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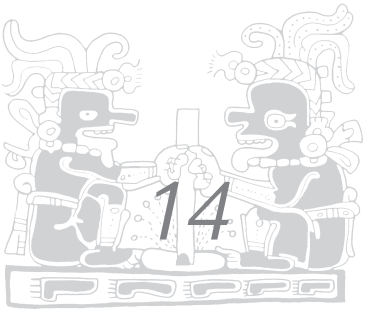

The New Fire and Corporal Penance

Comparative Perspectives between the Tlapanecs and the Aztecs

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Specialists in ancient Mexico have noted the relationship between fire and the practice of blood-letting, which is documented in the well-known myth of the creation of the Fifth Sun in Teotihuacan, narrated in Nahuatl by Sahagún (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 7:3–8, 1956:bk. 7:431–434) and revisited in the early seventeenth century by Ruiz de Alarcón (1892:pt. 1, ch. 10:150–151). In addition, several scholars have pointed out the symbolic association between this myth and the New Fire ceremony (Anders, Jansen, and Reyes García 1991, 1998; Brundage 1985:9; Elson and Smith 2001:158; Taube 2000:315). They did not, however, discern the ritual complex that associates fire with various penitential practices within this ceremony. Several factors contribute to this failure. First, researchers saw the lighting of the New Fire as an exceptional event. What gave rise to this impression was the importance of drilling the fire every fifty-two years, as described in numerous ethnohistorical sources (Durán 1967:2:453–454; Gómez de Orozco 1945; Motolinía 1903; Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 7:3–8; Tudela 1980:fols. 83v–84r). Recently Ferdinand Anders, Maarten Jansen, and Luis Reyes García (1998) demonstrated that a New Fire also marked the beginning of the cult and power of the Mixtec lordships, but they did not succeed in changing the impression of the rarity of New Fire ceremonies. Second, specialists who have dealt with the cultural importance of penances in Mesoamerica have isolated the practice of blood-letting from other penitential acts (Baudez 2012; Klein 1987). In designating blood-letting as "self-sacrifice," a tendency has arisen to subsume this practice under sacrifice and to separate it from the rest of the complex of lighting the fire at night, accompanied by a number of mortifications. Put differently, researchers have noted the mythical connotations of the lighting of the New Fire, but not the existence of the ritual complex of which it formed part. In this essay, I will attempt to overcome the above shortcomings in describing how contemporary Tlapanecs construct the penitential complex associated with fire, providing us with

new research leads and allowing us to return to the Aztec sources from a new perspective.

The Fire-Penance Complex among the Tlapanecs

The Tlapanec Indians, known today as Me'phaa, speak a tonal language of the Otomangue family and number more than one hundred thousand individuals living southwest of Tlapa in the Mexican state of Guerrero. In this essay, I will use data systematically gathered since 1998 in the municipality of Acatepec, which has some twenty-five thousand people living in villages with between three hundred and one thousand inhabitants each.

The Tlapanecs recognize fire as one of their major supernatural beings. Tlapanec words for fire, which have been gleaned from prayers collected in the municipality of Acatepec, are *ánolo mbatson* ("our father fire"), which simply designates the natural element (*mbatson*); *ánolo miñún* ("our purple-colored father"), a ritual name that alludes to the color of the coals;[1] and *ánolo si mba* ("our father big stone"), a more esoteric name that refers to the fact that the spark is contained in the stone, from which it is brought forth by striking. Ritual specialists consult fire in divinatory sessions ("at the table of fire") and, through this medium, they communicate with the dead. The supernatural being receives venison during the hunting rituals and participates in all occasions in which candles and copal incense are burnt. But the specificity of Tlapanec ceremonies lies in the New Fires that are built on numerous occasions.

The Tlapanec New Fires

The first Tlapanec New Fires observed by researchers were built on the occasion of weddings and called the "Burning of the Firewood Ceremony." The geographer Schultze-Jena (1938:3:150–151) witnessed one of these ceremonies in the municipal seat of Malinaltepec, while the anthropologist Marion Oettinger (1973, 1980:218–234) described it in the municipal seat of Tlacoapa. The ceremony consists of the lighting, at nightfall, of two piles of firewood (of different sizes), one for the bridegroom and the other for the bride, after having made before each of them a ritual deposit of plant objects and an animal sacrifice. Changes in family structure have led to the abandonment of this practice in recent years, since couples today usually begin marital life without further ado and parents no longer see fit to carry out this costly ritual. But the lighting of the New Fire continues in four Tlapanec municipalities and is generally linked to the political and religious organization of each community. In this essay, I will focus on the municipalities of Acatepec and Zapotitlan Tablas, where, beginning in 2000, I filmed and collected the prayers associated with the New Fire rituals (Dehouve 2001, 2007, 2010; Dehouve and Prost 2004).

In each municipality, there are two levels of government. At the first level, the president of the municipality and his officers are elected for a period of three years; they reside in the municipal seat. In accordance with state law, the new president of Zapotitlan Tablas and his fellow officers build a New Fire upon taking office in January. (The building of a New Fire does not occur in Acatepec, a municipality founded in 1993.) At the second level, each municipality watches over a certain number of subordinate communities whose authorities—including a *comisario* (assisted by several *regidores*) and a police corps—serve a one-year period. Upon taking office, each community lights a New Fire in order to begin a week of investiture rituals. An equivalent ceremony is carried out six months later during the Catholic movable feast of Pentecost. On this occasion, the authorities again light a New Fire, which is followed by the same ceremonies performed in January.

In addition, in the aforementioned municipal seats and their subordinate communities, there are annual offices with religious functions, including the *fiscal* (who is charged with providing assistance to the parish priest when he visits the community) and several *mayordomos* (who organize the annual feast of the patron saints of the community). During these feasts, the *fiscales* and *mayordomos* light a New Fire similar to that of the political authorities. In Zapotitlan Tablas, in particular, this tradition is

upheld by the *mayordomos* of Saint James and Saint Mark, a supernatural being who controls the rains and receives the Tlapanec name of *ajku*. This custom is perhaps connected to the one already noted by the priest Jacinto de la Serna in the Nahuatl-speaking regions in the seventeenth century. He found that the feast for each saint began with fire veneration: "In the feasts of their patron saints and churches, they have the custom of offering first to the fire what they eat the next day" (En las fiestas titulares de sus Sanctos e Iglesias, acostumbran la noche antes, que ofrescen primero a el fuego lo que se a de comer el dia siguiente) (Serna [1656] 1892:284). Although he does not use the words "New Fire," Serna does provide detailed information that is reminiscent of it, particularly when he states that the custom was carried out "the night before" the feast.

The two municipalities under study can be divided into three ceremonial areas with slight ritual differences: the first covers the communities (Barranca Pobre, Yerba Santa, Mexcaltepec, Cuixinipa, Agua Tordillo, and Xochitepec) in the center of the municipality of Acatepec; the second consists of Apetzuca and its subordinate communities; and the third is made up of Zapotitlan Tablas and the communities of this municipality.

New Fires are built at the beginning of a life event or a political term in office in order to secure good fortune. The time elapsed between fires depends on the circumstances: a lifetime (for a fire lit on the occasion of a wedding), three years (for a fire lit by municipal authorities), and one year (for fires lit by offices with religious functions). The ceremony is headed by a single person, the "ritual principal"[2] who represents the group. In the case of the wedding fire, the two "ritual principals" are the bridegroom and his bride, while the group designates the family that they are in the process of founding. The "ritual principals" of political and religious life are the municipal president and *comisario* (on behalf of their officers and villages) as well as the *fiscal* and *mayordomo* (on behalf of their helpers and villages). The Tlapanecs refer to the New Fires accordingly as the "*comisario*'s fire" and "the *mayordomo*'s fire," etc.

The New Fire receives supplications according to the "ritual principal" addressing it. On the occasion of weddings, for example, children are requested. *Fiscales* and *mayordomos* expect fire to protect their performance during their year in office and pray for the welfare of the village. The *mayordomo* of Saint Mark asks specifically for a good rainy season and fertility. The political authorities present a broad range of supplications, for both their own health and that of their fellow citizens.

The Lighting of the Tlapanec New Fire

New Fires represent the first ceremonial act of a ritual sequence. The fire is always lit after sunset and it burns throughout the night until three, four, five, or six in the morning. Only then is it allowed to go out. The preparations for the fires begin days earlier, since the firewood necessary to build the fire has to be cut and the plant objects used in the ceremonial deposit have to be crafted.[3] Those in charge of the preparations are the members of the group that makes up the "ritual principal," including the families of the bride and the groom or the helpers of the president, *comisario*, *fiscal*, and *mayordomo*. These group participants seek the assistance of a ritual specialist known as a *xiñá* ("grandfather"), who will be in charge of directing the preparations, building the fire, and crafting the deposit. Between sunset and midnight, the members of these groups meet either in a family house (in the case of the wedding fire) or in the center of the village (in the case of a political or religious fire). Note that the ritual specialist performs the ceremony alone; during this time, he does not cease to pray in Tlapanec, addressing himself to the fire.

In the Zapotitlan Tablas ritual area, the ritual specialist makes a drawing of the sun on the ground before beginning to build the fire. Each specialist reproduces an image of his own making, although he provides in each case a cosmic framework for the lighting of the New Fire and thus emphasizes the close relationship between fire and the sun. In the other ritual areas, the ceremony begins immediately with the cutting and setting of firewood in a square. This firewood is said to be "green" since it was cut the previous day from a living tree. The

a

b

c

d

figure 14.1.
The New Fire and its deposit, Mexcaltepec, January 2004: (a) arranging the firewood square; (b) placing the ritual deposit before the lighted fire; (c) completing the placement of the ritual deposit and the presentation of the candles; and (d) placing the deposit into the fire. Photographs by Danièle Dehouve.

number of pieces of firewood differs according to the custom in each ritual area: 4 × 4 = 16 (in Zapotitlan Tablas), 6 × 4 = 24 (in Apetzuca), and 8 × 4 = 32 (in the central area of Acatepec). The size of the square varies greatly, from one square meter to as many as five square meters in Zapotitlan Tablas. Once the square is made, several pieces of pine pitch, conceived as the food of the fire, are placed vertically in the middle. During his prayer, the ritual specialist refers to these pieces, as he addresses the igneous being: "Here is what you are going to eat. Sit down and eat" (Figure 14.1).[4]

The fire is then lit, generally with matches, except for at Tres Cruces, in the southern part of Acatepec municipality, where flint and a piece of iron carefully guarded in the *comisaría* are used to ignite the flames. There, four men bearing the title of *mayor* are appointed each year to carry out this

figure 14.2. Lighting the fire with two flints and a piece of iron, Tres Cruces, January 2005. Photograph by Danièle Dehouve.

operation. The first man attempts to make a spark by striking metal and flint; if he is not successful, then the second, third, and fourth man each make successive attempts. If none succeeds, then this augurs ill for the future of the community. For the *mayor* who succeeds in producing the ignition spark, this is considered a sign of good fortune for his personal life. Four materials await the desired spark: a cotton serpent whose head has been previously burned with a match, a handful of straw, corn husks, and a pine pitch stick (Figure 14.2). If the spark falls on the cotton, the successful *mayor* blows to activate the flame, causing the straw, the corn husks, and the pine pitch to catch fire. The fire is then considered sufficiently strong to be placed in the firewood square.

It is highly possible that this last technique is of Pre-Columbian origin. Although the fire drill was the best-known means of making fire, percussion may have been also used. Possessing no iron, pre-Hispanic populations would have used pyrite (Leroi-Gourhan 1971). But the instruments used in Tres Cruces suggest colonial influence. In the colonial period, the Spaniards made fire with flint and steel lighters; they struck the flint against the iron, causing small metal fragments to fly off to produce a spark to a starter, which was a piece of tinder in Europe. In the case of Tres Cruces, the use of a piece of iron provides proof of Spanish influence in a ritual of possible Pre-Columbian origin.

Once the fire begins to burn, a ritual deposit is offered (Figure 14.1b–c), which, depending on the area, consists of vertical piles of plant objects, cotton wicks, and metal powder. The number of objects included and their order of presentation varies with each community.

At the conclusion, a fowl, its neck adorned with a necklace of flowers, is presented for sacrifice. The turkey is the preferred sacrificial bird, but it can be replaced by a hen or eggs. In some villages in the central area, the bird's throat is slit before being placed in the fire together with the ritual deposit (Figure 14.1d), but in others (such as Zapotitlan Tablas), it is thrown into the fire alive. It is a divinatory ritual: if the bird falls into the fire, then it is a sign that the supernatural being accepts the gift, thus auguring good fortune. But if it flies and escapes, then it is a bad sign, thus auguring misfortunes for the community. The operation's success depends, therefore, on the ritual specialist's ability to enmesh the wings and throw the bird. In the same area, the deposit ends with a gift of *aguardiente* thrown into the center of the fire with cigarettes placed around the square. In the central Acatepec area, the participants deposit "ties," made of small stones and cotton threads that represent

the individuals engaged in the ritual. The participants let the fire burn all night and usually keep it alive through the following days. Then, the townspeople extinguish their fires and take the coals from the common New Fire back to their hearths.

New Fire and Tlapanec Penance

Immediately following the lighting of the hearth, the fire ritual enters its second stage, which begins with the penance of the "ritual principal" and the members of his group. In effect, this penance (which the Tlapanecs refer to as *dieta* in Spanish) includes fasting, sexual abstinence, and wakefulness. The fast entails eating twice a day, as is the custom, but restricted to a special diet. Specifically, they avoid the "sour" content of limes and oranges as well as condiments with a strong odor, such as onions, *epazote* (*Disphania ambrosioides*), and mint, which "give taste" to food. The penitent's wife and children must observe this same penance, which can pose problems when the children eat in the lunch room of a boarding school.

The new officeholder is prohibited from having sexual relations with his wife, who must observe the same abstinence and so, half-jokingly, the new office holders tell each other: "keep an eye on your wife." It is said that sex (along with the prohibited condiments) gives off a strong odor and that "odor drives off good." In fact, sexual abstinence is the fundamental rule that the men must follow, although rarely is it expressed directly; preferably, public reference is made to the prohibited condiments.

These two proscriptions are complemented by going without sleep for the first days following the lighting of the New Fire. The future functionaries are allowed to "half-sleep," seated in their chairs for some hours at night, but they may not lie down. At the same time, they are secluded in the *comisaría* building; they cannot return home, as the townspeople could not keep an eye on them and be certain they were not engaging in sexual relations.

The New Fire is the guarantor of the penance. Already during the preceding deposit, the ritual specialist has referred to it in his prayer with the words: "Those who have eaten, have drunk, your children, your people, the bitter, limes, oranges, mint, *epazote;* you will forgive them for this, forgive them so that they see the end of the year" (Dí nikhu xúgwí adia, dí nikhugwa xúgwí xabia, nikhu dímiga, nikhu límo, nikhu laxa, nikhu awá, nikhu míñaa, matasimba ajkia, matasimba kóma, garamon si'gú). In other words, knowing that fire can kill those who do not observe penance, the ritual specialist anticipates and asks forgiveness for sexual transgressions.

Let us now return to the New Fire ceremony and its new stage related to the beginning of penance. According to the custom of the central area of Acatepec, in Agua Tordillo, the men form a circle around the fire lit in the middle of the *comisaría* building. Each man sits on a miniaturized, carved wooden stool (known as a *burrito*) that symbolizes his commitment to observing penance (see Figure 14.5). Each man receives from the ritual specialist a previously prepared mixture (Figure 14.3a) of green tobacco (*Nicotiana rustica; ndí*, in Tlapanec) crushed with lime (*ídí* in Tlapanec). This mixture is the *picietl* described by the informants of Sahagún (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 10:140) and was known as either *picietl* or *tenexyetl* in the Nahua region of Guerrero at the beginning of the seventeenth century (Ruiz de Alarcón 1892:pt. I, ch. 4:139, pt. II, ch. 4:157) or as *beleño* in the Mixtec texts (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2009:42n38). This tobacco preparation should not be confused with the dry tobacco that the Aztecs smoked in reeds.

The ritual specialist enters the circle and gives a pinch of the mixture to each incoming officer, according to rank, beginning with the *comisario*. He makes four turns, meaning that each officer swallows four pinches (Figure 14.3b–c). Each officer rubs his joints and back of his neck with the tobacco mixture to obtain protection for his body (Figure 14.3d). Later, what is left over from the mixture will be tied to the legs of the *comisario*'s table.

The green tobacco with lime symbolizes the suffering of the officeholders as well as their commitment to observing penance during the prescribed period. It is a feared test, as indicated by a dialogue between the ritual specialist in Agua Tordillo and the *comisario* who "bartered" so as to swallow a smaller number of pinches of the tobacco

a

b

c

d

figure 14.3.
The green tobacco and lime ritual in different villages: (a) the preparation of the tobacco mixture with lime by the ritual specialist, Mexcaltepec, January 2004; (b) pinches of the mixture of green tobacco and lime, Agua Tordillo, January 2005; (c) the *comisario* swallows a pinch given to him by the ritual specialist, Barranca Pobre, January 2003; and (d) the tobacco is rubbed into the joints, Mexcaltepec, January 2004. Photographs by Danièle Dehouve.

figure 14.4.
Eating tamales with chili broth, Barranca Pobre, January 2003. Photograph by Danièle Dehouve.

mixture. The specialist began by addressing himself to the fire with the ritual formula: "You will bless the place where your children will eat; you will bless where your people will take" (Mataná saku rama dímopo ejña, Mataná saku rama dímopo xabia). Then followed the exchange with the *comisario*:

> Ritual specialist: "Will there be enough for four or five for each one?"
> Specialist's helpers: "There will be enough for four for each."
> Ritual specialist: "When you finish, drink water for it to go down. If you finished these, then eat the tamales."
> *Comisario*: "The four are not going to go down. Two, better one, like a pill. I'll take one. My throat burns."
> Ritual specialist, to his helpers: "Stick the four together so that they do not suffer. Have the water ready. I saw how they did it in Cuixinipa [another village]. They prepare it with just lime. It makes you want to vomit with so much lime. This is nothing. It's just a little. Just bitter but it doesn't burn your guts. When it has a lot of lime, it makes you vomit."
> One man: "You gave me more than the rest."
> Ritual specialist: "Too bad. Drink water."

When they are finished taking the tobacco, the participants drink a broth made from red chili (i.e., the extremely hot kind known as *chiltecpin* in Nahuatl and *chile pulga* in Spanish)[5] and eat penance tamales of "raw corn," which are made with grains not boiled in lime, but ground dry on the *metate* (Figure 14.4). When they are finished eating, the men leave the miniaturized stools, on which they sat to take the tobacco and the penance meal near the heat of the fire for several hours. These *burritos* are buried under the *comisario*'s table—known as "table of justice" because it is the place

figure 14.5.
Placing the miniaturized stools under the *comisario*'s table, Agua Tordillo, January 2005. Photograph by Danièle Dehouve.

of authority—and over the body of a sacrificed cat (Figure 14.5). They remain there for the authorities' year-long term in office.

Through this ritual, the *comisario* and his group commit themselves to observing penance during the time set by the ritual specialist. Generally, the number of days chosen is the same as the number of pieces of firewood and objects in the ritual deposit: twenty-four in the Apetzuca area, and thirty-two in the area of Barranca Pobre. The other officeholders (such as the *fiscal* and *mayordomo*) generally observe a lighter penance, with the intake of tobacco, that lasts only a few days. In Zapotitlan Tablas, the *mayordomos* complete their penance on the fifth day.

During the entire time of penance, the fire is fed and is not allowed to go out. In each community, there is a special group, known as the *somayo* (guardians of the house), who take turns feeding it. When the scheduled end of the ritual arrives, the fire is doused with water. Then, the ceremonial actors carefully collect the ashes and throw them into a body of running water, such as a spring or a river, which is an efficient means of getting rid of the dangerous ritual wastes. As previously noted, although a fire is lit between sunset and midnight, it is put out between three and six in the morning.

Observance of penance is a matter of life and death. The most serious transgression would be the failure of the *comisario* to practice penance, which can lead to the death of his neighbors by illness or accident (Dehouve 2012). For example, if some misfortune occurs in a village, rumors will circulate that the president engaged in sexual relations during the prescribed period of continence:

> All the members of the *comisaría* do penance. That's why they eat those tamales, to commit themselves to do penance. If [the *comisario*] does penance, he is clean. Nobody dies. There is illness, but people don't die when he does penance. And people thank the *comisario* when there are no problems, when children don't die, because he followed the custom. But if the *comisario* does not want to do penance, everybody says that when there is illness, people will die. Children, adults, three or four people in the year. Every day children die and they say that the *comisario* did not do penance when he took office (interview with

Marcelina Vázquez from Mexcaltepec, January 2002, in Dehouve and Prost 2004).

The failure of other officeholders to practice penance has lesser consequences. If a second-tier officer, such as a policeman, dies in exercising his office, people say that his death happened because he did not observe sexual abstinence. When the *mayordomo* of Saint Mark, saint of the rain, does not keep his penance, he spoils the rainy season and the entire community suffers through his fault. Thus subjected to judgment by their fellow townspeople, the officeholders try to protect themselves. They remain secluded in the center of the village for several days after the fire is lit, so that the people can witness their abstinence. On the night of the feast of the saint, the wife of the *mayordomo* of Saint Mark in Zapotitlan Tablas prepares a "sour" *atole*, so called because it ferments for twenty-four hours. If the fermentation process goes as it should, then all the guests can witness this at the conclusion of the ritual when they drink an *atole* with perfect texture. This means the *mayordomo* has kept his penance and cannot be blamed if rainfall is scarce. On the contrary, if the *atole* is piquant, the *mayordomo*'s transgression is revealed on the spot.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the "president's fire" and the "*comisario*'s fire" are ritually put out at the end of their term in office, just before the New Fire of their successors is lit. In reality, the fire of the outgoing president does not burn constantly for the entire year, for as we have seen, it is extinguished at the end of the first weeks of penance. Nonetheless, older people recall that, formerly, this fire remained lit from January through June. It was then put out and another New Fire that burned continuously from June to January was lit and extinguished only when his successor took office. Thus, the penance associated with the fire was continuous during the term in office of the authorities. Today, the fact that the outgoing president's fire is doused with water at the end of his term is merely symbolic. In fact, New Fire "indicates Year, New Year, New Justice, New Authority" (interview with Pascual Santos, 2002, in Dehouve and Prost 2004), which implies that all the acts—including the bad ones—of the outgoing president disappear when "his fire" is extinguished.

The Tlapanec Model of the Fire-Penance Complex

The ritual complex examined in several Tlapanec communities exhibits the following characteristics:

1. The treatment of the fire follows a precise protocol that includes ritually lighting and extinguishing it. The fire is lit between sundown and midnight. "Green" firewood is used and the pieces are placed in a counted number to form a square with two sticks of pine pitch placed vertically. A ritual deposit with a sacrificed animal whose body is consumed by the New Fire is offered. The fire is doused with water and its ashes are thrown into a body of running water between three and six in the morning.
2. The fire is a time marker. But it does not mark time like a timepiece; it does not mark a neutral time but rather a period in the life of a group through its responsible party. The success of the activities of this group and the very life of its members depend on observance of penance associated with the New Fire.
3. The close relationship between fire and penance is constructed by the ritual in its different phases: the acts of penance immediately follow the lighting of the fire, and the fire burns without dying out during the entire period of penance, whose end is signaled by ritually extinguishing the fire.
4. The penitential acts affect the bodies of the "ritual principals" and their family members. They mark the entry into a new state in which all that characterizes ordinary life (i.e., food, sex, and sleep) is prohibited. They demand renunciation and suffering. They construct the person responsible for a community office by transforming his body.

This summary of the complex associating fire, night, penance, and the life and death of the ritual actors allows us to return to sources related to the Aztecs with new questions.

The Fire-Penance Complex among the Aztecs

Despite what is commonly thought, among the Aztecs, lighting a New Fire was common. Fire, in fact, served multiple purposes: cooking, bathing and the *temazcal*, preparing land for cultivation, processing salt and other products, and burning copal incense in ceremonial contexts (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 1:29, 1956:bk. 1:39). The Aztecs did not have matches, so there were only two ways of obtaining fire: drilling a new fire, or taking the coals from an existing fire. Both options held a ritual character. Unfortunately, the evangelizers were not cognizant of this fact and consequently left few observations of the distinctive origins of fire used on different occasions. But a review of the documents shows that the drilling of a New Fire was far from an exceptional event.

The Aztec New Fires

Fire signaled the opening of different Aztec ritual cycles, which I will review in the following, beginning with the major and ending with the minor.

The 52-Year New Fire

The New Fire marked the beginning of the 52-year cycle during the "year-tying" ceremony (*xiuhmolpilli*), when the 365-day calendar cycle coincided with the 260-day cycle (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 7:25–32). At the start of the ceremony, the fires in all homes and temples were extinguished. The priests dressed as gods and journeyed to Huixachtlan Hill in the southern part of present-day Mexico City. Once the fire was lit by the commissioned priest, an immense bonfire flared up, in which the body of a sacrificed man was burned and could be seen from afar. The fire was distributed among the temples of Mexico, beginning with that of Huitzilopochtli, with pine slats. Later, the inhabitants of each house in each town came to take this fire to their homes, as the inhabitants of the municipality of Acatepec do today when new authorities take office.

The *Izcalli* Annual New Fire

Another occasion on which a New Fire was lit was the annual feast of *Izcalli*. On the tenth day of *Izcalli* (a twenty-day month that ran from January 18 to February 6 at the time of the Spanish conquest),[6] the *huauhquiltamalcualiztli* ("eating tamales made with amaranth leaves") ceremony was celebrated. Prior to eating this special food, which represented the New Fire itself (Dehouve 2013), a fire was made with a drill stick in front of the image of the Xiuhtecuhtli, the fire god, which was adorned with precious feathers and stones. Every four years, the feast was celebrated in an even more sumptuous manner with human sacrifices. The New Fire was lit in a special quarter of the city: "Tzonmolco Calmecac: from there came the fire, which they named Xiuhtecutli. There Moctezuma took the fire when he offered incense, and there the drill fell [to make the new fire] yearly, at the time of [the feast of] Uauhquiltamalalqualiztl" (Tzonmolco calmecac: uncan quizaya in tletl, in quitocayotiaya xiuhtecuhtli: ompa concuiya in tletl, in ihcuac tlemanacaya motecuzoma, ihuan uncan huetziya in tlecuahuitl: cexiuhtica, ipan huauhquiltamalcualiztli) (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 2:190).[7] This important citation shows that this fire was used on each occasion during the year in which the *tlahtoani* burned copal resin ritually.

The New Fire in the Royal Investiture

Two types of royal personages existed in Central Mexico (Dehouve 2016). The *tecuhtli* (pl. *tetecuhtin*) was responsible for the performance of ritual, the impartment of justice, and the conduct of war of a group of people. The *tlahtoani* (pl. *tlahtohqueh*) was a *tecuhtli* who held a high rank among the royal personages. The Mexicas and other Nahua populations staged a large number of these personages in Central Mexico. Both *tlahtohqueh* and *tetecuhtin* assumed office through long investiture ceremonies.

A single source mentions the drilling of the New Fire at the beginning of the investiture ceremony of the *tecuhtli*-level kings in Tlaxcala, Huexotzingo, and Cholula. In a document sent to Spain in 1537, the viceroy Antonio de Mendoza proposes that the representatives of the Spanish Crown legitimate the investiture ceremonies of the Indian nobles. The fire drilling was carried out by the *tecuhtli* and his family at the start of a thirty-day

penance: "And in those thirty days, a new fire was to be made with a drill stick and care was to be taken that in those thirty days the fire did not die out; and all his male and female relatives had to fast" (I en estos treinta dias, havia de encender nuevo fuego sacado de un palo de que lo sacan, i havia de tener cargo que de dia i de noche en estos treinta dias no havia de cesar [dejar?] el fuego de matarse, i havian de ayunar con el todos sus parientes hombres, y mugeres) (Carrasco 1965:136–137). This relationship between lighting the New Fire and penance is completely consistent with the Tlapanec descriptions.

The New Fire of War

When a war began, the priests, dignitaries, and warriors went to the battlefield in a fixed order. There, in the dark of night, all waited for the priests to give the signal of war, which they did by drilling a New Fire and blowing on the conch shells. Then, the warriors threw themselves into the shadows and began to take captives, who would subsequently be sacrificed on the same field of battle (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 8:52, 1956:bk. 8:470). A New Fire thus opened the cycle of war.

The New Fire of the House

A New Fire initiated the life cycle of the inhabitants of a house: "When someone built a new house, when it was finished, he gathered his relatives and neighbors and, before them, made a new fire in the house. And if the fire was lit swiftly, it was said that dwelling in the house would be good and peaceful and if it took time in lighting, they said it was a sign that dwelling in the house would be marked by misfortune and hardships" (Cuando alguno edificaba alguna casa nueva, habiéndole acabado, juntaba los parientes y vecinos y delante de ellos sacaba fuego nuevo en la misma casa. Y si el fuego salía presto, decían que la habitación de la casa sería buena y apacible, y si el fuego tardaba en salir decían que era señal que la habitación de la casa sería desdichada y penosa) (Sahagún 1956:bk. 5:284). According to another source, "to occupy a new house . . . they placed in the middle of the house a new fire made with some sticks" (para estrenar las nuevas casas . . . puestos en medio de la casa, sacan con unos palos fuego nuevo) and sacrifice a hen to it (Ponce de León 1979:129).

The Fire in the Birth Ritual

The newborn's fire is described by Ponce de León (1979:123) and Eberl (2013). After childbirth and one day before the newborn reception ritual, the house dwellers lit a fire: this ceremony was known as *itleuh quizas in piltzintli* ("coming out of the little child's fire"). Sahagún's informants described this feast in a slightly different manner, explaining that the child's fire was to remain lit for four days before the midwife performed the reception ritual: "And also for four days they carefully watched the fire. It never went out. It continued to flare up, to grow and increase, to flare red. They thus carefully started it; it was well set" (Auh ihuan nahuilhuitl in huel quipiah tletl aqueman cehui, xotlaticah, hualanticah, huahualanticah, mopipitzticah, huel quicpehuah, huel ic peuhticah) (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 4:111). The text uses the word "start" (*pehua*), which suggests that the fire was specifically lit after childbirth. A good lighting of the fire could metaphorically represent the favorable beginning of the existence of the child. In addition, this fire incarnated the life of the newly born: "And if anyone wished to take the fire, or a light, they would not give it to him, lest he take renown from the child who has been born" (Auh intla acah ontlecuiznequi tletlecuic: ahmo quimacah, inic ahmo quitleyocuilizqueh piltontli, in otlacatl) (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 4:111).[8] The fire remained burning while the child was given a purification bath: "During the time that she [the midwife] bathed the baby, a pine torch stood burning. It was not extinguished" (in ixquichcauh caltiah piltzintli, ocopilli tlatlaticac, ahmo cehui) (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 6:203). Sahagún does not specify whether this fire was associated with the penance of the parents of the child, but this could have been the case, since among the present-day Chontals studied by Carrasco (1960), the ritual known as "sowing the life of a child" required nine days of penance.

The Penance Fire of a Feast

Many feasts began with penance that was associated with a fire that had to be maintained.

Motolonía states: "Fasting of all the people began sixty-two days before the feast and during all this time the fire was not allowed to die, nor was it to go out in the house of the lords and dignitaries, neither in the day nor in the night, and if care was not taken and the fire died out, the lord of the house where the fire went out killed a slave and sprinkled his blood in the brazier where the fire died out" (El ayuno de todo el pueblo comenzaba sesenta y dos días antes de la fiesta, y en todo este tiempo no se había de amatar el fuego, ni había de faltar en casa de los señores y principales, ni de día ni de noche, y si había descuido y se moría, mataba el señor de la casa donde faltó el fuego un esclavo, y echaba la sangre de él en un brasero, donde murió la lumbre) (Motolinía 1903:pt. 1, ch. 27:76). A fire lit at the beginning of penance signaled that it would burn until penance was completed.

figure 14.6.
The fire drill in the Codex Vindobonensis. Drawing by Danièle Dehouve, based on Adelhofer 1963:11.

The Merchant's Fire

Long distance merchants lit fires upon their arrival in a city where they would do business. A ceremonial discourse warned the merchant: "And if thou canst reach the city which thou seekest out, be quick to take to the axe, the cutting of wood, the sweeping, the laying of fires, the lighting with torches, the shaking out of [mats], the washing of hands, of mouth" (Auh intla huel itech tahciz in altepetl, in ompa titlamattiuh, ma xoconcuitihuetzi in tepuztli, in cuauhtequiliztli, in tlachpanaliztli, in tletlaliliztli, in tlahuiliztli, in tlatzetzeloliztli, in tematequiliztli, in temamapacaliztli) (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 9:13). This set of acts includes the lighting of a fire associated with several penitential activities and the burning of incense: sweeping and "washing the hands and mouth" of the gods.[9]

The Lighting of the Aztec New Fire

The foregoing examination of the New Fire makes evident a certain operating mode and different uses of firing techniques. The evidence of the drilling technique is provided by the use a specific vocabulary in Nahuatl. The drilling stick was called *tlecuahuitl* (from *cuahui-tl*, "stick or wood," and *tle-tl*, "fire"). It consisted of two parts: a board and a stick that the priest in charge of lighting the fire turned between his hands. This operation was known as "throwing the fire stick" (*tlecuauhtlaza, quitlaza tlecuahuitl*) or "making it turn" (*quimamali tlecuahuitl*). When the spark flew, it was said that "the fire stick fell" (*huetzi tlecuahuitl*); then, the fire "took" when the priest blew on it (*pitza*, a verb meaning "to blow" and "to catch" fire) and, finally, "it flared" (*xotla cueponi*). To conclude, it was placed (*tletlalia*) in a hearth, a brazier, or a torch (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 7:11, 25–28). With this vocabulary, we can be certain that a New Fire was being drilled (Figure 14.6).[10]

The sources in Nahuatl make no mention of placing the firewood in the form of a square. Nonetheless, a description shows an arrangement of firewood that could be square and that the painter represented in green: "They took green wood from the forest . . . They placed the firewood one on top the other by hand" (Ca concuicah in xoxouhqui cuahuitl in cuauhtla . . . Quimaquetzayah; tomaban en el bosque madera verde . . . ponían los leños unos sobre los otros con la mano) (Sahagún 1958:58–59) (Figure 14.7).

The New Fire was inevitably drilled in the middle of the night, at *yohualnepantla;* this time corresponded to one or two in the morning, between

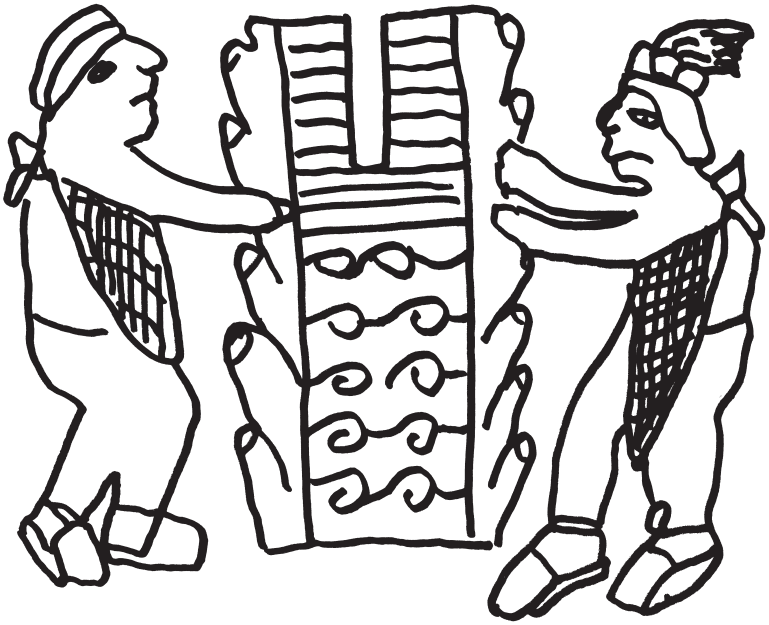

figure 14.7.
The placement of green firewood in the Aztec temples. Drawing by Danièle Dehouve, based on Sahagún 1958:58–59.

the canonic hours known as *maitines* (midnight) and *laudes* (three in the morning), as the Spanish division of time did not coincide with that of the Aztecs (Dehouve 2014:92). This was the fundamental moment when "the night is divided" (*in ìcuac xelihui yohualli*) (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 2:88). The notion of "division," from the root *xeloa*, was applied to the crossroads, to the crouching position of a toad assumed by women to give birth (Mikulska Dabrowska 2008:162), and to the place where sprouts of trees grew. It, thus, connoted the idea of birth and creation. This time, which corresponded to the nadir, signaled the beginning of a new day.[11]

At sunset on the day before the drilling of the fire, a procession of priests dressed as gods set out in the direction of Huixachtlan Hill, "it being the middle of the night" (*yohualnepantla*) when a priest especially in charge of this task drilled the fire (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 7:25). This was done when the Pleiades, a constellation of major importance among the Amerindians in both North and South America, were visible in the sky. The Pleiades were at their zenith at midnight around November 16, 1500 (Broda 1982).

In the case of Izcalli, it was said that "in the middle of the night [the priest] used the fire drill [to make a fire]" (Yohualnepantla tlecuauhtlaza) (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 2:159). Likewise, in the funeral rites, the mortuary bundle was cremated at night: at midnight, they brought out the body in a procession and put it to fire, "and at sunrise Caczonsin [king of Michoacán] was burnt and reduced to ashes" (É ya cuando amanecia estaba quemado el Caczoncin [rey de Michoacán] y hecho ceniza) (Motolinía 1903:pt. 2, ch. 1:241). Accordingly, the cremation of the bodies representing dead warriors began at sunset (Heyden 1997:104).

The fire for war was also drilled in the middle of the night. Upon arrival at the battlefield, the warriors remain immobile in place "until the moment that Yacauitztli, [god of] the night, would descend—that darkness would fall. And when they already were to rise against the city to destroy it, first was awaited tensely the moment when fire was flared up—when the priest brought forth [new] fire—and for the blowing of shell trumpets, when the priests blew them" (In ohualhuetz acahuiztli, in tlayohualli inic tlayohualcuihuaz: auh in ihcuac ye itech nequetzaloz, in altepetl polihuiz, achto oc cenca mochiya in tletl, in quenman cueponiz: inic tlecuauhtlazah tlamacazqueh: ihuan in tlapitzalli in tecuciztli, in oquipitzqueh tlamacazqueh) (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 8:52–53). It should

be further added that, generally speaking, fire was associated with penance performed at night, as will be explained below.

New Fire and Aztec Penance

Penitential practices consisted of fasting (*zahua*, *nino*),[12] "wakefulness" or sleep deprivation (*tozoa*), "blood-letting" (*ihzo*, *nino*), and sexual abstinence (*ahmo cihuacochi* "not sleeping with a woman" [male speaker] and *ahmo oquichcochi*, "not sleeping with a man" [female speaker]). On different occasions, the penitents painted their bodies black. Baths, with distinct variants, were of fundamental importance. Another activity associated with penance was sweeping, for which women awoke several times during the night (Dehouve 2011, 2016:278–279; Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 3:1).

The New Fire ceremonies opened a period of penance that the texts designated by mentioning any of the aforementioned activities, including, but not limited to, blood-letting.[13] Thus, the penance performed by new kings during their investiture ceremonies, which was described in great detail in the sources, included fasting, abstinence, wakefulness, blood-letting, and baths, and it was accompanied by the offering of incense and the sacrifice of quail to several gods. The *tecuhtli* and all members of his family, both male and female, were present at the lighting of a New Fire with a fire drill and began a period of penance lasting one month (Carrasco 1965:136–137).

War, which was begun with a New Fire, also opened a period of penance. We know that the *tlahtoani,* the family of the warriors, and possibly the warriors themselves spent the duration of a war with fasting, sexual abstinence, wakefulness, reclusion, and self-sacrifice (Pomar 1986:69). To this evidence must be added that of the fires of merchants, which are closely associated with fire and mortification, as we have seen. Finally, in the 52-year "binding," once the New Fire was drilled on Huixachtlan Hill, all the subjects of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, including "babies still in their cradle," cut their ears, a practice that has been described as "self-sacrifice" and that constituted the crux of penance: "They said that in this way they all did penance or gained merit" (Decían que de aquella manera, todos hacían penitencia, o merecían) (Sahagún 1956:bk. 7:440). Similarly, during the feast of Izcalli, they cut the ears of children.

Several of the texts stress that, during the entire time of penance, the fire had to be carefully stoked so as not to go out. They refer to an important feast in Tlaxcala (Motolinía 1903:pt. 1, ch. 27:76), the birth ritual (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 4:111), and to the investment of the *tecuhtli* (Carrasco 1965:136–137). It should be pointed out that, generally speaking, the penitents who resided in the temples spent the night burning enormous amounts of firewood, like the young men consecrated to Huitzilopochtli (Sahagún 1956:bk. 3:193). "Bringing firewood for the gods: . . . Those who lived in the house of the god, those who did penance, did this."[14]

The term referring to putting out the fire was *cehui tletl, cehuia tletl* ("to calm down, to cool off, to go out" [fire or candle]), according to Molina's *Vocabulario* ([1571] 1966). A fire could go out if sufficient care was not taken to stoke it; such neglect was considered to be a highly dangerous transgression. The fire could also be put out ritually. Sahagún mentions two occasions on which this occurred. The first consisted of the inhabitants of Mexico-Tenochtitlan extinguishing all of their fires at the end of the 52-day period and prior to the lighting of the New Fire (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 7:25). The second occurred in the middle of the night, right before the sacrifice of slaves during the feast offered by a merchant; then, the priests dressed the merchant before a fire that was extinguished immediately thereafter (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 9:63).

I have demonstrated the association between fire and the diverse practices of penance. It only remains to be said that both held a special relationship with the night. We have already noted that New Fires were drilled at the time designated as "the middle of the night" (*yohualnepantla*). Two penitential acts—the eating of penitential tamales and blood-letting—were performed at exactly the middle of the night and the middle of the day. The first moment was determined by taking into account the position of the constellation of Orion; the second, by noting when the sun was in its apparent zenith. In a

24-hour time frame, the penitents' fast consisted of eating only once, either at midday or in the middle of the night (Sahagún 1956:bk. 1:41, bk. 3:213). Blood-letting was also practiced at these two moments. If, at midday, the objective was to honor the sun, on other occasions (i.e., for the Lord of the Night), it took place as midnight struck.

In effect, nocturnal penance, accompanied by wakefulness, is the type of penance most frequently referred to in the sources, as has been pointed out in numerous scholarly works.[15] Both female worshippers and male priests did penance and practiced blood-letting in the darkest hours of the night, while the kings holding the title of *tecuhtli* re-created a symbolic night at the beginning of their investment ceremonies.[16]

Aztecs and Tlapanecs

A comparison of the the Aztec and Tlapanec ritual complexes reveal the following similarities:

1. The treatment of the fire—lighting and putting it out—follows a set protocol. Although the Tlapanec New Fire is lit at an indefinite time following sunset, the Aztec New Fire was drilled at exactly the middle of the night (*yohualnepantla*). The fire-drilling technique was used and the square of the hearth was made out of "green" firewood. All fires thus lit would be ritually extinguished. Unfortunately, we lack detailed information on the protocols of what followed.
2. The fire was a time marker of a period in the life of a person or group through his or its responsible party. From the lighting of the New Fire, the *tecuhtli* expected to properly exercise his power, the merchant to achieve success in his activities, the warrior to obtain victory, and the parents of a newborn to ensure their child would lead a happy life.
3. The New Fire rituals were associated with penance during their different phases: the acts of penance were performed immediately following the lighting of the fire, while the fire itself burned without going out during the entire time of the penance.
4. The penitential acts affected the body of the "ritual principals" and their family group more rigorously in the past than in the present, since blood-letting was practiced in addition to the usual mortifications (i.e., fasting, wakefulness, sexual abstinence, etc.).

Symbolism in the Association between Penance and the New Fire

The Fire-Penance Complex, teased out of the Tlapanec and Aztec descriptions, follows a strict ritual model that raises questions as to its symbolic meanings. The hypotheses in this regard are by no means lacking, but until now, generally speaking, the symbolism in the New Fire ceremonies has been looked at separately from the symbolism involving penance. The Aztec New Fire, particularly the one lit every fifty-two years, has been analyzed as the periodic renewal of cosmic time consistent with the more general role of fire in the creation and resurrection as well as the transition between cycles (see, for example, Chinchilla Mazariegos, this volume; Elson and Smith 2001; Izeki 2008; Nielsen and Helmke, this volume; Scherer and Houston, this volume; Taube 2000). Several scholars have shown that penitential acts, notably blood-letting, bundled together numerous meanings, since they were conceived of as the quest for a favor, a gift, a blood offering that feeds the sun and the earth, an act of gratitude for favors obtained, and a means of purifying the body (Baudez 2012; Graulich 2005; Nuttall 1904).

All of these interpretations combine to account for the complexity of the New Fire rituals and penitential practices, when viewed separately. But, as these rituals and practices are tightly bundled within the Fire-Penance Complex among the Aztecs and Tlapanecs, it is pertinent to raise the question as to whether this relationship created specific symbolic dimensions. In other words, why was penance linked to fire and the night? To answer this question, following many other scholars, we should turn to the myth of the creation of the sun at Teotihuacan, as well as the description of ritual practices.

The mythical model is found in the tale of the creation of the sun in Teotihuacan (Ruiz de Alarcón 1892:pt. 1, ch. 10:150; Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 7:3–8). These texts recount that, in the darkness, two people lit a fire and let blood during four nights. When the middle of the night (*yohualnepantla*) arrived, they dressed themselves and threw themselves into the fire. They came out metamorphosed as the sun and moon, and, as such, followed their course in the sky. Accordingly, in the myth, the "fire in the night" sequence precedes sunrise and the day, and the New Fire rituals are the reenactment of the myth as amply shown by Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2009:42) and Taube (2000:315) (see also Chinchilla Mazariegos, this volume; Nielsen and Helmke, this volume).

In a general manner, this sequence expresses a philosophy of existence, according to which the day is prepared during the dark of night. This idea was probably widespread and found among many peoples, as suggested by one historian, who notes that the pre-Christian Celts measured time not by the number of days but by the number of nights. For the ancient Celts, night precedes day as winter precedes summer: "This binary opposition between the other world and this one, between darkness first followed by light, between night first followed by day, between winter first and then summer . . . between death/non-life and actual life mirrors a metaphysical reflection between non-being and being" (Cette opposition polaire entre l'autre monde et celui-ci, entre l'obscurité d'abord et la lumière ensuite, entre la nuit d'abord et puis le jour, entre l'hiver d'abord et puis l'été . . . entre la mort/la non-vie et la vie en fait, reflète une réflexion métaphysique sur le non-Être et l'Être) (Sterckx 2003:259).

Among the Aztecs, all social activity was conceived on the basis of the model of solar activity, the preparation of which takes place in darkness. It is for this reason that the nightly penance by the "principal" mirrored that of the mythical personages, and that the beginning of their mundane activities (i.e., exercise of power, war, life period, etc.) was closely associated with the appearance of the sun. It can, in this way, be understood that the night-day time frame structured the Aztec ceremonies and that their meaning continues to operate in Tlapanec rituals. Such is the role of leadership: in preparation to assume his role, the "principal" lights a fire and his future activity is symbolically compared to the course of the sun after sunrise.

Two Parallel Time Sequences

What directly concerns us here is the nocturnal and preparatory sequence that combines penance with the lighting of the New Fire. In the Aztec and Tlapanec cases examined above, the amount of time that passes between the lighting and the extinguishing of the fire is equal to the duration of the penance, such that the acts of penance and the lighting of the fire constitute two rigorously parallel time sequences. In myth, too, penance begins with the lighting of the New Fire: "They began now to do penance. They fasted four days—both Tecuciztecatl [and Nanahuatzin]. And then, also, at that time, the fire was laid" (Niman ic conpehualtihqueh, in ie tlamacehuah: mozauhqueh nauhilhuitl: omextin in tecuciztecatl. Auh niman no ihcuac, motlalih in tletl) (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 7:4). This simultaneity is corroborated in what follows in the narration: "All the gods proceeded to encircle the hearth . . . where for four days had burned the fire" (In muchintin teteoh quiyahualotimomanqueh in tlecuilli . . . in oncan nauhilhuitl otlatlac tletl) (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 7:5). At the end of four days, the two beings threw themselves into the fire, thus transforming themselves into celestial bodies.

This custom is linked to the role of fire as a marker of time, which has often been noted by scholars who have translated the name of Xiuhtecuhtli as "god of time" (Boone 2007:41). But it should also be noted that corporal penance is a special marker of time, since it separates sacred and profane time: fasting, wakefulness, and sexual abstinence effectively break with the usual human activities of eating, sleeping, and engaging in sexual relations. Blood-letting adds a dramatic undercurrent to these acts by introducing pain and forced bleeding at set moments of the day and night (Dehouve 2014:312). The burning of the fire and the practice of penance should, thus, be considered as alternative ways of marking time. They also represent a double preparation for the transformation of

the body which, following the indications given in the myth, involve two ideas: purification and pain.

Purification

The New Fire is purifying. The being who was transformed into the sun after having thrown himself into the fire was Nanahuatzin, whose body was covered with pus-filled sores: "Then the stricken one threw himself into the middle of that furious fire with whose force and flames he purged and purified his illness, and he became beautiful and radiant, transformed into the sun" (Luego el enfermo animosamente se arrojo enmedio de aquel furiosso fuego, con cuya fuerça y llamas purgo y purifico toda su enfermedad y llagas, y quedo hermoso y luziente y convertido en sol) (Ruiz de Alarcón 1892:pt. 1, ch. 10:150). Note that this text adds an essential detail: the fire is also a receptacle of impurity and, for this reason, when the second being threw himself in turn into the fire, "since he found it tempered through the trial of the first one, from the humors and corruption that had been expelled from him, he could not attain so much purity . . . he was transformed into the moon with less light than the sun, converting himself into the moon since he had found the furnace to be not as hot" (Hallandolo templado con la prueua del primero, del humor y corrupcion que de el auia salido, no pudo llegar a tanta pureza . . . fue transformado en luna con menos luz que el sol, y con mudança en ella por auer hallado el horno desigual en el calor) (Ruiz de Alarcón 1892: pt. 1, ch. 10:151). This suggests that the purifying force of the recently drilled New Fire decreases as it becomes charged with impurities.

The same concept is evident in the ritual context of the ceremonies of a cyclical character. This would exclude rituals such as the lighting of fires at birth, ceremonies performed at the inauguration of a new house, the activities of merchants among the Aztecs, and the lighting of marriage fires among the Tlapanecs. Rather, cyclical ceremonies are those rites that marked the rhythm of the calendar and the succession of men to power: every fifty-two years, during the annual feast of Izcalli, and on the occasion of the investiture of a new ruler among the Aztecs, as well as each year when new municipal authorities take office among the Tlapanecs. In all of these cases, the lighting of the New Fire is preceded by extinguishing the old fire considered to be filled with impurities that have accumulated over time.

Every fifty-two years, all fires burning in Aztec-dominated territory were extinguished. The purifying character of this act is seen clearly in light of the expulsion ritual associated with putting out the fires. In effect, when the appointed day for lighting the New Fire in the hearth approached, each citizen of Mexico would throw the stones or wood pieces they held as household gods into the water of the irrigation canals or the lakes. They would do the same with the hearthstones they used for cooking and with the stones they used for grinding chili peppers, "and they thoroughly cleaned their houses and, when finished, they put out the old fire" (y limpiaban muy bien las casas y al cabo mataban todas las lumbres) (Sahagún 1956:bk. 7:439). Beginning at the time the New Fire was lit, the inhabitants would dress in new clothes and use new sleeping mats "so that all things they needed in their houses were new, as a sign that the new year was beginning" (de manera que todas las cosas que eran menester en casa eran nuevas, en señal del año nuevo que se comenzaba) (Sahagún 1956:bk. 7:441). And they said: "For thus it is ended; thus sickness and famine have left us" (Ihuan quihtoayah, ca ic oquiz, ic otechtlalcahui in cocoliztli, in mayanaliztli) (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 7:31). What we can understand from this text is that the fire and domestic utensils, charged with impurities of the past, had been eliminated by the renovation rituals. As opposed to the old, the New Fire and the new utensils were no longer carriers of dangers or woes.

On the occasion of the investiture of rulers, the Aztec king sent invitations to the other kings and received them in a room filled with the "stools and sitting mats they used, all new" (de sillas que ellos usaban y de esteras, todo nuevo) (Sahagún 1956:bk. 8:475). The mat, alongside the stool, make up the difrasismo "*petlatl icpalli*" that designated power. Seating the kings on these "brand new" seats meant that power was being renewed and cleansed. Elsewhere, I made a similar interpretation of the gifts of blankets, adornments, and shields made by the

new king to each of his royals guests, as well as to the leading personalities of the kingdom, nobles, captains, judges, singers, and all types of priests (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 8:65, quoted in Dehouve 2016:143–144).

Today, on beginning the investiture ceremonies of Tlapanec municipal authorities, ritual specialists ceremonially purify their staffs of authority prior to extinguishing the old fire, which represents the outgoing officials. "We have to get rid of the old *comisario's* filth," a Tlapanec explained, "because in order to govern the things past must go out, go away" (hay que quitar la mugre del comisario saliente, porque para poder gobernarse, se van las cosas pasadas, salen) (Dehouve 2016:272).

The foregoing text brings home a number of connotations that ancient New Fire narratives held. In the four days previous to Nanahuatzin's sacrifice, the hearth was fed and grew to become an immense furnace in preparation for the transformation of his body. During the same time lapse, his body was prepared through penance. The text describes blood-letting and concludes: "And when they ended their four nights of penitence, then they went to throw down and cast away, each one, their fir branches" (Auh in otzonquiz, nauhyohual intlamacehualiz: niman quitlatlazato, quimamayahuito, in imacxoyauh) (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 7:5). The terms "throw down" and "cast away" (*tlaza* and *mayahui* in Nahuatl: "throw, reject, repulse, get rid of") signify an act of expulsion of undesirable elements. Among all possible meanings of bloodletting, they point in the direction of purification. Thus, while the New Fire burns in preparation for the transformation, penance is the means by which the human body prepares for this transformation.

Pain as a Test

The myth also explains that only Nanahuatzin, the one who suffered the most during his penance, had the necessary courage to throw himself into the fire that would inflict on him even greater pain: "He had no fear; he did not stop short; he did not falter in fright; he did not turn back. All at once he quickly threw and cast himself into the fire; once and for all he went. Thereupon he burned; his body crackled and sizzled" (Ahmo tle ic mixmauhti, ahmo moquehquetz, ahmo motilquetz, ahmo tzinquiz: zan niman ommotlaztihuetz, ommomayauhtihuetz in tleco, zan ic cenia: niman ie ic tlatla, cuecuepoca, tzotzoyoca in inacayo) (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 7:6). This example was soon followed by the other assistants who turned into animals, as the result of the quality of their penance and offerings: "They say that other ones were converted by the Sun in good animals who always had something to eat" (A los demas que ayunaron y offrecieron, dizen los convirtio el sol en buenos animales y que siempre tuuiessen que comer) (Ruiz de Alarcón 1892:pt. 1, ch. 10:151).

Viewed as a sequence parallel to the burning of the fire, penance is invested with several meanings: it is not only a marker of time and a means of purification, as we have seen, but also a test that only the strong and brave can surmount. We can thus understand that, among the Tlapanecs, consuming tobacco leaves mixed with lime and a broth of extremely hot chili peppers recalls the burns produced by the burning fire. In this regard, the observation by Pereira (this volume) is suggestive, as he notes that the soot from burning was used to paint the bodies of dignitaries black. Among the Aztecs, this custom was associated with penance and the black of the night. All of these elements aid in tracing a metaphoric equivalence between a natural phenomenon, fire, and a human action, penance. Finally, as shown above regarding the Aztecs and Tlapanecs, fire assumes the role of guarantor of penance because it is fire that punishes men guilty of transgressions.

Conclusions

The Tlapanec and Aztec data provide evidence of the existence of a "ritual principal" whose life and death depend on a ritual complex including the lighting of a fire, night, and penance. The examination of early colonial sources has shown that, unlike what is generally thought, the drilling of a New Fire was a frequent event that not only opened calendar and politico-religious periods but also preceded the activities of warriors, merchants, and

diverse specialized groups (through their specific rituals) and marked the events of domestic life (i.e., births and new dwellings). The lighting of the New Fire continues among the Tlapanec in the life cycle (weddings) and politico-religious organization. We have shown that corporal penance consisted of a set of associated practices including fasting, wakefulness, sexual abstinence, and blood-letting, which, with the exception of the latter, have all been maintained by the Tlapanecs.

The coincidence between the duration of the burning of the New Fire and that of corporal penance makes it possible to speak of a Fire-Penance Complex with several meanings. This complex represents, above all, the sequence preceding sunrise, consistent with the myth of the creation in Teotihuacan of the Fifth Sun. During the ceremonies, penance performed at night by the "ritual principal" imitates that of the mythical personages and the beginning of their mundane activities (i.e., exercise of power, war, life period, etc.). This pristine action is conceived as the rising of the sun. In the Fire-Penance Complex, the burning of the fire and corporal penance constitute two time markers of time that elapse in parallel fashion. Each, in its own manner, achieves the purification necessary for the success and continuity of all human activity.

These findings are in concert with the reflections by several scholars in this volume concerning the relationships between fire and the human body. To this effect, Chávez Balderas, Pereira, and Tiesler explain that the transformational power of fire often involved the body through the use of soot and, above all, through the physical capabilities of cremation found in the hearth (for instance, during the burning of warrior bundles). However, while it is true that fire is an element that by nature produces combustion and, consequently, the transformation of bodies, this study of the Fire-Penance Complex emphasizes that the New Fire also held symbolic capabilities for the transformation of the human body through corporal penance.

NOTES

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1 In a similar fashion to that of the Aztec Xiuhtecuhtli of blue-green hue (from the Nahuatl word *xihuitl*, "turquoise").

2 This "ritual head" was named "principal" and "*personnage central*" by A. M. Hocart (1978) to designate the person responsible for a ritual and the one who will reap its benefits.

3 I use the terms "ritual deposit" or "ceremonial deposit" to designate what other anthropologists and archaeologists have called "offerings" in referring to the presentation of ritual objects (Dehouve 2007).

4 *Ká girigá dí misú, arao' misú*. I use the spelling developed by Carrasco Zúñiga 2006, which I adapt to the Acatepec dialectal variant.

5 *Capsicum annuum var. glabriusculum* is a sylvan hot pepper ancestor of *Capsicum annum var. annuum*, domesticated in Mexico (Nee 1986:22–26). The identification of a sample of the Tlapanec variety brought back by Danièle Dehouve was made by Araceli Aguilar Meléndez (Dehouve n.d.).

6 Broda 2000:55.

7 In this citation and in what is to follow, I use the standardized orthography adopted by Wimmer.

8 The word *quitleyocuilizqueh (qui-tleyo(tl)-cui-lizqueh,* from *tleyo(tl)*, lit. "fire-thing" and *cui*, "to take") means "take the fire-thing, the strength or the glory of the newly born."

9 Washing one's hands and mouth is an operation that has different meanings according to the context. In the quotation considered here, the term *tecamapaca*, "wash someone's mouth" means "wash

the mouth of the gods" before offering them the fire with copal incense smoke (*tlenamaca*) (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 6:95, 1956:bk. 6:18: "get up and wash the mouths of the gods and offer them incense"). This is a metaphoric manner of referring to the burning of incense. "Shaking out" (*tlatzetzeloa*) belongs to the set of verbs that refer to sweeping (*tlachpani, tlatzetzeloani, tlacuicuini*, "he who sweeps, dusts, empties the waste" (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 4:5) and to the vocabulary of penance.

10 The expressions "throw the fire stick" and "the fire stick falls" are symbolic; they designate the putting into a rotational movement of the fire stick and the making of the first spark, respectively.

11 The term *yohualnepantla* (literally "in the middle of the night") was translated by Sahagún into Spanish as *media noche* ("midnight") and is generally translated as "midnight" from Nahuatl to English, particularly by Dibble and Anderson. "The middle of the night," however, is a more exact translation since it refers to one or two in the morning and not midnight.

12 Rather than "not eating," it was, instead, a question of taking specially prepared food, as in the case of the Tlapanecs, who eat tamales prepared without condiments.

13 Most of the cases deal with penance begun following the lighting of the New Fire. But another case mentioned by seventeenth-century author Jacinto de la Serna (1892) indicates that during the fateful days at the end of the 52-day period—which consisted of fasting and wakefulness—penance lasted thirteen days and was carried out in a period without fire, preceding the lighting of the New Fire (Serna 1892:313).

14 "Colocar leña para los dioses: . . . Hacían esto los que habitaban en la casa del dios, los que hacían penitencia" (Sahagún 1958:59). Many texts provide evidence of the association between the lighting of the New Fire and penitential practices. For example, "one who fasted and bled himself; who swept, shook out clothing, gathered up rubbish, laid fires, and at night held vigil, rose in vigor, and was circumspect" (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 4:5) or "the little tasks of sweeping, gathering of rubbish, and laying fires" (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 4:66).

15 For example, Baudez (2012:100–101) stresses that the Maya diphrasism, *ch'ahb'-a'kab'*, "penance-darkness," is common in both Classic period accounts and colonial texts.

16 For Aztec women, see Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 6:141; for priests, see Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 3:65–66. On the occasion of their investiture, the *tecuhtli*-level kings performed penance in a closed precinct (in other words, dark as in the night), while the offering of incense, the sacrifice of quail, and the letting of blood were carried out at night (Carrasco 1965:136).

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