

BENEATH THE CROSS, THE MAIZE GODS SING: *Unveiling Indigenous Worldview in “Female Song for the Resurrection of Our Lord”*

ABSTRACT: This article offers a critical analysis of the song “Female Song for the Resurrection of Our Lord,” found in the colonial manuscript titled *Cantares mexicanos*. While seemingly a Christian hymn, a close reading of this song reveals deep continuities with pre-Hispanic Nahua religious thought, cosmology, and ritual language. Through contextualized textual analysis grounded in ethnohistorical scholarship, the study uncovers the song’s hybrid nature and the Indigenous conceptual models embedded within its Christian language and imagery. The article places the song within the evangelization efforts of sixteenth-century Franciscan friars in New Spain, highlighting the role of Native authors, singers and translators in shaping Indigenous devotional expression. It argues that the analyzed piece functioned not merely as a catechetical tool but as a site of cultural negotiation, where Christian themes were reinterpreted through Indigenous frameworks—most notably, by aligning Saint Francis with the Nahua corn deities, whose cult, associated with regeneration, sustenance, and cyclical vegetation renewal, coincided with Easter celebrations. Though rarely studied, this song contributes meaningfully to debates on syncretism, Indigenous authorship, and resistance in early colonial Christian literature. Emphasizing the agency of Native intermediaries, the article reveals the dialogic nature of missionary textual production and offers a more nuanced understanding of the *Cantares mexicanos* corpus.

KEYWORDS: *Cantares mexicanos*, evangelization, Nahua, corn

INTRODUCTION

The moment the Spaniards set foot on the territory that historians would later refer to as the “Aztec Empire” marked the beginning of Christianity’s presence in the region. Just three years after the fall of Tenochtitlan, the first group of Franciscans arrived in the Basin of Mexico to initiate a large-scale Christianization campaign. The process advanced rapidly,

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resulting in a substantial body of religious texts in Nahuatl, enriched by a Christian lexicon developed specifically for evangelization, which emerged from intense cultural and linguistic contact. Alongside various written genres newly introduced in Mexico, intended to communicate Christian doctrine to Indigenous audiences (such as, for example, *doctrinas*, *confesionarios*, *sermonarios*), the friars drew upon pre-Hispanic forms of expression, which the Nahua had employed in their former religious life, including *huehuetlatolli* (speeches), graphic representations, and *cuicatl* (song-dances). Especially the latter proved to be an effective vehicle for transmitting the new faith and attracting Native individuals to attend Christian ceremonies and prayers. As noted by one of the most distinguished Franciscans of this early period, Fray Pedro de Gante, "... we could not bring them into the fold and congregation of the Church [...] but rather they fled from it as the devil flees the Cross. [But once] I began to understand them, [I realized] that all their worship of their gods consisted in singing and dancing before them, [...] and when I saw this [...] I composed very solemn verses about the law of God [...] [and] when Easter approached, I summoned all the invited people [...] from twenty leagues around Mexico [...] and so many came that the courtyard could not contain them [...]."¹ Thus, drawing on the rich Nahua oral tradition, the friars and their Indigenous collaborators began to compose liturgical pieces for various Christian festivals. A number of these early Christian songs were preserved in the sixteenth-century manuscript now known as *Cantares mexicanos*.²

1. J. García Icazbalceta, ed., *Códice Franciscano. Siglo XVI: Informe de la Provincia del Santo Evangelio al Visitador Lic. Juan de Ovando, informe de la Provincia de Guadalajara al mismo, Cartas de religiosos, 1533–1569* (Mexico City: Salvador Chávez Hayhoe, 1941), 206–7. Translation from Spanish by the authors.

2. In this article, as a primary source, we use the high-quality photos from *Cantares mexicanos*. Biblioteca Nacional de México, Mexico City, Mexico, MS 1628. For selected studies on *Cantares mexicanos*, see, for example: Daniel G. Brinton, *Ancient Nahuatl Poetry, Containing the Nahuatl Text of XXVII Ancient Mexican Poems* (Philadelphia: Brinton's Library of Aboriginal American Literature; AMS Press, 1887), <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/53168>; Antonio Peñafiel, ed., *Cantares en idioma mexicano: Reproducción facsimiliar del manuscrito original existente en la Biblioteca Nacional* (Mexico City: Oficina Tipográfica de la Secretaría de Fomento, 1899); *Cantares mexicanos. Manuscrito de la Biblioteca Nacional de México*, facs. ed. (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Bibliográficas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), 1994); Ángel María Garibay Kintana, *Poesía náhuatl II: Cantares mexicanos. Manuscrito de la Biblioteca Nacional de México. Primera parte* (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, UNAM, 1965); *Poesía náhuatl III: Cantares mexicanos. Manuscrito de la Biblioteca Nacional de México. Segunda parte* (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, UNAM, 1968); John Bierhorst, trans., *Cantares Mexicanos: Songs of the Aztecs* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985); Miguel León-Portilla et al., eds., *Cantares mexicanos*, vol. II, t. 1 and 2 (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, UNAM, 2011); Richard Haly, "The Poetics of the Aztecs," *New Scholar* 10 (1986): 85–130; David Damrosch, "The Aesthetics of the Conquest: Aztec Poetry before and after Cortés," *Representations* 33 (1991): 101–20; Patrick Johansson, "El cucuecheuicatl: canto travieso de los aztecas," *Estudios de cultura náhuatl* 21 (1991): 83–97; Marie Sautron, "In izquioxchitl in cacahuaxochitl. Presencia y significación de un binomio floral en el discurso poético náhuatl prehispánico durante la conquista de México," *Estudios de cultura náhuatl* 38 (2007): 243–64; Kay A. Read and Jane Rosenthal, "The Chalcan Woman's Song: Sex as a Political Metaphor in Fifteenth-Century Mexico," *The Americas* 62 (2006): 313–48; Camilla Townsend, "What in the World Have You Done To Me, My Lover?: Sex, Servitude, and Politics among the Pre-conquest Nahuas as Seen in the *Cantares Mexicanos*," *The Americas* 62, no. 3 (2006): 349–89; Katarzyna Szoblik, *Entre los papeles de ocolote entono mi canto, yo Quetzalpetlatzín. El lugar de la mujer dentro de la oralidad nahua* (Mexico City/Bielsko-Biala: Centro de Estudios de Antropología de la Mujer, Campana Sumergida, 2015); Stephanie Schmidt, "Christian and Nahua Arts of Devotion: A Song of the Nativity from the *Cantares Mexicanos*," *Korpus* 21 3, no. 7 (2023): 29–54, <https://doi.org/10.22136/korpus212023107>; Peter Christian Bjørndahl Sørensen, "I Am a Singer, I Remember the Lords: History in the Sixteenth-

This article focuses on one of the pieces from the aforementioned corpus, the “Female Song for the Resurrection of Our Lord” (“Cihuacuicatl itechpa inezcalitzitzin totecuió”), reportedly created in 1536.³ The piece in question serves as a compelling case study for exploring how Christian content mingled with elements rooted in pre-Hispanic Nahuatl culture within early evangelization texts. By identifying both contact-induced Christian motifs and embedded Indigenous symbolism, we aim to understand how this composition may have functioned during the turbulent period of cultural encounter that occurred in sixteenth-century New Spain and how it reflects the subtle, often ambivalent interplay between European imposition and Indigenous continuity.

EARLY CHRISTIANIZATION OF NEW SPAIN

Numerous difficulties marked the early years of the friars’ activity in New Spain. The European newcomers had to face fundamental issues, such as organizing their missions and establishing churches and monasteries, which were structured around the precolonial *altepetl* model. Additionally, they had to familiarize themselves with the regions they traversed to reach more communities. They built *visitas* (smaller churches or chapels) in these areas, which lacked a full-time priest.⁴ Another significant challenge was to determine effective methods for Christianizing large populations. The goal was to bring as many souls as possible to the faith quickly, but without neglecting any essential elements of the sacrament of baptism, as failing to do so could be considered heretical. These practical concerns led to various conflicts between the Franciscans and the Dominicans, which were addressed in multiple meetings held in 1536, 1537, and 1539, as well as in the papal bull issued in 1537.⁵

However, the most critical issue was communication with the Indigenous people. The friars quickly realized they could not effectively transmit the Christian faith in Spanish—not only did the Native community not know it but also did not have in their worldview and their faith adequate concepts corresponding to the Christian ones. Therefore, instead of merely introducing Spanish terms, the friars had to explain the meaning behind them, creating a very specialized lexicon. To achieve this, they had to seek alternative communication tools.

Century Aztec Cantares” (PhD diss., Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2022), accessed via ProQuest, <https://doi.org/10.7282/T3-ZHC2-Z333>; Salvador Reyes Equiguas, “*Michcuicatl*, ‘Canto de peces’: Una alegoría lacustre de los mexicas en la derrota,” *Korpus* 21 3, no. 7 (2023): 55–88, <https://doi.org/10.22136/korpus212023107>.

3. *Cantares mexicanos*, 42v–43r.

4. James Lockhart, *The Nahuas after the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 215–7; Ryan Dominic Crewe, *The Mexican Mission: Indigenous Reconstruction and Mendicant Enterprise in New Spain, 1521–1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 93.

5. Osvaldo F. Pardo, *The Origins of Mexican Catholicism: Nahuatl Rituals and Christian Sacraments in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 31–5.

One possible solution was the graphic representation of selected themes and Christian concepts. This strategy was familiar to the friars, who commonly employed it in Medieval Europe, particularly among the illiterate masses. Painted books and wall paintings were also present in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, making this form of communication seem ideal. The friars used various graphic techniques to convey the message they sought to communicate. Indigenous codices were replaced by the pictorial catechisms featuring visual representations of prayers.

From the very beginning—around 1525 or 1528, when Fray Pedro de Gante is said to have created the first such book—these pictorial documents became a prominent tool for evangelization, remaining in use into the seventeenth century. They simplified the process of learning prayers and symbolized their owners' deep connection to the Christian faith.⁶ Moreover, as noted by Motolinía, in the first confessions of Indigenous people (as early as 1526), many penitents used illustrated lists of their sins in the form of drawings, which reflected their familiarity with this format.⁷ Additionally, elements of Christian doctrine were graphically illustrated on the walls of churches, chapels, and convents. For example, biblical scenes and depictions of punishments for sinners were painted on the walls of the open chapel in San Nicolás in Actopan, where participants in the festivals and prayers could constantly familiarize themselves with the supposed consequences of remaining faithful to ancient beliefs and not embracing Christianity (Figure 1).

Another step the friars took in their search for effective methods of evangelization was learning Native languages. Nahuatl, in particular, proved helpful, as it had functioned as a *lingua franca* during Tenochtitlan's dominance and was commonly understood, at least to some extent, even by non-Nahua communities.⁸ The places that became a scene of an intense linguistic and cultural exchange were convent schools—such as the one in Santiago de Tlatelolco established by the Franciscans in 1536—where the friars gathered children and young members of the Indigenous nobility, providing them with a European-style education and instilling in them the Christian faith. The initial plan was for Indigenous people educated at the *colegio* to become members of the clergy and

6. Louise Burkhart, "The 'Little Doctrine' and Indigenous Catechesis in New Spain," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 94, no. 2 (2014): 167–206, here 199–200; Elizabeth Hill Boone, Louise Burkhart, and David Távárez, *Painted Words: Nahua Catholicism, Politics, and Memory in the Atzaqualco Pictorial Catechism* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2017), xi.

7. Toribio de Benavente Motolinía, *Historia de los Indios de la Nueva España* (Barcelona: Linkgua, 2007), 117, 122.

8. John Frederick Schwaller, "The Expansion of Nahuatl as a Lingua Franca among Priests in Sixteenth-Century Mexico," *Ethnohistory* 59, no. 4 (2012): 675–95, here 676, 678–88; Justyna Olko and John Sullivan, "Empire, Colony, and Globalization: A Brief History of the Nahuatl Language," *Colloquia humanistica* no. 2 (2013): 181–216, here 193.

FIGURE 1

Detail of a Mural from the Open Chapel of the Ex Convento de San Nicolás de Tolentino in Actopan, Mexico, Depicting the Fate of Sinners during the Last Judgment. Source: Photograph by Ewa Kubiak



preach Christian doctrine themselves. However, this plan was later undermined by the provisions of the First and Second Provincial Synods (held in 1555 and 1565). Nevertheless, those educated at the colegio became cross-cultural mediators, navigating both cultures and languages. The friars relied on them to learn local languages and to gather information on the region's ancient traditions and beliefs. Together, the friars and their Indigenous co-workers (often not mentioned by name) created a vast corpus of both monolingual and bilingual doctrinal texts, including catechisms (*doctrinas*), collections of sermons (*sermonarios*), manuals for confessors (*confesionarios*), and religious dramas, many of which have survived to this day.

In addition, thanks to their Indigenous collaborators, the friars could draw on ancient forms of Indigenous expression, such as *huehuetlatolli* (solemn speeches) and *cuicatl* (song-dances). They quickly realized that the Nahuatl people had a deep affinity for singing and dancing, which had played a central role in their precolonial social and religious life. In sixteenth-century Central Mexico, knowledge could be recorded graphically in codices containing religious,

divinatory, calendrical, and historical information. However, these manuscripts were the domain of a specialized group of individuals known as *tlamatinime*, while most of society relied primarily on oral tradition. As Jan Assmann observes, in such predominantly oral societies, the communicative model of cultural memory transmission typically rests on three essential elements: poetic form, ritual performance, and collective participation—corresponding to the codification, reenactment, and transmission of knowledge.⁹

Thus, the song-dances performed by community members during religious festivals formed the axis of pre-Hispanic social and spiritual life. For this reason, if purged of precolonial associations and reshaped to reflect Catholic values, *cuicatl* seemed a perfect vehicle for transmitting Christian doctrine.

NAHUA SONGS AND EVANGELIZATION EFFORTS

In pre-Hispanic times, *cuicatl* often involved elaborate costumes and vast numbers of participants. A single performance could last for hours—or even days—reenacting historical and cosmogonic events, honoring past rulers, and commemorating significant migrations, battles, and victories. Francisco Hernández provides a vivid description of these ceremonies, emphasizing the impressive number of participants and the intricate coordination involved:

They practiced forms of dancing worthy of being seen, called by the Mexicans *nitoteliztli* (...). Even though sometimes three thousand, four thousand, or more men participated, all sang the same song, with the same voice, and performed the same dance, moving their bodies and every part of them in perfect harmony. The movements varied at every shift, aligning wonderfully with the songs' themes. Not only did they sing and dance, but they also acted out a comedy or tragedy, representing their heroic deeds.¹⁰

Equally important was the role of *cuicatl* in religious ceremonies. The Nahua ceremonial calendar was closely tied to the agricultural cycle. It consisted of eighteen periods of twenty days each (by Spaniards referred to as *veintenas*), plus five additional days called *nemontemi*. The *veintena* festivals celebrated different parts of the vegetation yearly cycle: blooming, growth, and harvest of the plants

9. Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 68–83.

10. “Acostumbraban unas maneras de bailar dignas de verse, llamadas por los mexicanos *nitoteliztli* (...). A pesar de que a veces concurrieran tres mil, a veces cuatro mil o más hombres, todos cantaban el mismo canto con la misma voz y con la misma danza y compás del cuerpo y de cada una de sus partes; variadas sin embargo en cada una de las mudanzas, respondiendo y concertando con los temas mismos en modo maravilloso; y no sólo se ejercitaban en el canto y en el baile, sino que representaban a manera de comedia o tragedia alguna imagen de sus hazañas.” Translated from Spanish by the authors. Francisco Hernández, *Antigüedades de la Nueva España, crónicas de América*, (Madrid: Dastin Historia, 2001), 124.

during *xopan* (the rainy season; from mid-April to mid-October), and death and regeneration of the earth during *tonalco* (the dry season; from mid-October to mid-April). Songs and music accompanied human sacrifices, offerings, ritual baths, processions, and other significant rites related to these changes. Many festivals involved mass participation, with male and female dancers and singers moving rhythmically in precise formations around the expansive courtyards in front of the temples.¹¹

After the conquest, the friars repurposed this deep cultural attachment to song and dance, engaging their Indigenous students in reworking the old *cuicatl* and composing new songs for Christian festivals. Records of such performances can be found, for example, in the so-called *Anales de Juan Bautista*, which mention the representation of the *papalocuícatl* (“Butterfly Song”) on the occasion of the festivals of Saint John and Saint Peter in 1566, *michcuicatl* (“Fish Song”) and *yaocuicatl* (“War Song”) in honor of the Virgin Mary on the feast of her Nativity, and *pipilcuicatl* (“Children’s Song”) during the celebration of Saint Francis’ Day in 1567.¹²

Songs with similar titles—*yaocuicatl*, *papalocuícatl*, and *pipilcuicatl*—also appear in *Cantares mexicanos*. The compositions that comprise this collection occupy the first eighty-five folios of a longer manuscript housed at the National Library of Mexico and labeled MS 1628bis. The dates that appear in the document suggest that the songs it contains were initially collected in the second half of the sixteenth century. Their thematic content and stylistic features suggest a Franciscan context, likely associated with the Convent of Santiago de Tlatelolco, the principal Franciscan center for educating the Indigenous nobility and producing Nahuatl doctrinal texts. However, the manuscript that has survived to the present day is most likely a fair copy of those earlier records. The orthography used in this extant version suggests that the clean copy may have been prepared later, possibly within a Jesuit environment.¹³

The manuscript of *Cantares mexicanos* includes songs of a highly heterogeneous nature, covering a wide thematic range—from *cuicatl* praising warrior death in honor of pre-Hispanic gods (e.g., *yaocuicatl*, “War Song,” ff. 31v–33v; *cuextecayotl*, “Huastec Song,” ff. 55v–56r; *cococuicatl*, “Dove Song,” ff. 74v–77r) to more or less accurate translations of sermons based on the Bible

11. Hernández, *Antigüedades*, 124–5; Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, trans. Charles E. Dibble and Arthur J. O. Anderson (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2012); Mirjana Danilović, *El concepto de danza entre los mexicas*, (PhD diss., UNAM, Mexico City, 2016).

12. Luis Reyes García, ed. and trans., *¿Cómo te confundes? ¿Acaso no somos conquistados? Anales de Juan Bautista* (Mexico City: Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, Biblioteca Lorenzo Boturini, 2001).

13. León-Portilla et al., *Cantares mexicanos*, I: 20–21.

(usually indicated by the term *teotlatolli*, “divine word,” e.g., ff. 30r, 38v, 41r, 43r), including a broad variety of intermediate forms.

The notion of authorship is virtually absent in the songs with pre-Hispanic themes. The situation is quite different in the case of compositions whose titles identify them as Christian-themed pieces created during the colonial period. In many cases, these songs include precise details, such as the date, name of the composer, and occasion for which the piece was written—for example, “Song of the Apparition to the Lady” (ff. 38v–39v), composed for the Feast of the Holy Spirit by Cristóbal del Rosario Xiuhtlamin in 1550; “Song about the Birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ” (ff. 37v–38v), composed by don Francisco Plácido in 1553; or “Salvation Song” (ff. 41r–42r), created for the celebration of the Feast of San Felipe and performed in Azcapotzalco in 1565.

The song analyzed in this article declaratively belongs to the last group. It is titled “Female Song for the Resurrection of Our Lord,” and the information provided in the manuscript describes it as composed by don Baltasar Toquezcuauhyo, the ruler of Colhuacan, and offered as a gift to the ruler of Azcapotzalco, don Diego de León, in 1536.¹⁴ As we shall see in the following pages, however, although declared deeply Christian, the song in question portrays the dynamic intercultural shifts, negotiations, and perhaps even acts of Indigenous resistance.

The syncretic nature of this text raises several key questions: What were the possible goals behind its creation? To what extent was its composition supervised by the friars? And how did the Indigenous neophytes interpret its content? While definitive answers may be elusive, the following analysis will aim to approach these questions and shed light on the complex and layered meanings embedded within the song.

CHRISTIAN COMPONENT OF THE “FEMALE SONG FOR THE RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD”

The explicit Christian title, the relatively precise contextualization within early colonial religious life, and the various invocations of God and saints might suggest that the “Female Song for the Resurrection of Our Lord” was a genuinely Catholic composition. This apparent Christianity seems to have dulled the alertness of modern scholars, who have largely ignored this song in favor of other, more explicitly pre-Hispanic texts from *Cantares mexicanos*. Neither

14. “Cihuacuícatl ytechpa ynezcalilitzin Tōtecuiyo quitlali don Baltasar Toquezcuauhyo Colhuacan tlatohuani quitlaubti y nican Azcapotzalco tepanecapa tlatohuani don Diego de León tocnotlatemol ypan xibuitl 1536 años.” *Cantares mexicanos*, 42v. All the translations of this song are by the authors.

Daniel Brinton nor Ángel María Garibay included it in their works focused on tracing the “ancient” Indigenous verbal art. In Bierhorst’s English translation of the full manuscript, it is treated merely as another “ghost song” within the supposed Nahua revitalization movement. Bierhorst suggests that it was likely performed by warriors identifying themselves as women, calling for the resurrected Christ in an attempt to summon him “as a distribution of the Aztec revenants.”¹⁵ The group of researchers led by Miguel León-Portilla, who published the complete Spanish translation of *Cantares mexicanos*, considered the text a typically Christian composition but noted that certain parts seemed unusual in the context of Christ’s resurrection and suggested that fragments of another song might have been incorporated into what was originally a Christian text.¹⁶ What follows is an attempt to explore the layered and multifaceted character of this piece, which reveals more than its surface might suggest.

The Christian purpose of the song is declared already in its title—it was created “*ytechpa ynezcalilitzi tt.*” (“For the Resurrection of Our Lord”). The main text begins with a reference to the period of Lent, as the opening verse declares: “For forty-eight [days] there was fasting, there was anticipating. There was sorrow, there was affliction among all your creatures in the world.”¹⁷ The song then describes a procession of dancing maidens celebrating Christ’s resurrection: “Come, come, let us go, you are my younger sisters, maidens. Let us go and see how, on his own volition, resurrected, raised, revived Jesus Christ.”¹⁸ A few verses later, after a drum cadence marked by the syllables *Tocoto tocoto tocoto tocoto . . .*, the same message is reiterated in slightly different words:

Let us go, my younger sisters! He has risen, he has resurrected. The God’s Son, may he be invoked. For forty days, we have been waiting for him to descend here. Let your harp be played. With it, let us wait for him to descend. Let us first pray to her, the Virgin, Lady, Our Mother, Saint Mary. Maybe she will pray a little for us, the sinners, to Our Lord, God. Only she is our intercessor; Saint Mary calms her Son’s heart down.¹⁹

15. Bierhorst, *Cantares mexicanos*, 462.

16. León-Portilla et al., *Cantares mexicanos*, II: 1202.

17. “*Yc ompobualli ye anchicueytica neçabualo tlatemachilo. ye òtlaocoyalotoc nentlamachotoc ye ixquich an motlachibhualhuā yecemanahuaco ohuiya.*” *Cantares mexicanos*, 42v. The forty-eight days probably refer to the forty days of Lent, along with six additional Sundays and Holy Friday and Holy Saturday. We would like to thank to John F. Schwaller for this observation (Annual Meeting of the Association of Nahuatl Scholars, Bloomington, 2024).

18. “*Cuelcā cuelcā tihuian annicutzāzāhuā ichpopotzāzānti ma ticyaittati yn omonomaizcali oyamoquetz yeoya yol Jesuchristo ohuiya.*” *Cantares mexicanos*, 42v.

19. “*Ma tōhuian nicubuan oya moquetz mozcali ipiltzino çan yebuā dios y ma oya notzalo ye ompobualo çan tictochielia oyeoc nicāyia oobuiya. Ça im momecabuehueuh ma ontzotzonalo ya ma icao ma tictochialicā oye’coc Etc. Ma oc achtopa yebuatzā ma tictlatlaubtica in ichpochtli Cihuapilli ye tonātzin S.ta M.a aço achitzi ye topampa coyatlatlaubtiz in tlatlacobuani*

This pattern recurs throughout the song: Each drum cadence, marking the beginning of a new section of the performance, is followed by an explicit reference to Christian themes—either through the evocation of the Easter celebration (“It is already the Great Easter Day; he has redeemed us, he has resurrected, Our Lord!”²⁰; “Let it begin now, let it rise. We have arrived at Easter Day. God has come to redeem people here on Earth, and this is true.”²¹), or of some form of devotional practice (“We go to offer holy precious feathers. Here, we, little maidens, we go binding the strings of beads”²²).

The discourse in these passages is characteristic of sixteenth-century Nahuatl religious texts, shaped during the early phases of Christianization. The song incorporates several Spanish loanwords—*Pascua*, *Dios*, *Jesucristo*, and *Santa Maria*—though their frequency remains low. This is likely due to the very early date of the song’s composition.

According to the periodization of language contact phenomena in Nahuatl proposed by Lockhart and Karttunen, the earliest decades following the arrival of the Spaniards—until the 1540s or 1550s—were marked by minimal linguistic change.²³ This phase involved mainly the creation of neologisms or the adaptation of precolonial nouns to refer to newly introduced objects. It was around 1550 that “the rush of Spanish loanwords began” and continued for about a century, as Spanish vocabulary increasingly flooded the Nahuatl language.²⁴ However, linguistic analysis of Christian sources from the mid-sixteenth century shows that the process of language contact in the creation of Nahuatl-Christian texts was significantly accelerated by the close collaboration between friars and native Nahuatl speakers, driven by the urgent task of Christianization. As a result, some linguistic phenomena appear in religious texts earlier than in secular ones.²⁵ The very early text of “Cihuacuicatl”, which addresses key concepts of the Christian faith in Nahuatl, reflects this dynamic. It shows that, as early as the 1530s, a core Nahuatl-Christian vocabulary—one that would endure for decades and even centuries—had already been established and was being used by the authors of ecclesiastical texts.

in tt.° *Dios yio ayo. Çan totepantlatocauh ye nello huel yebuatzi quiyolcehuia yn iconetzi Sancta Maria.*” *Cantares mexicanos*, 42v.

20. “Yn ye huey pascua techmaquixti omozcali tor.” *Cantares mexicanos*, 42v.

21. “Ma ompehualo nican ma ya nequetzalo yaye otacico ipascuaya oya ye’coc ş teotl temaquixti tlaltripac nica ye nello huiya.” *Cantares mexicanos*, 43r.

22. “ye tonquetzalyecmaamätihui o ye nican tichpopotztzinti tocoyecozcamecailhuixtibus.” This line refers to the act of praying the rosary, reimagined through Nahua poetic language.

23. Frances E. Karttunen and James Lockhart, *Nahuatl in the Middle Years: Language Contact Phenomena in Texts of the Colonial Period* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976).

24. Lockhart, *Nahuas after the Conquest*, 274.

25. Katarzyna Granicka and John Sullivan, *The Sixteenth-Century Laboratory. Critical Edition of the 1548 Dominican Doctrina Cristiana*, in press.

For instance, the line “*Yn ye huey pascua techmaquixti omozcali tot*”²⁶ is almost entirely composed of Christianized elements. It includes the Spanish word *pascua* and two Nahuatl verbs, *maquixtia* (to liberate captives) and *izcalia* (to raise a child or to come to life), both of which were resemanticized in Christian discourse—*maquixtia* came to signify “to redeem,” while *izcalia* referred to Christ’s resurrection.²⁶ Similarly, *totecuio* (our lord), originally denoting high-ranking nobility, was early on adopted as a calque for *nuestro Señor*, used to address the Christian God, and as such proliferated throughout the Nahuatl-Christian sources.

Another good example is the verse of the song referring to Saint Mary: “Let us first pray to her, the Virgin Noblewoman, Our Mother, Saint Mary. Maybe she will pray a little bit for us, the sinners, to our Lord God.”²⁷ The phrase *Cihuapilli Santa Maria* (Noblewoman Saint Mary) is another example of a well-established Christian Nahuatl phraseological unit. The term *cihuapilli* (noblewoman) quickly became an equivalent of the Spanish terms *doña* or *señora* and began to function easily in Marian contexts. It was used in reference to Saint Mary by the authors of one of the earliest doctrinal texts in Nahuatl, Molina (1546), and unnamed Dominican friars (1548).²⁸ The Virgin Mary is referred to by the term *ichpochtli*, a pre-Hispanic word meaning “maiden,” recontextualized as “virgin” in the context of evangelization. The new meaning of the term proliferated abundantly throughout the Christian texts; however, it is impossible to establish when the Nahua understanding of it shifted from “maiden” to “virgin” and how it affected their understanding of the doctrine.²⁹ Additionally, in the song, Saint Mary is implored to intercede for the *tlahtlacoani* (sinner), using *tlahtlacolli*, a term for “sin” formed from the verb *ihtlacoa* (to damage). The Nahuatl vocabulary for sin and sinning, created on the basis of the similarity between the Nahua concept of *tlahzolli* (dirt) and the act of being in contact with it as a damaging, polluting act, and the Christian metaphor of sin as dirt, proliferated throughout Nahuatl-Christian discourse from the earliest known sources.³⁰

26. Louise Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday: A Nahua Drama from Early Colonial Mexico* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 168.

27. “*Ma oc achtopa yehuatzâ ma ticlatlaubtica in ichpochtli Cihuapilli ye tonâtzin S.^m M.^a aço acbitzi ye topampa coyatlalauhtiz in tlatlacohuani in tt.^o Dios.*” *Cantares mexicanos*, 42v.

28. Alonso de Molina, “Doctrina christiana breve,” in *Nueva colección de documentos para la historia de México—Códice Franciscano, siglo XVI*, ed. Salvador Chávez Hayhoe (Mexico City: Editorial Salvador Chávez Hayhoe, 1941), 30–54; Dominican friars, *Doctrina christiana en lengua española y mexicana por los religiosos de la Orden de Santo Domingo* (Mexico City: Juan Pablos, 1548). Meanwhile Gante in his 1547 *Doctrina Christiana* used the term *cihuatlahlocapilli*, which combines *cihuatl* with *tlahloani* (ruler) and *pilli* (noble), in a way suggestive of a neologism rather than an extension of the meaning of a precontact term.

29. Louise Burkhart, *Before Guadalupe: The Virgin Mary in Early Colonial Nahuatl Literature* (Albany, NY: Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, 2001), 93.

30. Burkhart discusses the discrepancies between the Nahua and the Christian worldview that did not allow the treatment of the precontact *tlahtlacolli* and “sin” as full synonymous. Louise Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989).

All the Christian terms applied in the *canto* are well attested in the early sixteenth-century Nahuatl-Christian sources.³¹ They represent not only the earliest but also the most commonly used Christian vocabulary in the language. According to the data gathered by Sell, *Dios* was the most frequent Spanish loanword in Nahuatl religious texts, followed closely by *Jesucristo*.³² Their presence in “Cihuacuicatl” is thus neither surprising nor incidental.

Finally, the fact that the song is called a *cihuacuicatl* (female song or women’s song) and its main protagonists present themselves as *ichpopochtin* (maidens) perfectly aligns with the narrative of Christ’s Resurrection. The motif of women leading the way and announcing great joy to the whole world is related to biblical stories of female protagonists being the first to discover Jesus’ empty tomb.³³ The motif of three women approaching the tomb proliferated throughout Medieval art, and the role they played in finding and announcing the Resurrection became a permanent part of Easter descriptions in Europe (Figure 2).³⁴

Overall, the explicitly Christian portions of the song—those invoking Christ’s resurrection and the Virgin Mary—are emblematic of mid-sixteenth-century Nahuatl religious discourse, both in their terminology and linguistic structure. Their insistent repetition at the beginning of each new section of the song could have blunted the vigilance of the friars, convincing them of the song’s orthodoxy and making it a convenient space for transmitting pre-Hispanic content under the guise of Christian references.

SAINT FRANCIS AND HIS PLACE OF RAIN

However, the song’s Christian veneer, with its repeated mentions of Christ and the Virgin Mary, does not tell the whole story. Beneath this seemingly orthodox surface lies a complex layering of pre-Hispanic imagery and religious ideas—many of which, quite unexpectedly, focus on Saint Francis. Far from acting as a simple symbol of Catholic devotion, in the context of this song, the saint of Assisi seems to occupy a space deeply connected to Indigenous ritual logic, natural cycles, and possibly even links to Nahua deities.

31. Molina, “Doctrina christiana”; Dominican friars, *Doctrina christiana*; Pedro de Gante, *Doctrina christiana en lengua mexicana* (1553); facsimile ed., Mexico City: Centro de Estudios Históricos.

32. Barry Sell, “Friars, Nahuas and Books: Language Expression in Colonial Nahuatl Publications” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1993), 328.

33. For key Gospel passages where women discover the empty tomb and meet the risen Christ, cf. Matthew 28:1–10; Mark 16:1–8; Luke 24:1–10; and John 20:1–18.

34. Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

FIGURE 2

The Three Marys at the Tomb by Duccio di Buoninsegna (c. 1308–1311), Originally Part of the Maestà Altarpiece in Siena Cathedral. Source: Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain. Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Duccio_di_Buoninsegna_-_The_Three_Marys_at_the_Tomb_-_WGA06817.jpg. Accessed 18 July 2025



What begins as a genuinely Christian song gradually becomes more ambiguous, raising serious questions about the text's orthodoxy. The first unexpected turn appears in the third verse, when the singer says: "Oh, our Lord, your song comes, resounding with [the sound of] jingle bracelets. Let us raise it, let our souls rejoice with it in your place of rain, oh Saint Francis, and let there be joy. We have arrived with great pleasure."³⁵

35. "Maquizcoyolcahuātihuitz in mocuicatzin tt.° ma tocōehuacā ma yca yca pahpaquī toyolia in moquiappan.S.fran.° ma onpahpaquihua ayeo tacico y huey pacaca ohuiya." *Cantares mexicanos*, 42v.

Saint Francis of Assisi appears in multiple songs within *Cantares mexicanos*, and his presence is hardly surprising given the religious and cultural context of sixteenth-century New Spain. What is unusual about this fragment is the setting in which the singer places the saint and the symbolic attributes assigned to him.

The term *maquizcoyolli* (jingle bracelet(s)) refers to a pre-Hispanic item closely associated with Nahua warriors who died honorably in battle. *Coyolli* bells were part of the ritual war regalia worn by these warriors to announce their presence and sacrifice to the gods.³⁶ This association is also reflected in the myth of Huitzilopochtli's birth, where the *coyolli* jingles appear as part of the war attire put on by the god's siblings, the *Centzon Huitznahua* (Innumerable from the South), as they prepared to confront their younger brother: "They were in a war array, which was distributed [among them]; all put in place their paper array, the paper crowns, their nettles, painted paper streamers, and they bound bells to the calves of their legs."³⁷ Thus prepared, they faced the newly born solar god and perished in this primordial war. These 400 warriors also appear in other Nahua cosmogonic narratives, where they are known by several alternative names, such as *centzon mimixcoa* (400 cloud serpents) or "400 Chichimecs."³⁸ In Nahua ideology, the number 400 symbolized "innumerable," and these primordial warriors represented the countless valiant Nahua men and boys who, throughout the pre-Hispanic history of the Basin, died on the battlefield in honor of the gods.³⁹

Furthermore, the *coyolli* bells were worn by sacrificial victims, especially those who died as *imixiptlahuan* (impersonators of gods or, as Molly Basset calls them, "local embodiments" of the deities).⁴⁰ In addition to describing rituals involving the sacrifice of humans wearing *coyolli* among their many attributes, the *Florentine Codex* also includes various images showing the strings of jingles used in pre-Hispanic times, both as separate items (Figure 3) and as ornaments worn by the impersonators of gods (Figure 4).

In Nahua belief, both warriors who died on the battlefield and human sacrifice victims belonged to a special group known as the *xochimicque* (flowery dead).⁴¹

36. Arnd Adje Both, "La música prehispánica: Sonidos rituales a lo largo de la historia," *Arqueología mexicana* 16, no. 94 (2008): 30–7; Luis Antonio Gómez G., "Los instrumentos musicales prehispánicos: Clasificación general y significado," *Arqueología mexicana* 16, no. 94 (2008): 38–46.

37. Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, III: 3, transl. Anderson and Dibble.

38. For alternative versions of this myth, see John Bierhorst, *History and Mythology of the Aztecs* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992), 149–50; Rafael Tena, *Mitos e historias de los antiguos nahuas* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, colección Cien de México, 2002), 38–9.

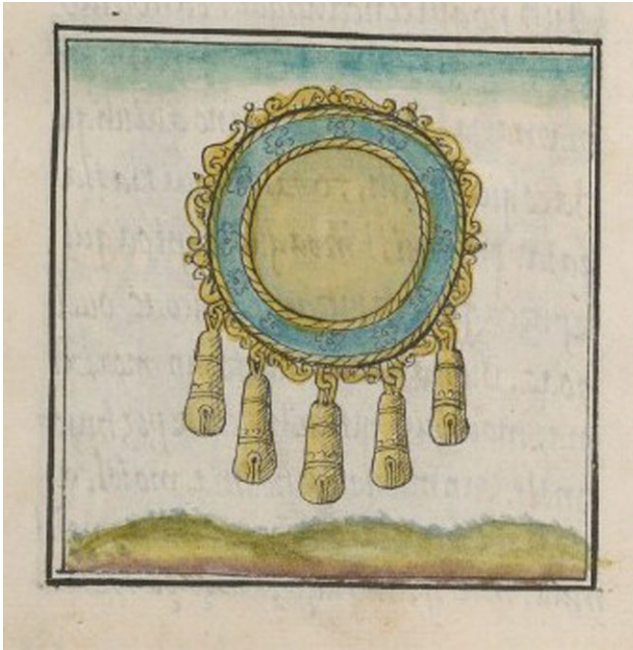
39. Michel Graulich, *Mitos y rituales del México antiguo* (Oviedo: Ediciones Istmo, 1990).

40. Molly Basset, *The Fate of Earthly Things: Aztec Gods and God-Bodies* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015). For mentions of the *coyolli* as attributes of the gods' impersonators, see, for example, Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, II: 67, 86, 87.

41. Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias de la Nueva España e islas de Tierra Firme*, 2 vols. (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1967 [1581]), II: 418–9.

FIGURE 3

Coyolli bells. Source: Digital Florentine Codex/Códice Florentino Digital, Edited by Kim N. Richter and Alicia Maria Houtroun, “Book 9: The Merchants,” fol. 50v, Getty Research Institute, 2023. Available at: <https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/en/book/9/folio/50v/images/4b05d513-6a9d-4309-a8e0-b35e22f57a47>. Accessed 18 July 2025



Their death held deep religious meaning, and for this reason, after leaving the mortal world, they could enjoy being with the Sun, guiding it as it travels across the sky each day. Additionally, after four years of this service, they turned into beautiful birds living freely in a lush land full of rain and nourishment, flying around and sipping nectar from flowers.⁴²

Thus, the *coyolli* were symbolically linked with the pre-Hispanic divine worship, human sacrifice, and Nahua cosmogonic myths—all elements that the friars would likely prefer to avoid in the celebrations of the Resurrection.

Equally troubling for the missionaries could be the expression *moquiappan S. fran. co* (“in your place of rain, Saint Francis”). In pre-Hispanic religion, the place of rain, also known as Tlalocan, was the domain of the rain god Tlaloc. This

42. Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, III: 46–7.

FIGURE 4

Coyolli Bells as an Attribute of the God's Impersonator. Source: Digital Florentine Codex/Códice Florentino Digital, edited by Kim N. Richter and Alicia Maria Houtrouw, "Book 1: The Gods," fol. xviii, Getty Research Institute, 2023. Available at: <https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/en/book/1/folio/xviii/images/c627f869-06ab-44ec-97d5-5ab9545ae96a>. Accessed 18 July 2025



otherworldly realm, abundant in food and water, was where the dead chosen by the rain gods enjoyed their afterlife.⁴³ Moreover, from Tlalocan, rain fell to earth, encouraging the germination and growth of plants, including the vital crop for the Nahuas in the Basin: corn (Figure 5). Considering that, in the Basin of Mexico, Easter occurs just at the beginning of the rainy season, describing Saint

43. Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, III: 45.

FIGURE 5

Page Depicting the Rain Deity Tlaloc as Inspiring and Patronizing the Growth of the Corn Goddess. Source: Codex Fejérváry Mayer, Folio 34r. Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain. Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tlaloc_Codex_FejérváryMayer_342.jpg



Francis in the song as linked to the “place of rain” suggests some blending of pre-Hispanic and Christian ideas, situating the saint of Assisi somewhere among the Nahuatl deities related to the renovation of vegetation.

This supposition is further supported by the following lines of the song, where Saint Francis is addressed with these terms: “Yellow parrot-flower-tropical-butterfly-woman, don Francisco. Here are your flowers. Dance! Sing, sing! Your skirt and your huipil are embroidered with a flowery water design. Make your dear merry-makers, the maidens, dance!”⁴⁴ Hence, not only does the singer refer to Saint Francis as a woman, but also describes him as a very special woman—one

44. “Toznenexochiçaquanpapalocibuatl don palacisco iz ca moxochitzi ma xōmitotiya oncuica cuican tla’tla’mach moyahuac moxochiacuetzin ye nobuipiltzi ye ipan aya xiquimonitoti ye mopilahuiltilhuā ichpopotztzint.” *Cantares mexicanos*, 43r. There is possibly a transcription error: “moxochiacuetzin ye nobuipiltzi” means literally “your skirt and my huipil are embroidered with a flowery water design.” Yet, we have assumed that the singer meant to describe the entire clothing set of the person invoked in this fragment. Thus, we treat this part of the text as if it said “moxochiacuetzin ye nobuipiltzi”.

FIGURE 6

Toznene. Source: Florentine Codex, Book 11, fol. 22v. Redrawn by Marta Lewicz-Więclaw



that combines features of *toznene* (yellow parrots), *xochitl* (flowers), *zacuan* (troupial birds), and *papalotl* (butterflies). All these animals and plants carried significant symbolic meanings in the pre-Hispanic Nahua worldview, linked to corn, flowery death, and the renewal of the world.

To begin with, *toznene* and *toztli* refer to two life stages of the yellow parrot—*toznene* designating the juvenile form, and *toztli* the mature bird. Molina describes these birds as very talkative, while Sahagún's collaborators underline the particularity of their feathers' color, which changed as the birds matured.⁴⁵ When the parrots were young (*toznene*), their plumage was mostly green, but when they reached adulthood (*toztli*), they became intensely yellow (Figures 6 and 7).

Thus, they experienced a transformation similar to that of the corn—a plant whose sprouting, growth, maturing, death, and regeneration were celebrated in many Aztec festivals.⁴⁶ Furthermore, *toznene* is one of the thirteen flying creatures of the tonalpohualli calendar, as shown in the *Codex Borbonicus*, which places it among sacred birds.⁴⁷ Given these connections, it is hardly surprising

45. Alonso de Molina, *Vocabulario en lengua castellana y mexicana y mexicana y castellana* (Mexico City: Antonio de Spínosa, 1571), 2:151r; Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, XI: 22–3.

46. Louise Deglin identified this bird species as either the sun parakeet (*Aratinga solstitialis*) or the golden parakeet (*Guaruba guarouba*). Both species were endemic to the north of Amazonia, but according to Deglin, they could have survived in a similar climate, which is present in the tropical coastal regions of Mexico, where Nahua and Maya merchants transported them. Louise Deglin, "Could the Mexica *toztli* Have Been a Sun Parakeet? Connecting Mexica Featherwork to South America," *Journal de la Société des américanistes* 105, no. 2 (2019): 93–105.

47. Ferdinand Anders, Maarten Jansen, and Luis Reyes García, *El Libro del Cuaucoatl. Homenaje para el año del Fuego Nuevo: Libro explicativo del llamado Códice Borbónico. Codex du Corps Législatif/Bibliothèque de l'Assemblée Nationale Française, Paris Y 120* (Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt; Madrid: Sociedad Estatal Quinto Centenario; Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1991), 67.

FIGURE 7

Toztli. Source: Florentine Codex, *Book 11*, fol. 23r. Redrawn by Marta Lewicz-Więclaw



that it also became one of the metaphors for the *xochimicque* (flowery dead) in the Nahua ceremonial discourse and songs.

The next element describing the “female version” of Saint Francis is a *zacuan* bird. In the Nahua worldview, the *zacuan* was considered one of the “precious birds,” and as such, in *Cantares mexicanos*, it often functions as a metaphor for fallen warriors and sacrificial victims.⁴⁸ The plumage of these birds is mainly red, with a bright yellow tail—colors that evoke the rising sun (red) and corn (yellow). The feathers of the *zacuan* were used in the regalia of warriors, sacrificial victims, and impersonators of deities.⁴⁹ Thus, these birds were also symbolically associated with the cult of warfare and the ritual celebration of the maize agricultural cycle.

As for the *papalotl* (butterfly), in the Nahua worldview, it primarily symbolized fire and its transformative powers.⁵⁰ One of the main attributes of Xiuhtecuhtli, the god of fire and the cyclical destruction and renewal of the world, was a turquoise butterfly pectoral. The symbolic link between butterflies, fire, and transformation also appears in the rituals of the *Xocotl Huetzi* (The Fruit Falls) festival, dedicated to Otontecuhtli. According to Graulich, Otontecuhtli represented the archetype of a warrior transformed and divinized by fire.⁵¹

48. Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, XI: 54; *Zacuan* as a metaphor for the flowery dead can be found, e.g., in *Cantares mexicanos*, 2, 3, 5, 5v, 6v, 16v, among others.

49. Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, II: 87.

50. Janet C. Berlo, “The Warrior and the Butterfly: Central Mexican Ideologies of Sacred Warfare and Teotihuacan Iconography,” in *Text and Image in Pre-Columbian Art*, ed. Janet C. Berlo (Oxford: BAR International Series 180, British Archaeological Reports, 1983), 79–117.

51. Graulich, *Mitos y rituales*, 413.

Captives selected for sacrifice during this festival were thrown into the fire, while their captors, who participated in the ritual, were adorned with butterfly-like ornaments.⁵² Additionally, butterfly-shaped nose plaques were adornments worn by water-associated deities, such as Chalchiuhtlicue, and vegetation deities, such as the goddess of flowers, Xochiquetzal; the goddess of the maguey plant, Mayahuel; or various corn gods, such as Cinteotl or Xilonen. (Figures 8–11).

Figure 12 deserves particular attention in the context of the analyzed song. The impersonator of the corn goddess Xilonen, depicted in this image, not only wears a *papalotl* (butterfly)-shaped nose plaque but also dons a headdress made of red (*zacuan*) and yellow (*toznene*) feathers, along with a necklace of *coyolli* (golden bells). She thus possesses all the attributes mentioned in the song, which supposedly describe Saint Francis but in fact correspond to this pre-Hispanic deity. Importantly, Xilonen is a *cihuatl* (woman)—unlike the saint of Assisi, whom the singer nevertheless dresses in a skirt and a *huipil* (traditional blouse) with a flowery water design. While this description bears no resemblance to a Franciscan habit, it closely matches the attire worn by the corn goddesses Xilonen and Chicomecoatl, as described in the *Primeros memoriales*, which consisted of *yyaxochiauipil*, *yyaxochiacue* (her skirt with a flowery water motif; her blouse with a flowery water motif).⁵³ Notably, the names *yyaxochiauipil* and *yyaxochiacue* contain the word *xochitl* (flower)—the final element completing the title given to Saint Francis in the analyzed fragment *Tōznene-xochi-çaquan-papalo-cihuatl*.

In summary, it appears that the description of Saint Francis in the analyzed text originally referred to the Nahua corn deity and was likely connected to festivals marking the transition from the dry to the rainy season. In the Nahua ritual calendar, the spring months, coinciding with the celebration of Easter, constituted a liminal period during which the cults of warfare and agriculture were closely intertwined. The heroic “flowery death” was honored as a means to promote the renewal of the world. Simultaneously, the sound of *coyolli* bells worn by warriors and impersonators of gods echoed the pattering of raindrops, symbolizing the arrival of rains and the sprouting of maize.

This supposition is confirmed by the following lines of the song, which reveal numerous references to young and blooming corn, for example: “Precious corn buds come sprouting, and the yellow maize tassels separate. Let us eat it [the corn],”⁵⁴ or “Multi-colored flowers of tender corn cobs rain in different tinctures.

52. Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, II: 106.

53. Bernardino de Sahagún, *Primeros memoriales*, trans. Thelma Sullivan (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 262r (p. 98) for Chicomecoatl attire, and 263v (p. 104) for the attire of Xilonen.

54. “On quetzaltocxilotl cuecuepontihuitz ontozmiahua oxexelibui ma toconquaca ma ica. Et.” *Cantares mexicanos*, 42v.

FIGURE 8

Detail Depicting the Maize God with a Butterfly-Shaped Nose Ornament. Source: Codex Cospi, folio 4b. Image by Stuart Rankin, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0. Wikimedia Commons. Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Codex_Cospi_04b.JPG. Accessed 18 July 2025



FIGURE 9

Detail Depicting Xochiquetzal (a Deity Related to Flowers) with a Butterfly-Shaped Nose Ornament. Source: Codex Borgia, p. 9. Wikimedia Commons; Public Domain. Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Codex_Borgia_page_9.jpg. Accessed 18 July 2025



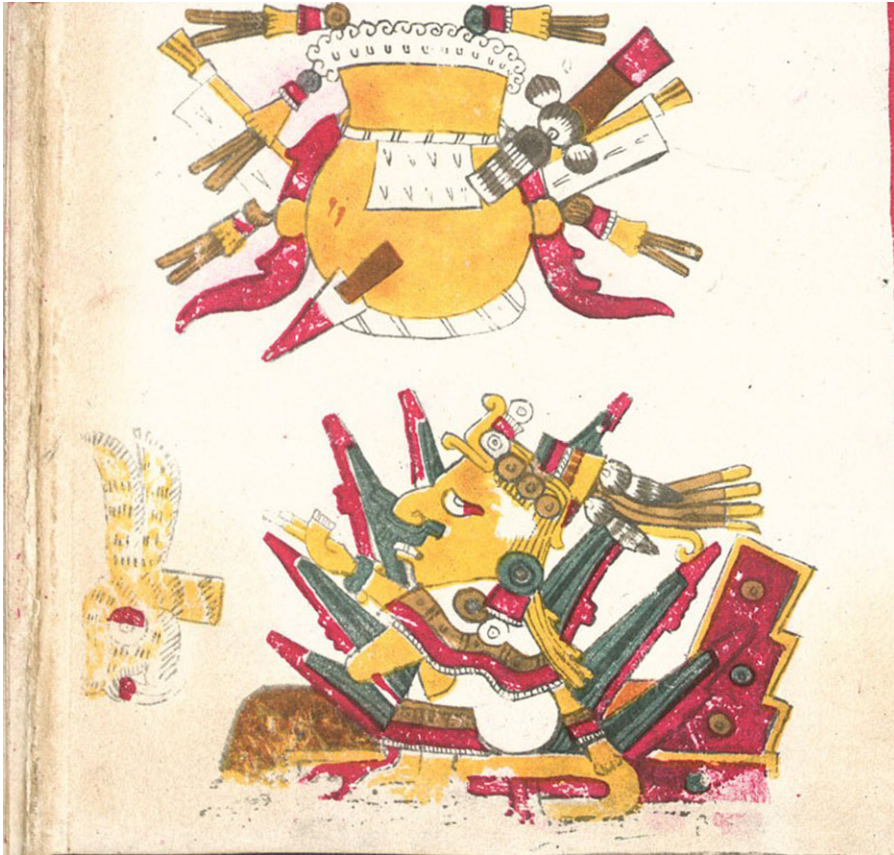
It is your flowery way; they fall like snow on us. Let there be arraying with them. Oh, you are my younger sisters. He is the owner of everything here on earth.”⁵⁵

Thus, what initially appeared to be an authentic Christian song dedicated to celebrating Christ’s Resurrection turns out to be an adaptation of an earlier

55. “Tlatlapalcamaxochitl tozcucuiltzetzelihiu maxochiotzin topā onpixahui ma yca yca ma neyahpanalo āniuctzitzibūā tlalticpac nica cecentlamātibua.” *Cantares mexicanos*, 43r.

FIGURE 10

Detail Depicting the Goddess of the Maguey Plant, Mayahuel, with a Butterfly-Shaped Nose Ornament. Source: Codex Borgia, p. 12. Wikimedia Commons; Public Domain. Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Codex_Borgia_page_12.jpg. Accessed 18 July 2025



pre-Hispanic piece, probably sung originally during the same time of year—namely, the transition from *tonalco* (the dry season) to *xopan* (the rainy season), when the sprouting of new maize was celebrated. Although the song's main character is explicitly identified as Saint Francis, the attributes described more closely resemble those of the Nahuatl corn goddess than those of the Franciscan patron saint. Having proposed this hypothesis, we now turn to an analysis of the corn-dedicated *veintena* festivals within the Nahuatl pre-Hispanic ritual calendar, seeking additional evidence to support it.

FIGURE 11

Detail Depicting The Goddess of Corn, Xilonen, with a Butterfly-Shaped Nose Ornament. Source: Codex Tudela, Fol. 14r.



CORN FESTIVALS IN THE PRE-HISPANIC RITUAL CALENDARS

The Indigenous collaborators of the friars could have chosen the song with motives related to vegetation renewal because of the presence of this cultural *topos* in European Easter celebrations, in which the emphasis on nature's rebirth reflects the symbolism of the Resurrection. A similar purpose may have dictated the choice of a song reportedly created for women to sing. As mentioned, the feminine nature of this composition, evident in its title—"Cihuacuatl"—and in the verses where the dancers refer to themselves as *ichpopochtin* (maidens), resonates with Christian symbolism.

However, dancing women were also important participants in the pre-Hispanic festivals, giving these ritual performances deep symbolic meaning. Overall, the ritual dances of the Nahuatl differed in terms of the performance location (temples, town squares, and patios of local noble houses, among others), time (dawn, noon, night, etc.), decorations, and musical instruments used, as well as

FIGURE 12

Detail of a Scene Depicting the Celebration of Huey Tozoztli, Including a Procession of Women and Offerings of Maize. Source: Primeros memoriales, fol. 250v.



the age and gender of the performers. Some dances involved the participation of both men and women, while others were performed solely by one gender. Likewise, some performances included people of various ages, while others explicitly called for either young or older participants.⁵⁶ The significance of these nonverbal elements was not just decorative; rather, they formed a crucial part of the communication, which, along with the lyrics of the songs, created the final, complex message delivered through the symbolic language of the performance.

The songs and dances performed by women were linked to maize, vegetation, and fertility. As Johanna Broda notes, young women symbolized young, blooming corn, while older women represented mature corn.⁵⁷ The dancers

56. Mirjana Danilović, *El valor simbólico de las danzas femeninas en el caso de las fiestas Tecuilhuitl, Huey Tecuilhuitl, Ochpaniztli y Tititl* (Master's thesis, UNAM, Mexico City, 2009), 41–2.

57. Johanna Broda, "Ciclos agrícolas en la cosmovisión prehispánica: El ritual mexica," in *Historia y vida ceremonial en las comunidades mesoamericanas: Los ritos agrícolas*, ed. Johanna Broda y C. G. Eshelman (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH)/UNAM, 2004), 35–60, here: 54–5.

either depicted fertility and maize goddesses or accompanied their *imixiptlahuan* (impersonators), ensuring that, despite being destined for sacrifice during the celebrations, they did not appear sad, as tears would be considered a ritual failure, bringing disastrous consequences to the community, such as many warriors falling in war or women dying in childbirth.⁵⁸ However, according to P.A. Scolieri, women accompanying the deities' impersonators who were set for sacrifice performed their dances to confuse and disorient the victims, creating a space where spectators could observe and feel terror and initial resistance, ultimately leading to submission to the dancers and unavoidable death.⁵⁹

In the festivals celebrated by the Nahua, corn was one of the most essential elements. According to Mazzetto and Dupey, the focus on different stages of the maize vegetative cycle organized the following *veintenas*:

Tōzōztōntli (Little Vigil), March 25–April 13

Huey Tōzōztli (Great Vigil), April 14–May 3

Etzalcualiztli (Eating of *Etzalli*), May 24–June 12

Tecuilhuitōntli (Little Feast of the Lords), June 13– July 2

Huey Tecuilhuitl (Great Feast of the Lords), July 3–July 22

Ochpaniztli (Sweeping), September 1–September 22⁶⁰

The term *cihuacuicatl* (female song-dance) appears in Book 2 of the *Florentine Codex*, in celebrations related to the vegetation cult during the rainy season. Sahagún's collaborators describe this type of song as very high-pitched, similar to birds chirping: "... they went singing, crying out loudly, singing in a very high treble. As the *centzōntli* bird takes [its song, so was] their song. Like a bell their voices [rang out]."⁶¹ It was reportedly performed during the festivals of *Huey Tōzōztli* (Great Vigil), *Huey Tecuilhuitl* (Great Festival of the Lords), and *Tecuilhuitōntli* (Little Festival of the Lords).

Out of these three, the one that corresponds in date with Christian Easter was *Huey Tōzōztli*. Celebrated in mid-April, at the beginning of the rainy season, *Huey Tōzōztli*, or Great Vigil, was charged with a similar symbolism to that ascribed to Christ's Resurrection, symbolizing the complete renewal of the world. Moreover, its name also correlated, although only apparently, with what the Catholic Church calls "The Paschal Vigil" or "The Easter Vigil," that is, the night preceding and announcing Christ's Resurrection.

58. Danilović. *El valor simbólico*, 73–9.

59. Paul A. Scolieri, *Dancing the New World: Aztecs, Spaniards, and the Choreography of Conquest* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 72.

60. Élodie Dupey García and Elena Mazzetto, eds., *Mesoamerican Rituals and the Solar Cycle: New Perspectives on the Veintena Festivals* (New York: Peter Lang, 2021), 5.

61. Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, II: 93.

Huey Tozoztli was held in honor of the maize deities: Chicomecoatl and Cinteotl. According to the *Florentine Codex*, during this *veintena*, young maidens gathered and carried the ears of maize grown the previous year, which needed to be newly seeded. Decorated with feathers, the girls went to the temple of Chicomecoatl, where they prepared an image of her out of dough, celebrating her as the one who made the plants grow and provided sustenance for people. The ritual dedicated to the goddess also included mock skirmishes in front of the temple, where the maize had been brought. Afterwards, the maize was taken back to the households, where it awaited the time of sowing. *Huey Tozoztli* also included many elements of sacrifice and autosacrifice.⁶²

The motif of young women gathering and proceeding to meet a deity appears both in descriptions of the *Huey Tozoztli* festival and in the song “Cihuacuicatl”. The description of the *Huey Tozoztli* in the *Primeros memoriales* clearly states that, during the festival, *ichpopochtin* (young women) carried the maize to the temple on their backs: “then they had each of the maidens carry [the ears of maize] on their backs.”⁶³ The procession of women also constitutes an important part of the illustration depicting *Huey Tozoztli* in this source. Below the image of dancing women, there are two others, heading for the temple, where the corn goddess’s impersonator is sacrificed. One of them holds maize in her hand, and the other one has it attached to her back (Figure 12). The analyzed song, on its part, puts into the singers’ lips the following words: “Oh younger sister, my fellow woman with long yellow hair! You are a multicolored flower. I carry you on my back, my little pleasure-giver!”⁶⁴

Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the illustration of *Huey Tozoztli* from the *Codex Tudela* (Figure 11) depicts the maize goddess, who shares many features with the mysterious figure referred to as *toznenexochiçaquanpapalocihuatl* in the analyzed song. Although this title is supposedly linked to Saint Francis, it seems to be more connected to the Nahua corn deities. The *Codex Tudela* image depicts a divine woman adorned with feathers from yellow parrots and troupial birds, along with a butterfly-shaped nose ornament—an almost identical representation of the “yellow parrot, flower, troupial bird, butterfly woman” mentioned in the song.

The singers greet this divine figure with words: “In your place of rain, oh, Saint Francis, let there be joy”⁶⁵—and, according to their words, they go accompanied by the sound of *coyolli* bells (whose sound may resemble that

62. Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, II, 7, 63.

63. “niman yc quinmamaltiaya y çeçeme ychpupuchti”; Sahagún, *Primeros memoriales*, 250v (p. 58).

64. “Aytzinicutzin Nocihuapatzin tozapatzin titlatlapalsocbitla nimitzonmama nopilabuiltitzi,” *Cantares mexicanos*, 43r.

65. “in moquiappan S. fran^{co} ma onpapaquibua,” *Cantares mexicanos*, 42v.

of raindrops). The first association evoked by *moquiappan* (the place of rain) is Tlalocan and its ruler, the rain god Tlaloc. Deities connected to rain were among the divine figures honored during all the festivals of the rainy season, including the *veintena* of *Huey Tōzoztli*. The *Florentine Codex* mentions child sacrifice during this period, and although Durán does not refer to the offering of children, he explicitly links *Huey Tōzoztli* to the rain god.⁶⁶ Broda interprets *Huey Tōzoztli* as a key moment in the cycle of child sacrifices. She describes it as “the grand royal celebration in petition for rain,” as the rulers of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan took part in a procession to the Mountain of Tlaloc, offering a boy or boys. Meanwhile, a girl was sacrificed in a lake, further linking the festival to the seasonal cycle.⁶⁷

However, a quick review of the Nahua ritual songs in the Appendix to Book 2 of the *Florentine Codex* shows that “the place of rain” was also considered the home of maize deities. In the “Song of Xochipilli,” the god called *tlaoicineutl* (Red Cinteotl), the *oyohualle* (owner of bells), leaves Tlalocan to come to earth.⁶⁸ The song appears to be a ritual calling to rain gods or *Tlalocan tlamacazque* (the rain gods’ priests) to prepare the way for the maize deity, ensuring his successful arrival. Tlalocan also appears in the “Song of Chicomecoatl” as the “home” of this maize goddess (“*tiyaviā mochā tlallocā*” (“you went to your home in Tlalocan”)).⁶⁹ Additionally, this watery otherworld can be known by other names. For example, in the song performed every eight years during the *Atamalqualiztli* ritual, Cinteotl’s home is called Tamoanchan, a place of *atl* (water) and *yayavican* (mist).⁷⁰

Moreover, most of the corn-related fragments from these ritual hymns associate the rebirth of nature and the sprouting of plants with *tlahuizcalpan* (the time-space of dawn) and with the precious birds’ singing, as, for example, in the following passage: “In the region of water, of mist, was Centeotl born. In the place of the lord of the fish made of jade are the offspring of lords given being. The sun has come forth, the morning has dawned, and sundry red spoonbills sip nectar from flowers where flowers stand erect.”⁷¹

66. Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, II, 61–5; Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, II, 241–53.

67. Johanna Broda, “El agua en la cosmovisión de Mesoamérica,” in *El agua en la cosmovisión de los pueblos indígenas en México*, ed. José Luis Martínez Ruiz and Daniel Murillo Licea (Mexico City: Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales, 2016), 187.

68. Sahagún, *Primeros memoriales*, 277r (p. 140).

69. Sahagún, *Primeros memoriales*, 280v (p. 148).

70. Sahagún, *Primeros memoriales*, 279r (p. 145).

71. “*Orlacatqui centeutl, atl, yayavicanj tlacapillachivaloya chalchimichvacà. yyao, yantala, yantanta ayyao, ayyave, tililiyao, ayyave oayyave. Oyatlatonazqui tlavizcallevaya inan tlachichinaya nepapà quechol, xochitlacaca yyátala, yantata, ayyao, ayyave, tililiyao, ayyave oayyave*”; Sahagún, *Primeros memoriales*, 280v (p. 148).

The motif of a procession of maidens also linked the festival of *Huey Tōzōtli* with Easter. Part of the *Huey Tōzōtli* celebrations took place atop Mount Tlaloc, where the entire procession journeyed. According to Sandstrom and Effrein Sandstrom, this was a ritual pilgrimage—an essential custom in pre-Hispanic Mexico intended to sustain the cosmic order. These scholars also emphasize that such practices remained vibrant during the colonial period.⁷² How distant were the precolonial maidens, who went on such a pilgrimage to greet the renewal of life and vegetation symbolized by young corn, from the three women in the Christian Easter story, who went to Christ's tomb to witness the renewal of life? In the song preserved in *Cantares mexicanos*, pre-Hispanic and Christian symbolisms intertwine: References to rain and maize enter the Christian context through verses sung by young women, celebrating both life renewal and Christ's resurrection.

Finally, the pre-Hispanic association of this part of the year with the world's renewal also must have corresponded nicely with the symbolism attributed to Easter by the Catholic Church. The Church chose to celebrate Christ's Resurrection on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the Spring equinox because, in addition to the correspondence of this date with the Jewish tradition of the celebration of Passover, this period of the year symbolically marks the triumph of light over darkness, echoing Christ's Resurrection as the victory of life over death. Early Christian texts, such as the *Exsultet* of the Easter Vigil, refer to Christ as the "Sun of Justice," rising to dispel the night.⁷³

THE QUESTION OF AUTHORSHIP

The presence of both Christian and precolonial motifs, intricately interwoven in a single song, raises the question of its authorship. The author must have been well acquainted with Nahuatl songs dedicated to precontact deities and forces of nature—their meanings and the contexts in which they were performed. At the same time, he was also able to navigate with ease through the emerging Nahuatl-Christian vocabulary, which in the 1530s was likely still *in statu nascendi*, being developed and applied by friars and Indigenous intellectuals across new textual genres. Moreover, he understood the context of Christian Easter celebrations, which in Europe had already absorbed associations with the spring equinox.

72. Alan R. Sandstrom and Pamela Effrein Sandstrom, *Pilgrimage to Broken Mountain: Nahuatl Sacred Journeys in Mexico's Huasteca Veracruzana* (Denver: University Press of Colorado, 2022), 316–17.

73. Please see the Bible verse Malachi 4:2.

Such a unique combination of skills and bicultural knowledge could only have been acquired in spaces such as the *colegios*—where friars and Indigenous people worked side by side, learning from one another, co-creating new discourses, and applying emerging vocabulary. Crucially, it was Indigenous individuals who served as translators between the two cultural worlds, enabling precolonial beliefs and traditions to permeate Christian texts. As Leeming discusses—drawing on Pratt’s concept of autoethnography in the context of Christian Nahuatl studies—Indigenous authors were able not only to adopt Christian rhetoric but also to resist and reshape it subtly.⁷⁴

However, since the friars’ main goal was to avoid heresy and safeguard doctrinal purity, autoethnographic expression in the official doctrinal texts produced in the *colegios* was limited. It operated mainly through subtle reinterpretations of doctrinal nuances, shaped by the precolonial semantic fields of certain terms on which the Nahuatl-Christian vocabulary was built. Yet, traces of precolonial celebrations remain clearly visible in “Cihuacuicatl”. The song’s polyphony does not manifest through linguistic subtleties alone; instead, entire passages originally referring to the corn goddess are reused. This raises questions about the circumstances of the song’s creation and its use in official Easter celebrations.

While no definitive answer can be given, some hypotheses may be proposed on the basis of the song’s very early date in the time of cultural contact. Assuming the song was indeed intended for performance in front of churches, two possibilities emerge. Either the friars were, at that point, so unaware of Nahua religious references that unintentionally they allowed epithets such as *toznenexochiçaquanpapalocihuatl* to be used for Saint Francis, or they recognized the non-doctrinal elements of the song but, under the difficult circumstances of early Christianization, permitted the inclusion of Indigenous forms into the discourse—even at the cost of doctrinal precision. After all, as Pedro de Gante himself acknowledged, such adaptations kept the people engaged in Christian rituals.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the song “Cihuacuicatl itechpa inezcalitzitzin totecuió” from the *Cantares mexicanos* manuscript suggests that it likely originated in the precolonial period as part of the cult of the maize goddess. Following the Spanish conquest, however, it was repurposed to fit a Christian context. According to Motolinía,

74. Ben Leeming, *Aztec Antichrist: Performing the Apocalypse in Early Colonial Mexico* (Louisville: University Press of Colorado; Albany: Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, 2022), 31; Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

even songs crafted under the friars' supervision were ultimately adapted to align with Indigenous styles, emphasizing a rhythm conducive to dance: "They dance and sing songs in their language, about the festivals that are celebrated, which the friars have translated for them, and their song masters have adapted to their meter, making them graceful and well-tuned."⁷⁵ This adaptation highlights the Indigenous musicians' preference for traditional forms, even when singing Christian themes.

As Arthur J.O. Anderson notes, there is little evidence to suggest that texts such as *Psalmodia Christiana*, officially approved by the ecclesiastical council, were actually used in practice. Their strict structure did not resonate with the Nahuatl oral tradition and sounded unnatural. By contrast, "Cihuacuicatl" appears to belong to an earlier period with less rigid oversight of content for doctrinal accuracy. Christian references appear throughout the song, interwoven with pre-Hispanic motifs. For example, in addition to terms such as *Dios* and *Santa María*, Christian elements such as offerings of rosaries and allusions to the Sacred Scripture coexist with references to former rulers such as *Tetlepanquetzatzin* and *Ilhuicaminatzin*, underscoring a solid connection of the song to the old oral tradition.

This blending of motifs could reflect a cultural process similar to early Christian practices in Europe, where longstanding cultural elements merged with new religious expressions. As in Europe, among the Nahuatl, female figures were associated with life and the regenerative powers of nature. In Christianity, this notion is embodied by the women who first witnessed the empty grave after Christ's Resurrection. In the Nahuatl rituals, the same *topos* appeared embodied in the figure of the maize goddess and female dances honoring the revival of nature at the end of the dry season and at the beginning of the rainy season. As Klor de Alva observed, newly converted Nahuatl were in the *nepantla* state (between worlds) and may not have fully recognized the boundary between creatively adapting old formulas for Christian purposes and creating heterodox texts that would later be deemed heretical.⁷⁶

Alternatively, the analyzed song may have resulted from an intentional effort by the newly converted Indigenous people to preserve aspects of their pre-Christian beliefs. As Cervantes de Salazar noted, "...they are so inclined toward their ancient idolatry that, if there is no one who thoroughly

75. "Bailan y dicen cantares en su lengua, de las fiestas que se celebran, que los frailes se los han traducido, y los maestros de sus cantares los han puesto a su modo a manera de metro, que son graciosos y bien entonados." Motolinía, *Historia de los indios*, 70.

76. Jorge Klor de Alva, "Spiritual Conflict and Accommodation in New Spain: Toward a Typology of Aztec Responses to Christianity," *Ethnohistory* 27, no. 1 (1980): 69–85.

understands their language, they mix songs from their paganism into the sacred prayers they sing. And, to better conceal their harmful act, they begin and end with words of God, inserting their pagan elements in a lower voice so as not to be understood and raising their voice at the beginning and end when they say ‘God.’”⁷⁷

Thus, while we cannot be sure of the exact intentions behind this fusion, the result was that fragments of precolonial ritual knowledge were preserved within what superficially appears to be purely Christian texts. The friars either failed to recognize the deep precolonial roots of the song created for Easter or consciously allowed it to enter the Christian discourse—accepting that this was the price to pay for Indigenous engagement in the celebrations. As a result, “Cihuacuicatl” stands as a rare exception among sixteenth-century Nahuatl-Christian sources. While in the case of the majority of doctrinal texts, scholars may speak of Indigenous elements permeating into the Christian discourse, we may consider “Cihuacuicatl” an example of a text where it is the Christian discourse that permeates into a precolonial song. This intricate blending offers a rare window into how oral traditions could persist under colonial rule, subtly safeguarding cultural continuity.

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77. “*son tan inclinados a su antigua idolatría que, si no hay quien entienda muy bien la lengua, entre las sacras oraciones que cantan mezclan cantares de su gentilidad. Y, para cubrir mejor su dañada obra, comienzan y acaban con palabras de Dios, interponiendo las demás gentílicas abajando la voz, para no ser entendidos y levantando en principios y fines cuando dicen Dios.*” Francisco Cervantes de Salazar, “Crónica de Nueva España,” in *Papeles de Nueva España*, ed. Francisco del Paso y Troncoso, vol. 2 (Madrid: Est. Fot. De Hauser y Menet, 1914–36), 46.

the conquest of Mexico: language and cultural contact, social change, coping strategies developed by Indigenous people, and native agency in the new reality.

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