The Feathered Serpent in Oaxaca

An Approach to the Study of the Mixtec Codices

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The Mixteca region of the Mexican states of Oaxaca, Puebla, and Guerrero is the home of one of the largest Native American groups in southern Mesoamerica (Fig. 1). Over 250,000 Mixtec speakers live in the dozens of small communities scattered throughout the high, dry lands of the Mixteca Alta, the cool forested mountains of the Mixteca Alta, and the steamy tropical plains of the Mixteca de la Costa. In addition to the quarter of a million Mixtecs in the homeland, an equal number inhabit the urban sprawl of Mexico City and farm labor camps in the United States, as grinding poverty, soil erosion, and other factors have forced many thousands to migrate.

I had the privilege of living in one Mixtec community, Santiago Nuyoo (pronounced New-yoo), a town of about 2500 persons straddling the mountaneous Alta and the tropical Costa. There I met the storytellers Fausto Modesto Velasco, Guadalupe Rojas, and the late Lorenzo Rojas, as well as my good friend Marcial Pérez, Indalecio Velasquez, Fernando Pérez Sarabia, and Juan López Nuñez. This article is based on the stories, ideas, and drawings they have shared with me, and could never have been written without them.

Besides its large indigenous population and the diversity of its climates, the Mixteca is also known as the home of one of the most exceptional traditions of manuscript illumination to be developed in the New World. Over the centuries prior to the arrival of the Spanish, Mixtec scribes produced a distinctive corpus of screenfold "picture books," or codices, which greatly influenced other Mesoamerican writing styles. Several of these codices have been preserved, and tell us of the gods the Mixtec worshipped, the ceremonies the Mixtec celebrated, the royal pedigrees of their rulers, and the deeds of their heroes. The surviving codices are unique in Mesoamerica, since they complement one another in the information they contain, and several of them are among the few manuscripts from the New World that actually predate the conquest. This means that unlike native documents produced after the conquest, they come down to us undiminished by Spanish colonial influence, an influence that, in the course of seventy to eighty years, erased this exceptional tradition of writing and manuscript illumination.

Even though the unique value of the codices has long been appreciated, the lack of any kind of auxiliary text explaining the content of the Mixtec pictorials (such as the Rosetta Stone or Bishop Landa's account of Maya hieroglyphs) has made the process of decipherment extremely difficult.

(Smith 1973). An approach which suggested itself during the course of my fieldwork in Nuyoo was to investigate the pictorial conventions of the ancient Mixtec through an analysis of contemporary Mixtec drawings and artwork. There are sound theoretical and empirical grounds for assuming that, given continuity between speakers of a language, continuity will also exist in the way the world is perceived and in the way these perceptions are represented. Since there is a close relationship between the Mixtec spoken at the time the codices were produced and that of today, there is reason to suspect that present-day Mixtec speakers will perceive, organize, and categorize objects in a way similar to their Pre-Classic ancestors.

While to my knowledge no folk tradition of visual representation exists in the Mixteca, it has been a longstanding practice of ethnohistorians to ask the people they live with to draw aspects of their natural, social, and cultural milieu. With this goal in mind, several hundred drawings were collected in Nuyoo, in which people were asked to portray such things as hills, rivers, lakes, celestial objects, birds and other animals, marriages, processions, burials, demons, and gods. As can be seen in Figure 2, which compares a contemporary rendering of a line of hills and a
line of hills depicted in the Codex Vienna, and in Figure 3, which shows a woman sitting in Nuyoo and one sitting in the Codex Nuttal, the similarities in pictorial conventions are sometimes striking. This suggests that there is a cultural, perceptual element in Mixtec manuscript painting, an element which continues to persist even after the deaths of the last of the Mixtec painters.

Here I use some of the drawings made by Fernando Pérez Sandías and Juan López Núñez, along with the accounts of Fausto Modesto Velasco and other men and women in Nuyoo, to examine a figure which is frequently portrayed in the codices, the feathered serpent. The feathered serpent, best known perhaps for its association with the Central Mexican god Quetzalcóatl, can be found in the art of all the high cultures of Mesoamerica, from the earliest examples of the Olmecs to the last manuscripts produced in the native style during the colonial period (Fig. 5). Even though the feathered serpent is found in the artistic imagination of Mesoamericans for centuries, we know very little about this mysterious creature, called the koo sari (pronounced coh saw-vee), or "serpent of the rain" in Nuyoo. Nuyoo people have many important observations to make about the koo sari, which will help us to understand both the nature of this creature, and why it is represented in the ways it is.

The Feathered Serpent

When people in Nuyoo describe the feathered serpent, they often emphasize its large size, with estimates of its length ranging from two to twenty meters. Drawings of the koo sari (Figs. 4, 8) demonstrate that there is variation in its form. Some people see it as cigar-shaped, like a giant earthworm, while others regard it as more reptilian. As is true for the ancient Aztecs, Maya, and other peoples of Mesoamerica, the koo sari is feathered (koo tami). It has luminous, multi-colored plumes which people compare to the feathers of a rooster's tail. The plumes are depicted as sprouting from the head of the koo sari (Fig. 4), as often is the case in Precolombian art, or from a wing-like structure on its side (Fig. 6). Nuyootecos also say that the koo sari has a shiny skin, which glistens, as one man put it, "like a pool of water when the light strikes it.

Many people in Nuyoo have seen feathered serpents, some when they pass above, flying through the air, while others have caught a glimpse of one when it suddenly emerged from a pond or marsh. When a koo sari flies, it is surrounded by rain clouds, which is said to be its back. It thus always moves in the midst of a storm. In fact, it is in stormy weather that people say they have seen them. Tata Fausto tells of the time a koo sari flew over him when he was out weeding a cornfield on the side of a hill. It had been a clear day, but as the koo sari drew near, the sky began to darken, and rain fell. For the time the koo sari was overhead, the cornfield was lashed by a violent rainstorm. Tata Fausto had just enough time to get a mat over himself and crouch under it. As he struggled to keep the mat from blowing away, he peered out and saw the koo sari go by, wriggling like a fish. Once the koo sari cleared the top of the hill, the rain diminished and the sky began to lighten. Within moments the storm ended, the clouds disappeared, and the sun shone.

As Tata Fausto's experience suggests, the koo sari is associated with violent and destructive storms. People can point out the area in Nuyoo where a koo sari once demolished a house that lay in its path, and many emphasize the danger of its thrashing tail which may knock down trees and cause landslides.

It is important to realize that the koo sari is not a true god in Nuyoo. The saints in the church and other obviously Prehispanic deities such as the bacan sari (rain god) are considered to be dios or divinities, but not the koo sari. Nor do people make prayers and sacrifices to the koo sari for rain, as they do for the saints and bacan sari. It is rather a koo, or animal, and as much a part of the local fauna as an opossum or deer. It is rare, like a puma, but an animal nonetheless. Many consider it a kiti la'tei, or "a humble animal," in that it does not generally cause problems for people. Some say, however, that it will gobble up sheep, goats and cattle that stray near their place where it lives.

While the koo sari is not considered to be a god, it is said to be ii or "delicate," an adjective often used to describe the saints and other deities, but also things which are fragile and easily damaged. The koo sari is ii not only because it is an animal which is especially beneficial to humans, but also because harming it invites disaster. One story tells of several hunters who killed a koo sari in neighboring Santa Lucia Monteverde. After it died, the surrounding trees, shrubs, and grasses began to dry up and die. To this day the spot is barren and lifeless, and some say that no rain ever falls there. The important and fragile link the koo sari sustains with the surrounding flora makes many people concerned for the fertility of their crops. This attitude can be seen in another story told about the koo sari, in which it landed on the roof of the house of a man in the Mixtec town of Chalcatongo. As the story goes, the weight of the animal threatened to crush the house, so the owner tried to scare it away. The koo sari would not budge, so the man went inside and took out his rifle and shot it. The animal fell off the roof and died of its wounds. Soon after, a nearby pond dried up, and it stopped raining in the area. The corn, beans, and squash which the people of Chalcatongo had sown began to wither and die, and the harvest was lost. Everyone blamed the man who had shot the koo sari for this misfortune, and they became so upset that they dragged him out of his house one day and lynched him.

The close connection between the koo sari and plant life can also be seen in the drawings, as the artists explained that the seeds of various plants, such as corn, wheat, coffee, beans, and squash, can be found on the skins of the koo sari, "as if they were painted there."
The place sign of Coixtlahuaca from the Codex Ixtlan, which is a copy of the Post-conquest Lienzo of Coixtlahuaca.

In addition to its connection with plant fertility, the koo savi is also associated with the beginning of the rainy season. The feathered serpent begins to fly in the months of May and June, as it is no longer necessary to replenish the misture. The whole process may take several days, and there are many stories of people like the man from Chokatongo who had the misfortune to live close to the site of a koo savi, but it is not uncommon for them to be present in the area. In some of these accounts, the people managed to drive the animal away before it flooded them out. In others, the people were not so lucky, and had to move away. One man told me how a koo savi once tried to make its home on a hilltop overlooking Mexico City. The government was forced to take action, since the rain that fell was flooding many homes. However, the area around its new home then bursts with fertility. Flowers bloom, crops begin to bear fruit, and other plants and shrubs grow lush. Meanwhile, the old home of the koo savi slowly dries up, as it is no longer necessary to replenish the misture.

According to Nuyoo teecos, a koo savi once lived in a pool below a large waterfall to the northeast of the town center. This pool was important because it was there that people would take newly born infants to be "baptized" so that they would become shamans (teco savi). The children were placed in a wooden box, and set out in the swirling waters of the pool. If the mist rising from the water had a reddish tint, "like the light of the setting sun," then the child would die. If the mist appeared white, then the child would live, and grow to be a powerful shaman. While the child was floating in the pool, the koo savi would emerge and swim over to the box. It would then "bathe" the child by licking it with its tongue. This would give the future shaman a special relationship with the rain which he would be able to summon through prayers and sacrifices.

The place of the koo savi in Nuyoo teecos should be mentioned. The koo savi, since it is a koo, or snake, has a phallic association. In fact, the effect the koo savi has on plant growth is compared to that which males have on females when they engage in the sexual act, as the earth is considered to form the "womb" of a developing seed (a wet, germinating seed is compared to a pregnant woman), and rain which is carried by the koo savi functions much like semen in generating growth. This same theme can be seen in the association of the koo savi with birds. The koo savi is bird-like because it flies through the air and has beautiful feathers.
(which Nuyootecos compare to the
tail feathers of a rooster, an animal
widely viewed in Mexico as the
epitome of male virility). Birds are
considered to be the purest and
most beautiful of animals, which
corresponds to Nuyooteco valuation
of male sexuality. The sky, the
domain of the birds, is also a
distinctly male arena. The deities
which are associated with the sky,
such as the hu'ın sati, carry
symbols of masculinity, such as a
machete and ax. In short, the koo sati,
linked with the birds, the sky, and
life-generating rain, is an expression
of the processes which make the
natural world fertile, and as such is
a sexually charged figure, intimit-
ately connected with the male role
in procreation.

Conclusion

A longstanding tradition in Meso-
american anthropology, dating at
least to the time of Alfred Tozzer
and The University Museum’s own
Daniel Brinton, has been the use of
the observations of the Indian
popules of Mexico and Guatemala
to aid in the interpretation of Pre-
columbian texts. As the discussion
of the Nuyooteco koo sati indi-
cates, contemporary Mixtec folk-
lore and classification can expand
our understanding of Preconquest
Mixtec mythology and symbolism
preserved in the codices. Talking
to people like Tata Fausto Modesto
Velaseo affords us an insight into
the connection the feathered ser-
pent has with rain, plant fertility,
the changing landscape in a tec-
tonically active region, and ideas
about gender.

Beyond aiding in the interpreta-
tion of the content of Precolum-
bian texts, the material presented
here shows us that contemporary
Mixtec peoples can help us address
stylistic questions about ancient
manuscripts. As the drawings repro-
duced illustrate, many of the stylis-
tic elements found in the codices
occur in Nuyooteco drawings, des-
pite the fact that the contemporary
authors are separated from their
ancestors by at least 450 years. The
remarkable similarity between the
drawings made by Mixtec Indians
today and those by their ancestors
centuries ago can be attributed, in
part, to the fact that what is repre-
sented has not changed greatly.

Thus women continue to sit in the
same way today as they did in
Prehispanic times, on the floor with
their legs folded under them and to
one side.

There may, however, also be a
much deeper, perceptual reason, a
way of looking at the world that is
fundamentally Mixtec. The simi-
larities between the depictions of
mountain chains by people in
Nuyoo and the artists of the Codex
Nuttall suggest that the Mixtec
represent the physical world in a manner
not necessarily inherent in the ob-
jects themselves, but instead based
in the Mixtec experience of their
environment, and perhaps in catego-
ries of relationships between
objects which are rooted in Mixtec
language and discourse. We need
to identify more Mixtec artists such
as Juan López Nuñez and Fernan-
do Perez Sarabia who can help
us explore ancient Mixtec canons
of representation, just as contem-
porary speakers of Mixtec aid in
understanding the morphology and
phonology of the Mixtec spoken in
the past, and contemporary story
tellers assist in interpreting Pre-
hispanic myths.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank
Laura Junker for aid in
editing and for
preparing the maps and
drawings. The research
upon which this article is
based was carried out
with the aid of grants
from the Boyer Fund,
the Department of
Anthropology of the
University of
Pennsylvania, and the
Wenner-Gren
Foundation.

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