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| ACTA CLASSICA<br>UNIV. SCIENT. DEBRECEN. | LIII. | 2017. | pp. 179–195. |
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## THE THREE SOULS OF THE OTOMI<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract:* The study of documental sources from New Spain (today Mexico) provides a window into the beliefs of the Otomi people regarding what is called ‘soul’ in Western culture. To begin, I shall explain who these people were and how they interacted with their Nahua neighbors in central Mexico. Then, I analyze the words, in the Nahuatl and Otomi languages, belonging to semantic fields that relate to the Christian concept of the soul. We find many calques, or semantic loans, revealing that these two language groups shared beliefs in multiple animic essences that could survive the death of the body. Finally, I present evidence from colonial period documental sources, showing how the beliefs of the Otomi were affected by the teachings of Christian priests. In these texts, one may observe the resistance of the Otomi people as a reaction to the efforts of the missionaries to impose Catholic doctrine and ritual on the native population.

*Keywords:* New Spain, Catholicism, missionaries, Nahuatl, Otomi, animic essences

### The Otomi and Nahua in central Mexico<sup>3</sup>

To understand the history of the Otomi people, we must look beyond the negative stereotypes that are ubiquitous in the historiography of central Mexico since the time of the Spanish conquest. To begin, conceptual variables should be treated separately. A language group is not necessarily a culture, nor an ethnic group, nor a nation. Language is but one of several elements that constitute the complex mosaic we call ‘culture,’ together with other aspects of learned,

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<sup>1</sup> This article is the English translation, expanded and updated, of an unpublished paper, presented by the author in Castilian, in the Colloquium on Beliefs about the Soul in New Spain, organized by the Institute of Historical Research, National Autonomous University of Mexico, in Mexico City, the 18<sup>th</sup> of August 2010.

*Nota bene:* I use here the word ‘Castilian’ to refer to the language often called Spanish, since there are several other Spanish languages, recognized by linguists and by the laws of Spain.

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<sup>3</sup> The content of this section is based on chapter 2 of my doctoral dissertation (Wright-Carr 2005b, vol. 1, 17-275), where a more profound discussion and abundant references may be found. For a summary of the main conclusions, see Wright-Carr 2005a.

shared behavior and ideology, such as the production and preparation of food, types of dwellings, dress, bodily adornment, ritual activities, and the construction, storage, and transmission of collective memory. Ethnic identity is a social construct, in which elements of culture, and sometimes biological traits, are selected, permitting the definition of a group and its distinction from other groups. Social structures (families, neighborhoods, towns, cities, and states) are also independent variables, that may or may not coincide with linguistic frontiers and other culturally or ethnically determined borders.

From this perspective, the often-repeated claim that the Nahua dominated the Otomi during the Late Postclassic period (AD 1200-1520) is unsustainable. Most kingdoms in central Mexico were plurilingual. The nobility from different language groups intermarried, thus weaving a network of kinship that provided a degree of regional cohesion and political stability. When the armies of the Triple Alliance of Tenochtitlan, Tetzaco, and Tlacopan – sometimes called the ‘Aztec Empire’ – went to war against the Tlaxcaltecan confederation, there were Nahua, Otomi, and speakers of other languages on both sides of the conflict. Tlacopan had an Otomi majority in the early colonial period, and there is no reason to doubt that this was the case before the Spanish conquest. As for Tlaxcala, speakers of Nahuatl were concentrated at the core of this territory, while the Otomi occupied and defended the periphery. The spatial distribution of language groups in central Mexico did not correspond to the political boundaries.

The Otomi participated fully in the plurilingual culture of central Mexico during the final centuries of the pre-Hispanic era. They shared with their Nahua neighbors a Mesoamerican worldview, expressed in aspects of their culture, including their belief system and ritual practices. When we compare lists of words in the Nahuatl and Otomi languages from several semantic fields – such as social structures, the calendar, deities, toponymy, personal names, and conceptual metaphors –, we find an abundance of calques, or semantic loans without the phonetic form of the words. This comparison reveals that the semantic categories of both language groups were practically identical. The same concepts were expressed with the morphemes of each language.<sup>4</sup> This should not surprise us, since at the time of the Spanish conquest speakers of Otomi and Nahuatl had been living alongside one another in the kingdoms of central Mexico for over five centuries, since the arrival of the Nahua from their ancestral homeland in western Mexico. The Otomi and other Mesoamerican members of the Otopamean family – speakers of Mazahua, Matlatzinca, and Ocuiltec –

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<sup>4</sup> Wright-Carr 2005b, vol. 1, 134-191. For a study of native central Mexican social structures, expressed in the Nahuatl and Otomi languages, see Wright-Carr 2008. Calendrical terms in these languages are analyzed and compared in Wright-Carr 2009. Conceptual metaphors relating to central Mexican visual communication are discussed in Wright-Carr 2011b.

have roots in central Mexico extending back in time for several millennia, to the beginnings of agriculture and sedentary life in this region.<sup>5</sup> When the Spaniards arrived, there was an essentially homogenous, plurilingual culture in central Mexico. Archaeologists have searched in vain for ethnic markers, in the material remains left by these groups, that would enable them to distinguish between the different language communities that lived together in this region during the early sixteenth century. Language and material culture should be treated as independent variables.

This situation, of coexistence and cultural homogeneity between speakers of Otomi and Nahuatl, continued during the early colonial period. If anything distinguished the Otomi from the Nahua, besides their diverse linguistic heritage, it was the lesser degree of cultural change wrought by Christian missionaries in the former group. This was due, at least in part, to the lack of priests with the ability to communicate in Otomi, while greater advances had been made in learning Nahuatl. These circumstances favored an attitude of resistance among many speakers of Otomi, who managed to avoid, or at least attenuate, the ideological and ritual impositions of the European invaders. This cultural resistance, coupled with the selective assimilation of elements of European culture, characterized many groups of Mesoamerican natives, among them the Otomi. In the following sections I shall present the linguistic and historical evidence that can inform us about Otomi beliefs in ‘souls’ or animic essences.

### The three souls in Nahuatl and Otomi

By ‘soul,’ I mean any immaterial essence of a living being that can survive bodily death, according to many traditions, including Christianity<sup>6</sup> and Mesoamerican culture. Alfredo López Austin provides a detailed and profound analysis of this semantic category among the ancient Nahua. He identifies three ‘animic essences,’ called in Nahuatl *tēyōlia* (with its variants *tēyōlitia* and *toyōlia*), *tōnalli*, and *ihīyōtl*.<sup>7</sup> He explains that each of these can continue to exist

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<sup>5</sup> The linguistic prehistory of the Otomi is explained in Wright-Carr 1997; Wright-Carr 2005b, vol. 1, 34-109; that of the Nahua is summarized in Wright-Carr 2007, 14-24.

<sup>6</sup> On the concept of the soul, according to the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century, see Carrillo 2006, vol. 2, 840-869; Zorita 1791, 374.

<sup>7</sup> To write Nahuatl, I am using the orthographic system developed by Andrews (1975a; 1975b) and used by Bierhorst (1985), Karttunen (1992), and Wright-Carr (2007). This system marks vowels with a long duration – which are distinct phonemes from short vowels – with macrons (*ā ē ī ō*). The *saltillo*, usually pronounced as a glottal stop, is represented with the letter *h*. This orthography is more precise than the spelling used by Franciscan friars and other authors in the early colonial period, since it represents all phonemic contrasts found in central Mexican

after the death of the body. The animic essence that most resembles the Christian concept of the soul is the *tēyōlia*, since it is the one that travels to the realms of the dead.<sup>8</sup> Jill Furst, expanding on Lopez's ideas, argues that the beliefs of the ancient Nahua regarding these three 'souls' are based on natural and observable aspects of human bodies, living and dead, unlike the metaphysical abstractions found in the Christian perspective.<sup>9</sup>

The destination of a deceased person's *tēyōlia* depended mainly on the type of death. Those who died of common illnesses departed from the world of the living four days after their death. They undertook an arduous and dangerous journey that lasted four years, until they reached *Mictlān*, 'among the dead,' in the most profound depths of the underworld. There, the *tēyōlia* was annihilated by *Mictlāntēuctli*, 'the lord of *Mictlān*,' and *Mictēcacihuātl*, 'the woman from *Mictlān*.' The relatives of the deceased made offerings – burnt or buried – of water, food, tobacco, clothing, ornaments, weapons, tools, and precious stones; it was believed that these things were consumed or used by the *tēyōlia* during its journey. The offerings were made annually for duration of the trip to the underworld. Dogs were sometimes sacrificed as companions and, in the case of the ruling class, slaves were sacrificed so the *tēyōlia* could be served. Warriors who died on the battlefield or the sacrificial altar earned the privilege of inhabiting a place called *Ilhuicatl Ihtic*, 'the interior of the sky,' where they accompanied the Sun on his daily crossing, from dawn to midday. After four years, they reincarnated as birds or butterflies, to sip nectar from flowers in celestial and earthly forests. Women who died in their first childbirth also ascended to the solar paradise, where they accompanied the Sun from noon until nightfall. After four years, they returned to the Earth as *cihuātēteoh*, 'woman-goddesses.' Sometimes they appeared to the living. People who were killed by lightening, drowned, or died from diseases that caused the swelling of some part of the

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Nahuatl. To reconstruct the phonology of Nahuatl words, adding contrast in vowel length and the *saltillo*, I have used several modern dictionaries: Andrews 2003b; Bierhorst 1985; Karttunen 1992; Wolf 2003. Regarding this system, and others that have been used to write Nahuatl, see Wright-Carr 2007, 46-61.

<sup>8</sup> López Austin 1989, vol. 1, 221-262, 357-393. Contemporary Tarahumara men of north-western Mexico, linguistic cousins to the Nahua, believe that they have three animic essences, according to oral tradition recorded in their language. These essences are called *alewá*. They provide people with "life, health, and vigor," and are seen as the vital breath granted by a divine being. Women have four animic essences, because they "give life." The *alewá* can separate themselves from people's bodies when they are either asleep or drunk. These essences meet with other *alewá* in mountainous areas, ravines, cultivated fields, and forests, returning to people's bodies when they awaken. The *alewá* can be captured by a spirit called the *bakánoa*. People become ill when they lose their *alewá*, and they die if this essence is not recovered (Bakánoa 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Furst 1995.

body were buried with special clothing and adornments; they travelled to the land of the rain gods, a fertile land where crops were abundant. Babies and unweaned infants who died went to a place called *chīchīhualcuahuitl*, ‘the tree of breasts,’ from which milk flowed to feed their animic essences.<sup>10</sup> According to the *Codex Vaticanus A*, a pictorial manuscript from the colonial period, the infant spirits were destined to repopulate the world in its next cyclical creation, after the destruction of the present era.<sup>11</sup>

The Nahuatl word *tēyōlia* is glossed by friar Alonso de Molina as “the soul, or anima.”<sup>12</sup> Despite being translated with two nouns, the origin of this word is probably in the verb *yōli*, ‘to live,’ with the indefinite human object prefix *tē-* (‘to someone’) and the causative suffix *-ā* (*tē + yōli + ā* [*ā > a*]).<sup>13</sup> Its synonym *tēyōlitia* has a similar morphology, but with the causative suffix *-tiā* (*tē + yōli + tiā* [*ā > a*]). Both words may be parsed as verb-sentences with the literal meaning ‘it makes someone live’, clearly expressing the idea of a vital essence.<sup>14</sup> *Toyōlia* is apparently the causative root *yōliā* reinterpreted as a noun, with the first person plural possessive prefix *to-* (*to + yōli + ā* [*ā > a*]), meaning ‘our source of life.’ These three words – *tēyōlia*, *tēyōlitia*, and *toyōlia*– are near synonyms. All are related to the morpheme *yōl* that refers to emotions and free

<sup>10</sup> Bierhorst 1985, 164, 212; Brundage 1979, 188-193; León-Portilla 1966, 59, 214-216; López Austin 1989, vol. 1, 357-393; Sahagún 1979, vol. 1, 224v-230r; Sahagún 1993, 84v; Soustelle 1983, 138-144. See also the glosses of the Nahuatl words in Molina 1571b. The belief in the solar realm as a destination for the soul, among the Otomi of the Mezquital Valley, is recorded in an article by Séjourné (1952, 26), who cites an unpublished ethnographic report by Sergio A. Morales (*Modos de vida otomí*): “No idea of reward or punishment is involved in determining the place a soul will go when it abandons the body. It is only the type of death that determines its path. Those who die tragically will go to the Sun; women who die in childbirth and stillborn babies will go to the Moon; those who die of sickness will go to the divine glory. But the life of the Otomi is too bitter an experience for them to sustain false hopes and for them not to know that their trials will never end. That is why they say: ‘...it is not nice to go to the Sun; they have to push the Sun-wheel to make it move. The Sun is good, it doesn’t mistreat the souls, but the work is very hard. That is why no one wants to go to the Sun.... The Moon is a place of sadness.... It is not nice to go to the Moon.’”

<sup>11</sup> Anders – Jansen 1996, 50-51.

<sup>12</sup> Molina 1571a, 8v, 10v; Molina 1571b, 95r.

<sup>13</sup> Long vowels shorten when they occur at the end of a word (Wright-Carr 2007, 74).

<sup>14</sup> On the morphology of causative verbs, see Andrews 2003a, 183-210; Carochi 2001, 232-241; Wright-Carr 2007, 155-157. Molina (1571b, 39v-40r) records the verbal root “yoli,” meaning “live, resuscitate, revive, or for an egg to hatch.” He also records the causative form “yolitia” (“to give life to another”). Siméon (1999, 195) parses the words “teyolia” and “teyolitia” as nouns, assuming the existence of the absolutive forms “yoliatl” and “yolitiatl,” although he marks the latter words with question marks. These derivations seem reasonable, since the prefix *tē-* is also used with nominal roots as a generic possessive prefix meaning ‘of someone,’ although the existence of the forms *tēyōlia* and *tēyōlitia*, both being causative verb-sentences, suggests a verbal origin.

will. This morpheme is also present in three nouns that mean ‘heart:’ *yōlli*, *yōllōtl*, and *yōllohtli*.<sup>15</sup>

The noun *tōnalli* expresses the concepts of ‘solar warmth’ or ‘summer,’ according to Molina. The word *totōnal* means ‘the sign under which a person is born,’ ‘soul,’ or ‘spirit.’ In this case, the nominal root bears the possessive prefix *to-*, ‘our’ (*to* + [*tōnalli* – *li*]).<sup>16</sup> *Tōnalli* is a sort of vital essence, located in the head. It can be lost and recovered, affecting people’s health. After a person’s death, his or her relatives performed rites to gather and store the dispersed *tōnalli*.<sup>17</sup>

*Ih̄yōtl* means literally ‘breath’ and, by extension, ‘life.’ It was thought of as a gaseous substance and a source of energy, concentrated in one’s liver. López Austin suspects that the *ih̄yōtl* may be related to the ghosts mentioned in colonial period descriptions of pre-Hispanic beliefs.<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to observe that both the Nahuatl word *ih̄yōtl* and the Castilian term ‘spirit’ have the same literal meaning – breath – and the same extended metaphorical sense – an animic essence –.<sup>19</sup>

A lexical entry in the trilingual (Castilian-Nahuatl-Otomi) vocabulary by friar Alonso Urbano, from the early colonial period, gives us two Otomi words that are equivalent in meaning to the Nahuatl terms *tēyōlia* and *tēyōlitia*: “manmuçey. antitete.”<sup>20</sup> The first of these, “manmuçey,” appears again (with the variant form “mamuçey”) as a gloss of the Castilian word meaning ‘heart.’<sup>21</sup> The root of the second word, ‘titete,’ also appears in a marginal note added to a copy of the first edition of Molina’s Nahuatl-Castilian vocabulary, printed in 1555; here we see the root “titete” associated with the Castilian words *alma* and *ánima* (both meaning ‘soul’), and with the Nahuatl glosses “teyolia” and “teyolitia.” In this scholium, the root “titete” appears twice: first with the

<sup>15</sup> Karttunen 1992, 342-343; Molina 1571a, 30v; Molina 1571b, 40v.

<sup>16</sup> Molina 1571b, 150v.

<sup>17</sup> López Austin 1989, vol. 1, 223-252, 367-369.

<sup>18</sup> Karttunen 1992, 98; López Austin 1989, vol. 1, 223-252, 257-262, 367-370; Molina 1571a, 8v; Molina 1571b, 36v.

<sup>19</sup> Gómez 1998, 274.

<sup>20</sup> Urbano 1990, 28v. On the orthographic systems that have been used to write the Otomi language from the sixteenth century until recent times, see Wright-Carr 2011a. Usually the grapheme *æ* represents the central, half closed vowel that contemporary Otomi write with an underlined *o* (*o̲*). There is another vowel, central and closed, usually written in colonial period manuscripts as a caudate *æ* or a caudate *e*; today it is written with an underlined *u* (*u̲*). The word written “manmuçey” in Urbano’s vocabulary may be a scribal error, or it may indicate a change in pronunciation between the sixteenth and the twentieth centuries. The equivalent – or related – words in modern dialects of Otomi have the vowel *u̲*: *m̄ui* / *m̄ui* / *b̄ui* / *mb̄ui* (Echegoyen – Voigtlander 2007, 196; Hernández – Victoria – Sinclair 2010, 32, 192, 199).

<sup>21</sup> Urbano 1990, 98v.

anthroponymic prefix *e-* and then with the singular nominal prefix *o-*, instead of the singular nominal prefix *an-* that Urbano uses: “etitete otitete.”<sup>22</sup>

In contemporary Mezquital Valley Otomi, there is a similar semantic field. The meanings of the words in Otomi are very similar to the meanings of their Nahuatl equivalents. One of these Otomi words is *mui*, ‘heart/stomach/life/to be born;’ it is related to the words ‘*mui*, ‘life/home/dwelling/family generation/customs’ and ‘*bui*, ‘live/birth.’ The word *te* is still in use, with the meanings ‘life/soul/to live/to grow.’ This Otomi word is registered by Urbano, with the nominal prefix *na-*, as an equivalent to the Nahuatl term *ihīyōtl*. The words *ndähi*, ‘air/wind/spirit’ and *nzaki*, ‘health/strength,’ belong to the same semantic field, judging by the way the Otomi use them. *Ndähi* refers to a sort of animic essence, like a soul. An example in a dictionary published in the twenty-first century illustrates its meaning: “*Ténä ge tsute yá ndähi ya hank’ei*. They say the spirits of the dead scold people.” The same lexical source records the proper names *Mäkä Ndähi*, ‘Holy Spirit’ or ‘sacred wind,’ and *Ts’ondähi*, ‘Bad Spirit’ (‘Satan’). The Otomi of the Mezquital Valley also use loanwords from Castilian: *alma*, *animä*, and *anmä* mean ‘soul/spirit/cadaver/compassion.’ We can observe here how Christian concepts have been adapted to the native worldview.<sup>23</sup>

The concept of *zaki* (a variant of the word *nzaki*) is important in the beliefs and rituals of the Otomi living in the mountains to the east of central Mexico. These people are linguistically and culturally more conservative than their cousins living in the valleys to the west. *Zaki* is the vital force possessed by people, nonhuman animals, plants, and certain powerful beings. This essential force is manipulated in ritual settings by Otomi wise men called *bädi*, especially for curing, through the manipulation of anthropomorphic figures, also called *zaki*, cut from paper.<sup>24</sup>

These concepts have been studied by ethnologist Jacques Galinier, and his interpretations suggest a correlation between the Nahuatl words expressing the three “animic entities” identified by López Austin, on the one hand, and the

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<sup>22</sup> Molina 1555, 15v. The copy mentioned above is held by the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin (GZZ IC023). It was in the possession of Mexican scholar Joaquín García Icazbalceta in the late nineteenth century.

<sup>23</sup> Hernández – Victoria – Sinclair 2010, 4-5.

<sup>24</sup> Dow 1974, 93-109; Dow 1975, 59-69; Dow 1982; Dow 1986, 26, 32, 34, 36, 44-46, 49, 95, 97, 100-101, 103, 108; Galinier 1979, 441-442; Galinier 1990, 228, 623. The root “tzaqui” is recorded in Urbano’s vocabulary (1990) as a gloss of Castilian words or phrases meaning ‘strength,’ ‘strengthen,’ ‘hard strength,’ ‘something strong,’ ‘strongly,’ ‘something hard,’ and ‘hardness.’ The phonological change *ts* > *z* is normal, reflecting changes in Otomi phonology that took place in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

Otomi terms discussed above, on the other.<sup>25</sup> The lexical set *tēyōlia/tēyōlitia/toyōlia* appears to be the equivalent of *m̥ui/'m̥ui/'b̥ui/mb̥ui*, a vital essence that resides in the heart. *Tōnalli* is related to *nzaki/zaki*, the force that sustains our health. *Ih̥yōtl* expresses a concept similar to *ndāhi* and *te*, a sort of vital breath or wind.<sup>26</sup>

In a recently published dictionary of the dialect of Otomi spoken in the eastern mountains, we find the words *mb̥ui*, *zaki*, and *dāhi*. The first of these is associated with Castilian words meaning ‘stomach/soul/sprout/center/pistil/heart;’ the second is translated as ‘strengthen/fatten/health/strength/fat/strong/healthy;’ the third means ‘wind/spirit/soul/tona.’<sup>27</sup> The Castilian word ‘tona’ – apparently a loan from the Nahuatl term *tōnalli* – refers to an animal, the destiny of which is linked to that of a human being, from birth to death.<sup>28</sup> The word ‘tona’ is also used with this meaning among indigenous groups in the southern Mexican states of Guerrero and Oaxaca.<sup>29</sup>

### Querétaro in 1582: an official report

In 1582, the Spanish scribe Francisco Ramos de Cárdenas wrote a detailed report in response to a questionnaire, prepared by royal officials with the goal of obtaining detailed information about Spain’s possessions in the New World. Ramos provides information about the administrative district of Querétaro, on

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<sup>25</sup> Galinier 1990, 623-626. It should be noted that Galinier has doubts about using the phrase ‘animic essence’ to refer to contemporary Otomi beliefs, after reading a draft of this paper. “I don’t know up to what point one can use the adjective ‘animic’ for entities like *nzaki* (which refers to psychic dynamics), *mb̥ui* (organic support, heart and/or stomach), and *ndāhi* (an immaterial and invisible entity, like *nzaki*, but without its own energy)” (Jacques Galinier, personal communication, 29 June 2010).

<sup>26</sup> This complex of beliefs had a pan-Mesoamerican scope, and has survived until recent times, as Martínez (2011, 68-69, 198, 201) has shown. The Otomi words that the latter author relates with “animic concepts,” however, are not transcribed and interpreted with precision. The words recorded by Urbano (1990, 27r, 28v, 202r), *manmuæy*, *antitete*, *nōhiä*, and *na thiphi*, are transcribed by Martínez as “Manmuey,” “Atitete,” “Nōhia,” and “Na ihiphi.” He derives the last of these, without justification, from the Nahuatl word *ih̥yōtl*, apparently because of their phonetic similarity. Martínez regards the variety of Otomi registered by López Yepes (1826) as “old Otomi,” and he relates the word *hioya* with these “animic concepts,” although the phrase recorded by López is “hioyá anim’a,” glossed by this Franciscan friar as “Lone, or very abandoned soul in purgatory,” with the more literal meaning “impoverished soul.” The word *hioya* (or *hyoya*) means ‘poor,’ ‘humble,’ ‘limited,’ or ‘to be impoverished,’ not ‘soul’ (Hernández – Victoria – Sinclair 2004, 119-120; López Yepes 1826, 100, 147).

<sup>27</sup> Echegoyen – Voigtlander 2007, 42, 196, 386.

<sup>28</sup> Galinier 1979, 429.

<sup>29</sup> Santamaría 1992, 1071.



what was then the northern frontier of New Spain. This region had been colonized by Otomi from the province of Jilotepec, in the western Mezquital Valley, after the fall of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan to the armed forces led by Hernán Cortés. The Otomi initially arrived here as refugees, fleeing Spanish domination by settling among the rustic hunters and gatherers, generically called the Chichimec, who lived in the arid country north of Mesoamerica. The report prepared by Ramos tells of an Otomi leader he calls Conni, baptized as Hernando de Tapia, a trader who converted to Christianity and served as governor of the Indian town council established by the Spaniards in Querétaro. He is described in this document as an exemplary member of the native nobility, who embraced the Christian faith and adopted European customs. This was not unusual among the Mesoamerican noble class, although much of the native population was not as amenable to the changes in ideology and lifestyle imposed by the missionaries.

*At this time Hernan Perez de Bocanegra arrived, bringing with him a friar, who was very well received by the Indians, both the Otomi and the Chichimec. The friar began to baptize them, and he gave the Indian Conni the name Hernando de Tapia, after Hernan Perez de Bocanegra, and the surname Tapia because in this province the name Andres de Tapia was flourishing; he was one of Hernán Cortés's captains. The good Indian Conni received the water of the holy baptism and the new name of Hernando de Tapia. So great was his virtue and Christianity that a large volume would be needed to tell of the many virtues possessed by this barbarian, who had recently come to the faith. But so that his virtue should not remain unrewarded, and embarrass the old Christians that live here, I shall briefly tell of the life and goodness of this man, Hernando de Tapia, founder of this town of Querétaro [...]. Hernan Perez de Bocanegra left in his company a servant named Juan Sánchez de Alanís, who later became a priest, because he knew the Otomi and Chichimec languages, with which he achieved a fruitful ministry in this land. [...] [Hernando de Tapia] took our faith to heart so much that he attracted many infidels, especially the Chichimec Indians in this land, he had them all baptized [...], and they all became his vassals, which was something that had never been seen in the people of this nation, who had never acknowledged anyone. He had them instructed in the things of our holy faith, be means of Juan Sánchez de Alanís, and he personally assisted in this work. Later more friars arrived, and orders were given to build a monastery. Hernando did this, and it was quite sumptuous, with a very peaceful cloister and orchard for these friars.<sup>30</sup>*

In spite of the acculturation the governing class, who as children were educated in the friars' convents, and of the efforts of the missionaries to extirpate what they regarded as 'idolatry,' most Otomi managed to conserve their worldview and rituals during the colonial period. Another passage from Ramos's report of 1582 provides evidence of the natives' resistance to Spanish ecclesiastic and civil authorities.

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<sup>30</sup> Ramos 2013, 2v-3v.

*They are very barbarous and slow to understand the good customs that they are taught. This is to a very great extent because of their language, for although the ministers of the holy gospel have worked on this with great curiosity, it has not been possible to print books about the things regarding our holy Catholic faith, as has been done with the other languages of this land, due to the difficulty of the orthography and pronunciation, since saying something fast or slow, high or low, each way has a different meaning. Although an attempt has been made to print a Christian doctrine, it was truly understood by the natives [sic] and thus for the Spaniards they are, among all the nations in this land, the most intractable and difficult to communicate with. Their natural inclination leads them to all sorts of vices, if they are not impeded by doctrine and justice. They are great liars; it is a miracle if they tell the truth. They are suspicious of everything they are told; they think that they are being deceived. They are great spies, peeking through the cracks and holes in the houses of the Spaniards, and much more so of the priests, who they are always watching. They have few laws among themselves. Fathers don't respect their sons, nor wives their husbands. On the contrary, they denounce each other to any judicial authority without taking oath. They do not fear nor respect anyone but the friars, and the latter must know their language, and the Spanish governors, and those who have jurisdiction over them and can punish them. If these authorities are absent, everything is in a state of chaos. They are cruel and pitiless with each other. They seek justice for any offense, even a wife against her husband, or a husband against his wife, or among other sorts of relatives. They are great thieves: although they steal little from each other, they ruin the Spaniards here, taking their horses and mares, sheep and cows, because they eat a lot, and the meat they have the most appetite for is beef. They eat very little Castilian bread, because they say that, compared to their corn bread, it is like fruit. They usually eat on the ground, the men squatting, and they do the same in church for the epistle and the sermon. They are very superstitious and they believe a lot in omens. A Franciscan friar swore to me that in the year 1576, when there was a huge epidemic in this land, they took an eleven or twelve-year-old Indian maiden to a mountain and, while alive, they opened her chest and took out her heart and sacrificed it to their idols and gods, better called demons. There is still a residue of their paganism because the women, when they cut open the plant called maguey [Agave spp.], which yields a sweet syrup when cooked, they take the first sap that seeps out, pour it in the fire, and sprinkle it in the gaps around the doors of their houses, saying "may my husband not be tired, may my husband not be tired," and they say they do this to have peace with their husbands. There are great sorcerers among these people, and when one understands their spells, they are ridiculous.<sup>31</sup>*

These words were written after nearly half a century of missionary work among the Otomi in this region. They reveal the frustration of the Spaniards with the limited results of the missionary campaign, a key element in the strategy of colonial domination.

### **Jesuit sermons in Tepetzotlán**

In the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections of the Princeton University Library, there is a manuscript with the title *Doctrina otomí* ('Otomi

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<sup>31</sup> Ramos 2013, 6r-6v.

doctrine'), written on 331 folios of European paper. This document may be attributed with a reasonable degree of certainty, based on internal evidence, to a group of Otomi scholars working with Jesuit priest Horacio Carochi in the mid-sixteenth century, at the college for missionaries and Indians at Tepotzotlán, in the northern Valley of Mexico. Its contents are a heterogeneous compilation of texts about Catholic religion, translated into Otomi, intended as an instrument for the work of the Jesuits in New Spain.<sup>32</sup>

The sections of this volume that are most relevant to our present interests are a sermon with the title *Declaration of the first commandment* (folios 256 to 279), the text *Various superstitions* (folios 280 to 309), and another entitled *They do not pay attention to what they are taught, and various superstitions* (folios 310 to 317). These texts, written in Otomi, remain untranslated. Their transcription and translation will be challenging, because of the small and tightly written calligraphy, as well as the abundance of diacritics, making these writings exceptional in the corpus of colonial period manuscripts in Otomi. In the meantime, we can glimpse part of their content by reading the scholia written in Castilian in the margins of the manuscript. The following excerpts shed light on colonial Otomi mortuary practices and concepts regarding animic essences or souls. As we have seen, the Otomi, like the Nahuatl, believed they had three of these immaterial forces. These marginal notes also express the frustration of the Jesuit priests who had to struggle with the cultural tenacity of their indigenous congregations.

*They bury dead children with canes of milk.*  
*They bury the dead with food and tools for work.*  
*What they believe the dead do in the afterlife.*  
*What they give women who die.*  
*The dead do not need food.*  
 [...]
 *The mother gives milk to her dead child.*  
 [...]
 *What they do on the fourth night after somebody dies.*

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<sup>32</sup> *Doctrina otomí*, ms., Princeton University Library, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton Mesoamerican Manuscripts, no. 1. For a general description, see Wright-Carr 2006, 120-135. There are two other manuscripts that are very similar to the *Doctrina* at Princeton: the *Handbook of sermons, letters, and devotional material in Otomi*, held by the Newberry Library of Chicago (Ayer ms. 1809), and the *Seminario en lengua otomí*, in the National Library of Anthropology and History in Mexico City (Gómez de Orozco Collection, vol. 27). These three volumes are related by their content, handwriting, and an abundance of diacritical marks that are not found in other Otomi manuscripts from the colonial period. The manuscripts at Princeton and Mexico City have brief translations in Castilian in the margins, in which the reader can glimpse aspects of Otomi religious beliefs and ritual practices in the seventeenth century (see Carrasco 1950, 21; Sandoval 1991, 54; Soustelle 1937, 215).

They give dead people what they need to work in the afterlife. To the man.  
 To the dead woman.  
 They doubt that good people go to heaven and bad people to hell.  
 The truth is confirmed: good people go to heaven and bad people to hell.  
 They give the dead tools for work.  
 They give womanly tools to dead women.  
 [...]

They bury tools for work with their dead.  
 They bury food for their dead.  
 [...]

The preachers tire themselves in vain with the Indians.  
 They don't pay attention to what they are taught.  
 [...]

Summary of what they offer to their dead.  
 Demons do not eat.  
 There is little hope that they might abandon their errors.  
 You are all the same.  
 [...]

There is no refreshment in hell.  
 What they offer to the dead is in small quantities.  
 How long can the food that they offer to the dead last? It is such a small amount.  
 They toss their sick into hell with their lies.  
 The dead do not eat.  
 The soul does not eat.  
 That which they bury for the dead rots and is wasted.  
 The souls in hell suffer and they do not eat.  
 In heaven there is no hunger, just satiety.  
 That which they offer to the dead does not reach heaven.  
 They dress their dead well, with many dresses, et cetera.  
 They bury money for their dead.  
 [...]

We thought they were good Christians.  
 Indians, persistent in their trickery.  
 They do not want to have good judgment.  
 They doubt the faith.  
 Some of them learn from the others.  
 A dead man was buried with diverse things.  
 They give tobacco to the dead.  
 They do not take advantage of the punishments that God sends.  
 Their follies are increasing.  
 They do not want to abandon their delusions.  
 [...]

They bury their dead with food or they bury it for them.  
 The medicine man tells of how he died and was reborn, and how he learned to cure in the afterlife.  
 Idolatrous liars who toss the poor people that they fool into hell.  
 They bury their dead with money, and why they do it.  
 [...]

They say that in hell there is a church under construction.

*They kill and bury a swallow for the dead man, and why they do it.*  
*In hell one does not eat.*  
*Neither the good dead nor the bad dead eat.*  
*The soul does not eat, nor does the dead body.*  
 [...]

*They murmur, mocking their preachers.*  
 [...]

*You cannot follow God and the Devil; choose.*  
*If you want to serve God, may it be sincere.*  
*If you want to serve the Devil, you need not come to church.*  
 [...]

*How much superstition must there be where there is no doctrine?*  
*They do not believe that the dead go to heaven and the bad to hell.*  
*Although I have not ascended into heaven, nor descended into hell, I know it exists.*  
*Those who do not believe the preachers, do not believe God.*  
*And you who have gone to hell, you say that a church is being built there?*  
*They say the church that is being built in hell falls apart and is rebuilt.*  
*Other things they say exist in hell.*  
*Come to your senses, realize that you are lost.*  
*What they say exists in hell is mocked.*  
*You should hope there is nothing worse in hell than carrying stones.*  
*What we preach is the truth of Jesus Christ.*  
*It frightens me to hear these things.*  
*Maybe you are all the same.*  
 [...]

*I have worn myself out teaching you, and you don't take advantage of it.*  
*I will not cease to preach, nor to obey God's will.<sup>33</sup>*

These scholia are a testimony to the cultural resistance of the Otomi in the northern Valley of Mexico, after more than a century of having been subject to the efforts of Christian missionaries. On the one hand, we find the survival of mortuary practices with deep roots in native tradition, such as burying the dead with offerings of food, tobacco, clothing, and diverse utensils to make the otherworldly existence of their animic essences more comfortable; at the same time, at least one European element is introduced into the funerary offerings: coins. On the other hand, we see how the natives mocked the priests, their teachings, and the imposition of manual labor, especially when they rumored that the souls in hell had to carry stones for a church that constantly fell apart.

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<sup>33</sup> *Doctrina otomí, op. cit.*, folios 267r-316r. For a precise transcription of these scholia, see Wright-Carr 2006, 125-133.

## Concluding remarks

The Otomi and the Nahua shared essentially the same beliefs about the three animic essences, usually bound to people's corporality, which could exist outside of the body, in a way that is partially analogous to the soul in the Christian tradition. At the time of the Spanish conquest, there was a homogenous culture in the kingdoms of central Mexico, where the Nahua, the Otomi, and speakers of other languages lived alongside one another. Their Mesoamerican worldview was based on the observation of nature, in contrast to the more abstract thinking of Catholic heterodoxy.

The documentary evidence presented in this study shows that the success of the Catholic missionaries in transforming the beliefs of the native peoples of New Spain was limited, despite affirmations to the contrary made by colonial authors – particularly the friars themselves – and by several prominent contemporary historians.<sup>34</sup> The Otomi seem to have been especially tenacious in their resistance to the cultural impositions of the Christian missionaries. These circumstances permitted the survival of a tightly articulated matrix of religious concepts – along with Christian ideas, reinterpreted and inserted into the native worldview – throughout the colonial period, and until contemporary times, in the regions inhabited by the Otomi.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Extreme expressions of this point of view, which tends to reduce the role of the natives to being passive subjects of historical processes controlled by the Spaniards, may be seen in certain publications written by historians, for students and for the general public, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Moreno (1973, 57) claims that the friars “Destroyed the foundations of all spiritual relations in a world that was fundamentally sustained by a religious concept of life.” Vázquez (1990, 37, 40) states that “It was not an easy task to substitute some beliefs for others, but the humility, poverty, and patience of the Franciscans won the trust of the Indians. An important factor was the desperate state of the natives’ morale, which permitted the friars to console them. [...] In fact, with their sacrifice and their great devotion, the friars achieved the true conquest: the conquest of the spirit of the vanquished.” González (2009, 19) expresses a similar opinion: “In little more than forty years, [the friars] had transformed the mentality of millions of natives who, converted to Christianity, created the largest Catholic nation of their time.” For a more balanced perspective of the evangelization of New Spain, see García 2000, 259-261.

<sup>35</sup> Jacques Galinier (personal communication, 29 June 2010) comments that “the processes of acceptance of Christian religious concepts were not a mere percolation of one religious system into another; once these were in contact, they were dissociated so that the Otomi had constructed alternative responses to the question of the souls, expressed according to circumstances under ‘Christian’ or ‘pagan’ formulas, throughout colonial space and time, and they continue to do so today.”

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(ISSN 0418 – 453X)