

LEGEND OF THE SUNS: REPRODUCING THE PRODUCTION OF A NAHUATL TEXT

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Introduction

This essay treats the Nahuatl text entitled “Legend of the Suns” in order to examine it for signs of the speech event in which it originated. Because of the importance of this text as one of our most-complete native accounts of Nahua cosmology and history, previous translations and interpretations have rightly viewed it as a fountain of preconquest “Aztec” thought.¹ This selective analysis and translation focuses instead on what the “Sun Legend” can tell us about postconquest interactions between Spanish and Nahuas and their joint, complicated, and often inadvertent production of both history and texts.

1. *Source*

The “Sun Legend”² is one of three texts located in the *Codex Chimalpopoca* (Bierhorst 1992b; Velázquez 1945). It begins with an “introduction,” dated 1558, and a body —separated stylistically and thematically— that tells of four previous ages of the world, or “suns,” and their subsequent destructions.³ Though not to be emphasized here, the rest of the text continues —again markedly

¹ See, for example, Bierhorst (1992a), Elzey (1974), León-Portilla (1990), and Velázquez (1945).

² This name is the invention of Francisco del Paso y Troncoso in his 1903 edition (Bierhorst 1992a:13).

³ The events treated in this section of the text exist in at least twenty-three separate sources. In time these range from the late 15th-century “Calendar Stone” to early 17th-century historian’s summaries, as well as modern-day variants collected by anthropologists (Elzey 1974: 64; Infante 1986; Ixtlilxochitl 1985: 49). In space it has an areal distribution that ranges from a Nahuatl-speaking group in Nicaragua to quasi-variants in the Maya lore (Elzey 1974: 76-77; Sharer 1994: 521).

different in style— by telling of the origin of the present sun and moon, the repopulation of the earth, and the giving of maize to the present people. It tells of the escapades of Quetzalcoatl, the meetings of the gods, and the origins and migrations of the Mexica. Finally, it tells of the Mexica's founding of Tenochtitlan and the names of their subsequent rulers, ending with the coming of Cortés. In short, the complete text is a history of the world.⁴

The reasons for picking this particular text (and only a part of it) are as follows. First, it contains the best extant Nahuatl source for the destruction of the suns, the only other one being the less-detailed version in the *Annals of Cuauhtitlan*, also located in the *Codex Chimalpopoca*, but dated 1570, and almost certainly written by someone else.⁵ Second, the actual destruction of the suns is by itself a complete unit. In other variants, whether cut into stone or recounted by Mestizos and Spaniards, it is treated as a whole, something not necessarily related to the “mytho-history” that follows. Finally, with respect to the details of this text's composition, almost nothing is known.⁶ All that exists is the general knowledge that certain Franciscans, from at least the 1530s, had been teaching the sons of Nahua nobility to write in a Latin script (Lockhart 1992: 330).⁷ This, coupled with the oft-repeated observation that the text reads as if someone were explaining the pictures of a native “book”⁸ (*i.e.*, using them as a visual prompt to create a narrative (Bierhorst 1992a: 7; Gruzinski 1993: 53; León-Portilla 1990: 37), creates the impression that the text is the written version of an Indigenous “exegesis” of a codex.

A primary goal of this essay is a more-thorough analysis of the above observation, focusing on those parts within the text where

⁴ In Mircea Eliade's view, it contains two parts: the first is a “cosmogenic myth,” or how reality came into existence (this would be the sequence of the first four suns); and the second would be a “myth of sacred history,” or how this creation was subsequently given structure (*i.e.*, everything that occurred during the fifth sun) (1963: 85-8). Likewise Boas (1985: 30-3) would divide them up into two “classes.”

⁵ This is due mainly to its content. See, for example, the version of the “sun legend” in the *Annals de Cuauhtitlan* (Bierhorst 1992b: 25-6; Velázquez 1945: 5).

⁶ From the date given in the text, an analysis of its orthography, and a knowledge from historical sources about whose hands it probably passed through, it can be deduced that the text was composed in 1558, but later copied (from Franciscan to Jesuit orthography), and perhaps recompiled. For example, the whole codex is written in a single hand, and marginal glosses can be seen to have been swept into the text. (Bierhorst 1992a: 12).

⁷ Unfortunately, regarding their methods, not much is known (Lockhart 1992: 330; Ricard 1966: 39-60).

⁸ Due to the associations this term conjures to a modern reader, I use it with some trepidation. See, for example, Mignolo's critique (1990: 220-70).

clues to the context can most easily be found. These include: the introduction or “preamble,” valuable for what light it sheds on the reception that the text foresaw; the actual destruction of the suns, a section that contains the information most likely to be “recounted”⁹ from a codex and thus not purely prompted from memory; and finally, certain sections in the middle and end of the text where the identity of the participants and their allegiances to the characters within the text are the most pronounced. Necessarily, it will step out of the text as well, examining the immediate historical context, pre- and postconquest literary practices, and the relation of this text to other colonial texts and genres. Its final intent then is to better delimit the “we,” “here,” and “now” of the context surrounding this text’s creation, and thus lead to a more-nuanced understanding of the “they,” “then” and “there” of the content thus created.

2. *Preamble*

Before the sequence of suns begins there is a preamble that, in effect, takes what would be an otherwise undated, unlocated, and undefined text, and proceeds to place it within two calendrical systems, define it, and offer an introduction. For all its help in understanding the context, however, many of the expected features of Nahuatl documents (given the preserved corpus) are not present, but are instead obscured, or even markedly absent. Thus, in the analysis of the “preamble” that follows, there will often be an attempt to hear the unsaid.

[All numbers in brackets [] refer to line numbers of the complete text located in the appendix, and all numbers in round brackets () and separated by a slash (only used when the original Nahuatl is quoted) are folio and line numbers in the original text.]

[1] *here is (located) what is known, what is spoken, a tale*

This first line carries much information. “Nicân” or “here” not only specifies a location near a “speaker” and a time at which they

⁹ James Lockhart writes:

“*Pohua*” had the additional, actually primary, meaning “to count,” corresponding well to the very prominent numerical facets of preconquest records. The word also meant “to relate, recount, give an account of”, hinting at the oral recital that accompanied a preconquest document, interpreting and expanding on it” (1992: 226).

“spoke,” it *presumes* the speaker—that someone needed to define the position “here.” It also presumes a listener, someone who would understand what “here” meant with it only being referred to and not explained. And finally (in the sense of “here is something”), it assumes an object, that which is “located” somewhere near the speaker.

This object is then described as “*tlamachîliztlahtôlzâzânîlli*” or “spoken-wisdom-tale”, a definition that reflects the speaker’s view of who a listener might be. It implies that the speaker assumes that there exists an immediate (and perhaps future) listener who doesn’t know that what “here” is, is “oral wisdom.” As well, it states its “spokenness,” and one could argue that “here” doesn’t point to an object at all, but (as one could imagine in the English “here’s what I’ve been thinking”), actually refers to “it that the speaker is about to say.”

But the object is not just “what is spoken” and not just “what is known,” it is also “*zâzânîlli*,” a “tale,” or, more markedly defined, “something without importance,” a “consolation to make one laugh” (de Molina 1571; Siméon 1885). Given that “*zâzânîlli*” is really the root and “oral wisdom” merely a modifier, and assuming that these glosses and their connotations are correct (an assumption to be discussed below), why then mix deprecation with what had once been the Nahuatl word for wisdom? Assuming this was not the usual way to introduce a codex or sacred memory, one may ask what else would have been lost, changed, or emended in the text to come?

Of course, relying purely on modern-day English intuition and colonial grammars is of dubious validity. It is probable that no Nahua ever read a dictionary such as Molina’s,¹⁰ needing neither to check what they meant, nor (in a system unused to our idea “word”) correct what they spelled.¹¹ But perhaps the speaker had internalized a friar’s condemnation—his art now reduced to fairytale, his role to raconteur (if not recanter). Or, perhaps he perceived the value in expressing his adherence to some position. Finally, rather than just naming a text, maybe it was an attempt instead to re-extend the meaning of a word—a lone Nahua’s under-the-breath: “Put this in your goddamn dictionary.”

But one may make numerous criticisms of all this. For example, the “here” might not have been a codex, the speaker (from now

¹⁰ There are of course questions, not touched on here, about those who helped him compile it, and their dialects, affiliations, and understanding.

¹¹ Thus the phoneticism of most texts (Lockhart 1991: chap. 8).

on referred to as “recounter”) could have been the scribe, there might not have been an overseer listening, or there might have been a room of them. One can even go to extremes, imagining the text as composed out of the imagination of a Nahua youth bored by his catechism class, or penned by Sor Juana years later as a lark to her lover.

Therefore, it must be remembered that the “actors” composed above have not been chosen as the closest approximation to reality. They have been chosen because, taken as a whole, they show a range of possible effects that could be expected—whether additions, omissions or deletions, whether errors, embellishments or lies. With this in mind, this (rather lengthy) analysis of the text’s first line should begin to destabilize any complacency in seeing the “Sun Legend” purely in terms of its preconquest content and, in a text of more than fifty folios, stress the multiple accents that must be read into each word.

[2] *a long time before now it was made*

In line two, if “what was made” refers to the previous line, and the previous line did indeed refer to an actual object, it is interesting to note that this object was “made” and not “written,” “painted,” “learned,” “discovered,” or “passed down.” Nor does one learn who made it, the verb is impersonal, and could even mean “made itself” or, idiomatically (which is how the form is usually used), “happened.”

But it might not refer to the first line, and may in fact begin the next. This means that “a long time ago” doesn’t refer to when the “spoken wisdom tale” was created, but to when “it” was made (see lines three through five), meaning perhaps the cosmos, the universe, the world. This would mean that “long ago” was indeed a while back, and that the initial creation didn’t have a named creator, and might even have created itself.

Though not to be belabored here, this lack of a named creator, just like the missing perpetrators in the destruction of the suns to come, should be compared with the text most similar to this in content known as the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas* (Garibay 1965; de la Garza 1983). In this Spanish text written within the first fifteen years after the conquest, not only are the creators of the world named, but the subsequent agents of destruction are said to be their descendants. In two works otherwise so similar, it is interesting that the difference is marked by the mere switch of

a verb's voice, and thus that it wasn't the actions, but the agents, that someone felt necessary to hide.

- [3] *thereby the land extended*
 [4] *one by one (inanimate, lumplike) things extended*
 [5] *thereby it began*
 ...
 [6] *only thus is it known how originated*
 [7] *so many (flat, inanimate, stonelike)*
 [8] *suns that were*
 ...
 [9] *2400 years*
 [10] *on top of 100 years*
 [11] *on top of thirteen years*
 [12] *today is the 22th day of May, 1558*

Lines nine through eleven of this last section begin by counting in the Nahuatl number system the actual number of suns "that were" —all 2513 of them. As this means that someone in the speech event understood how to count in this system, and either didn't know another system, or assumed the listener understood as well, it should be contrasted with line twelve in which a combination of Nahuatl and Spanish words is used to give a date relative to the Spanish system. Notice, however, that the numbers used here are shorthand symbols, not what one would expect if the date were read aloud. As well, notice whom the reader was expected to be by this hybrid notation. It is probable then that this last line was written by a scribe who understood Nahuatl and Spanish —both the languages, and their forms of dating.

This would make him a clerk-notary, a postconquest role (originating in the 1540s) akin to the preconquest "amatlacuilo" or "painter on paper" (Karttunen and Lockhart 1976: 40; Lockhart 1992: 40-41). Thus he would have been a member of the post-conquest generation, having grown up in a vastly different world than the recounter—presumably an elder or someone who could still make the pages of a codex "speak."¹²

¹² James Lockhart tells us:

"[that] preconquest Mexico also knew the official writer, the amatlacuilo or "painter on paper," and the role was associated with nobility. The records kept were, as far as is known, mainly religious and divinatory manuals, historical annals, censuses, land cadastrals, and tribute lists, in a form as much pictorial as glyphic. The parallel may have been of a rather general kind, but the Nahuas...apparently did see some parallel, since they adapted to the post of notary quickly, successfully and permanently, and notarial skills became self-perpetuating among them" (1992: 40).

It might then be inferred that in opening this document the scribe was aware of the conventions of such postconquest legal genres as the land grant, litigation, and will (Karttunen and Lockhart 1976:126). As he would have been conscious of his adherence to, or variance from, these forms, we may perhaps take his omissions as salient: Gone is the overt reference to readers, the "on behalf of," the "I believe in god," and the "it was copied faithfully." Gone too are the signatures, the names of witnesses, and the location where the writing took place.

Yet it is more probable that the scribe was lending his allegiance to another genre much closer to this in form, such as the postconquest "Annals," where author attribution was rare due to the lack of a strong preconquest tradition (Lockhart 1992: 376). And in asking what might be missing relative to this form, it is again worthwhile to turn to our closest text. In the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas* not only is the reader explicitly told where the information came from (books "smeared with blood" (Garibay 1965: 23), but also who the "recouters" were (elders and those who had been priests before the conquest). In other books, again similar in theme and form, such as the afore-mentioned *Anales de Cuauhtitlan*,¹³ there is the disparaging of old gods as sorcerers and devils (Bierhorst 1992a; Velázquez 1945). Thus, though not a legal genre, its "author" was probably aware of those conventions and, though similar in form and theme to other texts, it often lacks their evidentiality and opinion.

One may also notice that the Nahuatl "number of suns that there were" dates, relative to "today," an important event in a Nahua's past—the "beginning of the ages" (or whatever occurred in lines two through five). This is akin to the Spanish use of 1558, which dates "today" relative to an important date in their past—the birth of Christ. Thus, "today" is not only located with respect to two calendars, it references two almost incompatible events. Interesting as well, is the fact that it dates the document at all. This seems to assume a listener who was not present, and thus would not know what "today" was—*i.e.*, a future reader, perhaps a Friar, King or grandchild, and maybe even "us."

Before ending this section, one should remember what the actual date was relative to a Nahua's system of time, and thus what

¹³ These historical works, ordered year by year, deal with the events involving an altepetl (foundations, wars, elections, rearrangements, etc.). They were written by the same sort of people who wrote the more mundane legal documents and, as they are partly personal, are often full of partisanship (Lockhart 1992: 376).

it could mean in a Nahua's world. According to one version of the Aztec calendar (Tena 1987: 103), during February of 1559 and thus nine months from "now," the fifty-two year count would "roll over," and the "new fire ceremony" would have to begin. A Nahuatl description reads:

And when it came to pass that night fell, all were frightened and filled with dread. Thus it was said: it was claimed that if fire could not be drawn, then [the sun] would be destroyed forever; all would be ended; there would evermore be night. Nevermore would the sun come forth. Night would prevail forever and the demons of darkness would descend, to eat men (Sahagún 1953: 28).

But if all went well, and the fire were indeed drawn:

There was much happiness and rejoicing. And they said: For thus it is ended; thus sickness and famine have left us (Ibid., 31).

In the description of the destruction of the previous suns that follows, not only should one note the parallel between the above fate and the fates of the people of the past worlds, but what fate was predicted for this world as well. And finally, given the decimation of the Indigenous population occurring at this time, and the unequivocal destruction of the previous four worlds (as told in the body of the text to come), one can only wonder how present this was in the minds of the text's participants.¹⁴

3. *Body*

The destruction of the suns is divided into four sections. (See, for example, lines 13, 32, 51 and 69.) In turn, they describe the name of the age or sun, what the inhabitants of the world ate during its reign, how long it lasted, what finally befell those inhabitants, and the date that this all occurred. (See, for example, in the second age, lines 32, 41, 42-44, 47, 48 and 50.)

In addition to this similarity in each of the age's content, there is also a similarity in form. Each of the four sections is the same length as the others and uses almost equivalent wording for each of its individual events. However, though individual phrases or

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that the *Popol Vuh* was written under similar circumstances (beginning of a new cycle), with similar omissions (authorship, etc.), by similar people (Lords, interested in their lineage's history), and with similar sources (painted books) (Tedlock 1985).

groups of phrases in each section correspond to those in others, there is no unified order in which they all agree. (Compare, for example, the relative placement within their age of lines 17, 41, 64 and 84.)

One can go further with this lack of an order by noticing that not only does each age not refer to the others, but the details within an age seem to be lacking in self-reference as well. Thus, events within each age happen without building on the previous events and without being built on by the events in the ages that follow. This seeming lack of both teleology and narrative “logic” is a basic feature of the text. (An example of this is the order of events in the triplets 36-38, 55-57, and 78-80.)

A notable breaking of this characteristic is the fact that each age begins with almost exactly the same two lines. For example, the second age begins:

[32] *this sun, four wind (is) its name*

[33] *these were (in) the second time*

It makes sense to begin this way if one wants to introduce a setting: “the time of *this sun*,” an ordering: “the second time”, and a cast: “these” —which almost certainly refers to the “they” that is then carried throughout the rest of the section. Again the recounter is taking the listener’s knowledge of the setting for granted. And, assuming that “sun” really means “picture of sun,” one can then postulate that there existed a visual aid close to the recounter, listener and scribe.

This is confirmed in a later section of the text where the “fifth sun” is introduced:

this sun’s name is four-movement
this is our sun (under which) we go about today
and this is its appearance here
 (folio 77, lines 27-8)¹⁵

Note how closely its form follows that of the previous four suns two folios before. Notice that it is now in the present tense, and

¹⁵ The following is the complete text (not included in the appendix).

In-in tónatiuh i-tōca nā[uh]-ōllin===

this sun’s name is four-movement

in-in ye te[h]huân-ti[n] to-tónatiuh in t-on-ne(i)mi-[h] âxcân

this is our sun (under which) we go about today

auh in-in i-nêz-ca in nicân

and this is its appearance here (77,27-8)

that “they” has been shifted to “we.” Notice as well that besides “this” there is now a “here” —perhaps located with a finger (or the check of a stick) in the coordinate system of whatever was being read. And finally, notice that what is being located is referred to as a representation, or “its appearance here.”

If there was this visual aid —assumed from now on to be a codex— was this the “spoken wisdom tale” mentioned in the preamble? If so, it certainly suggests that the information that follows —destructions, durations, and dates— is being garnered from it. And as no codex survives (to my knowledge) that explicitly refers to these events,¹⁶ perhaps then the form of what is being spoken can iconically tell us something about the format of the codex from which it was recounted or read.

The first point to notice about the format or content of this codex is its prolific use of numbers and dates.¹⁷ Each age is given a position in the order of suns, and each people is given a number of years to live, an amount of time to perish in, and a year-date and day “sign” to either perish on, or with which to have their fate “explained.”¹⁸ Thus, even the way of dying —perhaps the most repeated element in each age—¹⁹ is conditioned by time and numbers. Given our knowledge (or lack thereof) about the type of information capable of being kept in a codex, this is not surprising (Lockhart 1992: 328).

The second point to notice is the exactness of what it records. As seen by comparing similar elements in each age (see again, for example, lines 36-38, 55-57, and 78-80), phrasings of similar elements are expressed in exactly the same way and in a style that is carried throughout: third-person plural “victims” (who are never described) being assailed by quasi-natural forces whose causative agents are never explained.²⁰

¹⁶ Aside from the highly Europeanized *Codex Vaticanus* (reprinted in Moreno de los Arcos, 1967).

¹⁷ There do exist several places, however, where this style is altered —for example line 68. What is especially interesting is that not only is the style altered, but the content as well. One suspects that this is an addition purely from memory, without the help of a picture’s prompt (a “riff,” so to speak).

¹⁸ Dating in Mesoamerica was very probably an attempt to tell “what kind of time it was,” rather than just when the event occurred. See for example Barbara Tedlock’s monograph (1982) on the 260-day calendar of the Highland Maya of Momostenango.

¹⁹ One might question whether this repetition is for “filler” or “emphasis,” and whether they can be distinguished.

²⁰ It is useful to again compare this with lines two through six of the “preamble,” where no causative agent is given either. And, compare it with the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas*, where the gods are responsible for the sufferings (Bierhorst 1992: 8). And finally, compare it with the “Sun Legend” in the “Annals of Cuauhtitlan,” where

It is tempting to suggest then, by the sheer iterability of content and wording, that the glyphs being read prompted not just an idea of what to say, but how to say it as well. If this is true, one wonders then why the order of events in each age was not “learned by heart,” and why the order of ages seems so unset in stone. One could almost say that there exists a set of unchangeable units (for example almost every line in this translation) that are arranged very differently within each age (the main method, in fact, for determining where the line breaks were). Or, in more suggestive terms, there seem to exist discrete and fixed units of meaning that can be combined and ordered rather freely with respect to one another.²¹

What this actually says about the source, however, is difficult to say. Perhaps each phrase was a separate item, capable of being remembered or drawn. Perhaps then the lack of a specific order was due to a faulty recounting of a “pristine” codex. Or, perhaps this “randomness” was meant. If this is true, then all attempts to find a canonical order—either of individual events within an age, or within the order of the ages themselves—might prove fruitless. This would not only explain the discrepancy of dates, orders and events found among the different variants of the Sun Legend (Moreno de los Arcos 1967), but it would agree with what is known about the form of many of the songs in the corpus known as the *Cantares Mexicanos* and *Romances de los Señores de Nueva España*. In these songs Karttunen and Lockhart (1980) have found a typical “model” that is made up of four or eight “verses” with no logical linear order. Instead they find the verses arranged around a “center”—a sentiment, theme, or person.²² As well, in the versions of the “same” song located in different parts of the corpus, the order of the four verses is changed, suggesting that there doesn’t exist a canonical model at all, only variants.

again the suffering’s causative agents are missing (Bierhorst 1992a: 25-6). It seems the “Historia” may be the anomalous text.

²¹ One can imagine a set of pictures whose “elements” could be read in different orders. Unfortunately, I have only been able to dig up one Codex whose pictures parallel events in the “Leyenda”: the (very Europeanized) *Codex Vaticanus* (reprinted in Moreno de los Arcos (1967)).

²² If this is true, one may then ask: “what is the Sun Legend’s central theme”? One possible answer comes from our oldest version of the sun legend—the “Sun Stone”—carved, if one is to believe its inscribed date, in 1479. In this stone, four sun, or age glyphs encircle a central figure whose face is a representation of the fifth sun—“*ōllin tōnatiuh*,” or “movement sun”—an age which would end in earthquakes, or, the age which we live in now.

The destruction of the suns then is yet another example of the Nahuas' propensity to meta-organize on a quadripartite and circular level. Though the afore-mentioned songs or "xochicuicat" are a particularly startling example of this, it occurs on so many other levels of organization (such as the ordering of calpolli rotation within an altepetl, or the structure of a Nahua household (Lockhart 1992: 15-17, 61)), that it is probable that with respect to the "Sun Legend" these features are definingly characteristic and not erroneous at all.

4. *Historical Context*

Shifting now out of the circles of Aztec time, and back into the more-linear march of the colonial encounter, this last section examines some events in the middle of the sixteenth century, important for what they say about one purpose for this text's production as well as the identity of its participants.

It is widely speculated (yet difficult to confirm) that in Mexico by the 1550s there was a drop of two-thirds in the Indigenous population, mainly due to European-introduced disease (Gibson 1964: 138). Of those in Mexico City that survived into the second half of the sixteenth century, it was reported that by 1562 "only a third...were receiving sacraments" (*Ibid.*, 111), with the archbishop of Mexico arguing "a direct connection between the small number of clergy and the inadequacy of the conversion program" begun almost four decades before (*Ibid.*, 114).

This failure of the conversion program was attributed to many factors. There was a wane in the early optimism of the missionaries (perhaps due to their realization of the ineffectiveness of their endeavor), and which of course prompted Sahagún to begin his *History of the Things of New Spain*, an attempt to learn as much as possible about preconquest religious customs in order to identify and eliminate (through "conversion, confession, and objective study" (Klor de Alva 1988: 43) those which were most antithetical to the Christian mission (Sahagún 1932: 22).²³ Because of their own dependence on Indian labor and goods, there was as well the friars'

²³ In doing this, he worked with old and prominent men "well-versed in their ancient lore" who were selected for him with the help of a native chief. As well, he worked with several trilingual students of his (whom he calls "grammarians) from the Collegio de Santa Cruz in Tlatelolco, famed for its attempt to teach the sons of native elites Spanish, Latin, and European learning. He writes:

growing inability to maintain their position as “defenders of the life of the spirit” in opposition to the encomenderos’ oppression (Gibson 1964: 112).²⁴ And finally, there was the failure of the missionaries to integrate the growing number of literate and religiously-trained Indians into the clergy as a lay elite (Ricard 1966: chap. 14).

Along with these radical shifts in demography, the growing disillusionment with one tradition, and the dispossession from another, there were shifts in the Nahua tribal and altepetl affiliations as well. These altepetls (consisting of “a territory; a set...of named constituent parts; and a dynastic ruler or tlatoani” (Lockhart 1992: 15)) were thought by the Nahuas to have been established by migrants (“most often refugees from the breakup of legendary Tula” (*Ibid.*, 15), and “were imagined to have had an ethnic unity going back into unremembered times” (*Ibid.*, 16).

The “Sun Legend” may be read then as the history (or perhaps “charter”) for the Mexica tribe. It tells of their origins and wanderings, their relation to the Toltecs, and their encounters, battles and alliances with other tribes —continuing through their founding of Tenochtitlan. This tribal identity, though interjected at most only five or six times, is pronounced in a persistent “tehuantín” or “we” throughout the middle and end of the text. In one place it is to talk about a scene in the source, locating the recounter (and whomever he includes within “we”) relative to events that are expressed as having actually occurred (folio 76, line 8). In another, it is mentioned that the gods did penance for “us” (77/2). Later, it is said that because a character named “Mecitli” suckled 405 Mixcoa “we [who are called] Mexica today are not Mexica, but indeed Mecitín” (79/1). And finally, it is said that the Mexica landed “here” in Tenochtitlan (84/9).²⁵

“All matters we talked about were given me by them by means of paintings which was the mode of writing they had in ancient times. The grammarians (the above mentioned students) then explained these paintings in their own language, writing this explanation underneath the pictures. (1932: 22)

With the information he gathered, he would of course write his *General History of the Things of New Spain*, formally compiled between 1558 and 1566 (*Ibid.*, 8).

²⁴ Spaniards to whom the Crown had granted estates, along with Indian tribute and (at least early on) labor.

²⁵ These sections are reproduced below:

iz cat-qui i[n] ye te[h]huantín inic ye[h] t-on-o-que[h]===
here is (where) we, because of this, are stretched out (76/8)

...
 ye[h] íca in ô-to-pan tla-ma[h]çêuh-que[h].
because of this they did penance for us (77/2)

...

It seems then that this “we” is not necessarily identified with the immediate participants in the speech event, nor with a purely Indigenous identity (as in opposition to the Spaniards), nor with a specific language grouping. Instead, it can be seen to encompass a preconquest tribal unity, which is identified —or at least presupposed—to be still existing. This becomes significant in relation to another important postconquest event—the great flood in Mexico City (known before the conquest as Tenochtitlan), which occurred in 1555, approximately three years before the creation of this text.

Charles Gibson tells us:

[that] the organization of labor for this emergency derived directly from [the] late Aztec tribal units...[corresponding] to the four pre-Spanish tribal areas of the Mexica, the Acolhuaque, the Tepaneca, and the Chalco (1964: 27).

Occurring at the same time, and as a function of whether one was victor, ally, or vanquished in the conquest and its aftermath, was a recognized weakening of what had earlier been the strongest tribal powers (such as the Mexica), with a subsequent recognizing and reinforcing of the more-intermediate peoples (Gibson 1964: 25), such as the Chalcas —emphasized in the “Sun Legend” to have been conquered by the Mexica many times. Thus there was both a delimiting of previously existing tribal boundaries, as well as a reordering of their previously established hierarchy— with the Mexica having been “bumped” towards the bottom.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay, by focusing on the signs of the speech act in which the “Sun Legend” was produced, has tried to undermine the use and interpretation of this text as purely a preconquest phenomenon, while at the same time illuminating the conditions of its creation—both as the recounting or “exegesis” of a codex, and as the reflection and product of postconquest events. This analysis, complicated by its use of the most contextually-dependent signs,

auh ye[h]-ica in âxcân ti-mêxi[h]ca-[h]
and because of that we mexica today
 yêce[h] a[h]mô ti-mêxi[h]ca-[h] ca ti-meci-tin
are not mexica, but indeed mecitin (79/1)

...

Auh iz catqui inîc tlâl-tech a[h]ci-co-[h] in nicân tenochtitlan
and here is when they landed here in Tenochtitlan (84/9)

as well as its necessary comparing of texts to find salencies and silences among the variants, has emphasized the placing of this text within an historic crossroads. Within the Nahuas' system of time it was not just the end of a "century," it was perhaps the end of the world. And, suffering as they were from disease, overwork and dislocation—as well as more than a generation of missionaries—one might imagine that, more than just a memory, this text was the placing of current events into an older, historical context—in this case, that of the earlier suns' destructions and its temporal emphasis on the transmutations and calamities that befell the previous peoples. With this end, one would see the continued encroachment (and Mexica re-emphasis) on tribal identity, the encomenderos' and friars' reevaluation of the Nahuas' place in the New World, and the death of the last generation to have known life before the conquest. Finally, this text may be seen as one of the last confrontations for a certain form of representation: codex to text, ideogram to phoneme, painted to written, and, for its creators, an uncalculatable symbolic efficacy (be it as dirge, charter, prediction or confession) reduced, for us, to mere "legend".

Appendix

A dash —represents a morpheme boundary. Letters in square brackets [] have been added to the original text. Letters in round brackets () are in the original text, but extraneous. And ^ means the vowel is long.

This translation covers lines 1-45 of folio 75 in the *Codex Chilpopoca*.

PREAMBLE

- 1 In ni-cân ca[h] tla-machî-l(l)iz-tla-[h]tô-l-çâ-çânîlli
here is what is known, what is spoken, a tale
- 2 ye hue[h]câuh mo-chîuh
a long time ago it was made
- 3 in-îc ma[h]-ma[n]-ca tlâlli
thereby the land extended
- 4 çê-çen-tetl in itla[h] ma[h]-ma[n]-ca
one by one things (inanimate, lump-like) extended
- 5 in-îc pêuh i
thereby (it) began

- 6 çan iuh machô ini[uh]qui tzînti-c
only thus is it known how (it) originated
- 7 in îzqui-tetl
so many (flat, discrete, stone-like)
- 8 in ô-ma[n]-ca tônatiuh
suns that were
- 9 chiquacen-tzon-xihuitl
2400 years
- 10 î-pan mâcuîl-pôhual-xihuitl
on top of 100 years
- 11 î-pan ma[h]tlac-xihuitl om-êi
on top of thirteen years
- 12 âxcân î-pan mayo, îc 22 ilhui-tia de 1558 años ===
today is the 22th day of May, 1558

FIRST SUN

- 13 in-în tônatiuh nâhui ôcêlôtl
ô-cat-ca—676 años.
this sun, four jaguar, was 676 years
- 14 ini[h]que[h] in î(z)[c] çê-pa(n) on-o-ca-[h]
these were (in) the first time
- 15 ôcê(l)lô-quâ(l)-lô-que[h]
they were jaguar-eaten
- 16 î-pan nâhui ôcê(l)lôtl in tônatiuh.
on four jaguar sun
- 17 auh in qui-quâ-ya chicôme malinalli in î-tônacâyô-uh cat-ca.
and he used to eat seven straw, it was his nourishment
- 18 auh in-îc nen-que[h] cen-tzon-xihuitl
and thereby they lived 400 years
- 19 î-pan ma[h]tlac-pôhual-xihuitl
on top of 200 years
- 20 î-pan ye-pôhual xihuitl,
on top of sixty years
- 21 y-pan ye nô caxtôl-xihuitl
o[c]-(z)[c]ê

FIRST SUN

- likewise on top of fifteen years, (and) one more*
- 22 auh in-îc tê-quân-quâ(l)-lô-que[h]
and thereby they were people-eater-eaten
- 23 ma[h]tlac-xihuitl î-pan yê xihuitl
ten years on three years (later)
- 24 in-îc po-poliuh-que[h]
thereby they perished
- 25 in-îc tlami-to-[h].
thereby they went in order to be finished
- 26 auh i[h]quâc pol(l)iuh in tônatiuh.
and then the sun disappeared
- 27 auh in î-n-xiuh cat-ca çê âcatl.
and their year was one reed
- 28 auh in-îc pêuh-que[h] in quâ-l(l)ô-que[h]
and thereby they began to be eaten
- 29 in cem-ilhui-tônalli nâhui ôcêlôtl,
(on) day-sign four jaguar

FIRST SUN

- 30 çan nô ye in-îc tlami-to-[h]
likewise (thereby) they went in
order to be finished
- 31 in-îc po-poliuh-que[h]—
thereby they perished

SECOND SUN

- 32 In-în tônatîuh nâ(u)hu-êcatl y-
tôcâ.
this sun, four wind (is) its name
- 33 ini[h]que[h] în in-îc ôp-pa
on-o-ca-[h].
these were (in) the second time
- 34 (y)êca-tocô-que[h]
they were wind-followed
- 35 î-pan nâhu-êcatl in tônatîuh
cat-ca.
on four wind, it was (this) sun
- 36 auh in-îc poliuh-que[h]
and thereby they perished
- 37 (y)êca-tocô-que[h],
they were wind-followed
- 38 oçoma-tin mo-cuep-que[h]
they turned into monkeys
- 39 in î-n-cal nô î-n-quauh moch
êca-tocô-c,
their houses and trees—all—were
wind-followed
- 40 auh in-în tônatîuh çan nô
(y)êca-tocô-c.
and this sun likewise was wind-
followed
- 41 auh in qui-quâ-ya-[h]
ma[h]tlactl[i]-om-ôme côhuât,
in î-nacâyô-uh cat-ca.
and they used to eat twelve
snake, it was their nourishment
- 42 auh in-îc nen-ca-[h]. caxtôl-
pôhual-xihuitl

SECOND SUN

- and thereby they (had) lived 300
years
- 43 î-pan yê-pôhual-xihuitl
on top of sixty years
- 44 ye nô î-pan nâhui xihuitl
likewise on top of four years
- 45 in-îc po-pol(l)iuh-q[ueh]
thereby they perished
- 46 çan cem-ilhuitl
(in) only one day
- 47 in êca-tocô-que[h].
they were wind-followed
- 48 nâuh-êcatl î-pan çem-ilhui-
tônalli
on day-sign four wind
- 49 in-îc pol(l)iuh-que[h].
thereby they perished
- 50 auh in î-n-xiuh cat-ca çê
tecpatl.
and their year was one flint

THIRD SUN

- 51 In-în tônatîuh nâhui
quiyahuitl.
this sun (is) four rain
- 52 in-îc ei->[iniquah] în îc ê[y]-
tlamant[l]i
these (are) (in) the third time
- 53 nen-ca-[h]
they (had) lived
- 54 nâhui quiyahuitl in tônatîuh
î-pan.
on four rain sun
- 55 auh in-îc pol(l)iuh-que[h]
and thereby they perished

THIRD SUN

- 56 *tle-qui[y]ahuî(l)-lô-que[h]*
they were fire-rained on
- 57 *tôtol-me[h] mo-cuep-que[h].*
they turned into turkeys
- 58 *auh nô tlatla-c in tônatiuh*
moch tlatla-c in in-cal.
and also the sun burned, all
their houses burned
- 59 *auh in-îc nen-ca-[h] caxtôl-*
pôhual-xihuitl
and thereby they (had) lived 300 years
- 60 *î-pan ma[h]tlac-xihuitl om-ôme.*
on top of twelve years
- 61 *auh in-îc po-pol(l)iuh-que[h]*
and thereby they perished
- 62 *çâ çem-ilhuitl*
(in) only one day
- 63 *in tle-quiayah.*
it fire-rained
- 64 *auh in qui-quâ-ya-[h] chicôme*
tecpatl in in-tônacâyô-uh cat-ca.
and they used to eat seven flint,
it was their nourishment
- 65 *auh in in-xiuh çe tecpatl.*
and their year (is) one flint
- 66 *auh i[n] cem-ilhui-tônalli*
nâhui qui[y]ahuïtl
and the day-sign (is) four rain
- 67 *in-îc pol(l)iuh-que[h]*
thereby they perished
- 68 *pî-pil-tin cat-ca[h] yê[y]i-ca in*
âxcân îc mo-nôtza cô-cone-
[h]-pîpil-pipîl—
they were children... ?...today thereby
they are called baby children

FOURTH SUN

- 69 *In-in tônatiuh nâhui âtl î-tôcâ.*
this sun, four water (is) its name
- 70 *auh in-îc man-ca âtl ôm-*
pôhual-xihuitl on ma[h]tlactli
om-ôme
and thereby water covered the
surface (for) forty years and
twelve
- 71 *ini[h]que[h] î[n] in îc nâuh-*
tlamant[l]i
these (are) (in) the fourth time
- 72 *nen-ca-[h]*
they (had) lived
- 73 *î-pan nâhui âtl in tônatiuh*
cat-ca,
on four water, it was (this) sun
- 74 *auh in-îc nen-ca-[h]. cen-tzon-*
xihuitl
and thereby they lived 400 years
- 75 *î-pan ma[h]tlac-pôhual-xihuitl*
on top of 200 years
- 76 *î-pan ê[y]-pôhual-xihuitl*
on top of sixty years
- 77 *ye nô î-pan caxtôl/pôhual/*
xihuitl o[c]-çê.
likewise on top of fifteen
years (and) one more
- 78 *auh in-îc po-poliuh-que[h]*
and thereby they perished
- 79 *â-pachiu-que[h]*
they became inundated
- 80 *mo-cuep-que[h] mî-mich-tin.*
they turned into fish
- 81 *huâl-pachiu-que[h] in ilhuicatl*
the sky collapsed
- 82 *çâ cem-ilhuitl*
(in) only one day

FOURTH SUN

- 83 in pol(l)iuh-que[h]
they perished
- 84 auh in qui-qua-ya-[h] nâhui
xôchitl in in-tônacâyô-uh cat-ca.
and they used to eat four flower,
it was their nourishment

FOURTH SUN

- 85 auh in in-xiuh cat-ca çê calli
and their year was one house
- 86 auh i[n] çem-ilhui-tônalli
nâhui âtl
and the day-sign (is) four water
- 87 in-îc pol(l)iuh-que[h],
thereby they perished

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