NUMEN

NUMEN appears twice a year. Each volume consists of 312 pages. Numen is edited on behalf of the International Association for the History of Religions by Hans G. Kippenberg and E. Thomas Lawson.

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INDIGENOUS EROTICISM AND COLONIAL MORALITY IN MEXICO: THE CONFESSION MANUALS OF NEW SPAIN

SYLVIA MARCOS

Summary

This article explores the impact of the Conquest on eroticism and the place of the feminine in 16th century indigenous society in Mexico. It shows how this most intimate area of human experience became the battleground of a war that amounted in part to a cultural annihilation. The article analyses one aspect of the missionaries’ well-intentioned “battle to save people’s souls”.

Like in previous, internal forms of violent subjugation of one culture by another, the Spaniards destroyed local gods and temples. However, unlike previous “conquerors” who superimposed their beliefs upon local customs, the newcomers demanded a complete eradication of those customs, as if they only could save the Indians by destroying their identity, their culture’s relation to reality and their very concept of time, space and of the person.

By condemning indigenous erotic practices and imposing unprecedented restraints on them, the missionaries altered the roots of ancient Mexican perceptions of the body and the cosmos.

Particular attention is paid to the confession manuals, written as an answer to the Spaniards’ discovery “that lust was the Indian’s most frequent sin”. These manuals are considered here as instruments of the alteration of indigenous perceptions. In these manuals the repetition of the same excruciating questions tended to graft guilt onto the Mesoamerican conscience and thus eradicate the Indians perception of eroticism in its sacred and vitalizing dimension.

Commentaries of the old song of the women of Chalco attempt to recapture, through the playful voices of women speaking openly, some of the flavor of a very different symbolic universe.

Get ready, my little sisters:
let us go and gather flowers...
with my garland of flowers adorn yourself,
my flowers they are, and I a women of Chalco.
...Among joyful pleasures we will laugh.
(Song of the Women of Chalco)

Introduction

The 500th anniversary of the “encounter” of the Old and New Worlds provides an excellent opportunity to look at what we know
about pre-Columbian societies in terms of sexuality and eroticism and the place and function of the feminine. This delicate and intimate area of human experience was an important battleground in the conquest of the Americas, especially in Latin America where Iberian Catholicism confronted and ultimately dominated the region’s rich civilizations with their complex cosmologies, thereby extinguishing many cultural attitudes and expressions.

While it is impossible to reconstruct the pre-conquest environment in order to ascertain the values and attitudes surrounding sexuality and eroticism, we do have recourse to many texts, objects and testimonies concerning the pre-conquest era. Similarly, there is a wealth of material from colonial times that reveal the course of this “battle for souls” as the missionaries viewed their work, or the process of cultural annihilation as the indigenous inhabitants experienced it.

**Forced Catechization**

Catholicism was established in the New World frequently through force and sometimes through violence and bloodshed. Although charitable work was carried out by many missionaries, their efforts could not counteract the destruction wrought by others nor the overwhelming impact of a new religion and culture on the indigenous one. The abuses that characterize the history of the Spanish Catholic Church in the New World were often sanctioned by Church authorities. When outright abuses, injustice and excess were not the case, then the “lesser evil” the conquered Indians endured was profound disapproval of their way of living and total repudiation of their world view.

Spain’s economic exploitation of the Americas was sanctioned by the objective of christianizing the Indians. Almost any means was allowed to achieve this end. The colonists made use of various legal mechanisms based on pre-Hispanic institutions to extract labor from converted Indians. Among these were the “mita” in South America and the “tequio” in Mexico which were systems of voluntary communal labor. They also introduced Iberian institutions such as the “encomienda” which put entire Indian villages under the control of the Spanish colonizers. In them, Indians were obliged
to work without pay while, in exchange, the grant holder or "encomendero" promised the Church to christianize them. Frequently the fulfilment of this requirement was reduced to providing a half hour of catechism per week, a condition met sporadically, when not entirely ignored (Las Casas, 1552).

The Franciscans (1524), Dominicans (1536), Augustinians (1553) and later the Jesuits (1572) who converted and catechized the indigenous populations were, for the most part, dedicated and humble religious, concerned about the well-being of the Indians. Some friars who participated in the colonization, especially before 1570 during the so-called "spiritual conquest" period (Ricard, 1933), vigorously opposed the abuses of the secular colonizers. However, they were also paternalistic, authoritarian (Lopez, 1976) and, above all, intolerant of the beliefs of a religious symbolic system foreign to them (Bonfil, 1988). Some friars glimpsed the validity and richness of Mesoamerican civilization, but the Church hierarchy viewed their accounts with suspicion and disapproval. The famous defender of the Indians, Fray Bartolome de las Casas, for example, wrote his controversial Brief Relation of the Destruction of the Indies in 1552. Its publication provoked discord and animosity on the part of the friars, his brothers in catechization. Las Casas was rabidly persecuted because he denounced abuses of the Indians by his co-religionists. His second work, Apologetica Historia de las Indias, was not published until 1909.

The majority of the clerics who came to new Spain to catechize were much less understanding than Las Casas. At times, the intolerant behavior of some clerics became so extreme that church authorities removed them from their posts as was the case with the Franciscan bishop of Yucatan, Diego de Landa. He punished the Mayan Indians he found celebrating the rites of their religion in a hidden temple in the jungle by hanging them by their hands and feet. Among the legal briefs or "allegations" of the time is one written in 1562 by Diego de Landa defending himself in a court proceeding where he was accused of having burned Indians alive. Although he was removed from his post, he was reinstated as bishop several years later.

However, just before his death he apparently repented of all the damage his excess of holy rage caused, because he tried to rescue
some of what his violence had destroyed. Thus he compiled, with
the help of knowledgeable local informants, the meanings of some
20 Mayan glyphs. He also wrote Relation of Things in Yucatan. This
essential work for the study of Mayan culture was written by the
person responsible for tremendous losses in this region: he had
burned mounds of sculptures, codices, terracottas, jewels and other
expressions of Mayan culture.

In their chronicles of life in the New World, clerics were required
to emphasize the “cruel” and “demonic” character of indigenous
Americans. Their writings were published only when overstocked
with phrases such as “these Indians have the devil as their idol,”
or “these natives live degrading lives,” or “it is astonishing to see
how bestial they are, how they lack understanding.” These formu-
las legitimized the abuse of the Indians that occurred under the
pretext of catechizing them. Even Fray Bernardino de Sahagun,
considered one of the most reliable sources for pre-Columbian
times, conformed to this requirement. An attitude that showed too
much understanding might have provoked charges by ecclesiastics
that he was an “idoler.” After several pages about the
achievements of indigenous culture, he seems to reconsider and try
to correct himself. Despite such contradictions, his investigation
was without precedent in scope and method. The questionnaire he
used to gather information on Nahua culture is perhaps the first
such systematic questionnaire in history. With good reason he is
regarded as the father of ethnology (Sahagun, 1982).

But no matter how valuable his work nor how measured his tone,
he nevertheless portrayed the Indians as “bloody,” qualified their
ancestral customs as “idolatries,” called their divinities “devils,”
and exaggerated the quantitative importance of the sacrifices
(Pagden, 1985). In spite of this, his General History of the Things of
New Spain is one of the most trustworthy documents on Nahual
culture.

The Indians of the Americas often chose to take refuge with the
missionaries who, in order to catechize them, defended them from
the voracious Spanish colonizers and their ambition for quick for-
tune. As Bonfil (1987) and Lopez Austin (1976) point out, the
option offered by the missionaries was the desperate choice of the
lesser evil. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that although
evangelizers during the era of the spiritual conquest did not, for the most part, torture the Indians, nor subject them to forced labor, nor let them die of hunger, nor rape the women, their "colonization" took place at deeper levels. In order to "save" them, it seemed necessary to destroy their identity. This negation of the indigenous self altered the way the Indians conceptualized themselves, their world, the earth, the sun, space and time, and the divinized cosmic forces. Genocide and ethnocide were arrayed against them: genocide despoiled them and even deprived them of life, and ethnocide devastated them spiritually and negated their culture's ways of perceiving the cosmos.

Concerning this, Gruziniski comments:

...(H)owever brutal the aggressions and impositions of the Indian victors might have been—the Triple Alliance, for example—they respected the equilibrium local cultures had in relation to reality, time, space, the person...At most, they imposed practices and customs that came from the same Mesoamerican cultural context. With Christianity, things were different. Christians, the same as the former invaders, burned temples and imposed their gods. But sharing or imposing theirs on what already existed was unacceptable to the Christians; instead they demanded the annihilation of local cults. They were not satisfied with eliminating the priests and part of the nobility; the Spaniards laid claim to a monopoly on the priesthood and the sacred, and thereby the definition of reality (1988 p. 195-196).

Norms and Sexuality

Sexual norms in Mesoamerica and the entire American continent differed radically from those imported by Catholic missionaries. This is not to say that total liberty existed: that would be impossible in any cultural and religious system. But the prevalent norms revolved around a significantly different valueing of gender, sexuality and eroticism.

Some norms governing Indian society before colonization can be discerned in the records of their rituals. The transition to young adulthood required a family rite. Sahagun records speeches that Nahua parents addressed to their daughters and sons at that moment in their lives. The discourses reveal what the Aztecs considered dignified behavior in their society. It should be noted that continence, respect, humility towards elders and fulfillment of religious obligations were expected of both sexes. Even though
identical behavior was not expected from men and women, expectations for conduct in these areas were similar (Sahagun, 1982). Likewise, both genders received equivalent punishments for the same sexual transgression (Torquemada, 1615; Las Casas, 1552).

Diego de Landa expressed his surprise at the ease with which marriages were dissolved. According to his Mayan chronicles, women could leave their husbands and change partners or return home without reproach (Landa, 1966). In indigenous Mesoamerica, marriage was not indissoluble (Gruziński, 1988). Investigators mention provisional marriages in pre-conquest Mexico (Lopez Austin, 1982b) and in Mayan culture a wife or husband could temporarily or permanently interrupt the marriage. But this was not so for the Spaniards whose influence on the Indians is described in the following text by de Landa:

...(W)ith the same ease, men left their spouses and children with no fear that others would take them as wives...and now, since the Spaniards in this matter (when women leave their husbands for other men) kill theirs, they (the Mayans) begin to mistreat and even kill their wives...(1966 p. 42-43).

In the Andean region of Peru, trial marriage, called “sirvinakuy,” is still practiced (Barrionuevo, 1973). Going back to Incan marriage customs, it survives as “a time of mutual service” when both parties try out their capacity for a harmonious, productive life together. If, after a year, one or both decide that the union does not have what is necessary for a permanent bond, they may separate and begin family life anew with another person with community approval.

Confession Manuals

Lust, the priests complained, was the most frequent sin, not stealing, murder, lying or drunkenness. In documents concerning Aztec, Mayan or Incan morals, it is difficult to identify the value judgements of the Catholic evangelizers (Lopez Austin, 1982a). Nevertheless, wide divergencies between indigenous norms and Catholic morality were evident.

The divergence was so wide that the missionary priests used minutely detailed questionnaires to conduct confessions. The inquisitorial questions exposed the sexual conduct of the new con-
verts to the disapproval of the confessor. Other areas of misconduct were probed, but the questions relating to sexual behavior show one of the instruments used to inculcate Christian morality.

In his analysis of the confession manuals of the first two centuries of colonization, Gruzinski (1987) discovered an exaggerated concern with sexuality as revealed by specific questions about sexual practices. For example, in the confession manual of Father Joan Baptista, 69% of the questions refer to sex, while 63% of those of Martín de Leon and Juan de la Anunciacion concern this topic. Such preoccupation with the sixth commandment, only one of ten, gives the appearance of an uncommon, obsessive interest on the part of the confessors and/or of the institution whose beliefs they represented.

Thus, in the Great Confession Manual in the Mexican Language and in Spanish by Alonso de Molina (1565) we find:

Tell me, my son,
Did you lie with a woman who was not yours?
How many times?
Did you lie with your wife making use of the proper entry?
Or did you take her by the back way thus committing the nefarious sin (of sodomy)?
How many times?
Did you lie with your wife while she had her month?
How many times?
Did you lie with your wife avoiding the procreation of children?
Because you are poor and needy or because you had a fight with her?
How many times?
Have you committed the sin against nature carrying out this act with an animal?
How many times?
When you were drunk, out of your senses, did you fall into the abominable sin of sodomy with another man?
How many times?
Have you done anything improper or dirty with yourself or with another man?
How many times?

(folios 32-35)

There were also questions specifically for women. In the Manual of Confessions in the Mexican Language and in Spanish by Father Juan Baptista (1599), we read:

Are you a married woman, widow, virgin or have you lost your virginity?
Did you have sexual relations with another woman like yourself and she with you?
How many times?
Did you desire anyone?
Have you touched the lower parts of a man with pleasure, desiring in this way to commit sin?

(folios 48 verso 51)

In another, *The Manual for Administering the Holy Sacraments* By Fray Angel Serra (1697), we find the following questions, also for women’s confessions:

Have you sinned with a woman?
Have you kissed a woman?
Was she your mother, the one who gave you birth?
Did you sin with a woman using both parts?
Did you sin with your sister?
Have you sinned with a woman while she took the position of an animal on all fours, or did you put her like that, desiring to commit sin with her?
And have you sinned with another woman as if you were man and woman?
How many times?

(1731 edition folios 111-136)

Even though these texts speak for themselves, it is important to stress that for the inhabitants of Mesoamerica, their bodies, their pleasures, the experience of sexuality must have been a very different matter. It was necessary to repeat these detailed questions hundreds of times in confession in order to instill in them the Catholic concept of sex as sinful. Even married life, legalized and blessed by the church, was subject to inquisitorial suspicion: ‘‘...remember the times that...you provoked your wife in order to have access to her’’ (A. Molina, 1569).

In these manuals we also find an immoderate zeal for quantifying, something alien to Indian thought (Gruzinski, 1988). In the *Confesionario de Indios* (1761) Carlos C. Velazquez reports these answers:

I changed my correct position because I reached for my wife from behind: seventy two times.
I desired to sin with my mother and had bad thoughts about many women. They can’t be counted, I can’t say how many times...sixty-six times (pp. 9-12).

Martin de Leon explains:

They finally say twice, and then for the rest of the confession, it is the same...these natives give the number used for the first sin they confess for all the rest (Gruzinski, 1986 p. 35).
Francisco Guerra (1971) confirms that these quantities had no meaning since the same numbers were repeated for all sins. According to Perez de Velasco in 1766:

The Indian at the feet of the confessor is supremely inadequate...the rules (of confession) are for the Indian in most cases, impractical, due to his ignorance, his crudeness, his lack of breadth, his inconstancy, his great unfaithfulness...understanding we cannot give them (Gruzininski, 1986 p. 36).

Studying the underlying reason for their exaggerated and repetitive quantification of sins, Gruzininski concludes that “without understanding and interiorizing the conceptual framework of Christianity, any attempt to total up sinful acts is as useless as it is senseless.” The Indians chose numbers arbitrarily and repeated them (1986). The use of numerical exaggeration and repetition, moreover, can be seen as a way of rejecting what was for the Indians a meaningless exercise. It served as a strategy to escape total control over their actions and pleasures.

In contrast to the sexual morality that the missionaries tried to impose on the Indians, however, the sexual abuses perpetrated by the Spanish appear even more startling.

The Spaniards regarded, as part of their booty, the “right” to sexually use all the female Indians in their territory. On the basis of this “right,” landowners claimed the privilege of raping all virgin women on their plantations. (Remnants of these abuses persist in contemporary Mexico. “Pernada” or first night rights—the landowner has relations with a new bride before her husband does—was studied by M. Olivera on the coffee plantations of Chiapas in southern Mexico [1977]. Barrionuevo mentions that this practice exists in contemporary Peru [1937]).

Sexual Spirituality

While throughout the Christian West sex has been considered shameful and troublesome and great energy is dedicated to ascetic repression of sexual impulses, the ancient cultures of America placed it at the center of religious rituals (Lopez Austin 1982a).

It is true that the Spaniards must have been hard pressed to understand the tacit joyful eroticism, openly practised, of religious fertility festivals... (Lopez Austin, 1982b p. 162).
For them, the union with cosmic forces was symbolized through sexual rituals in Aztec temples (Quezada, 1975). Priestesses were important celebrants in such rites. In ancient America, sexuality was a vital part of daily life and had an essential place in religious ceremonies. The orgasmic experience united humans with the gods.

Texts recounting these ritual practices are complemented by examples in terracotta figures. Funerary figurines of Mochica and Chimú in Peru and of the Nahua region of the Valley of Mexico show ceremonial and ordinary sexual practices of the inhabitants of ancient America. Despite the fact that objects with sexual content such as these were selectively destroyed by Catholic missionaries, some examples have survived (many can be seen in the Larco Herra Museum in Lima, Peru). The multiple possibilities of sexual positions shown in archeological pieces (terracotta figures, paintings, bas reliefs) testify to a rich eroticism.

The confession manuals of Molina, Baptista, Serra and others seem to indicate the missionaries' uneasiness over the diversity in sexual pleasures enjoyed by the souls in their charge. The priests had to repeatedly describe their limited idea of sexuality so that the vital Indians could understand that what for them was often a link with the gods was, in their new religion, always a sin, fault or aberration. Through evangelization guilt was grafted onto the Mesoamerican conscience. The morality of negation and abstinence propagated by the missionaries became one more weapon used in the process of violent acculturation (Bastide 1947).

Eroticism and Women

Concepts of the sacred, images of the divine, and ceremonial ritualization of the interaction between the divinities and humans give us an insight into social structure as well. The gods of a culture are frequently reflections of its human members; divinity created in the "image and likeness" of women and men (Baez-Jorge, 1988).

In Mesoamerican civilizations, women, priestesses and goddesses express a particular form of being female. Here we are not speaking of matriarchy but of a certain complementarity of both genders. We are not describing female power in the same areas as
men, nor are we referring to socially productive work carried out in similar spheres as men. We refer to complementarity or the duality of complementary opposites, one of the basic elements that gives coherence to ancient Mesoamerican civilization (Lopez Austin, 1982a).

Coatlicue, Teteoinan, Toci, Tonantzin, Ixcuiname are some of the goddesses in the Aztec pantheon (Baez-Jorge, 1988; Marcos, 1975, 1988). We will briefly mention Xochiquetzal and Tlazolteotl who are central to this essay because of their connection with sexual morality and what we refer to as sexual spirituality.

Eroticism and the Goddesses of Love

Ancient Nahuas had two divinities who represented what we call sexuality: Xochiquetzal and Tlazolteotl. Mesoamerican spiritual sexuality is revealed especially in the cult of these two goddesses. Xochiquetzal, the goddess of lovers, was the patroness of ritual sexual relations (Quezada, 1975). With this goddess, the emphasis is on amorous activity rather than on fertility. She protected illicit sexual relationships and was the patroness of the priestesses chosen to perform ritual sexual relations.

Tlazolteotl, on the other hand, was the goddess of sexual pleasure and sensuality associated with fertility. She is represented as a woman at the moment of birth and is the protector of pregnant women and midwives. Tlazolteotl is also the goddess of medicine, medicinal herbs and also of the healers “who provide herbs for abortion” (Sahagun).

Xochiquetzal and Tlazolteotl were the Mesoamerican divinities to whom the Indians confessed. Both goddesses represented the female principle before whom penitents implored pardon for their transgressions. The power of these goddesses was invoked to counteract the harmful effects of their devotees’ erring conduct.

The cult of these goddesses was a challenge to Christian categories. On one hand, Xochiquetzal is the goddess and patron of illicit sexual relations (Quezada, 1975), and on the other, Tlazolteotl is the protector of fertility but also of abortion. Both goddesses offer forgiveness through a confession ritual. Of course, in the Christian tradition there could never be divine protection for
what is illicit, nor sacred wisdom for abortion, nor confession to incarnations of the feminine. Here again are elements of the Mesoamerican religious universe that did not fit the evangelizers' categories.

The panorama of divine feminine powers and deified presences included women who died in childbirth and were transformed into goddesses: the Cihuateteo who supported the sun from its zenith to its setting. The mother of god was Coatlicue. The mother of the people was Tonantzin, and the Ixuiname held up the sky as pillars of the Nahuau universe. These sacred images gave the feminine pole importance. It was a very different symbolic universe from that of Christianity with its masculine trinity of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Song of the Women of Chalco

The ancient Nahuas developed the art of poetry to a high level. Garibay gives us translations of the poetry in which the inhabitants of Mesoamerica excelled. Among the selected poems translated by this author, the "Song of the Women of Chalco" is one that for its erotic and metaphorical character and its sexual symbolism is important to include at length. (Chalco is a town near Mexico City).

Beyond its historical, political and ritual interpretations, the song provides a glimpse into an eroticism that takes delight in sexual relations as the playful voices of women speak openly of sexual desire and express a voluptuous sensuality at odds with 16th century Iberian Catholic sexual morality.

While probably not "an isolated poetic phenomenon" whose uniqueness could possibly be due to the censoring of similar material (Lopez Austin, 1982b), the Song of Chalco stands almost alone. Two songs referring to lesbian love are found in the same collection (Bierhorst, 1985).

Full of metaphors, the song is a dialogue between various women and the warrior king Axayacatl.

Get ready, my little sisters:  
let us go and gather flowers...  
with my garland of flowers adorn yourself,  
my flowers they are, and I a woman of Chalco.
...and now, raise a song to dear King Axayacatito:
...By myself I raise my snake and make it stand up straight:
With it I will give pleasure to my darling Axayacatito.
Ay, my beautiful and dear king Axayacatito,
if you are truly a man, where you will have much to keep you busy.
...Take my poor ashes, then go on and work me.
Come and take it, take it, my joy:
Oh, my little boy, give yourself to me, my darling boy.
Among joyful pleasures we will laugh.
We will enter happiness, and I will learn.
Now you move, now you move your hands,
already you want to catch hold of my nipples.
Almost ready, my love!
...I give you my womb...there it is...
Here I have my husband: I can no longer dance with the bone;
I can’t make room for the spindle:
How you enjoy me, my child!
What can I do? ... I accept!
Is this how the plumed shield becomes pregnant
in the middle of the plain? I will give myself
...Fit yourself to me, show your virility.

Perhaps my women’s self will do crazy things,
my heart is ashamed.
What remedy is there? What will I do? Who will I have for a man?
Even though I wear a skirt and a blouse...
Come, take my tortilla dough, you king Axayacatito,
let me touch you...
Give it pleasure and raise up our snake,
again and once again!
...After, my little child, to give you pleasure!
Now I have no skirt, no blouse,
I am a little woman and here I am...
Slowly undo your skirts,
slowly open your legs, women of Tlatelolco,
those who are not going to war, Huhu!
keep your eyes on Chalco!


The song of the Women of Chalco recalls the Bible’s Song of Songs, but this erotic Nahuatl poem is exclusively from the side of female experience and sensuality. It is the woman who is presented as inciting and directing the vital sexual force of the cosmos.

**Eroticism and Old Age**

Texts containing accounts of pre-conquest customs and mores indicate that for the Mesoamericans old age, the last stage of life,
was not bereft of eroticism and power. According to Quezada:

The old person is not censured if he or she still has erotic desires even though they are regarded socially as impotent and sterile. To the contrary, the older woman is thought of as insatiable sexually. Certain texts develop the theme of the “older woman crazy for love.” (1975 p. 53).

In Sahagun we read the response of an older woman (a “grandmother”) concerning sexual desire:

“As old men, you no longer desire bodily pleasure for having indulged so often as youth, because your potency and seed have been used up. But we women never get tired of these doings nor do we get enough because our bodies are like a deep chasm that never fills up; it receives everything given it and desires more and demands more, and if we don’t do this, we aren’t alive” (Sahagun, 1982 Vol. II p. 145).

Active sexuality in the old occurred in the wider context of Mesoamerican culture where old people were considered powerful. Even today, among Mayan groups of the sierra of Chiapas, the old can accumulate k’al: “The older the person, the greater quantity of k’al he or she possesses” (Favre, 1984). This is the vital essence that not only animates all living things; it is indestructible and gives special powers to those who possess it. Old people, infused with k’al, can be as influential and even dangerous because of their power as are shamans and healers.

Above all, it is through the old that the treasure of an eminently oral tradition such as that of Mesoamerica are transmitted. Sahagun compiled his great work on the Nahua culture thanks to extensive interviews with old people—privileged sources of ancestral culture—who provided him with invaluable data about the ancient Nahua.

In Mesoamerica, it was the old person who was the most complete and powerful in the social fabric. He or she enjoyed moral privileges and ethical demands were relaxed. There was also greater freedom concerning drink and physical labor. The transformation that the old experienced as reduced physical strength due to their many years of life, manifested itself as gains in spiritual, religious and political dimensions. Old people formed the essential nucleus of a community. They even had their own god in Mesoamerican pantheon: Huehuetotl, the old god.
Conclusion

The sexuality that entered into conflict with the conquering ideology in Latin America cannot be precisely defined in contemporary terms. The only certainty is that its sense of eroticism, of the sexual in its sacred and vitalizing dimension, contrasted sharply with the dark and shameful view of sexuality of sixteenth century Catholicism. It also contrasts just as sharply with contemporary ideas of sexuality and sexual liberation.

Half a millennium ago the process of subjecting the part of the world known today as Latin America to Iberian Catholic missionaries, soldiers and colonists began. In no other region was the arrival of Catholicism so abrupt or its imposition so violent. In Mexico, but also in Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia and Colombia, the appetites of the conquerors and the zeal of the missionaries combined to destroy indigenous culture. While the first group exploited and abused the native inhabitants, the latter condemned their very way of being in the universe.

The Indian population, steadily decimated by disease and the effects of exploitation, witnessed the repudiation of the norms that maintained their society in balance, the prohibition of their life-renewing rituals, the negation of their way of perceiving the cosmos and their place in it. Even their sense of their own physical bodies was tampered with and turned into a source of guilt. The detailed and inquisitorial confession manuals were weapons in the war of acculturation.

The inhabitants of Central and South America were told that their goddesses and gods and the forces of the universe they relied on were the work of the evil one. What for the Indians was their way of participation in the power and harmony of the cosmos was declared base and vile. The sexual, as a life-giving force, had sustained both the cosmos and the individual within a greater order. Its practice was surrounded by rules and norms whose observance was essential for the proper functioning of the universe. As the sustenance of the universe, it had a central role in collective religious ritual. To have it torn out of the temple and thrust into the dark, as it were, disrupted the indigenous culture at its core.
Through the repression of indigenous eroticism, Catholic morality shook the foundation of indigenous cosmology.

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