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At the Crossroads of Empire:
Urban Form and Ritual Action in
Colonial Yanhuitlan, Oaxaca, Mexico

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Each year on April 29, during a solemn ceremony and long procession in the village of Santo Domingo Yanhuitlan in Oaxaca, Mexico, the sacred image of a crucified Christ, known by the local indigenous name of Ayuxi, or Tatayuxi, is brought from the chapel of El Calvario in the northern stretches of town to the main church of Santo Domingo. There, the image remains the center of many different religious, civic, and social activities until the last weekend of May (fig. 1). Documented since the sixteenth century, the celebration, known as the Mayordomia de Ayuxi, virtually and ritually connects significant places within the village boundaries. This paper focuses on the role that this and other local cults played in shaping the architecture and urban design of early colonial Yanhuitlan. As we shall see, the repeated ritual actions involved in these ceremonial activities contest the notion that Yanhuitlan's characteristic Hispanic outlook is merely the expression of a Hispanicized community.

Built between 1550 and 1580, during the peak period of Spanish missionary expansion in Mesoamerica, Santo Domingo Yanhuitlan, with its church and adjoining convento (mission), was one of the most important Dominican establishments in the region (figs. 2, 3).¹ The result of an alliance between Dominican friars, the local encomendero (Spanish conquistador and settler), and the indigenous Mixtec ruler, the mission became the center of cultural, religious, and economic activities in the densely populated valley of Nochixtlán. This served to strengthen the strategic position of Yanhuitlan within the Mixtec region and the Spanish imperial system.² The mission's architecture is, in fact, the expression of a local ideology that successfully incorporated Spanish forms into a Mixtec way of life.

The facade of the Yanhuitlan church is characterized by two large enclosing towers that do not exceed the height of the main body, framing a classicizing portal composed of three architectural orders. Similar to other contemporary establishments in the region, such as Teposcolula, Coixtlahuca, Tamazulapan, and Achiutla, it diverges from Central Mexican facade types.³ As recognized by George Kubler, John McAndrew, and Manuel Toussaint, while church missions in the Basin of Mexico and present-day states of Hidalgo, Morelos, and Puebla typically display a plain facade with doorway decorations, lateral projecting buttresses, and crenellations, in the Mixteca, a classicizing design dominates.⁴ Far from being an isolated experimentation, this Mixtec innovation is

Fig. 1. El Divino Señor de Ayuxi (on cross), taken from El Calvario on 29 April 2010. Photograph by author.

Fig. 2. The church and convento of Santo Domingo Yanzuitlan, 2005. Photograph by author.
prototypical of later designs that would become a trademark of Oaxacan religious architecture in the following centuries.5

The classicizing articulation of Mixtec facades has given rise to the term retablo-facade because of its formal similarities with the multipaneled altarpiece of Spanish and Latin American churches.6 The main altarpiece in the church interior does not merely reflect on the exterior; the large facades establish an ordering system that extends to the town beyond. Historical and archaeological evidence clearly indicates that the construction of these large missionary complexes occurred concurrently with other important nascent urban developments. Among the most noticeable architectural achievements in early colonial Mixtec villages are royal palaces that combined residential and political/diplomatic functions, thus continuing the long Mesoamerican tradition of royal architecture.7

The royal palace, known in Mixtec as aniñe, comprised several adjoining and interconnecting structures organized around internal courts. The best-preserved and best-known aniñe in the Mixteca is found in Teposcolula (fig. 4), where it is usually referred to as the casa de la cacica (residence of a female ruler) after Doña Catalina, who became cacica of Teposcolula in 1569.8 A characteristic frieze of disks runs beneath the flat roof of the building, which frequently appears in pictographic documents in association with

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elite and religious architecture.\textsuperscript{9} Round arches on the entrance door are, in contrast, of clear European derivation. In Coixtlahuaca, the community house, although heavily reconstructed, shows a few features that indicate a colonial construction, such as the main plaza's arcaded porch adjoining the church atrio (large courtyard) on the north side. At Yanhuitlan, the ruins of a building known as the casa del cacique are today part of a municipal complex. According to the account of the Jesuit friar Bernabé Cobo, who passed through the town around 1630, the construction of the ruler's residence and the convento were carried out at the same time, using the same workers and stone material. The compound was built around an internal patio so large it was later used as a bullfighting arena. The ruler's residential quarters were arranged around two smaller patios supported by stone columns.\textsuperscript{10}

When one moves beyond the confines of the enclosed aniñe's patios, it becomes apparent that a larger design is at work. Caciques' residences, sites of governmental power, are visible from the atrios of the conventos. The alignment of the two complexes forms an axis, projected along orthogonal lines, that extends to the rest of the town. The convento itself is not merely a building but rather a piece of the urban fabric thanks to the atrio, which serves as a buffer zone between the enclosed spaces of cloister and church and the village. Walls enclosed Yanhuitlan's atrio in the 1670s (fig. 5) and today still stand in Teposcolula and Coixtlahuaca.\textsuperscript{11} Characteristic of Mexican missions, the atrios—which frequently feature open-air and corner posit (processional) chapels (such as those in Teposcolula and Coixtlahuaca)—are original features of New World architecture that constitute a variation of the Mesoamerican plaza.\textsuperscript{12}

In Yanhuitlan, the north-south axis that connects the convento (fig. 6 [1]; see fig. 7) with the aniñe (fig. 6 [2]; see fig. 7) extends beyond the church patio to the north to reach the chapel of El Calvario, which houses the Christ of Ayuxi, one of the most venerated

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Fig. 4. The aniñe in Teposcolula, Oaxaca, 2007. Photograph by author
Fig. 5. The atrio of the church in Yanhuitlan, showing El Calvario in the background and the old site of Ayuxi on the left, 2008. Photograph by author

images in the valley (fig. 6 [3]; see fig. 1). According to the Dominican friar Francisco de Burgoa, on the northern edge of town a chapel dedicated to the Santa Cruz (holy cross) was already in place as early as 1601.13 To the west of the village, across from the Pan-American Highway (fig. 6 [5]) and aligned with the aniñe (see fig. 6 [2]), one reaches the chapel of San Sebastián (fig. 6 [4]), which was under construction in 1606.14 Finally, the main plaza of the village is found to the east behind the church of Santo Domingo (fig. 6 [6]). The plaza was built by 1598, when it is mentioned in reference to an aqueduct and public fountain constructed nearby.15 The earliest documentation on significant public buildings around the plaza dates to 1643, when casas reales (royal buildings) are mentioned in a local testament.16

While the convento was built on top of an ancient platform where local rulers were buried and ancestors’ rituals took place, the axis of the convento-aniñe complex created a new monumental core, a site of religious as well as civic activities, where previously only a few scattered buildings existed.17 The strategic innovation of this design, which situated the complex in the middle of a wide plain surrounded by densely populated hilltops, was revealed by a survey and stratigraphic excavations conducted in and around Yanhuitlan in the 1970s. Glazeware, porcelains, metal utensils, olive jars, and chicken bones—all items the Spaniards introduced to the New World—were discovered almost exclusively around the convento and ruins of the colonial royal palace, while in the neighboring areas only traditional red-on-cream ceramic and indigenous artifacts were found.18 This indicates that new “Hispanic” activities, indicative of consumption economies, were prevalent in the center; in contrast, surrounding areas continued ancient customs.

According to an instrucción (instruction) from the viceroy Antonio de Mendoza to his successor Luis de Velasco right before Mendoza left office in 1550, the viceroy was against the architectural works as they had so far been carried out in Yanhuitlan. Mendoza noted that although a large establishment was under construction, good resources had been wasted due to the lack of proper coordination and supervision.19 He made similar remarks regarding the missionary complex in Teposcolula. There, friars planned on congregating (resettling) the local indigenous population—still residing atop the hills—in a very humid spot downhill, where construction of a church had just begun. Mendoza advised against the resettlement, calling for measures to prevent the friars from moving forward with their plan.20

Mendoza’s remarks betray a certain antagonism between royal officials representing the Spanish Crown and the missionaries. In Yanhuitlan, the indigenous elite sided with the latter and also sought support from the local encomendero. The fact that the royal residence and convento were constructed at the same time, despite Mendoza’s disapproval, is only one expression of the ability of Yanhuitlan’s caciques to appropriate “Hispanic” places and institutions in order to guarantee continuity to the sociopolitical life of the village. While the atrio was used to address Mixtec subjects on matters relating to ancestry and legitimate rule, the aniñe served not only as residence for the ruling
family but simultaneously as council house (*casa de la comunidad* in Spanish; *huahi tniño* in Mixtec, literally meaning “duty house”) for the routine gatherings of the *cabildo* (town assembly) representatives. That is to say, if the church and mass offered an occasion to reinforce traditional rulership, the traditional setting of the royal palace hosted activities derived from political institutions introduced by the Spaniards.

The viceroy Mendoza also disagreed with the issue of *congregación*, which coerced scattered villages into one larger centralized settlement, a tactic apparently enforced by the Dominicans in Teposcolula. Congregaciones are often considered a major impulse behind reshaping indigenous settlements to conform to a rural Spanish pattern. In Yanhuitlan, it seems that partial congregation occurred only after 1598 and was still ongoing, albeit opposed by the local *encomendero*, in 1603—more than twenty-five years after the construction of the main church, adjoining convent, and *aniñe* had concluded.

Transformations in Yanhuitlan over the course of the sixteenth century offer an interesting case for understanding the complex dynamics between imperial policies and exigencies and unique local situations. Certain elements of the village’s architectural and urban design indicate a clear and conscious engagement with developments in the Spanish colonies. For example, the main plaza was the key generating principle in Hispanic design—a locus where all public activities took place, embodied by the church and administrative buildings that enclosed it—while in Yanhuitlan, the most important open area was the *atrio* found on the ancient elevated platform together with the *convento*. The *atrio* itself is not in front of the church but to the north of it. The imposing north side elevation of the church thus offers a perfect backdrop for ceremonial activities and at the same time connects this space with the preeminent chapel of Ayuxi, found in an elevated position clearly visible from the *atrio* (see fig. 5). The site of local government, the *aniñe* is also not found on the main plaza but rather on the axis that links the two most important symbolic referents in the valley, El Calvario and the church (see fig. 6 [1–3]). Finally, the imposing facade commands more attention from travelers and passersby than from local residents, as it faces the road rather than the main plaza (fig. 7; see fig. 2). Known today as the Pan-American Highway, from pre-Hispanic times this road was a major commercial route in Mesoamerica, acquiring even more importance after the conquest and the opening of Pacific maritime trade (see fig. 6 [5]). The supposed “colonial logic” of the grid as an expression of an imposed external power on a conquered territory is undermined in Yanhuitlan by the twisted placement of key monuments.

If Yanhuitlan’s grid plan, then, did not respond to colonial modes of domination, what informed the creation of this new monumental nucleus? In order to understand the inner logic of change in the community, I believe that we must look at ritual customs, including both belief and behavior. The erection of the *convento* and *aniñe* in the valley did not substantially alter preexisting settlement patterns, which were characterized (and still are in some areas) by a high degree of dispersion. Although quite densely populated in the Postclassic period, little urban concentration generally existed in the Mixteca;
rather, people lived in scattered settlements. In addition, ritual activities concentrated on small and dispersed shrines located most often on hilltops. Ceremonial centers, which rarely reached monumental proportions, were found not at the center of a settlement but removed from it.\(^{27}\)

Historical evidence clearly tells us that Yanhuitlan comprised several barrios or siña (a Mixtec term found in native-language documents) at least since Postclassic times and continuing throughout the colonial period.\(^{28}\) Ayuxi, the namesake of the venerated crucifix at El Calvario, was a prominent barrio as well, whose ancient location on the hills less than a mile to the east of the present chapel is still known today. Other prominent siña, Tinde and Ticoo, were found on the hilltops behind the chapel of San Sebastián. While these settlements are now abandoned, they constituted the dominant town partition in 1783, as noted in a tribute account.\(^{29}\) According to Ronald Spores’s survey, only indigenous red-on-cream ceramics are found at the sites of Ayuxi and San Sebastián, a fact that attests to the persistence of ancient sociobehavioral and belief patterns well into the colonial period.\(^{30}\) These chapels seem to have been placed midway between the ancient settlements and the new ceremonial and political/administrative center. Symbolically and functionally, they were the channel through which Spanish institutions entered and were incorporated into Mixtec life. As I was told several times, it is believed that an underground passage connects the chapel of Ayuxi with the convento platform.\(^{31}\) Underground passages such as caves and springs are understood in Mesoamerica as means of both physical and psychological displacement.\(^{32}\)

A few documents dating to the colonial period enable a general reconstruction of the use of sacred images and spaces at Yanhuitlan. In 1606, during a criminal trial, a witness testified that representatives of villages surrounding Yanhuitlan took part in Holy Week processions on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday, parading with their own crucifixes.\(^{33}\) This information indicates that ceremonial obligations involving the participation and sponsorship of communal rituals of nearby towns were an important aspect of interpolity relations at least since the early seventeenth century.

Not only images and their cults but also the chapels that contained them seem to have served more than a liturgical purpose. They functioned as administrative buildings for the local barrios, as attested by a 1677 petition signed by Yanhuitlan residents asking permission to finish a chapel that housed an image of Jesús Nazareno.\(^{34}\) The document states that the building had remained unfinished despite the fact that the image was greatly venerated in the village and surroundings and that the chapel itself had been used for years as casa de la comunidad. Finally, some forty years later, in 1711, several representatives of the barrio of Ayuxi also declared that their image of the crucified Christ was highly venerated in the village. A series of documents given to a judge in the murder case of a mayordomo (steward) asserted that the Mayordomía provided financially for the annual celebrations of Corpus Christi, Holy Cross (referred to as Santo Cristo), and Holy Week (specifically mentioning Maundy Thursday’s nightly procesión de la sangre [literally, procession of the blood], involving flagellants). The documents go on to state that
it was customary for every barrio, carrying its representative cross, to participate in this last procession. Crosses of several barrios, today kept in a storage room in the convent, were taken out during Holy Week processions until the 1950s.

The importance of crucifixes and their devotion during Holy Week and Mayordomía de Ayuxi is by no means a thing of the past, as I pointed out at the beginning of this essay. While “barrio crosses” are no longer in Holy Week processions, the cult to the Señor de Ayuxi is the most important religious and civic celebration in the valley. Beginning on the last days of April and extending throughout the month of May, the Mayordomía de Ayuxi is part of the widespread Mesoamerican tradition of the Holy Cross celebration.

Mexico’s month of May witnesses the beginning of the rainy season, and in the rural areas of the country ceremonial activities for the propitiation of good crops intensify. People gather on mountaintops to leave offerings of richly adorned altar crosses to the rain god (today known as San Marcos, with a feast celebrated on 25 April). In the Nahua village of Citala, Guerrero, barrio crosses are taken from a chapel on top of a hill to the main church where they remain for the duration of the celebrations. The cross itself is referred to as Tonantzín, “Our Mother,” or Tonacaquahuitl, “the Tree of Our Sustenance.” During the days on which their cult is celebrated, the crosses are literally covered with food offerings and flowers, similarly to the Señor de Ayuxi, which receives numerous baskets of fruits and flowers.

Anthropologists have examined the indigenous cross for clues about cultural continuity and survival of pre-Hispanic ritual and belief, pointing out the association of the celebration of the Holy Cross with fertility rituals and the maize plant in particular. The Tatayuxi of Yanhuitlan (fig. 7) disguises well his ancient roots under a perfect Spanish appearance. The hollow image is made partially of cornstalk paste, a Mesoamerican technique that allowed for the creation of light and portable sculptures. The use of corn-derived material also gives the image deep metaphorical significance related to the life cycle of the most important staple food in the Americas. During a restoration carried out in 1997, a Mixtec-language document was found inside the head of Christ. Its religious and liturgical text mentions not only the holy church but also the feast days of Lent, Holy Friday, and Sundays. Part of a larger document from which it was carefully cut out, the Mixtec document may be a prayer or an invocation, since God’s gifts and his mercy are mentioned more than once.

In Yanhuitlan, the processional route of the Mayordomía (see fig. 6) follows a north-south ceremonial axis that ideally centers and orders Yanhuitlan around the convent and along significant points, including the main plaza, the highway, and the royal residence. The procession follows a straight line, heading south from El Calvario (see fig. 6 [3]), passing by the main plaza (see fig. 6 [6]), and continuing until it reaches the Pan-American Highway (see fig. 6 [5]). At this point the procession changes direction by 180 degrees, passing by the atrio until coming to the church from the south side and, finally, moving around the atrio (see fig. 6 [1]) to enter the church from the west portal. Placed in a wider context, such a route is grafted upon an axis, contained by and visually connecting...
Fig. 7. Map of Yanhuitlan’s monumental core. Drawing by María Camila Escobar Vélez

Cerro Jazmín and the old site of Ayuxi, two Classic sites of uninterrupted visitation (fig. 8; see fig. 5). Throughout Mesoamerica, Classic sites became places of ancestral worship during Postclassic times, thus showing that the Classic past was acknowledged and celebrated during the later period. The inscription of colonial Yanhuitlan within these geographic referents again demonstrates the conscious efforts to signify continuity with the past yet at the same time recognize the beginning of a new epoch.

While Yanhitecos’ memories and accounts are a sign of the sacredness embedded in the village’s surroundings, its church, and its chapels, the aniñe-convento complex—a result of postconquest adjustments—represents the materialization of a spatial practice that comprised both religious and political activities: the gatherings at the church for sacred functions and at the aniñe for cabildo meetings. Finally, the ceremonial route sanctified these routine practices, allowing for the symbolic appropriation of the new religious-political order that has been continuously restated ever since, every time a procession has been held.

Early colonial architecture, urban design, and sculpture were seemingly imposed in Mixtec Yanhuitlan on a long-lived space of rituals, social organization, and local politics. It was not an abstract concept of imperial domination that created the modern outlook of this village and its religious activities. Quite the contrary: we are forced to ask how much of the currently perceived Hispanic character of Latin American art and religiosity is actually owed to indigenous experimentations.
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Notes  
2. Sericulture was introduced by the Spaniards in the Mixteca around 1530 and remained the single most important source of revenue in many Mixtec communities until the end of the sixteenth century; see Woodrow Wilson Borah, Silk Raising in Colonial Mexico (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1943), 23–26. Together with cochineal, an animal dyestuff produced since the pre-Hispanic period, silk was the major export of the region throughout the Spanish world, thanks to the opening of maritime trade that connected the Mixteca with Spain, Central America, Peru, and the Philippines. Woodrow Wilson Borah, Early Colonial Trade and Navigation between Mexico and Peru (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1954); and Raymond L. Lee, “Cochineal Production and Trade in New Spain to 1600,” The Americas 4 (1948): 449–50. See also María de los Ángeles Romero Frizzi, El sol y la cruz: Los pueblos indios de Oaxaca colonial (Mexico City: Centro de Estudios Superiores de Antropología Social, 1996), 146–65.  
5. The cathedrals of Mexico City and Puebla were finished, and their designed changed, during the course of the colonial period. By the late sixteenth century, the basilica of El Escorial, completed in 1584, had already become a referent for church design in the Hispanic world. For a discussion of a typical Oaxacan type, see Heinrich Berlin, “Oaxaca: La iglesia de San Felipe Neri: noticias de artífices,” *Archivo Español de Arte* 56, no. 221 (1983): 47–66. Elisa Vargas Lugo, “Las esculturas de la iglesia de San Pablo Guerate,” *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas*, no. 35 (1966): 50, defines this design as “clasicismo dominicano” (Dominican classicism) and extends its reach to the Dominican province of Chiapas. See also Elisa Vargas Lugo, *Las portadas religiosas de México* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1969), 182–87.


7. The most important example of Postclassic elite residential architecture in Oaxaca is found in the Zapotec town of Mitla in the Valley of Oaxaca.


9. For a discussion, see Kiracofe, “Architectural Fusion and Indigenous Ideology.”


11. Francisco de Burgoa, *Palestra Historial* (Mexico City: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1934), 292, writes that the atrio to the north of the church used to be enclosed by a wall five varas tall (about four meters), topped by crenellation. It is not known when the walls were torn down.


16. *Archivo Histórico del Juzgado de Teposcolula*, Sección Civil, Legajo 14, Expediente 73, fol. 9r. These royal buildings later served as jails (*Archivo Histórico del Juzgado de Teposcolula*, Sección Civil, Legajo 15, Expediente 36, fols. 11r–11v), a function they retained until the nineteenth century, as an inscription on the main entrance of the building attests.

17. The existence of a pre-Hispanic platform is confirmed by several testimonies during an Inquisition trial against the rulers of Yahnuitlán. See Jiménez Moreno and Mateos Higuera, *Códice de Yanhuitlán*, 40–42. During excavation works done in 2010 on the northern side of the existing platform, I was able to see what was possibly an ancient floor.


23. Forced congregations were carried out in two distinct campaigns (1551–64 and 1598–1607) following the promulgation of a series of reales cédulas (royal decrees). See Silvio Zavala and José Miranda, “Instituciones indígenas de la Colonia,” in Alfonso Caso et al., eds., La política indigenista en México: Métodos y resultados (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional Indigenista, 1954), 56–66; and, more recently, Noemí Quezada, “Congregaciones de indios y grupos étnicos: El caso del Valle de Toluca y zonas aledañas,” Revista complutense de historia de América, no. 21 (1995): 146–53. Quezada also offers a critique of the effectiveness of these policies in Central Mexico.


31. Mr. Gutiérrez Villanueva and Mr. Victorino Ramírez, personal communication, 2007.


35. Archivo Histórico del Juzgado de Teposcolula, Sección Civil, Legajo 20, Expediente 9, fols. 3–47.

37. Angels, also bearing barrio names, began to accompany the respective crucifixes during Holy Week processions sometime in the mid-eighteenth century, only to finally replace them, as seen in contemporary celebrations.


41. Although a Christian symbol, in indigenous America the cross is deeply connected to the concept of the cosmic tree, frequently depicted and narrated in ancient carvings, manuscripts, and early colonial sources. Trees in ancient times were considered the pillars that placed at the four corners of the earth, sustained the sky. Today, crosses mark village boundaries and are enduring symbols of community sovereignty. The growth of the tree itself is strictly connected to the regenerative function of human sacrifice. Since colonial times, the Christian holy cross has taken up the meaning and function of the ancient cosmic tree, conflating cosmological knowledge about world order and ritual significance through the enactment of the periodical sacrifice of Jesus in the celebration of the mass. For a general discussion, see Samuel Y. Edgerton, Theaters of Conversion: Religious Architecture and Indian Artisans in Colonial Mexico (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 2001), 58–71; David A. Freidel, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker, Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman’s Path (New York: W. Morrow, 1993); Enrique Marroquín, La cruz mesística: Una aproximación al sincretismo católico indígena (Oaxaca: Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca, 1989), 42–49; and Jill Leslie McKeever Furst, “The Tree Birth Tradition in the Mixteca, Mexico,” Journal of Latin American Lore 3 (1977): 183–226.


47. The most famous examples are Teotihuacan in the Basin of Mexico and Monte Albán in the Valley of Oaxaca, sacred places for, respectively, the Mexico and the Mixtecs and Zapotecas.