

Translating Esotericism: Náhuatl and Quechua

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During the sixteenth century in Spanish colonial America, some speakers of Náhuatl and Quechua who wrote in Castilian referred to the Renaissance discourse of *Prisca theologia* in order to defend themselves against accusations of idolatry and construct a Christian monotheism or religious revelation about the origin of their own peoples. These transformations of “idolatry” into “religion” instigated the translation of several terms and concepts in Náhuatl or Quechua to Neoplatonic vocabulary in Castilian. While the scope of this article does not allow a full discussion of all the relevant authors and discursive operations, it will focus on contextual clues and cultural considerations as well as on grammatical and semantic issues. In reading the following account, one should bear in mind that Náhuatl and Quechua have linguistic structures that are entirely different from English, Spanish or other Indo-European languages, and few Western concepts have equivalents in these languages.

The abundance of diverse documents written in Náhuatl and Castilian during the Colonial period in Mexico is evidence of these cultural exchanges. The *tlamatini* (plural *tlamatinime*, “those who know something,” “those who have the wisdom of the word”) was the equivalent of “philosopher” in the pre-Hispanic past. They discussed human existence as well as the nature and place of man in the world, and were the teachers of the *calmecac*, the school for priests and nobles. The *tlamatinime* debated about these themes with the first twelve Franciscans who arrived in America in 1524. In 1564, the Spanish

Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagún presented these discussions as a debate on “the origin of religion” under the title of “Colloquia and Christian Doctrine,” a manuscript discovered in the secret archives of the Vatican and published for the first time in 1924.¹

The term *tlatolli* (word, discourse) referred to all systematic knowledge that resulted from the *tlamatinime*'s disquisition. One form of *tlatolli* was the *nabuatlatolli*, invocations for communicating with the deities, associated with the semantic fields of “magic” or “sorcery” in seventeenth-century sources. The word *tlamacazqui* referred to all the recipients of these chants and to the sorcerer himself, translated into Spanish as *espiritado* (“possessed”), a word that today has rather the meaning of “charmed” or “bewitched.”² The *tlamatinime* were responsible for teaching the young nobles another specific form of *tlatolli*, the *teotlatolli* (*teotl*, divinity), “divine words about the origins” that recalled the memory of the community’s primordiality and the divine. The *teotlatolli* were part of the *buehuetlatolli* (*buehue*, old, ancient), “ancient speech-memory delivered by the elders,” referring to the “divine wisdom” by which social behavior was regulated and the younger generation was educated.³

After Mexico-Tenochtitlán fell into the hands of the Spaniards and their local allies in 1521, the Franciscans created the first humanistic institution in the Americas, the Imperial College of Tlatelolco (1536), to educate the children of these nobles and build ties with the subjugated populations. When writing the histories of their own nobilities, Texcoco or Tlaxcala, the connections with Antiquity not only allowed these students a defense against accusations of “idolatry,” but established a direct continuity with Christianity and an inevitable rehabilitation of “paganism.” Noblemen educated in this school,

1. See edition in Spanish (León-Portilla & Sahagún, *Coloquios*) and in German (Lehmann & Kutscher, *Sterbende Götter*). León-Portilla’s edition also includes a dialogue between Jesuits and Japanese Buddhists from Yamaguchi in 1551, and between a Brazilian Tupinambá and a French Capuchin, Yves d’Évreux, in 1613.

2. Mikulska, “Secret Language,” 328.

3. Gruzinski, *La colonisation*, 20; León-Portilla, *Literatura*, 3, 273.

such as Diego Muñoz Camargo (1529–1599), Juan Bautista Pomar (1535–1601) or Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl (1568–1648), thus associated the *teotlatolli* with Plato’s “divine hymns,” in order to argue that their pre-Hispanic rulers and *tlamatinime* had achieved religious revelation before the arrival of the Spaniards and Christianity.

One of the central concepts that these Tlatelolco students used in order to turn “idolatry” into a Christian monotheism was that of *In tloque in nabuaque* (“he who is close and surrounds us” or “he who is on the inside and outside”), to which some *teotlatolli* were dedicated. The term originally described the divinity Ometéotl, the “Lord of Duality,” the respectively invisible and visible manifestations of which were Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcóatl.⁴ *In tloque in nabuaque* is a nominalization of two adverbial forms: *tloc* (“near”) and *náhuac* (“in the circuit of” or “in the ring”). The personal possessive suffix *-e*, which is added to both adverbial forms *tloqu(-e)* and *nahuaqu(-e)*, gives both terms the connotation that the fact of “being near,” as well as the “circuit,” are both “of him.” *In tloque in nabuaque* was a concept that the natives used to express a perception of “reality” (*tloqueb*, “he who achieved intimate closeness,” “the Absolute”) that Christian missionaries and their Tlatelolco students used to signify “God.” The divergence referred to two diametrically distinct conceptions of the body and the place of man in the world that is well illustrated by the surviving pictorial registers. In the frescoes of the convents that the natives painted throughout sixteenth-century New Spain, the Westernized body is depicted as a homogeneous entity, separated from the outside world and surrounded by a continuous line. In the prehispanic codices, on the contrary, the body was similar to an assembly of parts, each one connected to the world, the opposition of inside and outside appearing less absolute.⁵

4. Gruzinski, “Visions et christianisation,” 124; *La colonisation*, 241.

5. Gruzinski, “Visions et christianisation,” 128; Andrews, *Introduction*, 424.

Following the attribute of Ometéotl, the aforementioned Tlatelolco authors translated *In tloque in nabuaque* as “visible and invisible God” or the “origin of all things,” referring to the idea of the “first essence” of the Church Fathers. Camargo, for example, defined God as the “Craftsman of the world” or “the supreme Craftsman and Creator of all things,” expressions that go back to the beginning of Christian literature but also to Plato’s Demiurge.⁶ It must be noted that Náhuatl, like Arabic but contrary to English, does not refer to agents in passive voice. The conjoined lexical unit formed by *In tloque in nabuaque* belongs to a “personal-name unit” type of conjunction, i.e., the subject pronoun refers to one and the same entity and the two conjuncts fuse into a single meaning. Consequently, we must recognize that the “Platonic” interpretations of *In tloque in nabuaque* and its translation as “God” were not a simple process, nor a gambit to preserve the integrity of grammatical rules.⁷

Another controversial element was the divinatory calendar. Pre-Hispanic divinatory practices were based on a conception of time, the world, and man that can hardly be restricted to the narrow sphere of ritual or the more general notion of “religion.”⁸ The *Tonalpouhque* (“the one who counts the sun”) was the person responsible for interpreting the *tonalpobualli*, the divinatory calendar, and predicting the fate and characteristics of newborns. Franciscans like Bernardino de Sahagún associated the *Tonalpouhqui* with the *Genethliaci* and demonic magic. The missionaries’ intellectual categories drew fundamental distinctions between the supernatural and the natural, as well as the material and the immaterial. Any practice that resembled the idea of transmigration of souls – fostered by the Mesoamerican cyclical conception of time and life – was not only attributed to the intervention of the devil but even to the influence of Platonic ideas on the natives.⁹

Contrary to Mesoamerican civilizations, those of the Andes never had a writing system to record the past. Due to this absence of a written alphabet,

6. Gruzinski, *Conversation*, 110.

7. Andrews, *Introduction*, 424, 606.

8. Gruzinski, *La colonisation*, 29–30.

9. Gruzinski, *Les quatre parties*, 429.

the works of chroniclers from the Viceroyalty of Peru, such as *Comentarios reales de los Incas* (1609) [Real Commentaries of the Incas] by Inca Garcilaso de la Vega (1539–1616), *Relación de las antigüedades deste Reyno del Perú* (1620?) [Account of the Antiquities of the Kingdom of Peru] by Juan de Santa Cruz Pachacuti Yamqui Salcamayhua, *Primer nueva crónica y buen gobierno* (1615) [The First New Chronicle and Good Government] by Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala, or *Dioses y hombres de Huarochirí* (1598?) [Huarochiri Men and Gods] by Francisco de Avila (1573–1647) are major sources for the study of the Andean cultures. Written in Quechua (Francisco de Avila), a mixture of Castilian and Quechua (Guamán Poma and Pachacuti) or a highly refined Castilian (Inca Garcilaso), these texts pose many linguistic and hermeneutical problems not yet fully explored in many fields, including that of Western esotericism.

The Incas are not an ethnic group but a lineage whose superiority resided in its solar filiation.¹⁰ The noble and royal classes of the Inca “empire” were formally educated by the Amautas (*hamant’u*, “master,” “sage”), while the general population (*Hatunrunas*, “common man”) received knowledge from their families passed on from generation to generation. In the *yachayhuasi* (“house of knowledge”), the Amautas taught the nobles the Quechua language (*Runasimi*), the official religion (*Inti*, sun divinity), the interpretation of the *quipu* (knotted strings for collecting data) and the military history of the Incas. Similar to the Viceroyalty of New Spain, authors from Peru, such as Inca Garcilaso or Pachacuti, interpreted the Amautas’ teachings from a Neoplatonic angle.

One of the most ambiguous terms was “Pachacamac,” the name of a major oracle center located south of Lima and dating back to the fifth century. Both missionaries and Quechua-speaking authors interpreted it as “God,” except that the former associated it with the devil and idolatry and the latter with Neoplatonic concepts.¹¹ “Pacha” is a term as rich in meaning and complexity

10. Bernand, *La religion des Incas*, 23.

11. Gruzinski & Bernand, *De l'idolâtrie*, 126.

as *logos* in Greek or *esse* in Latin. As an adjective, it means “below” or “within”; as an adverb, “below” or “immediately”; as a noun, “earth,” “world,” “living space,” “universe,” or “stratification of the cosmos”; as a suffix, it marks plural inclusion or the sense of belonging with someone or something, meaning “all” or “whole.”¹² “Camac,” on the other hand, refers in the Andean cultures to a “vital force” or “spirit” that enables the growth of corn or potato seeds, a force that also shapes mountains, people and animals. “Pacha” has a space-time connotation, so Pachacamac could be translated as “creator of pacha,” i.e., “creator of the space-time universe.” As the Western idea of “creation” (*creatio ex nihilo*) was alien to the life experience of the Andean human being, Pachacamac would be more *motor inmotus* than *causa incausata*.¹³

This ambiguity allowed the aforementioned Quechua-speaking authors to rapidly associate “camac,” “force that animates the world and things,” with the Platonic *anima* or with alchemical symbolism. Pachacuti, for example, represented God in the form of a heart inside of a house (*pacha*, “house,” “universe”), depicted as an oval or an egg, an element symbolizing the “origin” or source of life in Andean thought.¹⁴ Inca Garcilaso translated *camac* as *anima*, in the sense of “breath,” so “Pachacamac” was for him “the one who gave anima to the world” (*anima mundi*). He even complained that Spaniards erroneously associated Pachacamac with the devil and idolatry because of their ignorance of Quechua, specifying that “camac” could not be translated as “to create,” because it meant the vital force emanating from an “animating” source. Several decades after the Conquest, this “animating” notion of *camac* would be associated with *rurani*, “to make,” “to perform” in a more general and profane sense.¹⁵ It is worth noting that in fact, Quechua has no equivalent terms for “soul” and “body,” which shows that the idea of separating these two entities is alien to the Andean cultures (a body is always “animated”).¹⁶

12. Estermann, *Filosofía andina*, 156.

13. Estermann, *Filosofía andina*, 191.

14. Estermann, *Filosofía andina*, 161, 293.

15. Bernand, *La religion des Incas*, 17.

16. Estermann, *Filosofía andina*, 231.

These testimonies, both in the Viceroyalties of New Spain and in Peru, show that cultural exchanges and translations from Native American languages to Castilian were not defined by a preoccupation to respect certain grammatical rules or the meaning of concepts, but by the politics and religious ethos of those colonial contexts. Currents such as Hermetism, alchemy or astrology would be present throughout the seventeenth century in Hispanic America, mainly in Castilian and Latin, especially after the creation of the first chairs of astrology at the Universities of Mexico (1551) and Peru (1551), respectively in 1637 and 1650. Finally, it should be noted that these “Platonic” colonial sources would later inspire many Latin American and European occultists in Latin America during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁷

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17. Among the first European occultists inspired by Inca Garcilaso we find the French Henri Girgois “Dr. Amauta,” established in Buenos Aires in 1872, and the German Arnold Krumm-Heller “Huiracocha,” established in Mexico in 1904 (Villalba, *Henri Girgois*). Among the South Americans, we can mention the Costa Rican Rogelio Fernández Güell, who quoted Camargo and Ixtlilxóchitl’s interpretation of *In tloque in nabuaque* in his “Psiquis unveiled: Treatise on Esoteric Philosophy” (1912) to argue for the existence of Spiritism among prehispanic peoples in “Ancient Mexico” (Bubello, Diniz Silva & Villalba, *Spiritism in Latin America*, 257).

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