

Zapotec Time, Alphabetic Writing, and the Public Sphere

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Abstract. In this essay, I analyze a sample drawn from a corpus of about 107 alphabetic texts that were produced in a clandestine manner by Zapotec ritual specialists in northern Oaxaca, Mexico, during the second half of the seventeenth century. I argue that these texts represent an unusual appropriation of the Latin alphabet and of European literacy practices by local indigenous intellectuals. This development led to the inception of a novel textual genre, the *biyee*, an alphabetic, pluralistic, multilayered rendering of the Zapotec 260-day divinatory calendar. I also contend that, as they moved along social networks, these calendars mapped out literate modes of transmission of cosmological knowledge that linked individual specialists with both collective spheres and individual social spaces. In the end, the circulation of these texts provided an essential core for the reproduction of a clandestine public sphere.

In contemporary social theory, the influential work of Jürgen Habermas has been instrumental in defining the origins and transformation of a social realm labeled “the public sphere.” The German philosopher has provided us with a momentous portrayal of the public sphere as an emerging space of intellectual activity that breaks through the protracted domination of public discourses and spaces by European monarchs and religious institutions. In Habermas’s view, this often secular movement toward greater freedom of expression is presaged by the work of Immanuel Kant on law and morality, advanced by the proliferation of an independent press in Great Britain and the United States, and crowned by the emergence of mass media in states that are resolutely modern and republican (Habermas 1989: 10–26, 102–10, 185–95).

Given this familiar teleological progression from monarchic to modern

republican (and, one need not say, European) nation-states, and Habermas's (1989: xviii) distinction between a public bourgeois sphere and a plebeian one, it could be argued that the colonial Spanish American counterpart of Habermas's public sphere begins with the publication of early periodicals—such as Ignacio Castorena y Urzúa's 1722 *Gaceta de México*—and blossoms with the proliferation of various forms of what Benedict Anderson (1991: 50, 61) has called “print-capitalism” in his influential précis about the emergence of national identities in Latin America. This paper, however, is a first step toward an analysis of the emergence of a public sphere in colonial Spanish America that examines a particular subset of exchanges that took place in Central Mexican indigenous communities among indigenous authors. My analysis focuses on a broad and unusual case study: the production and semiclandestine circulation of a novel Zapotec textual genre in the second half of the seventeenth century.

A large corpus of alphabetic ritual texts authored and placed in circulation by northern Zapotec ritual specialists during the last two decades of the seventeenth century provides us with an exceptional opportunity to assess their production and circulation within a collective sphere. This corpus was produced in the *alcaldía mayor* of Villa Alta, a vast jurisdiction to the northeast of Oaxaca City in New Spain inhabited by speakers of Chinantec and Mixe and three separate ethnic groups who spoke northern Zapotec dialects: Cajonos to the south, Nexitzo to the north and west, and Bijanos to the east. Between September 1704 and January 1705, the elected authorities of 104 native towns journeyed to the jurisdictional seat of San Ildefonso to register confessions regarding their local ritual observances in exchange for a blanket immunity from idolatry prosecutions offered by Bishop Fr. Ángel Maldonado only two years after the momentous execution of fifteen Zapotec rebels from San Francisco Cajonos. During this period, the officials of fifteen Bijanos Zapotec, twenty-seven Cajonos Zapotec, twenty-six Nexitzo Zapotec, twenty-nine Mixe, and seven Chinantec towns presented brief confessions, denounced their ritual specialists, and turned in copies of their ritual texts (Alcina Franch 1993, Archivo Histórico Judicial de Oaxaca 2004, Gillow 1978 [1889], Tavárez 2006).

This bureaucratized exercise, which involved directly or by proxy most of the 60,000 indigenous inhabitants of Villa Alta, was the most multitudinous experiment in idolatry extirpation carried out in New Spain. Although Maldonado's regional focus may bring to mind the persistent extirpations of Francisco de Ávila in Huarochirí in the early seventeenth century (Duviols 1971, Mills 1997, Griffiths 1995, Salomon and Urioste 1991), one element sets this campaign aside from other eradication exercises in colonial Spanish America: the surrender of about 107 separate textual units con-

taining alphabetic ritual texts in Bijanos, Cajonos, and Nexitzo Zapotec by officials from forty communities. Among them, one finds four collections of transcribed ritual songs, two of which are devoted to Christian entities (Tavárez 2006), while the remaining two celebrated Zapotec deities and founding ancestors from the standpoint of local cosmological theories (Tavárez 2008). The remaining 103 units are copies of the 260-day Zapotec ritual calendar, bound into ninety-nine *cuadernos*, or “booklets.”¹ The corpus encompasses ninety-one complete calendars, seven calendars with at least 75 percent of the 260 day names, and three calendar fragments, as well as two calendars with aberrant day orders. These texts, along with the better-known Maya books of Chilam Balam, are the two largest extant corpuses of clandestine ritual texts authored by native specialists in colonial Spanish America.

These booklets were spared from the flames by Maldonado, as they were prime exhibits of the uneven results obtained by Dominican ministers in Villa Alta after almost 170 years of residence in the region. Their contents demonstrate that in the last two decades of the seventeenth century, two separate time counts that date back at least to the preclassic were in constant use in at least forty northern Zapotec communities in the late seventeenth century: a ritual 260-day count called *biyee*, or “time period,” and a vague solar year count of 365 days, called *yza*. The 260-day count consisted of two cycles, each of which advanced once a day: a numerical count from one to thirteen and a count of twenty word roots that referred to plants, animals, or forces of nature. It had four major subdivisions of sixty-five days, each of which subdivided into five *trecenas*, or thirteen-day periods (Córdova 1578b: 202), for a total of twenty *trecenas*. The Villa Alta officials’ confessions repeatedly stress the fact that ritual practices were divided into *del común*, “communal,” and *de particulares*, “individual,” sacrifices, and that many communities had one or several resident *maestros de idolatrias*, “ritual specialists,” some of whom focused on counting and interpreting the 260-day calendar, a *métier* sometimes designated by the term *colaní*, which the Dominican lexicographer Juan de Córdova (1578a: 13v) translated as “diviner,” but meant, literally, “one who makes the holidays.”

Authorial Practices in the Zapotec Calendars from Villa Alta

It would be erroneous to regard each of these textual units as standardized copies of the same template with no important variations. There is, indeed, a core of textual contents—the ordered list of the 260 day names, four major subdivisions, and divisions by *trecena*, and the names of the fifty-two Zapo-

tec 365-day years. However, each text was composed by different authorial layers: the first one, which often contained all of the aforementioned core elements, was in all likelihood provided by the primary author or authors of the text. Other owners or readers of the text provided supplementary layers, which contained a miscellaneous range of annotations, including specific auguries or cardinal orientations for each day, cosmological diagrams, brief excerpts from larger cosmological or historical narratives, and correlation statements regarding Christian holidays. They were, therefore, open-ended texts created through collective, pluralistic authorial practices. Figure 1 provides an example of the supplementary annotations made by a primary or secondary author—probably the father of Juan Mathías of San Juan Malinaltepeque²—after the completion of the core elements of booklet 81. The first annotation, aligned with the day *yolatzi* (2 Jaguar), reads “Wednesday. On this day, the moon got eaten [eclipsed]. It floated in the air on January 21, 1693.” The second note, aligned with the day *yoxoh* (5 Earthquake), states that “it happened before on a Thursday that the sun burned [eclipsed], on August 23, 169[3].” Both dates correspond with the exact dates of lunar and solar eclipses visible in Central Mexico (Justeson and Tavárez 2007: 40–46).

While many of these mostly anonymous authors possessed, if not standardized, at least broadly equivalent calligraphic practices, the widely divergent spellings for each of the day names suggests that many authors were attempting a transcription that depicted their own, or their teachers', local phonemic realization of these day names; thus, the day names cited above could be spelled *yolatzi*, *yolachi*, or *yolaachi*, and *yoxoh*, *yoxoo*, or *yoxooh*. In a somewhat unusual but not surprising instance of graphic pluralism, the author of booklet 41 used a mixture of characters for numerals; while most numbers are indicated in Roman characters, “four” is written with the Arabic character 4, “five” is 4i (Arabic “4” plus Roman “i”), and “eight” is represented by two instances of the Arabic character for “four,” or 44 (fig. 2). This practice was probably based on the author’s appraisal of Roman and Arabic numerals used in the European graphic system for numbers, since the Zapotec number system does have separate lexical items for 5 (*caayo*) and 8 (*xoono*) not based in the term for “four” (*tâpa*; see Córdova 1578b: 99r; Munro and Sonnenschein 2007).

Many calendars began with a formula that indicated the contents and genre of these texts for any literate Zapotec reader. The formula was variable, but it often included the clauses *niga betapa yaga biyee*, “here are the four time counts,” which refers to the four 65-day subdivisions of the 260-day calendar, and/or *lani que xotao xoçi reo*, “the holidays of the ancestors and fathers of us all.” In total, about twenty booklets contained a version

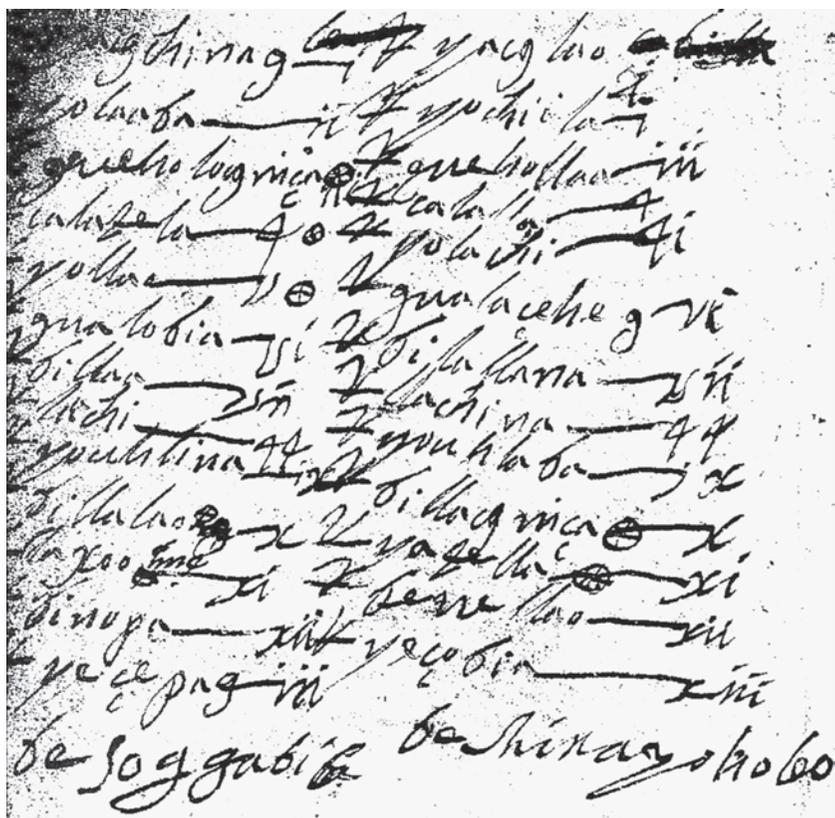


Figure 2. An example of graphic diversity in booklet 41: the combination of Arabic and Roman numeral systems to indicate “five” as *4i* (fifth row from top) and “eight” as *44* (eighth row from top). AGI México 882, 952v. Illustration courtesy of Archivo General de Indias, Seville, Spain

of this formula,³ and four booklets contained the first phrases of a cosmological narrative regarding the most recent creation of the world (Tavárez 2008).⁴ The fact that this narrative ended with the words “et cetera” in two instances implies that its implied audience was a literate reader who knew or had access to the narrative’s full version, perhaps in oral form. Surprisingly, the authors of seven booklets used the Spanish word *tiempo*, “time,” to refer to the 260-day count, rather than *biyee*, the standard term employed elsewhere.⁵ Furthermore, the unusual label *calentario de los yntio* [sic], “calendar of the Indians,” appears in booklet 82. The use of these terms suggests that

by the late seventeenth century, literate specialists found it useful to employ Spanish terms with a broad circulation in the multilingual public sphere in order to convey the significance of these calendrical texts to Zapotec readers.

Literacy, Orality, and the Circulation of Ritual Texts in Northern Oaxaca

These calendars circulated in a collective sphere that operated in relative clandestinity and encompassed several northern Zapotec towns. It is clear that calendar authors regarded the production of these texts as a public but illicit practice that had to be carefully compartmentalized from a broader textual sphere. Several calendar owners reported having buried these texts for safekeeping; others inserted a title page that contained the beginning of a document in Zapotec directed to civil or ecclesiastic authorities (Tavárez 2006). Although townspeople did continue to consult illiterate specialists, evidence from fifteen Villa Alta towns implies a correlation between text authorship or ownership and one's renown beyond hometown boundaries as a specialist offering individual and collective consultations. While it would be a misnomer to characterize these *colaní* as "bourgeois" inhabitants of a public sphere, each of them was at the center of a small, intercommunity network of clients who paid specific fees for consultations, starting at about 2 *reales*. There were at least twenty-one specialists whose services were requested either by town officials for collective observances or by individuals. Towns who made the most frequent requests tended to be small; for instance, Lachichina, La Oya, and Yalahui had estimated populations of 205 or less in 1703 (Chance 1989: 48–52). A majority of the specialists who had clients outside their own communities were text owners—twelve out of a group of sixteen whose text ownership status is known. On the other hand, in contrast with the calendars, copies of ritual songs seem to have been a textual genre with a restricted pattern of circulation. The confessions contain only five reports about the existence of these songbooks, and two men from Betaza were the sources for the two of them that circulated outside their towns of origin—the renowned specialists Pedro de Vargas and Don Juan Martín.⁶ Residents from Lachirioag, Yalahui, and Yatee surrendered songbooks that did not circulate outside these villages. In any case, as noted above, only four of these songbooks are extant: two booklets containing traditional ritual songs from Betaza and Lachirioag, and two texts devoted to Christian songs produced in Yalahui.

A more detailed analysis of the activities of three calendar authors provide us with an understanding of how these texts circulated within

a restricted social space. These individuals—Gabriel López, Francisco Morales, and Juan Gerónimo—may be regarded as important nodes in a collective sphere of calendar specialists active in northern Oaxaca in the last two decades of the seventeenth century. Two would-be day counters from Cacalotepec, Sebastian Hernández and Juan Marcial, testified that Gabriel López, a well-known specialist from the neighboring town of Yavechi, had sold them one booklet each for 6 reales—about two to three days’ wages for a skilled laborer—and that the sale included one lesson, during which he explained the calendar to them.⁷ While Hernández and Marcial did not fully master the day count, López found a more proficient student in Nicolás Ruis of Lachichina, who told the magistrate he had paid López 3 reales for one of his booklets. Questioned further, Ruis said that he had bought the text circa 1698, using it to learn “the appropriate days for superstitious observations,” apparently for his own individual needs, since he did not identify himself as a day counter. López, a modest man who offered his services as the sole resident specialist in Yavechi on a sliding scale—“half a real, a real, and he does not collect a thing from the poor”⁸—composed at least four booklets. This was the largest number of surrendered booklets from the same known author, as noted in the Villa Alta confessions.

The booklet trade in which Francisco Morales engaged was facilitated by his training and geographical location. Besides being the notary of the Bijanos town of Yetzelalag in 1704, his home community was located on Villa Alta’s main northbound trade route, which connected the provincial capital of San Ildefonso with Guaspaltepec, a terminus with river access to Veracruz (Chance 1989: 22). While López’s texts circulated primarily in Nexitzo communities and were relatively affordable, Morales’s regional range was broader, and his prices were higher. One of his clients, Joseph Velasco from Yagayo, declared that he had bought a calendrical booklet from Morales for the rather steep amount of 12 reales; however, the interval during which he held the booklet before surrendering it—five months—had not allowed him to learn how to use it.⁹ In fact, several text owners reported that learning to read and interpret the *biyee* could take years; thus, Pedro de Asevedo of Tagui avowed that, after buying a booklet from Morales and attempting to learn its proper use for a year, he had relented, selling it to Francisco de Chaves of Talea.¹⁰ The social trajectory of this text—produced by a Bijanos specialist, sold to a Nexitzo speaker, and transferred to a Cajonos speaker—suggests that dialect or cultural differences did not hinder the dispersal of calendrical information. Indeed, Morales’s renown as a specialist cut a broad swath through Villa Alta, since witnesses from Camotlán, Temascalapa, Yatzona, and Yelago knew him as a prominent “teacher of idolatries.”

The relative ease with which booklets traveled across Villa Alta is illustrated by two further examples. In Reagui, Juan Gerónimo, one of four local maestros, became an important link in a tripartite exchange of booklets, reales, and ritual implements; local resident Cristóbal Hernández bought a calendar from Gerónimo, as well as six reales worth of parrot feathers from Yaeé resident Nicolás Tarifa, who had also acquired a transcription of Gerónimo's booklet. These feathers could come from as far away as Chiapas, and were used during communal celebrations.¹¹ Calendars were occasionally given as gifts, as shown by the transfer of texts from three maestros at the Nexitzo village of Teotlaxco. Gaspar Gómez and local notary Juan Santiago gave copies of their texts to their fellow maestro and principal Domingo Morales of Zoogochi;¹² moreover, Baltasar Santiago gave a calendar as a gift to a young apprentice from the Cajonos town of La Oya, Joseph Mendez.

How did this broad pattern of text dispersion influence the oral reproduction of ritual knowledge? Three examples suggest that the competence and experience of day counters, even if they were illiterate, did not necessarily result from the possession or use of calendrical texts for individual needs. Although the aforementioned Joseph Mendez of La Oya obtained a calendar from Teotlaxco, town officials emphatically denied that they could employ Mendez as the organizer of communal rituals solely on the basis of calendar ownership, declaring instead that, "since he was a young man," they had consulted two seasoned specialists who also provided individual consultations: Juan Baptista and Gerónimo Flores of Lalopa.¹³ Moreover, Pedro de Aquino of Marinaltepeque implied that even experienced calendar owners regarded public divination as a burdensome privilege. Aquino declared that, even after having possessed a calendar for twenty years, he employed it for individual practices and would not use it "in public," even though he wished to do so, since "he was afraid of other, more expert maestros."¹⁴

Moreover, several calendar annotations and confessions show that experienced day counters who knew the correlation between the Gregorian calendar and the two Zapotec time counts made it available to non-specialists by using Christian saints' holidays as a publicly accessible point of reference (Tavárez and Justeson 2008). Between 1689 and 1692, the feast of Saint Matthias (February 24) fell on the first day of the 365-day Zapotec year, and Saint Peter and Saint Paul's (June 29–30) fell at the beginning of a new 260-day count in 1691. The Saint Matthias correlation appeared on the first page of a calendar bound in booklet 85, along with the only known list of the subdivisions of the Zapotec year. Moreover, both the Saint Matthias¹⁵ and the Saint Peter correlations were added as annotations by

an anonymous user of booklet 63, who also noted the correlations with the feasts of Saint Gregory and Saint Andrew, each of which happened to coincide with lunar eclipses in 1686 and 1694 (fig. 3). In fact, a division of labor between correlation and calendar specialists existed in Yavago. In this town, four calendar specialists who possessed a total of three calendars were consulted by town authorities to schedule the inauguration of town officials on propitious dates, but turned to the *colaní* Juan Francisco and Juan Martín to determine when the holidays of Saint Mathias and Saint Peter fell each year, a correlation these two “knew by heart.”¹⁶ This is a remarkable display of preference for specialists who employed oral rather than textual modes of knowledge, especially since booklet 94, one of the calendars produced in this locality, has a correlation statement that demonstrates its author did know the correlation between the Gregorian and the 260-day Zapotec count.

Conclusions

In this essay, I have argued that the appropriation of the Latin alphabet and some calligraphic conventions drawn from European genres and literacy practices by local indigenous intellectuals in northern Oaxaca resulted in nothing less than an explosion in the production of a novel textual genre—the alphabetic, multilayered Zapotec *biyee*—by the late seventeenth century. Through their circulation across social networks, these works reinforced the presence of indigenous ritual and cosmological knowledge in both public spaces and more intimate social spaces. These calendars mapped out literate modes of transmission of ritual knowledge that linked individual specialists with both local collective spheres and individual or familial social spaces. One could regard this literate sphere as a highly visible component of an intercommunity clandestine ritual sphere that was also populated by renowned but illiterate specialists. Given the cosmological claims implicit in calendrical observances, it is impossible to think of Zapotec individual and collective devotional practice that was somehow separate from local theories about the cosmological order and historical narratives (Lambek 2003).

The exchange of texts in Villa Alta suggests that, much like the groups of readers created by the circulation of *pliegos sueltos* in Spain and the *Bibliothèque bleue* in France, such communities of native readers and manuscript authors were diverse in terms of literacy skills and modes of appropriation of the text (Chartier 1996: 138–39). These groups of readers maintained a certain integrity through the circulation of texts in a highly restricted but still relatively public social space that was compartmentalized from

the broader public sphere through measures of control prescribed by the Mexican councils and the Council of Trent, which were upheld in an episodic manner through local interventions by mendicants and parish priests. Through the intellectual labor of the obstinate authors and readers of Zapotec ritual texts, these clandestine manuscripts provided an essential textual core for the reproduction of a common clandestine public sphere.

Notes

- 1 José Alcina Franch (1993) numbered the Villa Alta calendars 1–99, and this numeration is used by the Archive of the Indies. Nevertheless, some of these booklets contain two different calendars, or split the same calendar into two booklets. Since there are 103 separate partial or full calendars bound into 99 booklets, this system identifies separate booklets, but not separate calendars.
- 2 Archivo General de Indias, Spain (henceforth AGI), México 882, 914r.
- 3 Booklets 8, 17, 19, 24, 25, 31, 32, 43, 44, 45, 49, 50, 52, 58, 59, 64, 74, 85 (part 1), 88, and 97.
- 4 Booklets 22, 24, 31, and 32; 31 and 32 contain the same text with diverging spellings.
- 5 Booklets 43, 49, 58, 59, 74, 88, and 97.
- 6 AGI México 882, 182r–184v, 299v, 430r.
- 7 AGI México 882, 1026v.
- 8 AGI México 882, 1319v.
- 9 AGI México 882, 1347r.
- 10 AGI México 882, 345r.
- 11 AGI México 882, 511v–512v.
- 12 AGI México 882, 694r–695v, 1458r.
- 13 AGI México 882, 998r, 1000r.
- 14 AGI México 882, 914v.
- 15 AGI México 882, 1198r.
- 16 AGI México 882, 1542r.

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