

In the Tlalocan of Saint Francis - religious syncretism and intercultural dialogue in the Christian texts of *Cantares Mexicanos*

The subject of this project will be a collection of songs written in the 16th century in the Nahuatl (Aztec) language, included in a manuscript known as *Cantares Mexicanos*. Since the conquest of what today is Mexico by Hernando Cortez, the indigenous people of the area have been successively evangelized, first by the conquistadors and then by European, mainly Spanish, religious. The Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians, who were the first to begin these activities on a large scale, quickly realized that the Aztecs had a rich oral tradition and that their system of values was not as different from the Christian one as it might seem at first glance. Therefore, together with their indigenous disciples, they started adapting the old song models to the new needs. Singing and dancing performances (*cuicatl*), which in pre-Hispanic times played an important role in transmitting knowledge about the past and reinforcing the group's cultural identity, proved to be an excellent evangelistic tool. However, precisely because they were rooted in ancestral lore, they were also a space in which the Natives could smuggle elements of the ancient cult in ways unnoticed by the friars. The primary objective of this project is to analyze the process of creating Christian-themed songs contained in the manuscript under study, as well as their role in the evangelization process.

By reconstructing in detail the context in which these songs were created and presented, as well as by critically translating them and analyzing the ambiguous fragments (i.e., possible to be understood in different ways depending on whether the recipient was an Indian neophyte or a representative of the European clergy), we will try to answer the following questions: What methods and translation strategies were used to convey in Nahuatl the meaning of terms specific to the Christian religion (e.g., soul, hell, heaven, sin, confession, etc.)? What metaphors, cultural topoi, symbols, and other linguistic devices from the ancient Aztec oral tradition found their way into the investigated songs? What was the intention of the natives who were creating and singing these songs? Were these performances expressions of their genuine conversion to Christianity, while the references to the ancestral traditions were purely formal devices? Or, as some friars (e.g., Bernardino de Sahagún) suspected, reluctant to accept the new ideology, they consciously smuggled in elements of the old cult?

Understanding the message hidden beneath the thick layer of pre-Hispanic metaphors and symbols, mixed with neologisms, borrowings, and other linguistic devices used to translate Christian doctrine into Aztec, will reveal the true meaning of this another great source of knowledge about the history of New Spain. Until now, the *Cantares Mexicanos* have been translated mainly in a literal manner, making their reading seem like wandering blindly through a chaos of flowers, birds, scents, and colors. Only by being aware of the meaning behind each of these symbols can one understand the real message hidden in them. One of the expected outcomes of the project is an interpretation of these songs that will lift the veil of symbolic language and allow us to understand what they are really about. In addition, we will also try to show how some of the Christian terms merged with the ancient beliefs of the authors, giving birth to many syncretic religious practices which to this day form an integral part of the ritual life of many Mexican and Guatemalan indigenous communities. An example of this fusion is the titular figure of Saint Francis, who in the *Cantares Mexicanos* is depicted as the ruler of Tlalocan, the realm of the Aztec rain god Tlaloc, and in some contemporary Nahua communities is still seen as the ruler of thunder and storm.