

On the concealing of idolatry Bernardino de Sahagún (1576)

Bernardino de Sahagún was a Catholic priest from Spain. He spent most of his life in colonial Mexico, known as New Spain, where the Spanish, having conquered the Aztec empire, ruled over the indigenous Nahua people. Sahagún directed a team of missionary-educated Nahua Christians in compiling a 12-volume encyclopedia of Nahua culture, which included extensive information about Nahua religion as practiced prior to the Spanish conquest. The encyclopedia was composed of images made by Nahua artists, with explanatory text in two languages: Nahuatl and Spanish. The monumental work remained unpublished in its creators' lifetimes; but the Spanish text, by itself, was published in the 1800s under the title General History of the Things of New Spain, with authorial credit assigned solely to Sahagún.

The following selection from the General History is an editorial digression inserted by Sahagún after a section on springs, rivers, and mountains in central Mexico. Sahagún voices an alarmed suspicion that Nahuas are still worshipping their ancient gods at churches dedicated to Catholic saints, including the famous shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. He also offers an origin theory for indigenous religious festivals.

Having discussed the springs, waters, and mountains, this seemed to me an opportune place to discuss the principal ancient idolatries that were performed, and are still performed, at the waters and mountains. [...]

Near the mountains there are three or four places where they used to perform very solemn sacrifices, to which people came from very distant lands. One of these places is here in the city of Mexico, where there is a hill called Tepeyacac—or Tepeaquilla, as the Spanish call it—which now is called also Our Lady of Guadalupe. In this place they had a temple dedicated to the mother of the gods, whom they called Tonantzin, which means *Our Mother*. There they performed many sacrifices in honor of this goddess, to which people came from very distant lands, more than twenty leagues away, from all the present districts of the city of Mexico, and they brought many offerings. To these festivals came men, women, striplings, and maidens; on those days, a great crowd of people gathered, and all of them said, “Let us go to the festival of Tonantzin.” Now that the church of Our Lady of Guadalupe has been built there, they call her also Tonantzin, due to preachers who refer to Our Lady, the Mother of God, as Tonantzin. How this usage of *Tonantzin* came to be established is not known with certainty; but what we do know certainly is that the word refers, from its first usage, to that ancient Tonantzin, and this is a thing that ought to be remedied, for the proper title of the Mother of God, Our Lady, is not *Tonantzin* but *Dios Inantzin*.^a This appears to be a satanic device to conceal idolatry beneath the ambiguity of this title *Tonantzin*. They come now to visit this Tonantzin from very far away, as far away as before—which devotion is suspicious, because there are many churches to Our Lady, everywhere, but they do not go to those; they come from distant lands to this Tonantzin, as anciently.

^a Dios Inantzin = “Mother of God” in the Nahuatl language, with the Spanish loanword Dios being used for God

The second place where anciently many sacrifices were made, to which people came from distant lands, is near the Sierra de Tlaxcala, where there was a temple called Toci. There a great multitude of people used to gather to celebrate the festival of Toci, which means *our grandmother*, also known by the name Tzapotlantenan, which refers to the goddess of temascals and medicines. Since that time, a church has been built there (where now there is a monastery of friars of our father St. Francis), dedicated to St. Anne, whom the natives of that place call Toci, and they gather still for the aforesaid festival from more than forty leagues away. They call St. Anne thus due to preachers who say that because St. Anne is the grandmother of Jesus Christ, she is grandmother also to all us Christians; and hence, from the pulpit, they have called and continue to call her Toci, meaning *our grandmother*. All the peoples who come, as anciently, to the festival of Toci come supposedly for St. Anne; but as the word is ambiguous and they observe still the ancient custom, it is more believable that they come out of devotion to the ancient way than to the modern. And so this is another place where idolatry seems to be concealed; for with so many people coming, and from so far away, without St. Anne having performed there any miracles, it seems more likely that they come for the ancient Toci, not for St. Anne. Furthermore, in this year of 1576, the present epidemic commenced there, and they say that now no one is left there; this appears to be an act of God, the scourge having begun in the same place where began the offense of concealing idolatry under the name of St. Anne.

The third place where anciently there were many sacrifices, to which people came from distant lands, is at the base of the volcano in a town called Tianguismanalco, St. John; here they used to hold a great festival in honor of the god known as Telpochtli,^b who is Tezcatlipoca. And because they heard the preachers say that St. John the Evangelist was a virgin, and such a one in their language is called *telpochtli*, they took occasion to celebrate the same festival they did anciently, concealed under the name of St. John Telpochtli, as they say. But in reality, their festival is in honor of the ancient Telpochtli, who is Tezcatlipoca—for St. John has performed no miracles there, nor is there any more reason for them to gather there than in any other place where he has a church. Today there come to this festival a great many people from very distant lands, and they bring many offerings; this thus resembles the ancient way, although they no longer perform the sacrifices and cruelties they did anciently.

I am convinced that this dissimulation in the places I have named is done not for love of the idols but for love of avarice and vainglory; for the people of those places wish to lose neither the offerings that were customarily given, nor the glory of the status they received from being visited by so many foreigners from distant lands. The people anciently adopted the practice of coming to visit these places as follows: Because these mountains are noted for producing the clouds that bring rain to those parts, the peoples who dwell in the lands that are watered by the clouds formed in these mountains, perceiving that the blessing of the rains comes to them from those mountains, held themselves obligated, in ancient times, to go visit those places and give thanks to the deity who resided there, who sent the rain, and to take offerings in gratitude for the blessing they received from thence. Thus the inhabitants of the lands watered by the clouds from those mountains, having been persuaded or advised by devils or their satraps, adopted the custom and devotion of coming to visit those mountains every year for the festival established there: in

^b Telpochtli = Nahuatl word referring to a juvenile male; in this context, it could be translated as "the Youth"

the city of Mexico, the festival of Cihuacóatl, whom they also call Tonantzin; in Tlaxcala, the festival of Toci; and in Tianguismanalco, the festival of Tezcatlipoca. And to prevent this custom from being lost, the towns who enjoyed the benefits of it persuaded the surrounding provinces to continue coming as they were used to, on the grounds that they still had Tonantzin, Tocitzin,^c and Telpochtli, who outwardly resemble—or have been made to resemble—St. Mary, St. Anne, and St. John the Evangelist or the Baptist. And it is clear that, inwardly, for the simple people who come to those places, it is nothing other than the ancient way.

It is not my opinion that they should be stopped from coming and making offerings, but it is my opinion that they should be undeceived of the error under which they labor, being made to understand, on the days they come there, the falseness of the ancient way, and that what now is done there does not accord with the ancient way. This should be done by preachers well versed in the people's language and the ancient customs they had before, as well as in the divine scripture. I well believe that there are many other places in these Indies where idols are worshipped and given offerings under cover of the festivals that the Church celebrates in honor of God and his saints, which it would be well to investigate so that those poor people may be undeceived of the error under which they now labor.

^c *Tocitzin = Toci, plus the Nahuatl suffix -tzin to indicate respect and devotion*

Source: Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (Mexico City: Editorial Pedro Robredo, 1938), 3:298-302 (book 11, chap. 12, sect. 6, appendix), https://archive.org/details/b29827620_0003. Free eBook from the Internet Archive.

Excerpts translated into English and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Paragraph and sentence breaks adjusted for readability. Spelling of names and Nahuatl words modernized to facilitate identification. A verb form in the Spanish emended (*viene* → *vienen*) in order to make an obscure sentence intelligible. Punctuation and typography (italics) emended in line with modern conventions.

The capitalizing or lowercasing of Nahuatl words and their translations reproduces the usage of the source publication. An anomalous instance of *Predicadores*, capitalized, has been converted here to lowercase (*preachers*) for consistency. The capitalization of *Church* is retained from the source when referring to the Catholic Church as a whole, but the word has been converted to lowercase when referring to local churches. A few other terms capitalized in the source publication have been converted to lowercase for the sake of modernization and readability: *volcano*, *our father* (referring not to God but to St. Francis), *scripture*, and *saints*.



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