



From *Tonantzin-Coatlicue* to The Virgin of Guadalupe: The Emergence of a Religious and Cultural Mexican Icon

Presented by: Martín Mercado García
Advisor: Dr. Donaldo Urioste
California State University of Monterey Bay
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Abstract

For many, the Spanish Conquest of Mexico brought endless contributions to the indigenous civilizations; and for others, it is a synonym of suffering and difficult times. With the arrival of the Spanish, the indigenous cultures had to forcefully adapt and assimilate to the new ways of living of the Spanish; one of which was the conversion to the Catholic religion. This project examines how the image of the *Mexica* (Aztec) deity *Tonantzin-Coatlicue*, through religion, was syncretized with a Virgin of the colonizers, with the sole purpose of converting the indigenous peoples into Catholicism with more efficiency. Finally, this project also explains how the Virgin of Guadalupe is not only a religious icon, but has also become a cultural icon for Mexicans, both inside and outside of Mexico.

Significance of Study

Growing up in a Catholic religious environment meant that I had to pay tribute to the Virgin of Guadalupe; ever since, I was taught only version about the apparition of this Virgin. Nevertheless, throughout the my studies here at CSUMB, specifically in Aztec culture and Chicano studies, I learned that there was a connection between the Aztec goddess *Tonantzin-Coatlicue* and the Virgen of Guadalupe. For this reason, I decided to do extended research on this topic, which I hope demonstrates how religious syncretism through the image of the Virgen of Guadalupe, played an important role in the conversion and religious lives of the indigenous people of Mexico.

What is religious syncretism?

- Syncretism- “The combination of different forms of theories, attitudes, beliefs and practices” (RAE).
- Religion: “A set of beliefs or dogmas about the divinity, feelings of worship, moral norms for individual and social conduct, and ritual practices, principally prayers and sacrifice for its worship” (RAE).

History of the Mexica (Aztec) civilization

The origin of the Mexicas

- Aztlán refers to the place of origin of whom were known as the Aztecs. Also, in some occasions this place is referred as *Chicomoztoc*. Aztlán seems to be a suppressed form of the word *Aztatlan*, which means “place of the herons”. On the other hand, *Chicomoztoc* means “the place of the seven caves” (Portilla 308).

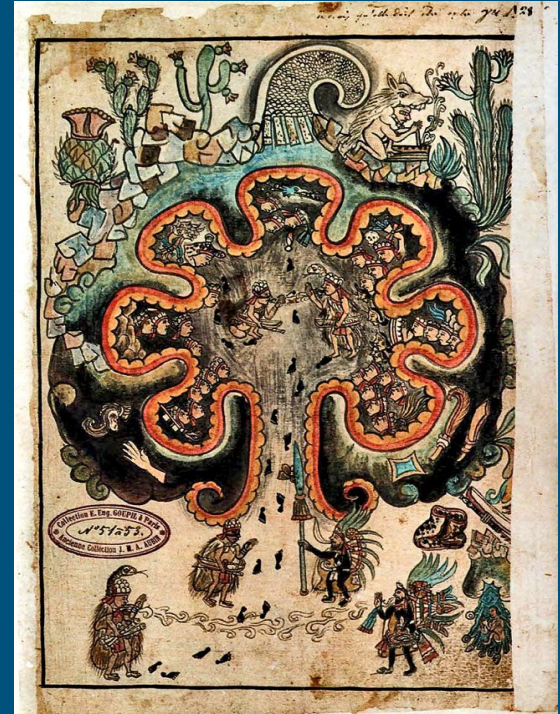


Diagram from the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*

Aztec religious practices

- Polytheism: “The belief and worship of many gods. Typically, these gods are distinguished by particular functions and often take human characteristics”
(allabouthistory.org)

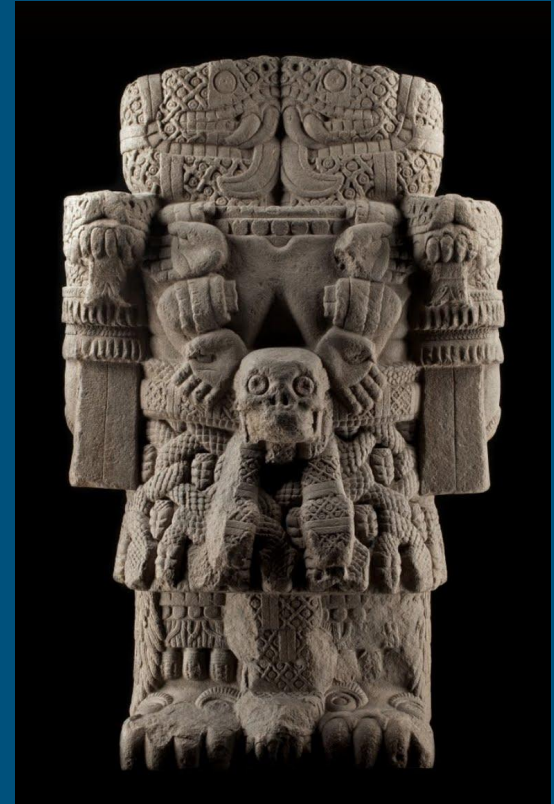


- The Aztec Pantheon:
The main deities were linked with the solar cycle and agricultural activities :
Tezcatlipoca (god of the night),
Huitzilopochtli (god of the sun and warfare),
Tlaloc (god of rain),
Quetzalcoatl (feathered serpent; main god of the Aztecs), and
Coatlicue (Serpent Skirt; “mother of the gods”, “mother earth”).

Who is *Tonantzin-Coatlicue*?

Nahuatl Definition: “Our venerated mother earth”

- *To*-our, *nan*-mother, *tzin*-venerated (Our venerated mother)
- *Coatl*- serpent, *tli*- locative, *cueitl*-skirt (“Serpent Skirt”) (Mitología Americana)
 - “Mother Earth”
 - Mother of the Gods: Huitzilopochtli, Coyolxauhqui and the 400 *Centzon Huitznahua* (southerner stars/gods).
 - Goddess of fertility/femininity



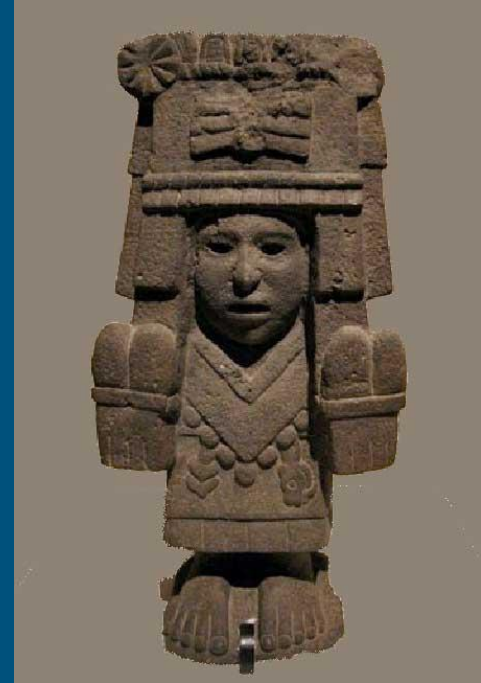
Tonantzin-Coatlicue: Mother of the Gods

“One day, as she was sweeping, a ball of feathers descended from the heavens and when she tucked it into her belt it miraculously impregnated her. The resulting child was none other than the powerful Aztec god of war **Huitzilopochtli**. However, Coatlicue's other offspring, her daughter **Coyolxauhqui** ('Painted with Bells' and perhaps representing the Moon), herself a powerful goddess, and her sons the Centzon Huitznahua ('Four Hundred Huiznaua', who represented the stars of the southern sky) were outraged at this shameful episode and they stormed Mount Coatepec with the intention of killing their dishonoured mother” (Delhalle, Luykx 17).



Worship at the *Tepeyacac*

- Bernardino de Sahagún
 - *General history of the things of New Spain* (1590)
 - “The first ceremony was dedicated to *Xilonen*, goddess of maize, in which a woman sat on the back of a priest and decapitated; the young woman represented *Xilonen*” (16).



Tonantzin, “Our venerated mother”

The other Virgin of Guadalupe

- In 714 the image of the Virgin is buried near the Guadalupe river in Spain, due to the Moor invasion in the Iberic Peninsula.
- Apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe to Gil Cordero (a cattle herder) in Extremadura, Spain in 1322.
- During the 14th century a shrine is built in her name in Extremadura, Spain.
- Venerated by Hernan Cortes and brought to New Spain in 1519 during the Spanish Conquest. (Antonio Corredor, 15).



Our lady of Guadalupe, Extremadura, Spain.

The Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe

- In December 12, 1531 the Virgin of Guadalupe allegedly appeared to an indigenous man named Juan Diego in the Hill of Tepeyac.
- In 1609, a shrine dedicated to her is built in the Hill of Tepeyac.
- By 1737, the Virgin of Guadalupe receives the title of “Patroness of Mexico” and “Mother of the Mexicans” (Oleszkiewicz, 243).



Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mexico, Mexico City.

Syncretism between two icons



- Name: Guadalupe/*Cuauhtlapcupeuh*
- Complexion: Non white, but brown like the indigenous people
- Clothing: The turquoise cape and red dress represent sacred colors of the Aztecs
- Mother of God: The ribbon around her waist indicates she is pregnant with a child (Jesus), similar to Coatlicue with Huitzilopochtli.
- Place of worship: The hill of Tepeyac is the place of apparition and place of worship; the place of worship for Coatlicue (Oleszkiewicz, 115).

Corona de Luz (Crown of Light): Miracle or Fraud?



- Rodolfo Usigli (1905-1979)
 - Mexican playwright born in Mexico City; trilogy of Mexican history, the Corona plays : (Corona de fuego, Corona de luz, and Corona de sombra)
 - Corona de Luz (1963): the base of sovereignty of spirituality of Mexico.
 - Three main acts: 1) Prólogo político 2) Los siete por México and 3) La Corona



Corona de Luz: Summary

First Act: Prólogo político (Political Prologue)

- New Spain is in conflict, military and religiously speaking, with the indigenous people, which could lead to the destruction of one another; and have a major disadvantage for Spain.
- Emperor, Charles V, is obligated to “create” a miracle using his wife’s, Queen Isabella’s preferred image, the Virgen of Guadalupe of Extremadura.
 - “-Isabel: Yo no tengo mas arma ni más fuerza que mi fe de mujer. Voy a ponerme en oración ante mi virgen predilecta, que es la Guadalupe, para que interceda por ti” (Usigli 139).
 - “-Isabel: No hay más que un camino, señor, y ese no es para corrido por los pies del hombre. El único camino es el camino de un milagro” (139).
 - “-Carlos: La Virgen de Guadalupe. . . Eso sería un milagro” (142).

Second Act: Los siete por México (Seven for Mexico)

- Such miracle is developed in this scene; a nun is sent from Spain to play the role of the Virgin and a gardener to cultivate roses, the name of Guadalupe is to be used, a young indigenous man is selected, and finally, the date is set for the 31st of December (Day of St. Sylvester).
 - “-Fray Juan de Zumárraga: Carlos V me ha enviado, por emisario de boca, una orden de mis convicciones más arraigadas, mi sentido de lo que debe ser la Iglesia en el tiempo moderno me constriñen no obedecer. . .¿Que me ordena Carlos V, hermanos, no sólo luterano sino preluterano amamantado por la loba de la penumbra de pasados siglos? Que haga yo un milagro. Que me sustituya a Dios Nuestro Señor y que haga aparecerse a una virgen que tenga una apariencia mexicana (Usigli 161).
 - “-Fray Juan: No entiendo porque, pero se me hizo saber claramente que debía de usarse el nombre de la Virgen de Extremadura...Guadalupe”(177).

Third Act: La Corona (The Crown)

- In this last act, the truth is revealed due to the miraculous apparition of a Virgin to an indigenous man, Juan Diego, who is not the one who they have selected.
- The events do not occur as planned, due to the fact that the place of the apparitions of the Virgin occurred in the Tepeyac and the day selected occurred 19 days before as planned.
 - “Juan IV: tengo encargo para ti, tata Obispo. No mas para ti, vengo de lejos. . . Vivo en Tepeyacatl, junto cerro....tiene mujer india....encargo solo para ti. . . Tata, en falta cerro señora hermosa muy hermosa dice Juan pobrecito dice Juan aquí quiero una casa hermosa muy hermosa. Soy tu madre pobre indio Juan...Di a tata Obispo quiero aquí casa hermosa para Madre de Dios y de indios... Yo digo a tata Obispo” (Usigli 209)
 - “Juan Darío, ¿es esta la señora que viste al pie del cerro del Tepeyacatl? ¿Es esta la hermosa señora?. . .¿La señora que te dio el encargo para mi?”(219).

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- “Juan: Parece- no es tata, Obispo, no es. . . su voz- mas ... dulce... mas...luz. Y falta xochitl. . . Señora dice: Da xochitl tata Obispo para que haga mi casa qui. Es señal que mandó” (220)
 - “Zumarraga: -31 de diciembre, 12 de diciembre, ¿que importa? Agencias humanas, ¿como existirían, como funcionarían sin Dios?. . . No diremos nada. Dejaremos que la orgullosa corona española piense que todo pasó como ella lo había dispuesto. Dejaremos que España crea que inventó el milagro” (222).

Guadalupe: A Mexican cultural symbol

Influences of Guadalupe in Mexican History

- In 1810, Miguel Hidalgo, leader of the Mexican Independence movement, rose against the *Peninsulares* for independence from Spain.
- The image of the Virgen of Guadalupe was placed on a banner and became the symbol of the movement and the army that fought for independence (Mexico Desconocido).



Banner of the Virgen of Guadalupe carried by Miguel Hidalgo during the Mexican Independence movement

Other influences

- José Miguel Ramón Adaucto Fernández Félix (Guadalupe Victoria): First president of Mexico (1824-1829).
- Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo (1848): Ended the Mexican-American war.



Guadalupe Victoria, Mexico's first president.

The Chicano Movement



- In 1965 Cesar Chavez, leader of the Farmworkers movement, marched from Delano to Sacramento to protest against unjust treatment and poor working conditions.
- The image of the Virgin of Guadalupe served as an icon, symbol, and rallying point for farm workers in their fight to gain union representation and recognition of their rights (Cultivating Creativity).
 - “She is a symbol of faith, hope, and leadership” -Dolores Huerta

Chicano Art and Literature

- “The Virgin of Guadalupe is chosen because she represents *Tonantzin*, the Aztec goddess of maize and earth who was venerated at the Tepeyac hill. She is seen as the goddess who reflects the metaphorical place where racial barriers do not exist, the same place that oppresses the non-whites of this country” (Johnston-Hernandez, 1993)



Tonantzin, Jake Prendez



- Odalia Galvan Rodriguez: *New Chicano/Chicana Writing* (1993)

“Diosa”



“...a galaxy of bright stars
adorned her swaying
black night skirt
with silvery threads of moonlight
sister spiders
embroidered lightening bolt
and web patterns
on the summer sky blue huipil

she wore a garland of jet
snakes
dancing about her neck and
chest
radiant face of a billion lives
enclosing eyes of fire and ice
full oxidite lips which broke
into abalone teeth smiles
from time to time
hair the color and smell of
wood pitch
from which all life flowed
crowning her head a hoop of
white roses
reminding her that she was the
queen of the universe...” (86)

Conclusion

- Religious syncretism played an important role in the conversion to Catholicism of the indigenous people of Mexico; through the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe.
- The existence of previous deities such as *Tonantzin-Coatlicue* and the Virgin of Guadalupe of Extremadura served as major influences in the new image of the Virgin of Guadalupe of Mexico.
- The Virgin of Guadalupe has become a symbol of leadership in important movements for Mexicans throughout history; The Mexican Independence Movement (1810) and The Farmworkers Movement in the U.S. (1965) and has become an important mexican cultural symbol in the Chicano culture.
- Despite the controversies that surround the Virgin of Guadalupe, she has not only become an important religious icon for mexican catholics, but also symbol of Mexican culture for Mexicans, both inside and outside of Mexico.

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