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# *Los Tlocololeros: a structuralist interpretation of a Mexican dance drama*

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## Abstract

This article describes various jaguar or *ocelotl* masquerades performed in the region around Chilapa, State of Guerrero, Mexico. It argues that the timing of the performances, often to coincide with the feast day of San Marcos or Santa Cruz, suggests that the dances mark the transition from the dry to the wet agricultural season. Furthermore, the two feast days with which they are most commonly associated may form part of a more inclusive ceremonial round dedicated to agricultural activity. Certain similarities are then noted between these performances and pre-Hispanic central Mexican beliefs about the *ocelotl* and the divinity, Tezcatlipoca. It is suggested that though the present meaning of dance dramas like the *Tlocololeros* may be quite distinct from any pre-Hispanic version, there nevertheless subsists strong structural parallels between them.

## Key words

Tlocololeros, dance-dramas, jaguar, Guerrero, masquerades

## Resumo

Este artigo descreve várias mascaradas *ocelotl* ou jaguar representadas na região em redor Chilapa, Estado de Guerrero, México. Argumenta-se que o tempo das representações, tende a coincidir com o dia de São Marcos ou com o de Santa Cruz, sugere que as danças marcam a transição da estação seca para a estação agrícola húmida. Além disso, os dois dias de festa com os quais tais representações se encontram comumente associadas podem fazer parte de um ciclo de cerimónias mais vasto dedicado a actividade agrícola. Algumas semelhanças entre estas representações e crenças pré-hispânicas do México central acerca do *ocelotl* e da divindade Tezcatlipoca são identificadas. Pese embora o

presente significado dos dramas dançados como o *Tlocoleros* seja muito distinto de qualquer versão pré-hispânica, subsistem ainda assim fortes paralelos estruturais entre ambos.

### Palavras-chave

Tlocoleros, dramas dançados, jaguar, Guerrero, mascaradas.

The sun was good. The men of the llano were men of the sun.  
The men of the farms along the river were men of the moon.  
But we were all children of the white sun.

Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972)

Dance dramas incorporating the *ocelotl* or jaguar, the Mexican mountain tiger (*Felis glauca*),<sup>1</sup> are widely distributed throughout the Republic. This paper however, is concerned only with one conjunction of such dramatic representations in the various small settlements within the municipalities of Tixtla and Chilapa located in the folds of the Sierra Madre Sur, south of Chilpancingo, the capital of the state of Guerrero. Within this area, in the villages of Zitlala, Acatlán, and Atliaca, the dance drama known as the *Tlocoleros* is performed as part of the ceremonies dedicated to supplicate the rain between the feast days of San Marcos (25th April) and the Santa Cruz (3rd May); ceremonies which for many of their participants culminate in the pilgrimage to a well nearly 200 metres in diameter and 300 metres in depth, not unlike the *cenotes* found in Yucatan, located at Ostotempa.<sup>2</sup> Four rain deities, the main recipients of

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<sup>1</sup> There is not one but various species of *ocelotl* found in Mexico. *Felis glauca* refers to the white *ocelotl*, *iztac ocelotl* in Nahuatl. Other species include *Felis hernandesii*, a species in which the colour red predominates, *tlatlahqui ocelotl*, and *Felis Pardalis*, the smallest member of the family, which the Mexica called *tlacocelotl* (León-Portilla, 1980: 172).

<sup>2</sup> The well is an important ceremonial centre that attracts pilgrims from many of the communities in the area, particularly between the days of San Marcos and the Santa Cruz. According to Sepulveda (1973: 10-11), about 50 metres down in the well is a tree which,

the dances and sacrifices, are believed to inhabit the bottom of the well which some think marks the centre of the world.

It has been suggested that individually these feast days form part of collective regional ceremonies that take place between April and May and are most often connected not only to the feast days of San Marcos and Santa Cruz, but also to those of San Isidro (15th May) and Espíritu Santo (22nd May) (Sepulveda, 1972: 539-540). In some communities the ceremonies in which the *Tlocololeros* are enacted are still part of a more comprehensive ceremonial cycle related to the cultivation and harvest of the maize.<sup>3</sup> According to Marcos Matías Alonso (1982: 112-116), in Acatlán, this fuller ceremonial cycle begins with the blessing of the seeds, *xinaxtli* (25th April, the Day of San Marcos); followed five days later by *atzatzilia* (3rd May, the Day of Santa Cruz), a ceremony to petition the rains; the blessing of agricultural instruments (15th May, Day of San Isidro); *tlaxochitlalo*, celebration of the first cobs and to ask protection of the fields from pests (14th September). A second ceremony, *quitotoca mayantli*, to protect the fields is performed fifteen days later (29th September, Day of San Miguel).<sup>4</sup> It is unfortunate that the articulation of the dance dramas within the saint's day ceremonies and the wider agricultural round has not been sufficiently studied anywhere in this area, leaving a prominent lacu-

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if it has green leaves, is considered to augur abundant rain. To one side of the well is a newly erected church next to 48 wooden crosses of different sizes. Ten more crosses stand near the edge of the well, while a further 20 covered a rocky promitory which jutted out over the well and is used as a platform from which to make offerings. One of Sepulveda's informants believed at the bottom of the well were four caves each of which had a garden in which every type of seed, including the different coloured maize plants grew, tended over by a giant. The same informant compared the appearance of the giant to the masks worn by the *tlocololeros*. Each giant was associated with one of the winds that blow from each of the cardinal directions: that from the east with the good rains; that from the west the provoker of dryness; that in the north, ice and snow and the bad rain; while the southern giant could send either good or bad rain.

<sup>3</sup> The *Tlocololeros* are also performed in Guerrero in the communities of El Ocotito, Ostotempa and Chilpancingo (Day of Santa Cruz) and Atlixac (Day of San Isidro) (León, 1988). In Mochitlán a variant of the dance is performed on the 8th May.

<sup>4</sup> See also Apaéz (1995: 92-94) for a similar description of the agricultural cycle in this region.

nae to a full and better understanding of the region's popular religion and associated practices.

The *Tlocoleros* were witnessed at the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico City on 12th December 1981, and subsequently in Chilapa on the 25th April 1983. A different performance incorporating *ocelotl* masquerades was recorded in Zitlala on the 9-10th September 1982. The performances witnessed in Chilapa and Mexico City were sufficiently similar with others recorded in Atliaca to merit them being susceptible to a common interpretation. The symbolism and structure of events underlying these and other performance of the *Tlocoleros* will be compared to what might be considered their pre-Hispanic antecedents to elicit the possible significance of the dance-drama within the catholic ceremonial cycle operative within these communities in the 1980s.

## Los Tlocoleros

The notion of a dance drama as employed here, refers to those narrative performances which are articulated and choreographed by a written or oral text and are usually accompanied by music. Dramatic performances were already prevalent in pre-Hispanic Mexico and after the Conquest, provided a useful medium for the Spanish propagation of their own faith. Subsequently, most of what could be considered pre-Hispanic ritual performance tied to a ceremonial calendar, *tonalpohualli*, disappeared as a result of the Spanish ethnicide against the political and religious elite of the societies they encountered. Nevertheless, more rudimentary, local beliefs related to agriculture appear to have survived the centuries of evangelisation and became syncretised in catholic forms of drama (Shelton, 1994: 99).<sup>5</sup> Such performances are regarded as dances in as

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<sup>5</sup> The area is full of miraculous saints and virgins. El Señor del Nicho in Tlapa, was supposedly found in a nearby cave; The Santo Entierrito of Xalpatláhuac attracts large pilgrimages from throughout the state; while Chilapa has Santa Severina and San Dimas (Muñoz, 1963: 151-152). San Nicolás, the patron saint of Zitlala, is said to have first appeared on the peak of the sacred mountain Zitlaltepec radiating light, therefore identifying

much as the movement of their participants is formally and systematically regulated, in this instance to represent the story of the hunt and sacrifice of the *ocelotl*. In some communities of this part of Guerrero, written texts, some old, others which have been recopied over and over again from earlier sources, can still be found and are guarded either by the leader of a dance group or a priest. When a dance is identified with a particular saint, the text may be kept by the *mayordomo* of that image and passed to his successors, or when part of parish records, may form part of the municipal or state archive. In as much as the orchestration of the dance is predicated on the dramatic enactment of events described in narratives, such performances, even when they are orchestrated with a limited or non verbal content may be analysed as texts whose structure can be elucidated by the same means applicable to oral or textual genres of discourse.

Toor (1979: 360) stated that once the *Tlocololeros* was performed with twenty actors, but since the first publication of his description in 1947 and 1982, when I saw the dance in Chilapa, its participants seem to have declined to eleven. This notwithstanding, the decline in the number of participants was restricted to those who played the *tlocololeros* and does not seem to have led to the demise of any of the other roles described by Toor. The structure of the dance-drama can therefore be regarded as having been conserved. The protagonists are the *ocelotl*, called simply *tigré*; Maya the leader of the hunters; his assistant Salvador and a black bitch, Maravilla, who helps track down the *tigré*. The remainder of the participants take the role of the *tlocololeros* or farmers who prepare the fields for planting. Each of these bears the name of a domesticated plant (El Chile Verde, El Calabacero)<sup>6</sup> or an animal connected with the maize

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himself, with the pre-Hispanic deities that were previously venerated there (Andraka, 1983: 46). All these miraculous images are used in processions to supplicate the rains.

<sup>6</sup> In Copanatoyac, on the day preceding the Day of San Marcos, a group of men and women convene a private meeting to prey and make offerings of *atole*, *tomales* and birds. Each of the participants has a ceremonial name. The men bearing such names as Yehyecatl (wind); Cosemalotl (rainbow); Tlatlazini (lightening); Quiantzin (rain); and Tonacayotl (maize). The women are more commonly associated with the different seeds (Muñoz, 1963: 154-155).

field or *milpa*. In addition there appears a clown, *huezquistle*, who parodies the other participants as well as making fearful grimaces against the onlookers.

The *tlocololeros* wear smocks and trousers made from rough burlap. They wear wide-brimmed straw hats and carry a whip in their right hand which they crack over the padded left arm of their companions. Their faces are hidden beneath large red or white painted masks with extended grimacing mouths, and sometimes, protruding tongues; noses are thick and animal-like; while eyes are engorged with blue pupils. The *tigré* masquerade consists of a yellow, spotted wooden mask worn with a yellow suit with spots painted on it and to which a long tail has been attached. The tail is held in the hands and at the beginning of the performance is swung at the audience. Maravilla wears a black dog mask. In Chilapa, children who while not part of the performance, may also dress as *tigrés*, carry a string threaded with metal bottle tops which they use as a rattle. The music for the dance drama itself is provided by violins.

The dance drama, led by its *captain*, opens with the *tlocololeros* making movements to imitate the sowing of a field. Next they turn to Maya telling him how the *tigré* has brought them misfortune by devastating their fields. These narrations include much local knowledge and incorporate contemporary and historical events centred on the town or village. The deeds of its townspeople are exaggerated and sometimes given satirical expression, relating them to the deeds of the *tigré* who is crudely mimicked. After hearing all this Maya summonses his assistant Salvador whom, together with the dog, begin their search for the *tigré*. The second part of the dance-drama enacts the hunt of the *tigré*. After being tracked by Maravilla, Maya and the *tigré* enter into a fight which ends with the beast's death. Maya has Salvador measure its skin so they can ascertain its value. In the third and final part of the dance drama once skinned, the *tigré's* body is burnt. The *tlocololeros* divide into pairs and begin a dance to celebrate the death of the *tigré* in which they crack their whips over each other's left arm. As the music quickens, the steps of the dancers become more frenzied and the cracking of their whips more frequent and less discriminatory. According to Toor (1979: 360), a fire is made and then extinguished, causing the *tlocololeros* to search for the culprit and crack their whips, in imitation of the lightening that might rekindle it. From this Toor (1979: 360) goes on to surmise that the dance is not so

much concerned with the sowing of the field, but with clearing it, with the noise of the whips imitating the crackling made by the burning trees and shrubs. Mompradó and Gutierrez (1976: 118) give the meaning of the Nahuatl *tlacolotl* as 'land cleared for agriculture and planted', suggesting the *tlocoleros* might well be re-enacting both the clearing and sowing of the fields ready for the commencement of the growing season and rains; an identification confirmed by the general purpose of the San Marcos celebrations in which the *tlocoleros* perform. However, the dance is also performed on the Day of Santa Cruz, a few days later, as well as by the side of the sacred well at Ostotempa, suggesting that in these contexts it serves as a more general petition for the rains.<sup>7</sup> (figure 1 to 4).

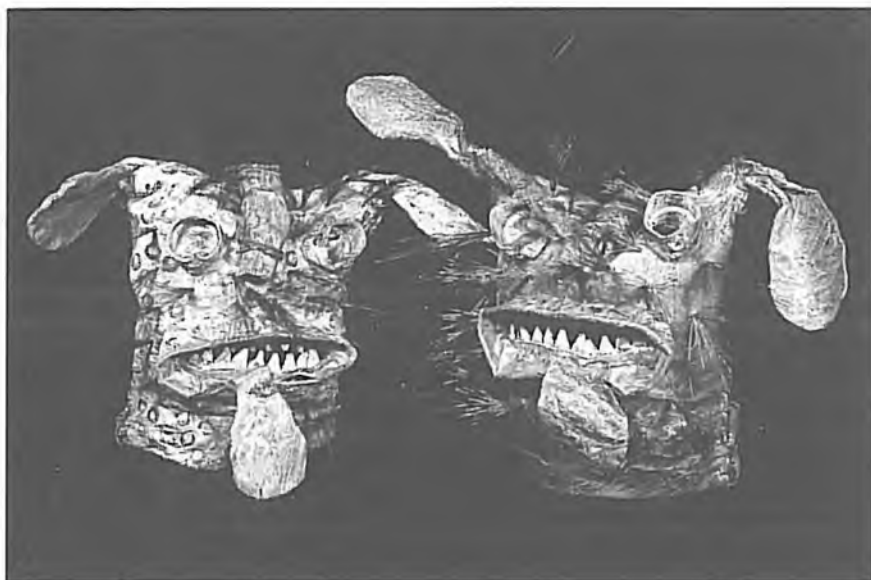


Figure 1. Leather helmet masks used in ritual combats. Zitlala, 1970s  
[Collection of the author].

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<sup>7</sup> The performance of the *Tlocoleros* is not entirely restricted to these two feast days. Furthermore, even in Guerrero a tiger masquerade may appear at other points in the agricultural season. In Atzacoyaloyán and Temalacatzinco, for example, a lone tiger presents the first maize cobs to the church or civil authorities (Lechuga, 1991: 49).





Figure 2. Masked tlocolero dancers, Church of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico DF. 1981.



Figure 3. Los Tlocoleros, Chilapa, Guerrero. 1983.



Figure 4. El Tigré, standing next to masked tlocoleros. Church of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico DF. 1981.

## Variations

### Los Tecuanes

This version of the combat play between a *tigré* and its hunter employs more roles than the *Tlocoleros* and has a more complex narrative structure. The protagonists include the *capitain* of the dance armed with a wooden rifle; two healers or doctors; a lancer; five old men, *peons* of a *cacique*; two dogs; two deer and four buzzards (*quebrantahuesos*), and a transvestite clown. It opens with a *tigré* stalking and eventually killing a deer. The hunters then join together to track and attack the *tigré*. The *tigré* dies in its cave and its body is taken to a place surrounded by buzzards, a role usually reserved for children who, in the last scene, encircle and dance around the fallen feline. *Los Tecuanes* is widely performed throughout the

Republic and has been reported from the states of Chiapas, Guerrero, Mexico, Morelia, Michoacan, Oaxaca and Puebla. In Guerrero it is found in the communities of Morelos and Zaragoza (Muñoz, 1963: 160); Olinalá (Tibón, 1960: 109-110); Apetlanca (15th May), Coatepec Costales (3rd May), Cocula (3rd May), Chiautzingo (3rd May) and Tecoyo (20th May) (León, 1988); as well as in San Francisco Cuauzosco in Mexico State (Villalobos, 1975). As with the Dance of the *Tlocoleros*, the *Tecuanes* is sometimes performed at ceremonies which fall outside that part of the agricultural cycle connected to the clearing of the fields and the petition of the rains.

### Combat of Yellow and Green Tigrés

Not a dance drama but an actual contest included here not only because of its derivative symbolism but its articulation with the same set of religious ceremonies. These ritualised combats take place in Zitlala, about 24 kms from Chilapa on the feast day of Santa Cruz and involve the inhabitants of the town's three *barrios*, La Cabecera allied with San Mateo engaging in ritual bloodletting against members of San Francisco (cf. Andraka, 1983: 54). According to one person I interviewed in Zitlala, the different colour masks were reserved for members of the different *barrios*, orchestrating the ritual combat along strict *barrio* lines.<sup>8</sup> Masks are helmet-like in form and made of hard leather which must first be soaked in water overnight before they can be worn. Masks are painted either yellow or green with black dashes and have tufts of hair stuck into their surface. Mouths with jagged teeth are cut out at eye level to enable their wearers to see and surrounded by red lips. Cut out leather attachments are fixed for ears, nose and tongue. Eyes are made from small round mirrors.<sup>9</sup> Previously different groups of masquerades met on the crown of a nearby

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<sup>8</sup> Muñoz writing in the early 1960s reported that the masquerade suits and masks belonging to the various *barrios* were identical, apart from those of San Francisco, the poorer neighbourhood, being generally older and more damaged. The *barrio* affiliation of the combatants was indicated by those of San Francisco painting marks on their hands (1963: 153).

<sup>9</sup> In recent years, red masks have also begun to appear.

hill, El Crucero, which still continues to be the focus for ceremonies associated with the town's patron saint, San Nicolás Tolentino (8-10th September), though all ritual combats have been relocated to the central plaza where they can be supervised and prevented from being played out with the deadly enthusiasm that was sometimes noted in the past. Protagonists are armed with a heavy tied and carefully knotted rope which is used to strike their opponents. Each combat continues until one of the opponents has been knocked to the ground and surrenders himself to the other. A similar combat involving masked *tigré* men has been reported for the nearby town of Acatlán by Alonso (1982: 113-114); Saunders (1984: 77-81), and Apaéz (1995: 93-97). Here the combatants do not use the heavy knotted ropes, but their hands in obtaining victory over their opponents. The blood spilled during these combats is thought as an offering to supplicate the rains.<sup>10</sup>

These ceremonies involving *ocelotl* masquerades do not exhaust the full range of such dramatic representations in contemporary Mexico, but do provide thumb nail sketches of three of the best known examples.<sup>11</sup>

## Antecedents

The relations between the roles of the characters represented in these dramatic enactments bear many resemblances to those documented in pre-Hispanic cosmological narratives and rituals. Direct comparison however, is made difficult on at least two counts. First, the pre-Hispanic protagonists, similar to those in contemporary dance dramas, did not possess any one singular or general significance within either a specific geographic area or historical period. In the pre-Columbian world specific supernatural beings appear to have come into prominence and achieved their followings at particular times, but were later abandoned or re-integrated and re-adapted either at a different structural level within the same religious

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<sup>10</sup> In 1983 during the feast day of San Nicolás Tolentino two tigers collected the *teponaztli* and delivered it to the church. They played it, then climbed one of the towers and left offerings in the bell tower. Two days later they scaled the tower again to regain the offerings.

<sup>11</sup> Two leather helmet masks were acquired in Zitlala in 1983.

articulation or re-incorporated within a different configuration and invested with a new semantic content as a result of shifting political and military conditions. The proliferation of supernatural beings within post-classic Mexica society, for example, resulted from military adventurism which confiscated, re-established and centralised cults of the patron deities of their conquered subjects within the Tenochca capital itself. After Spanish colonisation and Christian evangelisation, a similar process led to the assimilation and identification of the powers and jurisdictions of pre-Hispanic deities with catholic saints and miraculous virgins and Christ figures (Shelton, 1994: 99-101). Although a large body of literature has been accumulated during the past century on this widespread process of transferral, the mechanisms underlying it and the relation between structural and semantic domains remains ill understood. Nevertheless, a comprehensive analysis of the significance of present day dramatic representations and symbolic motifs, must first take account of the historical development and changing structural and semantic significance of the protagonists within contemporary dance dramas.

A further difficulty arises with the Spanish colonial period because of the proliferation of significations which clustered around symbolic roles. As a result of the Spanish genocide against members of the pre-Hispanic elite, including priests, Indian cosmology was severely truncated, losing its importance as a means of state legitimation and signification and disintegrating into vernacular expressions usually tied to the agricultural or fertility concerns of the laity within local communities. Vastly different social, economic and political conditions introduced during the colonial period, but further changed after the Republic's independence and again after the Mexican Revolution, have provided fertile subjects which have been semantically expressed within dance dramas. Although at a morphological level, the roles contained within dance dramas may reveal symbolic similarities to their pre-Hispanic antecedents, when roles are taken together within a particular dance drama, they may encode quite different semantic meanings related to distinct sets of class and social structural relations characteristic of a particular region or epoch.<sup>12</sup> Any

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<sup>12</sup> The dialogue recorded for the Dance of the *Tecuani* in Coatepec Harinas in 1984 reveals a strong pre-Revolutionary flavour in which the *ocelotl* threatens the economic

reading therefore, of the structural relations between the different roles within a dance drama will necessarily be only one among others. Different interpretations may be collected from ecclesiastical sources, the protagonists themselves and the more politically adept members either belonging to a community or members of the wider national or international society.

It comes as no surprise that the first of these methodological problems stemming from historical ambiguity soon asserts itself in the analysis of the central role played by the *ocelotl* in these dance dramas. Despite the antiquity of feline symbolism, no ready agreement has ever been reached on the significance of the *ocelotl* within pre-Hispanic thought. For the earliest period (2000 B.C.- A.D. 300), Covarrubius (1957) argued that the *ocelotl* was regarded as a rain deity. Its iconography later provided a rich symbolic repetoir from which a pantheon of Olmec deities was generated. The *ocelotl* is therefore, the oldest mesoamerican deity. Others have argued that the Olmec did not possess any formal deities at all (Bernal, 1976), a position robustly refuted by Coe (1968) who distinguished six different types of deities and Joralemon (1971) who added four additional deities to the emerging reconstruction of the Olmec pantheon. Furst (1968) emphasised the transformatory nature of the *ocelotl* and associated it with shamanism. Luckert (1976) argued that the venera-

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basis of the hacienda. Class relations are strongly demarcated in the narratives. *Mayeso: Yo sou Mayoso, buenos tardes. Vengo de parte del Señor Salvadorche, que si le pueden hacer favor de ir a matar un animal que está acabando con su ganado. Juan Tirador: Quién es ese señor? Mayeso: Es el mas rico de por aquí. Juan Tirador: Va a pagar? Mayeso: Creo que sí, allí se arreglan. Juan Tirador: Vamos. (After they have killed the ocelotl). Juan Tirador: Ya regresamos, Don Salvadorche. Salvadorche: Ya volvieron, Juan Tiradores ... Comó les fue? Juan Tirador: Matamos el animal. Don Cleto: No, yo fui el que lo maté con mi cuarenta y cinco. Juan Tirador: No, no, los matamos los tres. Salvadorche: Cuál de los tres lo mató? Juan Tirador: Vengo pa' que lo veo. (They go to see the tecuani dead on the ground.) Juan Tirador: Tiene un becerro todavía. Don Cleto: También una gallina. Salvadorche: Sí, se los estaba comiendo. Lo que vamos a hacer es que le abren la pancita, le quiten la pielecita, para ver si me puede servir a mí... Juan Tirador: Qué mas va a querer de la pielecita? Salvadorche: Una carterita que esté de buen tamaño. Juan Tirador: Cómo de qué tamaño? Salvadorche: Pa' guardar billetes grandes. Juan Tirador: Cuáles billetes? Salvadorche: Monedas grandes, 'clacos'. 'chagollas', de todo (Mejía and Zavala, 1984: 4-15).*

tion of the *ocelotl* was imposed by the shaman-leaders of a hunter-gatherer society on a group they dominated which previously possessed a popular serpent cult. The stylised feline found in Olmec art is, according to this interpretation, not a jaguar at all but a formal representation of a serpent. Neither the stylistic or possible symbolic affinity between the feline and serpent is disputed by any of these authors, and uncertainty over the historical relations between these two motifs does not detract from their fundamental association. It is not the external historical circumstances underlying the process of iconographic convergence that are important here, but the affinity itself, which, as will be discussed later, is not unlike a similar ambiguous relationship between the *ocelotl* and the rain deities found in contemporary Nahua ceremonies in Guerrero.

Bernal (1976) has argued that regardless of its ontological nature, the recurrent Olmec *ocelotl* was the root for the post-classic central Mexican cults of the eagle and the *ocelotl*, with the eagle representing a sedentary society, and the *ocelotl* a society of hunter gatherers. According to Luckert these cults did not appear until late post-classic times and only in the *Codice Borgia* can they indisputably be considered to have ever been depicted as discrete societies.

The Olmec also associated the *ocelotl* with the earth and the dark, cold, wet caves which even today, along with mountain tops, are sometimes thought as the homes of rain deities. The relation between the earth and caves is strongly indicated in the identification between *ocelotl* and the earth monster, particularly when the mouth of the beast is shown head on as in reliefs I and IX in a cave near Chalcatzingo, where a wide cruciform mouth surmounted by two eyes and a nostril is depicted with plants sprouting from the corners of its four sides. The analysis of this motif as well as others from this Olmec site has led Grove (1970: 161) to note the close identification between caves, rain and fertility which reinforce the multivalent character of feline symbolism. The *ocelotl*, as Jorlman (1971) suggests, was the most important Olmec deity and its versatile iconography allowed it to incorporate a more extensive ideology of agricultural fertility. At this early period solar symbolism or any attempt to juxtapose it with an oppositional motif or symbol appear to have been absent. According to our present knowledge, Olmec cosmology appears to have been remarkable in its semantic and structural simplicity; both in its inclusiveness and in its avoidance of oppositional categories.

In the 13th century A.D., with the Mexica ascent in the Valley of Mexico, there emerged specialised cults devoted to individual deities each with their own ceremonies, regalia and priesthoods and particular articulations of knowledge which the state sought to systematically wield together within a theocratic style government. The time had long passed when the *ocelotl* alone could serve as the all inclusive symbol through which a whole corpus of knowledge conveying agricultural fertility could be encoded. By the post-classic period (A.D. 900-1520), if not before, the animal became closely associated with Tezcatlipoca, smoking mirror, the nocturnal aspect taken by Toniatuh, the sun, during the nightly journey it took through the underworld prior to its daily rebirth in the east. In the guise of Tezcatlipoca the *ocelotl* was still found associated with the interior of the earth; a terrestrial sun that no longer provided the heat and light for the human world. Among some contemporary indigenous groups the sun is referred to as 'the measurer', closely associated with judicial authority and a particular ethical attitude; the guardian of his subject peoples (as among the Chamula and Huichol). While the documentary evidence suggests Huitzilopochtli, the day-time sun of the Mexica was attributed similar qualities, an argument can be made to suggest Tezcatlipoca represented their negation. Tezcatlipoca was the exemplary, ferocious and cunning supernatural warrior and patron of the Mexica Order of the Jaguar Knights. He is described as the enemy; the planter of discord; encouraging sexual licence, but also appointed for taking confession. He was friend to the powerful and protector of the slave; master of all the things of this world (Sejourne, 1962: 88). More than demonstrate Tezcatlipoca's ambivalent nature, as Sejourne suggests, such attributes testify to his association with material things; the flesh; the physical body and the emotions which motivate them. Tezcatlipoca was a Mexica high god, invisible, omnipresent found in the sky, earth and underworld. He alone wielded the destiny of the world, taking away or bestowing fame, fortune, riches and honours on its inhabitants. Impoverishment and calamity were equally his to bestow as were abundance and riches (Barjau, 1991: 19-20). As master of the physical world, a world of forms all of which were impermanent and doomed to disappear, perhaps ultimately to be enveloped by the subterranean world of Mictlan, Tezcatlipoca, it is argued, was opposed to Tonatiuh / Huitzilopochtli associated with the non-material and lasting essences which constituted the only true and enduring reality.



Although unlike in Olmec times, the *ocelotl* was associated by the Mexica with the nocturnal aspect of the solar cult, his close connection with the earth were never disavowed. Tezcatlipoca's sojourn from west to east is reminiscent of his movement through a long cavern, a place the Olmec believed to be the *ocelotl*'s natural home, suggesting strong cultural continuities between pre-classic and post-classic Mexican civilisations. Thus, in Mexica cosmology the *ocelotl* not only retained its association with the earth, caves and agricultural fertility, but assumed the nocturnal aspects of a solar symbolism opposed to the celestial, day-time attributes represented by Tonatiuh / Huitzilopochtli. To ensure its regeneration the Sun must assume the *ocelotl* guise when undertaking its subterranean journey to the east. There, it is transformed again into the eagle which ascends back into the day-time sky. Following its descent into the underworld it fertilises the earth on which the life cycle of wild and domesticated plants depends.

A connection shared between the earth and fertility and the nocturnal aspect of the solar cult is found in their reiteration of the theme of re-birth; the diurnal resurrection of the Sun and the seasonal rebirth of the earth's vegetation. The diurnal cycle of birth, death and re-birth is reiterated in the annual seasonal cycle. It is through the *ocelotl*'s cavernous jaws that plant life returns in the growing season. While the nocturnal Sun represents the negation of his celestial opposite, he nevertheless connotes the positive values of terrestrial fertility, whereas on his transformation into the morally positive role of Huitzilopochtli he is seen as antagonistic to the earth.

This discussion on the relation between celestial and nocturnal suns; Huitzilopochtli and Tezcatlipoca, in the context of the diurnal cycles, leaves us better placed to understand the significance of another set of oppositions represented in Mexica thought by the juxtaposition of the eagle with the serpent. The eagle is, of course, a representation of the ascendant, celestial Sun, Tonatiuh / Huitzilopochtli, and its association with the light and heat of the dry season is still recognised in the Nahua community of Quechultenango, to the west of Tixtla and Chilapa.<sup>13</sup> In the

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<sup>13</sup> A mask now in the Horniman Museum, made in Quechultenango in the 1970s, is decorated on its top and bottom by an eagle devouring a snake.

same area the serpent conceived as its rival is associated with the wet season. Among the Huichol and Tepehuan, serpents are thought to enter agricultural plots, or are captured and placed there, to protect the maize from predators during the growing season. The serpent and eagle are identified with the wet and dry season respectively. The serpent ensures the birth, growth, maturation and ultimately the regeneration of maize, while the eagle, although participating in this cycle, also takes part in the reproduction of the sun. Neither the wet or dry season can successfully complete their regenerative cycles without the reconciliation and co-operation of the two principles usually seen as antagonistic and opposite. The celestial Sun is required to ripen and dry the maize towards the latter part of the wet season and beginning of the dry season. The transformation of the rain deities into terrestrial water allows the unobstructed passage of the sun through the celestial realm in the dry season. Returning again to the diurnal period, we can see similar relations of reciprocity pertaining to earth and sky. The earth allows the safe passage of the nocturnal sun through the underworld deep within her, while the celestial sun nourishes with light and warmth the plants that sprout from the earth's body. The eagle occupies a similar celestial position and shares a common solar symbolism both in the diurnal and seasonal temporal cycles. However, the position and significance of the *ocelotl* as the nocturnal sun associated with the earth in the diurnal cycle is replaced by the serpent in the seasonal cycle. Both the *ocelotl* and serpent appear to share a similar meaning within the contexts of each of their specific temporal cycles. Both the diurnal and seasonal cycles encode similar structural relations which are essential for the reproduction of agricultural fertility. These structural relations of opposition, mediation and reconciliation appear almost archetypal of mesoamerican cosmologies and related genres of discourse.

## Interpretation

The *ocelotl*'s core symbolism, its equivalence to the serpent, and its relation to the celestial and nocturnal suns and cycle of terrestrial fecundity have been described in sufficient detail to allow comparison with the dance dramas under current discussion. Although not all the elements in the antecedent pre-Hispanic beliefs necessary for an interpretation of the

*Tlocoleros* have yet been presented, this is nevertheless an opportune moment in the argument to return to the contemporary dance drama.

Although in contemporary dance dramas, it is the *ocelotl* who is ultimately vanquished, this is not achieved until the animal has repeatedly shown his wit and cunning in evading the farmers, as is recounted in the descriptions they give of their troubles to the hunters. The *ocelotl* is more of a nuisance than a danger. He endangers the maize by his scavenging, but does not eat it. No explanation is given about why the *ocelotl's* antics have been tolerated until the time the farmers employ the hunters to track him down, but a clue to the timing of the event may be provided by the wider ceremony in which the *Tlocoleros* is part. *Los Tlocoleros* is usually performed on the feast days of San Marcos and Santa Cruz, the time roughly when the work of the agricultural season begins. Other ceremonies taking place in the area also show a close connection with the beginning of the agricultural season. In Acatlán, on the day of San Marcos, seeds are presented for blessing (Alonso, 1982: 111), although many communities prefer to take their seeds to the shaman who preside at the sacred well at Ostotempa (Sepulveda, 1973:17); in Atliaca offerings and petitions for rain are made between the days of San Marcos and Santa Cruz (Sepulveda, 1973: 16); in Atlamajalcingo del Monte and Teocuitlapa sacrifices and offerings are made on the Day of San Marcos, while in Ahuacuotzingo and Tlapa ceremonies to implore the rain are performed on the Day of Santa Cruz (Muñoz, 1963: 154-5). The opening of *Los Tlocoleros*, when the farmers are shown complaining about the *ocelotl*, begins with them clearing their fields prior to sowing. The clumsy way the clearing is dramatised and the repeated intrusions that the *ocelotl* makes suggests the farmer's work is ineffectual; an ineffectuality that is not remedied until the *ocelotl* is finally tracked down and killed. The *ocelotl's* death; a death that might best be regarded as a sacrifice, corresponds then to the beginning of the wet or growing season.

In the drama of *Los Tecuanes*, it is not the fields that are ruined or the maize that is endangered, but the deer which the *ocelotl* tracks and kills. This Dance has been reported from San Francisco Cuauzosco, Mexico State, as being performed on the Day of El Señor del Santo Entierro, seven weeks after Easter, which corresponds with the beginning of the rains. Through its pre-Hispanic symbolism, the dance has been closely linked to *Los Tlocoleros* and it has been noted that the timing of both

dance dramas in which the *ocelotl* plays an ubiquitous role roughly coincides with the pre-Hispanic Mexica festivals of Hueytozostli, Tóxcatl and Teotleco dedicated to Tezcatlipoca and his closely connected affiliates, Chicomecoatl and Cinteotl, goddesses of sustenance and maize respectively (Villalobos, 1975: 19-20). Most of the surviving ceremonies concerned with the propitiation of the rains are in fact earlier than the pre-Columbian Mexica festival dedicated to Tezcatlipoca which took place during the month of Tóxcatl, from 20th May to 8th June in the Christian calendar. Nevertheless, the earlier festival of Hueytozostli, which had a particular appeal to farmers, when offerings were made to the rain god, Tlaloc, beginning on 30th April did coincide more closely with the current ceremonial round.

*Te-cuani*, in classical Nahuatl, signifies 'devourer of men', and was used to describe the *ocelotl* as a species of earth monster, first created to slay a race of giants (León-Portilla, 1956: 105). The deer in pre-Hispanic thought was closely connected to agriculture and in contemporary Huichol thought deer and maize are symbolically identical. The *ocelotl* in the dance of the *Tecuanes* threatens to destroy humanity by symbolically destroying its main staple. An alternative interpretation could be that the humanity which inhabited the fifth and current created world were said to have been made from maize. To kill the deer, the symbolic equivalent of maize, was therefore tantamount to destroying the people of that creation themselves.

The opposition between the deer and the *ocelotl* can also be seen as analogous to that which pertained between the solar deity Huitzilopochtli with whom the deer may have been closely affiliated<sup>14</sup> and the nocturnal sun, Tezcatlipoca, endowed with *ocelotl*-like attributes. Ethnographic evidence from Nahua communities of the northern part of the Sierra del Puebla confirms that maize continues to be closely identified with the Sun (Taggart, 1983: 140-1), while the Huichol may see the Sun as the father of the maize maidens (Shelton, 2001: 147). Such comparative examples not only help confirm the association between the *ocelotl* and deer as a

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<sup>14</sup> The deer was associated with the hunter god Mixcoatl-Camaxtli. However, Huitzilopochtli too was seen as a Bowman shooting arrows of light, giving him some of the attributes of a hunter himself.

transposition of the relation between Tezcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli, but provide good reasons to suppose the continual close relationship between indigenous Mexicans and maize, which is still capable of generating elaborate and important structural codes.

The central theme in both the dances of the *Tlocoleros* and *Tecuanes* is the hunt and ensuing fight between the *ocelotl* and those the farmers have engaged to pursue the beast. Although the farmers have been assumed to be human agents and the structural relations already described would make such an identification both plausible and concordant to the logic of the drama, their dress suggests a different identity. The attributes of the masks worn by the *tlocoleros* in Chilapa; their large grotesque features which place the rest of the body out of proportion and, together with their costume, make it appear bigger than normal, and their polychromatic masks suggest they are meant to be supernatural persons.

After the *ocelotl* has been vanquished, the *tlocoleros* form pairs and strike each other on the arms and shoulders with their whips to produce loud claps. If we agree with Toor (1979: 360) and Alonso (1982: 114) that the cracking sound of the whip represents thunder and lightening, there is a strong presumption that the *tlocoleros* themselves are rain deities. Furthermore, the cracking of their whips, an act anticipating the advent of rain, only occurs once the *ocelotl* has been killed, further suggesting that the dance orchestrates the transition between the dry and wet seasons. It is surely not coincidental that the four rain deities, each associated with the rains and winds from the four cardinal directions, that inhabit the well at Ostotempa are also said to be giants (Sepulveda, 1973: 11).

A set of five dance masks said to represent the *tlocoleros* and used in the same dance, collected from San Francisco on the Balsas River in Guerrero, however, have quite different attributes from those used by the Chilapa masqueraders. These masks have a raffia braid that encircles a rather crudely carved anthropomorphic creature whose nostrils and extending fangs identify it clearly as a serpent. The close associations which are made in many parts of mesoamerica between serpents and rain further strengthens the case for regarding the *tlocoleros* as rain deities. However, the roles played by the *tlocoleros* each carries its own name which suggests that their characters are more complex still. Names are taken from cultivated plants, combining together the subjects of the ritual with the agencies for their renewal.

The rain deities are not themselves unconditionally good and if angered they may deliver torrential rainfall which might wash the seeds away or bring strong winds and hail which could destroy crops, hence a cock is sacrificed to them. In Ostotempa, the bird is thrown into the well as the dance is being executed. It is thought important that the bird does not hit the rocks as it falls, but reaches the bottom unscathed. In the community of Petlacala a cock or goat is sacrificed and the its blood offered a stone deity which represents the rain deity Chac. A prayer said during the sacrifice associates the animal's different organs with the well being of particular crops; kidneys for beans; the head for squash; the hoofs for other crops, and the heart for the rain alone (Oettinger and Parsons, 1982: 376-377).

The death of the *ocelotl*, as the periodic re-enactment of the drama makes clear, is temporary and seasonal. The episode in the *Tlocololeros* where the hunter measures the length of the dead beast is concerned only with its physical death. Indeed, in the case of the *Tecuanes*, the final episode shows the *ocelotl* surrounded by birds usually associated with the celestial day-time aspect of the Sun, as if the beast was awaiting a non-physical resurrection until it would again assume its physical identity at the close of the wet season. The hunt and destruction of the *ocelotl* was not simply to prevent it damaging the fields, but to provide a sacrifice. The death of the *ocelotl* can be interpreted as a dramatisation of a sacrifice to the earth, a means of replenishing it or even fertilising its womb to bear the seeds of the planting season.

In this interpretation the *ocelotl* occupies two distinct roles. At the beginning of the dance drama he stalks the earth trampling underfoot and disrupting the cultivation of the fields. The *ocelotl* is strident and aggressive, while the earth is passive and the actions of the cultivators ineffectual. In this part of the dance drama the *ocelotl* can be compared to the pre-Hispanic descendent sun, Tezcatlipoca, as he travels through the earth to return to the east. This suggests that the descendent sun impregnated the earth and his strong sexuality is an acknowledged and often repeated characteristic of his nature, as is his role as one of the original creator deities. Furthermore, as Tepeyolotl, 'heart of the mountain', the *ocelotl* was closely associated with the earth. In his second role, the *ocelotl* succumbs to his fate as a sacrificial offering and, in the example of the Dance of the *Tecuanes*, is surrounded by celestial birds ready to carry him hea-

venwards. His sacrifice fertilises the earth, but more than this, his non-material resurrection allows him to intercede in more reciprocal relationships by nourishing the rain mothers who, in turn nourish the maize, as well as by directly caring for the maize by giving her warmth and light.<sup>15</sup> The *ocelotl* therefore, during his diurnal role and prior to his death, by fertilising the earth is genitor of the maize, while in his celestial aspect, by nourishing the rains through the sacrifice of his physical body and providing warmth and light to the maize, he performs the role of pater. The *ocelotl*, and therefore the Sun, is thus revealed as the father of the maize whose nocturnal and celestial attributes are complimentary in engendering and bringing to maturity the young maize.

In these dance dramas, as in his post-classic Mexica guise as Tezcatlipoca, the *ocelotl* remains omnipresent and central to the cycle of creation. As Tezcatlipoca can be interpreted as encompassing the whole of creation; himself constituted with other faces representing Tonatiuh, Huitzilopochtli and even Miclantecuhtli, lord of the underworld, the *ocelotl* too possesses more than one guise. In our interpretation he is both the devourer of the world (representing the dry season) and its replenisher (offering himself as sacrificant to entice the wet season); his underworld aspect fertilises the earth, while in his celestial guise he brings the warmth and light necessary for the growth of maize and other crops. He is, in one sense, the stable, unchanging principle of creation, which causes and orchestrates all else to change. In pre-Columbian astronomy, Tezcatlipoca may have been associated with the polar star, the one celestial body that appeared to be static and constant and which may have been identified with Omeyoacan, in which all disunity; all oppositions and contradictions were reconciled; the place of duality where dwells the creator. Urse Major was also identified with Tezcatlipoca and called the 'tiger' (González Torres, 1979: 124), while in the south, the Maya saw the sky as the *ocelotl's* skin and the stars as his spots. According to Abrego (1985: 12) the movement of the constellation Urse Major, the Great Bear, around the Pole Star was used to plot the spring, summer, autumn and winter equinoxes and solstices, as well as provide the referent by which the car-

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<sup>15</sup> In Acatlán, it is the dead who are credited with bringing the rains (Alonso, 1982: 115).

dinal directions were designated. The *ocelotl* remained therefore at the very heart of mesoamerican cosmology right up to the Spanish Conquest. The agricultural ceremonies of the sierra Guerrerense accord him a similar structural position which, in one sense, subordinates the Christian pantheon to him (figure 5 and figure 6).

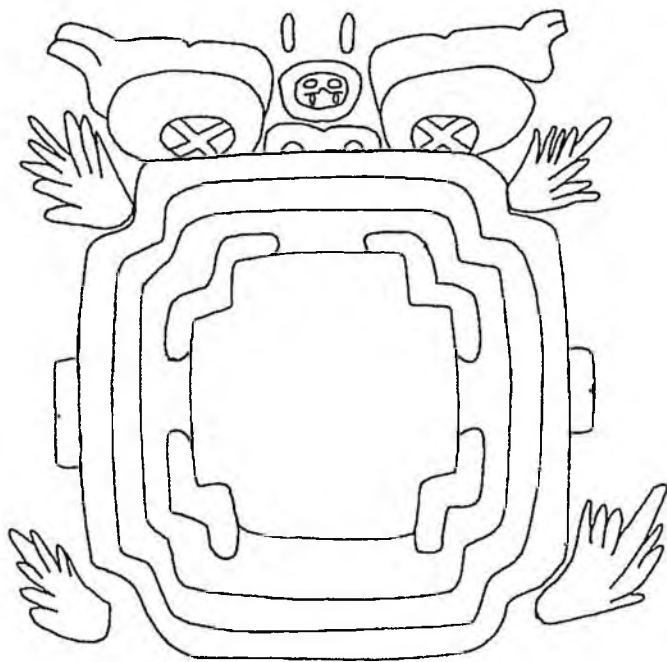


Figure 5. Relief IX . Frontal view of God I with flame eyebrows above eyes and cross bands in each iris. Between the eyes, above the snout, a round plaque depicts God X. The ocelotl is shown with a monstrous wide open, fanged mouth, with vegetation sprouting from each corner. Olmec (2000 B.C. - A.D. 300), Chalcatzingo, Guerrero.

An Olmec depiction of a flayed *ocelotl* skin depicts it covered not with spots but crosses. The cross in pre-Hispanic thought, *ollin*, is a symbol of totality representing the conjunction of the sky, earth and underworld and four cardinal points and centre. It is Omeyoacan, the place of



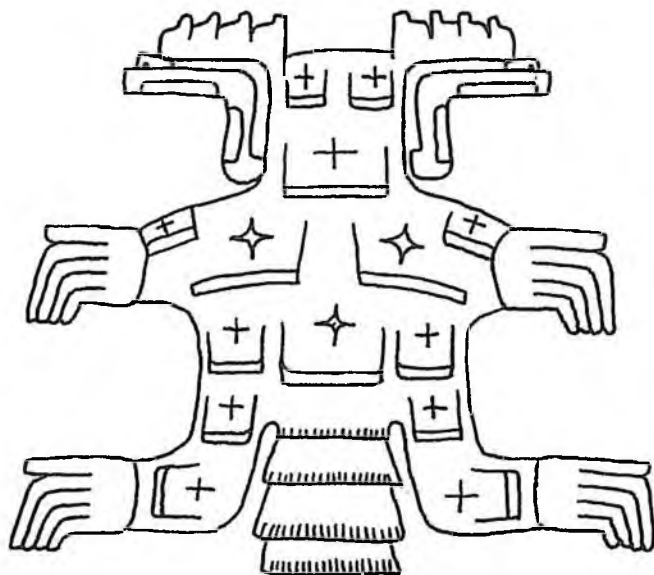


Figure 6. Jaguar pelt decorated with ollin signs. The design is from the back of a seated ceramic figure identified as God I. Olmec (2000 B.C. - A.D. 300), Atlihuayan, Morelos.

duality; the origin and end; the place of creation, where the supreme deity, Tezcatlipoca, resides. It is known that the *ollin* / cross symbol survived the conquest, as did the jaguar, and was carved onto the crown of the Virgin of the Capilla Posa at the ex-convent of Huexotzingo (Abrego, 1985: 18), just as jaguar knights were depicted on church murals at Ixmiquilpan. This identification of the sign *ollin* with the cross, reaffirms the articulation of the sign of movement with the *ocelotl* in the ceremonies of the Santa Cruz. The proliferation of crosses at the well in Ostotempo and the miraculous crosses in the churches of Atitlán, Zitlala, Coatepec Costales and elsewhere to which the jaguar allows himself to be sacrificed, is too coincidental to represent anything less than the survival and integrity of the significance of the *ocelotl* as a central figure within vernacular Christianity.

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