

## The Meaning of the Codices for the Present-Day Indigenous Peoples

When we try to reconstruct the past of the Mesoamerican indigenous peoples we must resort to the documents they themselves elaborated and making use of their concept of man, time and history. Conventionally, we call these manuscripts “codices” due to a particular historic circumstance. Actually, this denomination was assigned to medieval manuscripts in the 19th century and was applied by extension, in that same century, to the Mesoamerican documents deposited in European collections (León-Portilla 2003: 12-13). In reality, codex is a generic term for many types of primary sources with different formats. In this way codices are considered to be canvases elaborated with cloth and in a large format; manuscripts on deer skin, on European paper, or *amatl* (a Nahuatl word for paper made from the bark of a ficus tree) with an explanation in Latin and in the indigenous language. These can be either bound or on loose sheets of paper; including descriptive or cadastral maps with scriptural elements typical for the Mesoamerican indigenous tradition and other documents regarding pre-Hispanic and colonial history, as well as descriptions of diverse cultural aspects such as rituals, costumes, laws, economic records and calendars, among others. To the best of our knowledge, the common denominator of this vast collection of documents – a necessary condition in order for them to be considered codices – is that their content was conceived by the protagonist as consisting of their own narrated history, conserving features of the ancient scriptural tradition (this being either in Maya, Zapotec, Nahuatl, Mixtec or of another filiation), and that they register diverse aspects of their culture (history, religion, social life) with the use of the Latin alphabet, with a possible mixture of pre-Hispanic glyphs. As “codex” we must also include the historic sources written in Castilian that incorporate aspects of indigenous history and culture, written by native inhabitants of the land, when we consider that Castilian was the mother tongue of these people. In other words, a codex is the indigenous voice trapped in images or letters and registered on supports such as paper, skin or cloth. In turn, these codices can be classified according to various criteria, such as cultural origin, temporality or subject matter. Within the codex, we consider it important to include the “fundamental titles” (“títulos primordiales”), which are documents that narrate the political and territorial establishment of indigenous people in a certain site, alluding to mythical and cosmogonic passages as well as historical and ancestral passages; some

tales begin in pre-Hispanic times. Likewise, within the codex we can find representations of settlement boundaries which were elaborated on cloth; the so-called “lienzos”

Diverse specialists have attempted to catalogue these historic sources with relative success, due to the constant discovery of these types of documents in diverse heritages and even in the communities that inherited them from their ancestors (Glass 1975; Glass/Robertson 1975). There are individual investigations of several types of codices. The list is very vast; for example, Mary Elizabeth Smith, Alfonso Caso’s disciple, concentrated on the study of Mixtec codices in connection with the Nahuas; Ralph Roys analyzed diverse Mayan documents, among them the *Chilam Balam* books; Joaquín Galarza attempted to typify Nahuatl writing and Luis Reyes edited and translated diverse manuscripts in Nahuatl. Paula Caballero carried out a compilation of the majority of “fundamental titles” known and published in *Los Títulos Primordiales del Centro de México*.

Within the present-day indigenous communities that are fortunate to conserve any of these documents, we can observe various uses which have little to do with our concept of scholarly history. Whether it is their land records, genealogies, local history, oral traditions, or rituals, for the communities the codices are a source of identity preservation, historic memory and even a fundamental part of their rituals.

We don’t know for certain how many people have ancient documents as part of their cultural heritage, although there are individual studies of particular regions (Jiménez/Villela 2006). We can not rely on a precise inventory regarding these documents and it is very probable that it is better that we lack it; if such an inventory existed and were lent or consulted, many collectors would set off to woo them, stripping the peoples not only of their tangible patrimony but also of all that it implies, such as the loss of rituals, oral traditions, and in the end a substantial part of their identity, of which the codex forms an active part of. Let us just remember that recently in the state of Veracruz the *Chiconquiaco Codex* was removed, but fortunately recovered by the authorities.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand we do not have any news of a community that preserves a document of pre-Hispanic times and it is most probable that we never will. The codices which are preserved by their authentic authors are of the colonial period and are an unmistakable sign of concern by the native people of Mesoamerica to register their daily events, whether it is to build their identity in the new period or to relate with the colonial administrative structure. In this sense, the content of these documents are cultural heritage and the bequest of the ancient indigenous peoples to their modern inheritors. Of course, this patrimonial perspective places these documents as products that form part of a social collective, sharing a particular vision of the world and the same history and must be understood as a collective work, in the same way as lan-

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1 <<http://mujerdejuarez.blogspot.com>> (July 2007).

guage, dress and gastronomy. This is the reason why these documents are not signed by a certain individual. Thus we can say that another feature of a codex is its community characteristic, whether in its production or its pertinence. It is thus inconceivable for members of the community in these villages where these types of documents are conserved, that a codex belongs to a single person. It is understood that the authors are their ancestors with the entire symbolic implications that this perception implies. Like in many traditional villages, it is understood that many ancestors acted upon the thought of their descendants, organizing a local cosmos that still remains today, and that these ancestors belong to the whole village, without any need to specify names.

It is known that the codices that form part of the so-called Techialoyan group were elaborated in order to legitimize ownership of land, due to the fact that they describe the land limits in pre-Hispanic times. Some authors believe that they were recognized by royal disposition in the colonial period and of course the defense of these territories was of communal character, no individual land was defended.

Other codices reconstruct the immediate and distant past of the people. For example, in the *Lienzos de Chiepetlan* the authors narrate events from the pre-Hispanic wars till the evangelization and the pilgrimage of the Xochimilcas to the region of La Montaña de Guerrero (Galarza 1972). Documents of this type were conceived by and for the communities themselves. In contrast with other colonial documents that were elaborated at the request of the colonial authorities or within the political or legal structure, such as the ones that are enclosed in the files of the petition of grants of land on behalf of the communities or of an individual, such as the majority that are found today in the *Archivo General de la Nación* in Mexico (Montes de Oca et al. 2000). The result of the relationship between the communities and colonial authorities constitute much of what is found on the sheets of the *Relaciones geográficas* (Acuña 1982).

Motivated either by colonial authorities or by personal motives, for centuries the communities registered their perceptions and concepts of their new reality. These records resorted to many strategies; among them was to maintain the use of codes and conventions from the ancient writing tradition (that must have been adapted to recent circumstances by incorporating new conventions in order to express the elements in their new historical context), and the use of the alphabet introduced by the missionaries (Lockhart 1999: 476). Documents such as the central Mexican Nahuatl *Cantares mexicanos* or the Maya manuscript *El ritual de los Bacabes* were transcriptions from ancient traditions that contained hard to understand passages, due to the complex expression of cosmogonic expressions (León-Portilla et al. in press).

We must acknowledge that our vision of these documents contrasts with the value accorded them by their own communities. As a product of our times, our interest is of a scholarly character and when we approach them, we look to decipher the meaning of the glyphs, know the history of the document and in light of historical positivism we wish to confirm or reject the truthfulness of the facts. When studying a codex we usu-

ally lose sight of the fact that its functions for the communities are very complex and by far exceed the limits of its content. The reason is very simple: For us the documents are “sources” of scholarly knowledge, in order to historically reconstruct a truth. While for the communities, the maps, fundamental titles and in general all the ancient records are “sacred books”, a source of identity and religious fervor, as well as a source of knowledge for their own history as well.

Although the construction of knowledge is the most positive aspect of the Western approximation to these documents and this has permitted material conservation and protection in optimum conditions, it is also true that in many cases it has mutilated the complex relations between the codex and their authors. Without going into depth on the negative aspect of collectionism, in spite of its contribution to conserving these material goods, in many cases it has reduced the possibilities of their being known and studied. This attitude follows the desire of seizing the tangible cultural patrimony in a demonstration of hierarchy and status, in other words of power.

Fortunately, we are witness to exemplary experiences that gradually impose new forms of approaching codices which belong to indigenous communities. Researchers and institutions have redefined the ethical values of the knowledge of codices. Institutions such as the *Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia* (INAH) and the *Biblioteca Burgoa* in Oaxaca City have created ties in collaboration with diverse communities. We would like to refer to all the cases which without a doubt deserve recognition but due to the lack of space this is impossible. Among them are Joaquín Galarza (*Lienzos de Chiepetlan* 1972) and Guy Stresser-Péan (*Códice de Xicotepec* 1995), who after bonding with the villagers of The Guerrero Mountain and the Sierra of Puebla obtained permission by the local and traditional authorities to publish the aforementioned documents, with the condition that they be restored and left in the own communities, where they are located today. As far as the institutions are concerned, the *Biblioteca Nacional de Antropología e Historia* receives every three years the recently elected members of the town council of the Zapotec village of San Miguel Amatlán, Oaxaca, who carry out a ceremony of recognition of the newly elected authorities before the San Lucas Yataú and Yatiní codices. Since 45 years ago these codices can be found in the institution’s safety vault, due to the community’s decision to turn them over to the INAH in commodatum. At the same time this library has turned in a facsimile reproduction of the documents to the village for its exhibition. During the ceremony where the reproductions were handed over in 2005, the municipal president of San Miguel Amatlán at the time, Cruz López Santiago, pointed out that these would “allow children, youths and adults to understand the origin and history of our community. Over all, we will be full of pride in our identity”.

The *Biblioteca Burgoa* works under the tendency of restoring and reintegrating the documents to their communities, as happened with the canvases from Santa Nativitas and Macuilxóchitl, among others.

In this paper we will comment on diverse cases that we have witnessed in the communities where the meaning of these codices actively participates in the construction of identity, understood as the recognition of their proper being. Without this being an exhaustive analysis, we intend to focus on only the importance of the complex relation between the documents and their authors. We will deal with a *mestizo* and a Mayan community, making a brief mention of other cases.

### 1. The *Lienzo de Ajusco* and the villages of Santo Tomás and San Miguel

Ajusco is a village in the political entity of Tlalpan, south of Mexico city, made up of two settlements, Santo Tomás and San Miguel. Both share a communal property and total 604 inhabitants between them. These former Nahuatl speakers and now predominantly *mestizo* villagers conserve a canvas that registers detailed boundaries of their communal lands as well as historical and genealogical data. The main character – due to the fact that it takes up the main part of the canvas – can be observed by the representation of the hill we name Ajusco, but according to the canvas was originally called *Cempoaltepec*, an elevation that outstandingly dominates the landscape of the locality. The canvas was elaborated at the end of the 19th century as a copy of an ancient document, perhaps from the 17th century (Brito Guadarrama 2006). Accompanied by other documents, this canvas forms part of a small archive, placed in Santo Tomás, where certified copies of distinct documents of legal origin such as sentences, witness presentations, etc, are found. To date, the archive is protected by professor Julio Romero Camacho, who received it in 1994, and it had been preserved by other custodians for generations. Don Julio was preceded by his cousin, the professor, Concepción Romero, as she was preceded by her father, Silvestre Romero. It is very notable that this custodian position has been charged to professors, an understandable situation if we consider that this job lends itself to communicating the information contained in the canvas. It is worth mentioning that in spite of the fact that Don Silvestre wasn't a professor, he was highly esteemed by the village due to his active participation in the Mexican Revolution. It is important to point out that the archive with all its documents can be consulted by the members of both settlements. We can say that the *Lienzo de Ajusco* and the historical documents from the archive mentioned are fraternal elements between San Miguel and Santo Tomás. Today, the members of the communities, particularly the children, consult Don Julio when they are in need of finding out about their local history (Fig. 1: *Lienzo de Ajusco*). It is necessary to emphasize that this archive was created on the initiative of several institutions that intervened in the process of the copies, such as the *Archivo General de la Nación* (AGN) and the *Biblioteca Lafragua* of the Benemérita Universidad de Puebla. In that collection we found a Nahuatl manuscript, perhaps from the 16th century, that narrates the villages' re-structuring after the Conquest and the cultural imposition that thus arises. This manuscript was reproduced in facsimile and turned over to the Ajusco village, which

all together journeyed to a reception ceremony held in the city of Puebla presided of course by the communal authorities.

**Figure 1:** *Lienzo de Ajusco*



*Source:* Courtesy of Brito (2006).

The information contained in the canvas is extremely delicate, due to the fact that it represents the extension and boundary of the villages' land. Recently it solved an old conflict over land between Santo Tomás and the neighboring community of Xalatlaco, both part of the *Estado de México* (while Tlalpan, in the same jurisdiction as Santo Tomás, belongs to the *Distrito Federal*). In this conflict, the information contained in this archive was significant because it was presented as documentary proof of the ownership of land in dispute; by means of a dotted line the canvas registers with precision the limits of the villages' property. In another document, the "Testimonio de la fundación y Título de composición del pueblo de Santo Tomás Axuchco", the cacique of Xalatlaco, Nicolás de los Ángeles validates and is presented as a witness of the territorial delimitation of Ajusco (Brito Guadarrama 2006: 46).

To date, all the dispute's sentences have favored Santo Tomás and the tension levels between these villages have required the intervention of police forces. The dispute remains unresolved, which makes it impossible to consult the file. Due to legal stipula-

tions, it will be open for reference in 50 years. According to the settlers of Ajusco, we know that Xalatlaco also presented as documentary proof of their property an alleged codex, whose authenticity has been questioned during the legal process and which for obvious reasons we have not been able to consult. The claims of these villages are fundamentally based on their codices. This is and has always been understood by the inhabitants of Ajusco as the proof and affirmation contained in the “Copia del Mapa de San Agustín de las Cuevas”, that literally says, “anyhow, as we can see, our village of Santo Tomás Ajusco is depicted in the aforementioned general map to prove at anytime the antiquity of the referred town” (Brito Guadarrama 2006: 34).

Importantly, the *Lienzo de Ajusco* is a representation of space, of the locality’s universe. Although the first connotation of the canvas is political, as it represents the boundaries of a property, we must not lose sight of the fact that it is also cosmological, due to the fact that in it two actors appear that define the cultural entity of the Tepanecas, as the inhabitants of Ajusco call themselves. These actors are the Ajusco hill itself, which locals say has received the essentials to live and of which oral traditions exist that assure that riches can be found deposited in its interior and that can be taken advantage of by whoever enters the hill through an entrance that only opens once a year and where time goes by at a slower rhythm than outside the hill. The Cañada River is painted blue and drawn in an old-fashioned style, there is also a church that represents the core of the population, around which the Tepaneca homes are established, and four characters among whom Joseph Martin Palomares stands out due to his size. He acted as “supreme justice” of the village of Ajusco in 1609, date in which according to the map and the documentation, the village was re-founded. The other characters are Xiuhmolpilli, Macuilxochitl and Camaxtli, all represented in an indigenous manner and whose role in this canvas is unknown. We suppose that they are main characters that in a way participated in the re-foundation of the village.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, they are remembered as prominent figures; like the first patriarchs that defined the collective patrimony of Ajusco.

The aspect we must emphasize is the fact that even though the canvas is protected by someone that receives the appointment for life, each time after the appointment as new commissioner of the communal lands the aforementioned is presented before the canvas to legitimize the appointment.

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2 It is very common to observe the founders of villages in diverse codices of distinct periods and cultures. For example, in the façade of the *Códice Mendoza*, Tenoch, Mexica leader during the foundation, appears among the founders. Likewise, the main men are always a substantial part of the founding of the Techialoyan codices, the same occurs with the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, among others.

The functions the canvas performs are:

1. To disseminate knowledge of the land and their boundaries among the members of the village, who are obliged to participate in the defense of the land.
2. Reveal the origin and the way the village was born for the generations to come, the way in which they define themselves as Tepanecas, even though it can not be scientifically proven that these *mestizos* are affiliated to the village.
3. To register the founding ancestors, who hold Nahuatl names, even though there aren't any records of their possible genealogical line. The intention, as we understand, is to assume themselves as the heirs of the ancient Nahuas.

All things considered, becoming acquainted with the canvas provokes a feeling of pertinence to the village, as Santo Tomás and San Miguel share a tie of fraternity, support and solidarity. In this sense both villages are bound to the canvas, which represents the common patrimony.

On the other hand, by becoming part of the content of the subjects in elementary and middle schools, this knowledge has been formalized. The objective of the recent edition of the canvas (a print run of 1,500 copies) was to hand it out in the village, without it being distributed at a commercial level in other fields (Brito Guadarrama 2006).

As we mentioned before, the documental patrimony of Ajusto is made up of various documents, aside from the canvas. This archive sees the light only when it is required in order to present proof in the defense of the property of the land.

## 2. The historical documents among the Mayas

Among the Mayas, the survival of the codices is an inexhaustible subject. Let us remember that the Mayas developed the most complex writing system of Mesoamerica. Its use was restricted to a politically dominant social sector. After the conquest and its subsequent social and political restructuring the writing system disappeared completely. We have little information on the existence of canvases and maps of Mayan origin that had been conceived in order to represent property of a specific land. Perhaps we can count the map that accompanies the *Relación geográfica de Tihó*, close to Mérida, Yucatan, written in the 16th century, and others after the 18th century (Roys 1939: 1-63, illustrations 5-7).

Evangelization permitted cultured Mayans to register much of their ancient traditions, beliefs and knowledge through the Latin alphabet. We are acquainted with about twenty books generically known as the *Chilam Balam*. All of them were written in Mayan with an explanation in Latin during the colonial period and conserved religious and mythical concepts of the pre-Hispanic period. They register historic events, medical texts, calendar count, and other events with more or less influence from Christian thought. Their names include the village where they were elaborated, such as *Chilam*



*Balam de Maní*, the *Chilam Balam de Tizimin* and the *Chilam Balam de Chumayel*. The word *chilam* acted as the designation for the group that accessed its lecture in a ritual sense (Barrera Vázquez/Rendon 1984). The great masterpiece of the Mayan literature, the *Popol Vuh*, is a late record (18th century) of the Mayan cosmogony and we know for certain that it was ritually used among the Quichés. Surely it could only be read by a very small group of priests or by any other traditional authority that had received instruction from missionaries and at the same time possessed broad knowledge of the ancient tradition.

During the 19th century the Mayas continued to elaborate texts in Mayan Yucatec. Proof of this are the various documents generated during the Caste War, as for example, the proclamation of the “Cruz Parlante” (Speaking cross) in a place then called Noco Cah Santa Cruz Balam Nah Kampoloche, now Felipe Carrillo Puerto. Evidently the cross didn’t write the document, but it’s revelations dictated the content of the documents to the priest and leaders of the insurrection.

Much of these colonial and 19th century documents are conserved by the Mayan people beyond their being considered “cultural patrimony”. The majority of documents remains protected by the priests (*hmen*) and only they can consult them. Even though they can hardly read them, since they don’t have the formal knowledge to do so. Some read and write only in Spanish, and others are completely illiterate. Particularly the villages that participated in the Caste War are reluctant in showing their documents. In fact, the village of Xocen, south of Yucatan and with one of the most important Maya sanctuaries for the “Cruz Parlante”, was recently deprived of their sacred book (allegedly a *Chilam Balam*), after lending it for an exhibition in Mérida (Serafin Dzib, Nicanor Nahuat Nahual, Hermilo Cahuich, Darío Dzib, Primitivo May, Xocen guardians, personal communication, 2002). The sacred values that the peninsular Mayas grant to their documents have great ancestral and historical roots. In the case of Xocen, the Mayan adorers of the “Cruz Parlante” consider that the center of the earth resides there. This phenomenon is manifested precisely with the presence of the “Cruz Parlante” in the altar, which is a rocky outcropping sculpted in that form.

In principal, the denomination of the document is of the “Testamento Sagrado de Dios de Xocen”. The testament quality necessarily refers to the past, in other words, it is the patrimony left by the ancestors, these being either human or divine. Its content gained force in accordance with being an echo of the collective memory, ritually revitalized as it formed part of the celebration of the rain petition, fundamental for any agricultural society.

In their cyclical view of time, the Mayas trap the occurrences in this outline, this dynamic produces guilt due to the negligence during the loss. In their own words:

Now listen to what has happened to the “Testamento Sagrado de Dios de Xocen” (The Sacred Book of Xocen). First, it was lent to the village of Chichimila. Later it was lent to Saki’ (Valladolid). Later we found out that it was in Mérida, where we lost track of it. Since

Since then and until now, nobody wants to be responsible, knowing full well that it is wanted. For the authorities of this place it is like if part of God were stolen and left among us. Part of this had been predicted by our ancestors, as for example: “The Santa Cruz will be lost, it’s body will be destroyed without any reason”. (These and the next fragments have been translated from the Mayan by Rolando Ek Naal.)

As we can see, the book forms a substantial part of the sacred material and the authorities are responsible for this disgrace before the village. Once again, the relation between the Sacred Book and the authorities is close. Nobody is liable for the loss, but the authorities must carry out its return: “We are searching for someone to look for it. This Sacred Book is in someone’s hand, such as perhaps a president or somebody like that [...]”

According to this guardian, the loss of the Sacred Book has provoked insuperable disgrace. Due to the fact that these types of documents contain information about diverse calendrical and astrological aspects as well as traditional medicine and the form of some rituals (Brito Sansores 2002: 608), their lack implies the loss of a substantial part of the ritual. In tears, one of the members of the guardians said: “Without that Sacred book we are dying little by little, due to the lack of water and because the drought is more severe every time”.

Nonetheless, cyclic time will induce the good times that we once had to return. Without a doubt, in a cyclic notion of time, the *post factum* prophecies achieve their purpose. If there once existed a prophecy about it’s loss, now we have the prophecy that the Sacred Testament is going to come back:

[...] this testament, even if the rich people (*disulo’ob*) don’t want to give it back, will return by itself. Therefore all we ask the Almighty is that one of these days, we are able to see its return without any problems, before our lives go from one difficult situation to a more terrible one with a lot of suffering.

Furthermore, according to this prophecy, the person who will return the book will be a “white man”, being understood as meaning someone that is not Mayan. After all, if the evil came from one of them, they themselves will bring the remedy, thus emphasizing the Mayan cyclical view of the future.

In regard to the reading of the book, we have reports that this only happened under special conditions. To begin with, only some specialists have access to the reading of the book, as in ancient times. The *hmeen* is in charge of this task. In the village of Chan Cah, Veracruz, a person who tried to read the Sacred Book could not manage it, due to the lack of spiritual preparation, so that when confronting the text the person would suffer from strong headaches (Carlos Chan, personal communication, 2002). The Xocen guardians state that its reading follows a special procedure:

According to my grandparents, each page corresponds to a year, during which you can’t turn to the next page until the following year. Otherwise if you try to turn to the next page, it bleeds and furthermore nothing would turn out; everything would be in vain. It is like

something whose time has not come, in order to be known or revealed. In this manner, the passing by of the days in a harmonious way is due to the management of the book's content. Keep in mind that the book is inherent to the sacredness; to god's body. It is in this way that by not respecting the rules of reading it is humanized and bleeds when desecrated.

The reading (in the sense of accessing the management of the alphabet) becomes important and this is the reason why the community demands educational services for their children, in hopes that when the testament returns, it can be read. Furthermore, the Maya guardians are aware that the book's reading only has meaning in the same context where it was created; in other words, reading it without a ritual purpose makes no sense.

Reading among the Mayas has also been restricted to a special group which conserves the ritual and historical memory. This is the priest's double duty. It is important to recall the figure of Juan Bautista Vega, who lived among the Mayas in the last phase of the so-called Caste War, a rebellion of the Mayas from the Yucatan peninsula that started in 1847 and lasted until the beginning of the 20th century. According to his son Martiniano's testimony, Juan Bautista arrived in Tulum in the company of his stepfather on an archaeological expedition from Cozumel Island, a *mestizo* refuge in those years. When the boat was discovered by the Mayas settled in the archaeological ruins, the crew was annihilated, with only the child Juan Bautista surviving. The leaders, on realizing the child's ability to read and write, protected him. A black man in particular, who joined the rebel Mayas called *cruzob* Mayas and had achieved high ranks in the *cruzob* military and social hierarchy, adopted Juan Bautista. Subsequently, after his death, the child was entrusted to Florentino Kituk, who took him to the village of Chumpón, where Kituk granted him the privilege of consulting the Sacred Book of this village, which was to be read by Juan Bautista during the festivals of the "Cruz Parlante" held in May and December. Among the tasks which were revealed in dreams to Juan Bautista Vega, the Sacred Book was to be handed over to Juan Bautista and read to Florentino Kituk as well as to the rest of the community, including the children (Martiniano Vega, personal communication, 2002).

It seems very probable that the Sacred Book was a *Chilam Balam* and that its reading was very important during Juan Bautista's life time, in such a way that he reached the highest rank in the priestly and military structure of the Mayans of Quintana Roo, that of Nonoch Tatich. We can say that his ability to read saved his life.

The literate have always been respected and valued among the Mayas since ancient times. Let us remember that the *Chilam Balam of Chumayel* ends with the question: Who will be the *ah bobat* prophet, who will be the *ah kin* priest of the solar cult that can explain the words of the hieroglyphic signs properly?

### 3. The amate paper and its value among the Otomies

All that has been mentioned until now demonstrates the complexity of the cultural meanings of the codices among the Mesoamerican peoples. It is worth mentioning, regarding the making of the American indigenous books, that the elaboration of the paper occurs in the Otomi village of San Pablito, Puebla, where the ancient technique of using ficus tree bark in order to elaborate the traditional paper is conserved (Fig. 2: *Codex Otomi*). The amate paper is used in diverse ways for rituals, as offerings, in the representation of sacred entities and to record distinct rituals such as the rain petition, traditional healing and blessings for newly built homes, among others. In these rituals the paper is cut out by the folk healer, who gives it various shapes that represent distinct deities such as “Maize God”, “Bean God”, “Pineapple God” (Christensen/Martí, 1972: *passim*) and other entities like the folk healer himself and each of the winds that provoke disease. These latter entities stem from the indigenous vision of the cosmos are conceived like variable winds, of distinct colors and origins, and from which it is necessary to protect yourself by means of rituals. The fact that present-day folk healers record the diverse rituals in tiny books in a form similar to painted folding screens where the sacred representations are glossed with Latin and Spanish explanations (due to the fact that they can not write in Otomi) that precisely describe the rituals is greatly appealing. This can be understood from two perspectives. First of all, it means the preservation of the ritual that can be learned by a disciple who utilizes the book as learning material and second as a way of obtaining money in hard economic times. Ultimately, the folk healers usually preserve these books, waiting for the opportunity to sell them to the anthropologists and ethnologists who study them.

Figure 2: Otomi book



Source: Courtesy of León-Portilla (2003).

We previously mentioned that this paper performs many functions in the ritual. It is an offering because it is presented to the Gods; a bed will be elaborated where the gods summoned to the rituals will lie. It is a representation of god because the paper is converted into the reincarnation of the distinct sacred entities, with specific attributes. For example, the evil entities wear boots, similar to the way the *mestizos* dress; the good entities are barefooted. The “Banana God” has a vegetable shape and a bunch of fruit comes out of its body, as occurs with the coffee, the peanut and the rest of the plant gods. The representations of the winds are not elaborated with amate paper but with Chinese paper, taking advantage of its many colors to express the way in which the winds are conceived. Eventually the aspect that we would like to emphasize is the fact that the books record the rituals as a way of preservation. In principal, the book is made with amate paper, which in itself is valuable, because it is the ancestor’s paper. If the intention of registering the ritual were merely explanatory, it could be written in any notebook, but it is registered on traditional paper due to the sacred characteristics of the record, the custom. After all, the positive narration of the ritual is done by the anthropologist in the field diaries.

On the other hand, the book is sacred because the god figures are in their pages. Their representation conserves part of their essence in the form of a relic. Each page is dedicated to a god. In the making of these books, the folk healer utilises all his knowledge. In principal, as a ritual performer, he must count on a special ability in the use of scissors in order to elaborate the complex figures. This task requires the detailed knowledge of the iconography of each god and ritual, lastly one should know how to read and write to make the register. In this sense, the amate books are the preservation of this knowledge, since an assistant in training with the healer can see them and remember the details of the complex iconography. Each folk healer preserves his own books and not his colleague’s. The books are a testimony to his trade and of the occasion in which he practiced, of his efficiency to heal or his petition of water.

#### **4. Conclusions**

We believe that the knowledge of a community is registered partly in a manuscript but that knowledge is complemented with other elements which are not captured on paper, such as oral traditional, medical prescriptions, language, games, and other components of popular culture. In this form, both written and intangible knowledge are complements and establish a complementary relationship. What is said in the written source is transmitted among the community through their language, and the full understanding of the reading demands popular knowledge and cultural codes typical of their own. This can be seen in the case of the Mayas that keep on reading their document during diverse moments of the festive cycle, as happened with Juan Bautista Vega.

When these types of knowledge are separated from each other, the interconnection is broken. What was registered in the codex is unlikely to be understood in its totality.

Its original authors will never be able to access a certain part of knowledge of their past and in consequence, of themselves. This is exemplified when we consider that the pre-Hispanic Mixtec codices can not be fully understood by the scholar, as the visualization of the codices by the present-day Mixtecs is an experience full of mysteries and questions. Unfortunately the *Códice Vindobonensis*, one of the Mixtec codices that survived destruction by the priests and Spanish conquerors, is in a great way foreign to the everyday life reality of modern day Mixtecs and their rituality. We might add that the document's nomenclature is usually foreign to the culture that produced it, increasing the dissociation between the documents and their authors. In this case, the *Vindobonensis* takes its name from the place where it is presently being conserved (Vienna, in Latin), which contrasts with León Portilla's proposed title (*La vida de 8 Venado Garra de Tigre*). The same occurs with the *Códice Fejervary-Mayer* and León Portilla's proposal of *Tonalámatl de los pochtecas* (2005). When a neophyte finds out that the *Lienzo de Filadelfia* exists, and whose name is due to the fact that it is deposited in that city, he or she will ask "if it was made in Philadelphia", when in reality it is a Mixtec codex about genealogies. The cases of dissociation between the indigenous reality and the codices could be counted by the hundreds, among which we can find the *tonalamatl*, the Borgia group codices (located in their majority in European libraries), the *Códice Borbónico* (located in the Bourbon palace in Paris) and a series of codices of which we are unaware of their precise culture origins.

When removed from its cultural context a document loses its natural connection with its authors and becomes a drawn-on piece of paper with glyphic representations that must be decoded by intellectual practice. In this sense, the main conclusion of this work is that we consider the tangible patrimony as very intimately linked to the intangible; the deposit of the former in museums and other types of collections can represent the risk of impoverishment for humanity. Although the function of these repositories for conservation is clear, these could interact with the creators of that type of goods and establish ties of cooperation. It would be extraordinary for the communities to count on at least copies of the editions of their documents, if not with professional reproductions. On the other hand, the scholarly view would be enriched, since many communities could contribute to the interpretation of the contents, much more than what the scholar can imagine.

Of the cases presented, we can state that:

1. The contents and use of the codices among the present day indigenous communities are of communal character.
2. These documents are the protagonists in the shaping of the local identities, given the sacred value that the people grant them, independent of their contents, whether it be ritual or cadastral.
3. The communities that own documents of this type are conscious of their value as communal patrimony. The documents are considered to come from ancient times

and be elaborated by their ancestors, the reason why they feel obliged to conserve and pass them on to the future generations.

We would have liked to mention other interesting cases, such as the ones that occur in the region of La Montaña de Guerrero, and the *Lienzo de Petlacala*. This last canvas records the lands and the migration of this village since pre-Hispanic times and in which we can observe Charles the Fifth in the foreground, whom the locals believe walked across the village personally demarcating the property. The canvas defines the ritual geography (since it recounts the migration route and specifies the act of establishment of the village), which tells us about their perception of space, as well as representing their real territory, which is remembered year after year in their holidays when the canvas is exhibited and adored.

Finally we must recognize that the significance of the codices for the indigenous communities is a topic on which there is much to reflect on. If a codex or any other source of historical knowledge is preserved in the heart of its respective community and if its contents are known by its inhabitants, then it will participate in the building of identity for many reasons. The first is because the document allows the construction of a discourse about the historic and/or mythical past. When it is of historic character, truths that have an impact on the economic lives of a community can be established, like the definition of the collective property of a territory. When it is of mythical character, its continuous recall and re-actualization establishes cyclical rituals in which the cosmogonic concepts of a certain community are presented. While we can say that the documents represent the formal aspect of ethno-historical sources, these are complemented with the popular culture; the dialectic relationship between them both, in our point of view, is what must be understood as identity.

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