

NAHUATL THEATER
VOLUME I
DEATH AND LIFE IN
COLONIAL NAHUA MEXICO



EDITED BY BARRY D. SELL AND LOUISE M. BURKHART
FOREWORD BY MIGUEL LEÓN-PORTILLA

NAHUATL THEATER

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VOLUME I

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Volume 1 Death and Life in Colonial Nahua Mexico

Edited by Barry D. Sell and Louise M. Burkhart
With the assistance of Gregory Spira

Foreword by Miguel León-Portilla

Also by Barry D. Sell

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Nahuatl Theater

Dedicated to Fernando Horcasitas, author of *El teatro náhuatl* (1974)
We stand on the shoulders of giants

Volume 1

Death and Life in Colonial Nahua Mexico

To pathfinders Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, for their editing of fray Bernardino de Sahagún's *Florentine Codex* (1950–1982)

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FOREWORD

Fernando Horcasitas (1924–1980) and Nahuatl Theater

Miguel León-Portilla

New Spain's various forms of theater in Nahuatl have attracted the attention of a good number of researchers. Thanks to them we know that such theater owes its existence to the efforts of Franciscan friars. In some ways this theater came to take the place of the feasts and performances of pre-Hispanic times. Only a few years after the conquest of the Mexican metropolis of Mexico Tenochtitlan (now Mexico City), some Franciscans, with the invaluable help of their native assistants, chose subjects mostly from the Holy Scriptures and also from texts already existing in Spanish or Latin, then prepared scripts, had them translated into the Nahuatl language, and organized performances.

Accounts left by some Franciscan and Indian chroniclers recall how intensely the natives enjoyed such performances, which were usually held in the open air. I myself, as an eyewitness, can testify how in our time many people have similarly enjoyed attending the staging of one of these old theater pieces. The staging was put on by a professional, Miguel Sabido, and his company, which includes Nahuatl-speaking actors. The performance also took place in the open air, near the pyramid of Tlatelolco to the north of Mexico City; there have been other performances at the sumptuous Palace of Fine Arts in the heart of the metropolis.

We owe to the Franciscans Toribio de Benavente Motolinia, Gerónimo de Mendieta, and Juan de Torquemada the first vivid accounts of how these plays were presented, as early as the 1530s at places such as the same Santiago Tlatelolco or in the atrium of the cathedral of Mexico City. Their extant scripts, mostly copies of the original texts, are preserved at various archives and libraries in Mexico, the United States, and Europe and permit careful appreciation of the plots, dialogue, and other stylistic attributes of the plays we know today as pieces of this early theater. A very good example of what can be done is offered by this book in which seven pieces are rendered (some for the first time) in English, translated directly from the Nahuatl language by Louise M. Burkhart and Barry D. Sell.

The recent “discovery” of what may be the oldest extant original Nahuatl text of this genre, dating to about 1591—entitled “Miércoles Santo” or “Holy Wednesday” and published by Louise M. Burkhart—demonstrates that the field is open to further progress in the study of what is indeed the earliest form of Euro-Indian theater in the Americas (Burkhart 1996). The recording, translation, and publishing of some of these plays has a rich history, in which a very significant role was played by Fernando Horcasitas Pimentel, to whose memory the *Nahuatl Theater* set is dedicated.

Predecessors in Research on Nahuatl Theater

I will briefly recall some of Fernando’s most distinguished predecessors in the field. Two Mexican scholars deserve particular attention. One is the well-known bibliographer and editor of several sixteenth-century chronicles, Joaquín García Icazbalceta (1825–1894). He wrote a well-documented study on this subject, “Representaciones religiosas en México en el siglo XVI,” published in 1877, as an introduction to the *Coloquios espirituales y sacramentales* by Fernán González de la Esclava. García Icazbalceta also made several references to the same matter in his *Bibliografía mexicana del siglo XVI* (1886 and 1954). His contributions in this field called the attention of scholars to these compositions conceived as an instrument for the conversion of the Indians and as a genre within the literary productions of colonial Mexico.

Francisco del Paso y Troncoso (1842–1917) is the other Mexican scholar who made important contributions related to Nahuatl theater. He was well versed in the Nahuatl language and an assiduous researcher in the main documentary repositories of Europe. He was the first to publish the Nahuatl texts and his own translations into Spanish of five pieces of this genre (Paso y Troncoso 1899, 1900b, 1902, 1907). He also wrote “Comedies en langue nahuatl: Une petite vieille et le gamin, son petit fils,” a paper presented at the twelfth International Congress of Americanists, held in Paris (1900a, 309–16). Thanks to Paso y Troncoso’s publications, examples of Nahuatl theater became widely accessible for the first time.

Two North Americans who spent a large part of their lives in Mexico, John H. Cornyn (1875–1941) and Byron McAfee (1880–1962), also became attracted by these plays. In 1944 they introduced and published the Nahuatl text and an English version of a composition entitled “Tlachahuapahualiztli (Bringing Up Children),” preserved at the Library of Congress (Cornyn and McAfee 1944, 314–51). This play does not have, as several others do, a biblical subject. Its theme is the Christian education that is to be offered to indigenous youth. As noted by its two editors, to achieve its purpose, ideas and forms of expression in the play were derived from some *huehuehtlahtolli*, testimonies of the “old word.”

To the same researchers is due the study and English translation of another play, entitled “Souls and Testamentary Executors.” A copy is preserved at the National Library of Anthropology and History, housed in the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City; an English translation was published by Marilyn Ekdahl Ravicz (1970, 211–34). This is another example of a play with a nonbiblical plot, as it deals with the misdeeds perpetrated by a widow, helped by the executors of her dead husband’s will. Instead of ordering masses for his soul, she used the inherited riches to foolishly enjoy life.

Byron McAfee translated another play into English, also catechistical, but like “Souls and Testamentary Executors” of a nonbiblical nature. Its plot has to do with the avaricious dealings of a *pochtecatl* or “merchant” who loses his soul in punishment for his misdeeds. McAfee’s English version of this play has been published by the same Marilyn Ekdahl Ravicz (1970, 99–118). To the same McAfee, in collaboration with the short-lived but well-known Mexicanist Robert H. Barlow (1918–1951), is owed the publication and translation of another production, *Un cuaderno de Marqueses* (1947), a good example of popular theater whose plot has to do with the conquest of Mexico.

Angel María Garibay K. (1892–1967), the chief exponent in contemporary research on Nahuatl literature, included indigenous colonial theater among his many concerns. To it he dedicated a whole chapter in his *Historia de la literatura náhuatl* (1953–1954, 2:121–59). There he makes a pertinent observation on how “it was not possible that the Mexicans, once they fell under the burden of the Conquest, would lose their [essential] nature. Being a people inclined to live in the open air, they required the constant presentation of various forms of spectacles in their feasts during the year” (1953–1954, 2:122).

Garibay continued his discussion on what he calls “the catechistical theater,” describing the pieces published by Paso y Troncoso and others of whose existence he knew. Commenting on an article by Fernando Horcasitas, “Bibliografía descriptiva de las piezas teatrales en lengua náhuatl” (Horcasitas 1948), he states that “it is the most complete attempt ever done on describing the known materials in this area of literary production. Therein thirty four pieces are included there” (1953–1954, 2:129). If in his chapter on “the catechistical theater” Garibay could not encompass all of what is known today about this dramatic genre in Nahuatl, it is at least true that he offered a well-informed comprehensive synthesis of it, as well as some excerpts of his own translations into Spanish of several of those plays.

Theater in Nahuatl, in a different key, is exemplified by the piece edited and translated into English by William H. Hunter, *The Calderonian Auto Sacramental El Gran Teatro del Mundo* (1960). This piece was originally adapted into Nahuatl by the priest Bartolomé de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, a brother of the well-known Tetzcoacan chronicler don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl. In his publication Hunter discusses the historical background, paying attention to the development of various forms of theater in New Spain and in particular to the genre known as *auto sacramental*, to which this piece by Calderón belongs.

In his appreciation of the work done by Alva Ixtlilxochitl, Hunter states that Alva “demonstrates good judgment in refraining from any attempt to render into Nahuatl the sonorous intricacies of the Calderonian verse” (1960, 150). Hunter acknowledges the considerable help he received from Garibay and McAfee.

I have mentioned already the name of Marilyn Ekdahl Ravicz. Although not a scholar concerned directly with the Nahuatl language and culture, she produced a book entitled *Early Colonial Religious Drama in Mexico: From Tzompantli to Golgotha* (1970), with an ample preface in which she also deals with the pre-Hispanic background and the colonial context of religious drama. She offers English translations of the versions prepared by Paso y Troncoso of “The Sacrifice of Isaac,” “The Adoration of the Kings,” and “The Destruction of Jerusalem.”

She includes three more pieces in her book. These are: “The Merchant,” “How the Blessed Saint Helen Found the Holy Cross,” and “Souls and Testamentary Executors.” In doing this she took advantage of the translations into English done by McAfee, who, according to her, authorized their publication. In only one case, that of “Souls and Testamentary Executors,” had McAfee prepared his translation in collaboration with Cornyn. The main merit of Ravicz’s book is its calling attention once more to the existence of this colonial literary genre.

The authors we have considered published their works years before the more comprehensive contribution by Fernando Horcasitas. Several of them profited from Fernando’s bibliographical essay on Nahuatl theater that appeared in 1948. Here I will just add that, after the publication of Horcasitas’s *El teatro náhuatl* in 1974, others have continued research on various aspects of the same subject, although—with the exception of Louise M. Burkhart (1996)—no one has edited and translated another piece originally in Nahuatl. The names and works of those researchers are María Sten, *Vida y muerte del teatro nahuatl* (1974, 1982) and Othón Arróniz, *Teatro de evangelización en Nueva España* (1979). They both continued along the lines first proposed by José Rojas Garcidueñas as early as 1935 in his *Teatro de la Nueva España en el siglo XVI*, in which no in-depth research was done to approach directly the compositions in their Nahuatl originals.

Fernando Horcasitas’s Distinguished Career as a Nahuatl Scholar

Born in Los Angeles, California, on September 26, 1924, and registered by his parents as a Mexican citizen, Fernando grew up in an environment influenced by two cultures. In the milieu of his family he became rooted in Mexican tradition. While attending grammar school and later Loyola High School, he was at the same time exposed to Anglo-American culture. So it was that his background was bicultural and bilingual. He could express himself, with equal proficiency and elegance, in both Spanish and English.

When his parents returned to Mexico in 1944, putting an end to their voluntary political exile, Fernando settled in the country’s capital. He then enrolled in the Department of Philosophy and Letters of the National University. There he became deeply interested in studies of a humanistic nature, mainly history and linguistics. Two years later he joined the National School of Anthropology, concentrating on the fields of ethnology, archæology, and Nahuatl culture.

At those two institutions he met Robert H. Barlow; it was an encounter that profoundly influenced his professional career. In 1947, at Barlow’s request, he began to serve as secretary for *Tlalocan*, a journal of source materials on the native cultures of Mexico. Many years later, in 1977, he wrote in the same magazine an article entitled “Para la historia de *Tlalocan*,” in which he described the origin of this journal, conceived, as he stated, by Barlow, “one of the most brilliant anthropologists attracted by the cultures of Ancient Mexico” (Horcasitas 1977, 15).

Under the guidance of professors as distinguished as Pablo Martínez del Río and Wigberto Jiménez Moreno, he obtained in 1953 his master’s degree in anthropology *summa cum laude*. His dissertation, entitled “An Analysis of the Deluge Myth in Mesoamerica,” was presented at the institution then known as Mexico City College,

the predecessor of what is now the Universidad de las Américas. At the same college he began his teaching activities, which embraced a rather large number of subjects including the ethnohistory of Mesoamerica, the Nahuatl language, and a seminar on folklore narrative.

Among his first publications the one already mentioned on Nahuatl theater, published in the *Boletín Bibliográfico de Antropología Americana*, stands out, as it signaled the revival of active interest in this genre of Nahuatl literature and the beginning of Fernando's valuable contributions in the area. His activities as secretary of *Tlalocan* intensified following Barlow's death in 1951, and he took on the task of publishing the journal as one of his most cherished responsibilities until the end of his life.

In *Tlalocan* and in other journals such as *Mesoamerican Notes*, *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl*, and *Anales de Antropología* he published a good number of articles, several of which dealt with oral tradition and theatrical pieces performed in some contemporary Nahuatl-speaking communities such as, for example, "Textos de Xaltepoxtla" (1962), "Los xoxocoteros, una farsa indígena" (1967), "El entremés del Señor de Yencuicatlapan, una farsa en náhuatl" (1972a), and "La danza de los tecuanes" (1980).

In 1963 Fernando Horcasitas became a full-time research professor at the National University. There he taught Nahuatl in the Department of Summer Courses. Becoming a member of the same university's Institute of Historical Research, of which I was director, he played a significant role in the creation there of a Department of Anthropology. The seventeen years he worked at the university, in particular those since the transformation of said department into the Institute of Anthropological Research in 1968, were particularly fruitful in his life. He prepared and published several other contributions while working there. Two had to do with oral narratives he had collected from a very distinguished native speaker of Nahuatl, doña Luz Jiménez (1897–1965), native of the town of Milpa Alta in the southern part of the Federal District of Mexico.

In one he presented the remembrances of doña Luz, expressed in Nahuatl, about the last years of the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz and subsequent happenings during the Mexican Revolution of 1910–1920. Emiliano Zapata occupies an important place in her narrative. Horcasitas accompanied the Nahuatl text with a Spanish translation and an ample introduction. He asked me to write a prologue, which I did, stressing the significance of the publication. The book, *De Porfirio Díaz a Zapata. Memoria náhuatl de Milpa Alta* (Horcasitas 1968), aroused wide interest and was also published in an English version, translated by Horcasitas himself (Horcasitas 1972b).

Another contribution, also based on oral narratives by doña Luz Jiménez, was entitled *Los cuentos en náhuatl de doña Luz Jiménez* (Horcasitas and O. de Ford 1979). In it a good number of legends, tales, and other accounts were also presented in the original Nahuatl, accompanied by Fernando's translation into Spanish.

Horcasitas was very interested in the sixteenth-century work of the religious chroniclers and in several indigenous early colonial codices (books of paintings) with Nahuatl glosses. One manifestation of this interest was the preparation—in collaboration with Dr. Doris Heyden and with an extensive introductory study, copious notes, and an index—of an English version of what can be described as the ethnographic work of the Dominican friar Diego Durán, *Book of the Gods and Rites and the Ancient Calendar* (1971). His extensive introductory study is particularly valuable because of the information

he gathered about the author and his work. Once again, Fernando asked me to prepare another prologue, which was for me an honor and a pleasure.

As for the codices, I will only mention two examples that had been previously unpublished: “Anales jeroglíficos e históricos de Tepeaca” (Horcasitos and Simons 1974), and “El Códice de Tzictepec, una nueva fuente pictórica indígena” (Horcasitas and de Magrelli 1975). The first is a pictorial chronicle with text in Nahuatl covering the years 1524–1645. It deals with natural phenomena held as omens, with epidemics, the arrival of viceroys, the building of churches, the execution of criminals, the construction of an aqueduct, and a plague of grasshoppers. The other document belongs to the group known as Techialoyan codices. It is interesting how in this codex there is emphasis on the bonds that the village of Tzictepec (near Toluca) had with Tlacopan in the period of the Triple Alliance and also during colonial times.

His Main Contribution

Busy as Fernando was with these and other publications, he continued his research on the subject he cherished so much: Nahuatl theater. In 1974 he succeeded in offering the first part of what he entitled *El teatro náhuatl: Épocas novohispana y moderna*.

As he put it in an introductory note to *Teatro náhuatl*:

The aim of the present work, of which the first part appears in this volume, is offering something little known to researchers of the language and culture of the Nahuas: a corpus of dramatic pieces in that language. We will take as a point of departure the catechistical productions of the first half of the 16th century, proceeding to those which continue to be represented in our towns. (Horcasitas 1974, 13)

In what is entitled “Preliminary Study” Horcasitas describes “the universe of the feast” and theatrical representations in several indigenous languages of the New World, particularly in Nahuatl. He points to what is known about pre-Hispanic representations, as one antecedent, and also discusses theatrical performances in Europe, mainly in Spain, during the Middle Ages and in the sixteenth century.

Concentrating on missionary theater he investigates its origins and purpose, giving also a chronology of its development. To facilitate an understanding of how such theater was staged he describes people’s participation in it, the scenery and costuming, the music that accompanied it, and how the actors were chosen and taught.

Of much interest to the discussion in this volume is the attention he gives to the causes of the decline of this theater, as well as to the literary merit of the compositions, the reactions of the natives, and the results the friars obtained with these performances. The preliminary study, ample enough, is followed by an “Anthology of the Dramatic Pieces,” in which he presents thirty-five of them, offering whenever available their Nahuatl text accompanied by a translation and a relevant commentary.

Fernando described in a “Note” at the beginning of his book what were the other dramatic compositions he intended to publish, in addition to those he labeled “ancient missionary theater,” that is, the ones included as a first part in his published volume. The second part of Horcasitas’s work should embrace pieces of moral content,

dealing with themes not taken from Holy Scripture. A third part would be composed of the “Marian Theater,” those about the Virgin Mary. Part 4 was to be dedicated to “Courtly Theater,” also in Nahuatl, which would include adaptations from the Spanish classical theater. Pieces related to the conquest of Mexico and to the battles between Moors and Christians, and others in which the apostle Saint James played a key role, were to make up the fifth part. A last part was to be concerned with what he described as “Village Theater,” a miscellaneous corpus of popular compositions, several of them still performed in modern times.

Of this vast project Fernando succeeded in publishing only the first part, dedicated entirely to missionary theater in Nahuatl. The materials he had assembled to be incorporated into the other five parts, in accordance with his plan, are preserved today at the Latin American Library of Tulane University in New Orleans, depository of his personal archives.

In the present book, three of the pieces published and studied by Horcasitas are rendered into English: “The Sacrifice of Isaac,” “The Three Kings,” and “Final Judgment.” As to the other four pieces included here, Fernando knew about those published in *Tlalocan*, that is, “Yn Animastin Yhuan Alvaceasme” (Souls and Testamentary Executors) and “Yn Pochtecatl” (The Merchant). He was aware also of the Nahuatl texts that Paso y Troncoso had published and of others entitled “La Pasión del Domingo de Ramos,” which is preserved at the Middle American Research Institute of Tulane University, and “La conversión de San Pablo,” which was in a manuscript belonging to the bibliographer and historian Federico Gómez de Orozco. In addition, he listed and described, with the support of reliable sources, others pieces reaching—as noted—a total of thirty-five compositions.

Fernando Horcasitas Pimentel has left us a rich legacy of works related to the culture and language of the Nahua people. He guided and helped a good number of students and colleagues, and even when he had to interrupt his teaching activities due to illness, he kept his spirits up until his last days. Proof of this is provided by a report he wrote a few months before his final departure on the precise date of his fifty-sixth birthday, September 26, 1980. In this report he stated that he had reached the final stage of what would be the second volume of his *Teatro náhuatl*. He wrote also that “in view of the very poor situation regarding the publication of Mexican folklore texts and of serious studies on them, I plan to dedicate time to the publication of a collection of them” (Horcasitas in León-Portilla 1982, 36).

I just will add that it has been an honor and a pleasure for me to join here Louise M. Burkhart and Barry D. Sell in dedicating this book to Fernando’s memory. He opened many new doors into the treasure trove of literary productions in Nahuatl, conceived indeed as a part of universal literature, produced by men and women of all times and in all places.

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PREFACE

Louise M. Burkhart and Barry D. Sell

In the entire western hemisphere the only extant colonial plays in any Native American language are those in Nahuatl, the principal indigenous language of Central Mexico. In the decades following the Spanish conquest, Roman Catholic friars taught Nahua students to write their own language using the roman alphabet. As the Nahuas already had pictographic writing and tremendous respect for the written word, they enthusiastically adopted the new technique. European genres of discourse and text were transposed into hybrid Nahua-Christian forms.

As early as the 1530s, friars began to use theatrical performances as a tool of evangelization. Theater, like other performative modes of Christian devotion, appealed to the Nahuas, whose traditional religious activities focused more on collective rituals than on preaching or private devotions. A native theater developed, based on Spanish models but with native actors and sponsors. Scripts were authored by friars, in collaboration with literate Nahuas, and also by Nahuas themselves—with and without priestly oversight—and were sometimes based on Spanish scripts and sometimes invented for the local context.

The purpose of this and the other three volumes in the *Nahuatl Theater* set is to bring together and disseminate scripts and scholarship on this first truly American theater. By publishing a series devoted to Nahuatl theater we aim to establish the place of these dramas in the literary canon of the Americas, approaching them not just as an evangelization technique (as they have often been treated) but also as subaltern literature, as symbolic capital, as transcripts of intercultural dialogue, as primary linguistic data, and as artistic products.

We build especially on the work of the late Mexican anthropologist Fernando Horcasitas, whose *El teatro náhuatl* of 1974 is still the classic book on the subject. To this groundwork we bring a quarter-century of advances in the study of Nahuatl grammar and translation; current understandings of the colonial history of Mexico, and of colonial historical processes more generally; grounding in contemporary cultural and