined that the vowel *i* denotes the higher tone, *o* the lower. Intuition, and perhaps science, favor this choice,<sup>16</sup> but should it turn out to be the other way around, the analysis would be altered in this respect only. Accordingly, the first of the examples given above could be adapted to modern notation in one of at least three ways, as shown in Figure 7a. One way of writing the second example is given in 7b.

Cadences like the following, which begins with a weak beat, are much less common: “cotoco cotoco tico coti titico tocoti” (song 87, canto C). This obviously complex rhythm could be analyzed in several ways other than the one shown in Figure 7c—using triplets, for example, or with ad-

## Ghost Songs in Performance

a. Song 46, canto D

or

b. Song 46, canto E

c. Song 87, canto C

d. Ticoiti cadence

(1) ti - toco ti - toco ti - toco ti - toco ti - toco ti - toco ti  
 (2) ti - toco - ti toco - ti toco - ti etc.

Fig. 7. Some two-tone drum cadences in vocalise syllables, with suggested musical notation

ditional rests in order to get rid of the heterometry. But the juxtaposed *co* must always be kept in separate phrases. For example, the notation cannot be rewritten “coto coco toco etc.,” which would violate the rules of tonguing. Fortunately, the manuscript makes the phrasing perfectly acceptable in this regard—and except for a “tico coto” in canto D of song 90, there are no other examples of juxtaposed *co co* (or *co qui*, or *qui qui*, or *qui co*) anywhere in the *Cantares*. The total absence of the tonguing hypothesis, especially phrase is a strong argument in favor of the tonguing hypothesis, especially since every other possible linkage (*coti*, *titi*, *quti*, etc.) is represented.

In Figure 7c, note that the rhythm of the first four phrases has nothing in

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

common with the last two. Probably the rhythms were not meant to be connected, as can be seen clearly in these constructions given elsewhere in the manuscript: "Tico tico ticoti tico ticoti. And when the song ends: totoco tocoto" (song 45, canto B); "Ticototi tocoti tocoti etc. Ticototi titocoti when it ends" (song 48); "Toco toco titi/Tico tico tocotoco" (song 90, canto B). In the example shown in Figure 7c, the transcriber is probably giving two cadences, one for the beginning of the "song," or stanza, the other for the ending.

Evidently the phrasing can be varied without changing the character of the rhythm. An isolated example from the codex *Romances de los señores* is especially helpful in this regard, because it applies to a song that is duplicated in the *Cantares* manuscript, which likewise gives the drum cadence. This is the famous *tocotín*, or *tocotín*, cadence already seen in an example from song 48 and mentioned by several seventeenth- and eighteenth-century chroniclers.<sup>17</sup> Figure 7d.1 shows the cadence as given in the *Romances* (fol. 6v, lines 19-20) and 7d.2 the same cadence as given in the *Cantares* (fol. 30, line 22). Of course, the manuscripts give only the vocalise in alphabetic script. (Observe that the Spanish accent on the final syllable of the word *tocotín* accords with the tonguing hypothesis.)

The reader who studies the manuscript may glean further particulars. It should be kept in mind, however, that the copyist does not always preserve the cadence boundary or the phrase boundaries within the cadence. Sometimes the syllables are all run together, sometimes they are broken off—as in "coto coto co" (song 54-C), which must be read as "coto cotoco."

In conclusion, it seems clear that the method as outlined above could work satisfactorily in oral transmission. Yet in notation, it would convey only relative pitches, certain relative durational values, and most aspects of the accentual scheme. Absolute pitches and absolute durational values, as well as tempo, would have to be guessed. The notation is simply not rich enough to permit greater particulars—unless various conventions, such as the prohibition of triplets, were taken for granted. The vagueness of the system may be appreciated if we take two-tone cadences preserved in modern notation and attempt to rewrite them in *Cantares* style. The examples I have in mind are for the large Mayan log drum, or *tun*, as it was used in the 1850's to accompany the Quiche dance-drama *Rabinal achi*. These were published in 1862 by Brasseur de Bourbourg in his *Grammaire de la langue quiché* and are the earliest that I have been able to discover.<sup>18</sup> Three of the fourteen cadences in this score (which includes parts for first and second trumpets) are excerpted in Figure 8. The first of these would be "ti toco ti." But the second would also be "ti toco ti." The third would be "tiqititi tocotoco," but observe that the distinction between eighths and sixteenths is not retained.

## Ghost Songs in Performance



Fig. 8. Three two-tone drum cadences excerpted from the *Rabinal achi* (after Brasseur de Bourbourg)

## The Work of Elsa Ziehm

To test the validity of the drum cadence readings, it could be helpful to search the archival collections of Mexican Indian folk music for clues about what the vocables *ti*, *to*, *qui*, and *co* might mean to modern performers. I have not attempted the task; but as this book was nearly in press I did learn of a Cora song tape-recorded in 1968 by Fernando Benítez, in which the four syllables are sung in patterns like those preserved in the *Cantares*.

The song in question was transcribed by Elsa Ziehm, of Berlin, who has been editing the Nahuatl texts collected in southern Durango by the late Konrad Theodor Preuss. Benítez' collection was made sixty kilometers farther south in the Cora-speaking village of Jesus María, just over the Nayarit border.<sup>19</sup> Normally performed (with instrumental accompaniment?) during one of the all-night maize ceremonies called *mitotes*, the excerpt reproduced in Figure 9, given to me in transcript by Ziehm, was obtained live by Benítez from a single male singer.

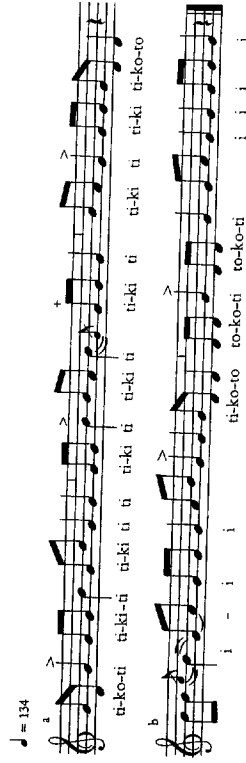


Fig. 9. Excerpt from a Cora *mitote* song (Elsa Ziehm's No. 28, Benítez Cora collection of 1968)

Familiar with Schultze Jena's edition of the *Cantares mexicanos*, and evidently inspired by the Cora example, Ziehm has also provided me with her reconstructions of the two-tone teponaztli cadences from *Cantares* folio 26v (Fig. 10). Based on her extensive acquaintance with music of the Nayarit-Durango region, she conjectures that the *Cantares* interval may have been a fourth, as shown. Except for this feature, her readings—developed independently, using a quite different approach—agree with mine.

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Fig. 10. Ziehm's reconstructions of two *Cantares* cadences (fol. 26v)

Patient scrutiny will show that the necessary ideas for these reconstructions are presented in Ziehm's 1976 essay, "Ein Wort über die Tonsilben in aztekischen Handschriften," which I had overlooked until recently.<sup>20</sup>

Ensemble

As for the manner in which the drumming fits in with the singing, little or nothing can be stated with confidence. The only contemporary description, found on folio 7 of the *Cantares*, seemingly refers to a performance in which the singer accompanies himself—probably not a typical occurrence, at least not in full-dress public recitals. It would certainly be difficult, if not impossible, to sing a heterorhythmic chant while beating out one of the metrical cadences described in the preceding sections. It would, however, be possible for the singer to accompany himself with a simple metronome-like tapping, as Indian singers frequently do. And in fact, this is what seems to have occurred in the case at hand. The description reads as follows:

And the drum is beaten thus: when a stanza ends and another stanza is to follow, it's three-beat. And when it actually begins, it's one-beat. But as it comes back in, then the drum falls beneath it, and the hand just keeps on going. But when it is in the middle, again the voice of the drum emerges. This, however, must be seen from the hand of the singer who knows how it is beaten. And newly, again, this music was in the home of Don Diego de León, gobernador of Azcapotzalco. Don Francisco Plácido beat it out in the year 1551 of the resurrection of our lord Jesucristo.

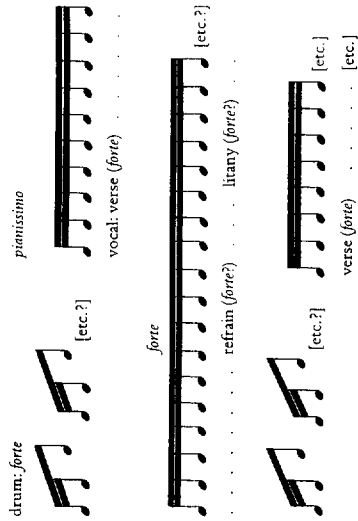
The "three-beat" is perhaps one of the triple-beat cadences such as "tocoti" or "tiquiti." The "middle" of the stanza, if it is a natural division, would have to be either the point where the verse gives way to the refrain, or the refrain gives way to the litany. If "one-beat" is the metronomic tapping, then a hypothetical score for a two-stanza solo performance, arbitrarily based on a "tocoti" cadence and not neglecting the prescribed dynamics, might read as shown in Figure 11a.

But of the drumming instructions connected with actual songs in the manuscript, none can be safely recommended for self-accompaniment. The typical case appears to be represented by the cadences for song 59, canto B: "Tocoto tocoto tocoto tocoto." Comes the middle of the song, then it finishes: tiquiti tiquiti tiquiti tocoto." If "song" refers to the stanza, the score for the first two stanzas might be as shown in Figure 11b.

Many stanzas, however, do not have a refrain, and the litanies are

Ghost Songs in Performance

a. Hypothetical score for 2 self-accompanied stanzas with *tocoti* cadence



b. Hypothetical score for 2 stanzas in canto B of song 59

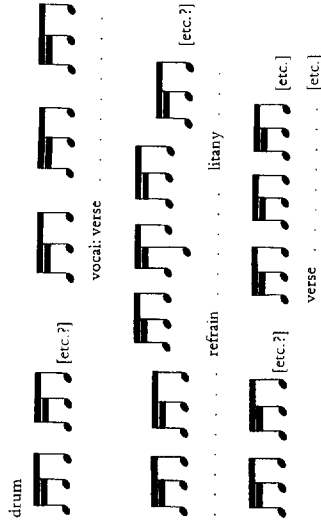


Fig. 11. Reconstructed two-tone cadences with suggested vocal cues

frequently not written out in the manuscript. In such cases the point of change for the cadence would remain in even greater doubt than in the examples reconstructed here. Note that in several songs, including 19, only a single cadence is given. Often, though, what appears to be a single, complex cadence is really two cadences run together by the copyist. Occasionally, as in song 44, canto B, and song 45, canto A, a pair of cadences run together will be followed by the instruction "just thus it will come back in," evidently referring to the return of the chant after the break between stanzas. If this is a general rule, it suggests that my reconstruction in Figure 8b is wrong in presuming the return of the first cadence before the commencement of the chant. The "just thus it will come back in" implies that it is the second cadence, not the first, that fills the gap between stanzas.

## Musical Style

Of the various sixteenth-century writers on Aztec culture, only Motolinía shows signs of having had musical training. On the basis of his *Memoriales* description, supplemented by stray details in other sources, including the *Cantares*, it is possible to sketch a tentative outline of Aztec musical traits, which may then be compared with the more secure descriptions of Pueblo, Plains, Yuman, Navajo, and other North American styles as presented by such musicologists as George Herzog and Bruno Nettl. The results, though inconclusive, tend to show that the sixteenth-century Aztec style had much in common with the music of the North American Southwest.

Two jarring features, distinctly non-North American, may be mentioned at once: the playing of the huehuetl with bare hands (an Aztec and Mayan feature, as opposed to the North American use of drumsticks) and the presence of the teponaztli (a characteristically South American instrument). Otherwise the style appears to belong with the Northern half of the hemisphere, particularly the Southwest, though it must not be assumed that any of the features to be mentioned below are necessarily absent from the much more poorly known Central and South American cultures.

The essentially vocal nature of Aztec music, the use of percussive accompaniment, the presumed absence of polyphony, and the heavy reliance on vowels, or meaningless syllables, are among the more immediately apparent traits. Microtonic deviations from the twelve-tone scale (so-called blue notes) are implicit in Motolinía's observation that the singers were "desentonados."<sup>21</sup> Reading between the lines in the well-known description of the "good" singer in Sahagún's *Historia*, Robert Stevenson has suggested, shrewdly, that Aztec melodies were much too narrow in range for European tastes,<sup>22</sup> which would imply hexatonic, pentatonic, or even more limited scales. As noted in Chapter Four, the *Cantares* texts appear to be heterometric and heterorhythmic. Such characteristics—all of them—are typical of American Indian music in general.

In addition we learn from Motolinía that the Aztecs had "thin" voices, not "robust" and "mellow" like the Spaniards', because, as he says, they went about barefoot and with their chests half uncovered. Las Casas too blames this trait on nakedness, explaining that the Indians fell prey to "humidity." Only the boy sopranos, he claims, had pleasant voices.<sup>23</sup> Evidently what we have is a reaction to the tight, throat-based tones typical of Plains and Pueblo singing, which contrast markedly with the relaxed head tones used by modern European singers. Throaty singing is somewhat less pronounced among Eastern, Northwestern, Eskimo, and, notably, Great Basin and Yuman groups. To find at least a measure of it in Aztec territory would be in line with the general rule. Again according to Motolinía, bass

## Ghost Songs in Performance

(*contrabajo*) was the preferred vocal range. Similarly Pueblo singers, especially in kachina songs, cultivate the bass range.<sup>24</sup>

Extensive verbal development, found in Eskimo, Northwest Coast, Navajo, and Pueblo music, is of course the sine qua non of the *Cantares*. To some extent there is a correlation between verbal development and microtonic, highly heterorhythmic recitative—in other words, music that closely approaches speech. Yet certain formal features in the *Cantares*, namely the paired stanzas, the tag litany, and the possible occurrence of the "rise" (see below), suggest that ghost songs could not have exhibited a completely unchecked recitative.

Paired stanzas are common in music of the Southwest. Litany, perhaps, is a pan-Indian feature. In the so-called rise, typical of Yuman music and found also in the Pueblo area, melodies of narrow range jump a few half-tones higher for one or two phrases, then return to the original, slightly lower melodic line. During this rise the percussive accompaniment is altered. Rattling, for instance, changes from a rhythmic beat to a tremolo. According to one report, the dancers raise and shake their fists during the "rise."<sup>25</sup> In the problematical description on folio 7 of the *Cantares*, a change in the percussive accompaniment is said to occur in the middle of a stanza. Whether a rise is indicated remains a matter of pure conjecture. With reference to the dancing of young people (*moozotl*), Durán writes that "the dance was not only governed by the music ['no solamente se rige por el son'] but also by the highs and lows ['los altos y bajos'] that the song makes, singing and dancing together."<sup>26</sup> Possibly the rise is meant. But it is doubtful that the dances of these "young people" were ghost dances.

Another feature Motolinía describes is the rise in pitch and the increase in tempo from one song to the next when a song cycle is performed. Thus each new song is a little higher and a little faster than the preceding one. Although the trait is said to be lacking in the Yuman area, it is not uncommon elsewhere in North America.<sup>27</sup> Working with an informant from Santo Domingo Pueblo, Frances Densmore found the rise in pitch to be a half-tone at each juncture, which would accord with Motolinía, who observed that the opening passages were "como bemoledos" (as if lowered a half-tone). Densmore also recorded the "rise" among the Santo Domingo, but this, as we have seen, is an entirely different feature, not to be confused with the progressive pitch elevation in song cycles. As it happens, Densmore states that the "rise" occurs in Aztec music; but her source is a garbled fifthhand account that can be traced back through a writer named Gabriel Saldívar to Torquemada to Mendieta and ultimately to Motolinía, who in fact was describing progressive elevation.<sup>28</sup>

Among musical instruments the Aztec skin drum, turtle drum, con-tainer rattle, rasp, sistrum, conch horn, whistle, and flageolet (or block-

flute) are all represented north of the border; and the rasp, the sistrum, and the conch horn are associated with the Southwest in particular.

The huehuetl and the teponaztl provided continuous accompaniment for the singing Motolinía witnessed, with help "at times" from "trumpets" and flageolets (which were "out of tune") and also from bone whistles (*huéscuzuelos*). Evidently this does not qualify as orchestral music in the modern sense. Nor are orchestras to be found farther north, not even among the Northwest Coast and Pueblo tribes, which exhibit the most complex musical styles north of Mexico.

Part-singing is less easy to rule out. Although Torquemada, writing very late, asserts unequivocally that the natives sang only in unison (*en voces iguales*), neither Motolinía nor Mendieta is quite so specific. The fact that the friars taught the Indians *canto llano* (plainchant) and *canto de órgano* (organum) does not mean that the native tradition was lacking in rough equivalents. Actually the organum mentioned by Motolinía and other sixteenth-century writers is not the organum of medieval music, which was merely a chordal homophony, but modern four-part harmony. That the Aztecs may have had primitive organum, as found for example among the tribes of the Northwest Coast,<sup>29</sup> is suggested by the remarkable ease with which they learned harmony and by Motolinía's tantalizing observation that in the strictly Aztec performances the addition of boy sopranos "much adorned the song."<sup>30</sup> If the sopranos were added at intervals of an octave, or, especially, a fifth, tenth, or twelfth, as in Northwest Coast examples, the result would be chordal. This seems a likely conjecture—and it seems equally safe to assume that polyphony in the modern sense was absent.

The very hazy portrait of Aztec music that emerges from such clues appears to place it comfortably within the Amerind context, perhaps with special Southwestern affinities.<sup>31</sup> No doubt it had less in common with Southwest music than with the music of the Mixtecs, the Tarascans, the Totonacs, or the Mayans. Scenes of Mayan music making preserved in the Bonampak and Santa Rita murals, for example, are strongly reminiscent of the usual Aztec paraphernalia, including the turtle drum and even the huehuetl.<sup>32</sup> But the actual music of these cultures is not known to have survived in its pure form beyond the 1500's, and since none was recorded, the desired comparisons cannot be made.

## Ghost Songs Outside the *Cantares*

A look at ghost songs preserved in other sources will help to establish that the *Cantares mexicanos* has pre-Conquest roots, that it was influenced by Spanish models, and that the ghost-song genre, if no longer viable, may still be detected in modern folkloric remnants. One must be careful, however, to distinguish between ghost songs and other genres. The short songs in the *Anales de Cuauhuitlan*,<sup>1</sup> for example, are typical American Indian storyteller's songs, performed as part of a myth recital or the telling of a traditional history. Similar pieces are to be found in the *Historia Toltteca-Chichimeca* and the *Códice Aubin*.<sup>2</sup> The numerous *conjuros* preserved by Hernando Ruíz de Alarcón are not songs at all, but spoken formulas belonging to a widespread Indian genre well represented in Maya and Cherokee collections.<sup>3</sup> To compare such material with the *Cantares* would be of limited value.

The twenty "demons' songs" recorded by Sahagún are a different case. A few of these appear to be festival chants, performed in honor of particular gods. But at least three of them are evidently ghost songs, or proto-ghost songs, and will be discussed below. In view of the undisputed pre-Conquest provenience of these twenty pieces, they hold special interest.

A number of ghost songs recorded in alphabetic script and preserved into the seventeenth century are now apparently lost. Carochi, in his *Arte* of 1645, quotes five examples of the "poetic language" of the "ancients," only two of which can be traced to the *Cantares*. The other three, though obviously excerpted from ghost songs, cannot be located in either the *Cantares* or the closely related *Romances*. Two excerpts quoted by the historian Ixtlilxochitl are likewise from ghost songs now missing. Other songs described or partially quoted by Ixtlilxochitl, Torquemada, and Muñoz Camargo suggest the onetime existence of important compilations, the nature of which can only be guessed.<sup>4</sup>

## The Florentine Codex

Sahagún's great work includes one easily recognizable ghost song—rather a pair of ghost-song stanzas—tucked into one of the *huehuetlatolli* orations that were said to have been used by fathers when advising their sons:<sup>5</sup>

O cloud companion [or ghost warrior]! You will succeed in being born as a song on earth. You will live beside the drum in Huexotzinco [i.e., Mexico], you that will please the princes, you whose friends will see you.

Your heart is a turquoise bead, and you give it to the one who comes shining [the sun]. Again you will sprout, again you will burgeon on earth. You will live beside the drum in Huexotzinco, you that will please the princes, you whose friends will see you.

Inserted with a clumsy and almost certainly erroneous explanation that breaks the *huehuetlatolli* style, this little exhibit raises a serious question: is it plausible that song texts, with or without exegesis, were quoted by *huehuetlatolli* orators? More than likely we are dealing with intrusive material added by one of Sahagún's bilingual glossators. As such, the two stanzas may even be post-Conquest, despite the fact that the *huehuetlatolli* are presented as "ancient" oratory.

But the twenty "demons' songs" recorded in an appendix to Book Two of the same work have all the earmarks of pre-Conquest ethnicity. And among these we have what appear to be ghost songs, though stylistically they are slightly different from the *Cantares mexicanos*. The seventh of these, the "Song of cloud companions," will serve as a sample:<sup>6</sup>

They've departed from Chicomoztoc! Where do they bloom? Where, where, these pricklers?<sup>8</sup>  
They've departed from Spine Land! Where—ah!—do they bloom? Where, where, these pricklers?  
I've descended, I've descended, I've descended with my arrow spines, descended with my arrow spines.  
I've descended, I've descended, I've descended with my pack basket.  
I take them in my hands, I take them in my hands. I take them in my hands, my hands.

The ancestral revenants (or "cloud companions") are returning from the dead land (called Chicomoztoc and Spine Land) in response to the muse's call for warriors ("prickers," "arrow spines"), whom he seeks on a song trip, bringing them down in his pack basket, picking them up in his hands (like flowers).

The eleventh and twelfth songs in the same series may also be ghost songs and possibly the fourteenth as well. Further study of this material is much needed.

## The *Anales de Tlatelolco*

Two rather lengthy songs in the "manuscript of 1528," also known as the *Anales de Tlatelolco*, appear at first sight to be storyteller's songs. But one of these is a variant of *Cantares* song 54-E, and evidently a ghost song. The opening phrases of the piece (which awaits critical study) read as follows in English: "The earth gapes, and marvels are upon us: the sky has opened over us. Life Giver has descended!"<sup>9</sup> The remainder incorporates numerous phrases from 54-E yet is clearly an independent composition.

The absence of post-Conquest allusions and the possibility that the material was recorded as early as 1528 argue strongly for a pre-Cortésian origin.

## The *Romances de los señores*

The quaintly entitled *Romances de los señores de la Nueva España* (Ballads of the Lords of New Spain) comprises thirty-six ghost songs, ranging in length from two to sixteen stanzas each.<sup>10</sup> Messily written in a fast copyist's script known as *procaesal*, this all but illegible manuscript is partly clarified by the fact that its contents are identical in style to the *Cantares* and duplicate more than a few *Cantares* passages (e.g., songs 43, 48, and 69, canto C).<sup>11</sup> However, the *Romances* contains none of the more difficult songs, none that are lengthy, no satire, no ribaldry, and no songs that deal overtly with Conquest or post-Conquest themes. Despite an occasional "Dios" or "Santa María," which could be explained as later additions, the *Romances* material, like many pieces in the *Cantares*, gives the (misleading?) appearance of having been composed prior to the Conquest.

Although the manuscript has been assigned to the seventeenth century, it is no doubt a copy of songs recorded in the 1500's.<sup>12</sup> The fact that it is preserved with the *Relación* of the sixteenth-century Texcocan mestizo writer Juan Bautista Pomar suggests that it may have been compiled by Pomar, and that the songs themselves may be Texcocan. Strong affinities with the *Cantares*, however, give reason for thinking that these pieces were collected by members of Sahagún's circle. As for the Texcocan connection, the texts fail to establish it. But like the *Cantares*, the *Romances* has its glossator, who in this case seems to have a particular interest in Texcocan matters. He has taken the song beginning on folio 26, for example, and labeled it "de quaquauhtzin R[e]ly de tepexpan"—in other words, song of Cuacuauhtzin, king of Tepechpan (an Acolhuan town subordinate to Texcoco). But it is more likely that the song itself refers to Cuacuauhtzin, the first king of Tlatelolco, rather than to the relatively obscure Cuacuauhtzin of Tepechpan.<sup>13</sup> This and the glossator's preoccupation with Nezahualco-