*Ancient Mesoamerica* (2024), **35**, 937–949
doi:10.1017/S0956536124000129

Research Article

# Sisters, liaisons, and dangerous things: A cognitive approach to a Nahua metaphor of early colonial stories

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## Abstract

This article unpacks a Nahuatl metaphor based on the kin term *hueltiuh*, "man's elder sister," used in multiple sixteenth-century Nahuatl texts and their Spanish derivatives. Through a minute analysis of several Nahua stories, the article identifies various roles described with this term: spies, "toothed-vagina" femmes fatales, heart-eating monsters, and seducers. Applying a method borrowed from cognitive linguistics, it then constructs a model of "man's elder sister," which explains the application of this metaphor to different contexts. In Nahua stories, *hueltiuh* is usually a female mediator who throws the male characters off balance, leading to a new *status quo*. Confusingly, this metaphor often appears where one would expect a real kinship term and in a way that makes identifying its symbolic meaning difficult. These complications have led scholars to see (only) genealogical information in stories concerned with symbolic rather than genealogical relations between elite members or deities. The results presented here allow for refining our understanding of some famous Nahua narratives, such as the one on Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl's abandonment of Tollan. They also invite a rethinking of our views on the Nahua (Aztec) pantheon of gods, whose figurative "family bonds" may, in fact, indicate complex nonkinship relations and dependencies.

## Resumen

El enfoque de este artículo es una metáfora náhuatl basada en el término de parentesco *hueltiuh* (hermana mayor del hombre), utilizada en múltiples fuentes nahuas del siglo XVI y sus derivados españoles. El artículo empieza por un minucioso análisis de varios relatos nahuas en los cuales aparece el término *hueltiuh*: Chalchiuhnene y la caída de Tlatelolco; la historia de Itzpapalotl, Xiuhnel y Mimich; el nacimiento de Huitzilopochtli y la muerte de Coyolxauhqui; y la transformación de Yappan en un alacrán, entre otros. Identifico en ellos diversos papeles desempeñados por las mujeres-„hermanas": espía, „vagina dentada", devoradora de corazones y seductora. Con la ayuda de un método adoptado de la lingüística cognitiva, construyo a continuación un modelo de „hermana mayor del hombre" que explica la aplicación de esta metáfora a varios contextos. En los relatos nahuas, la *hueltiuh* suele ser una mediadora femenina que desequilibra a los personajes masculinos y conduce a un nuevo statu quo.

Los resultados de este estudio tienen implicaciones para la lectura de algunas narraciones nahuas famosas, como la del abandono de Tollan por Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl. En esta historia de origen, algunos investigadores han visto un motivo de incesto que, a la luz de mi análisis, no se puede sostener. Varios ejemplos muestran que la metáfora *hueltiuh* aparece a menudo en los contextos donde se podría esperar un término de parentesco verdadero, lo que obstaculiza la identificación de su significado simbólico. Estas complicaciones han llevado a los investigadores a ver (solo) información genealógica en relatos que, efectivamente, no describen lazos genealógicos sino simbólicos. Mientras tanto, la interpretación del término *hueltiuh* como una metáfora nos hace reconsiderar las ideas sobre el panteón de los dioses nahuas. Lo que hasta ahora hemos visto – gracias a los términos utilizados en las fuentes – como „lazos familiares" entre los dioses puede, de hecho, remitir a complejas relaciones y dependencias que no tienen nada que ver con el parentesco.

**Keywords:** Nahua; Nahuatl; metaphors; cognitive linguistics; kinship terms

> When Quetzalcoatl started having fun, he said, "Go bring my elder sister Quetzalpetlatl. Let us drink pulque together!" His messengers went to Nonohualcatepec, where she was making offerings, and said, "O, lady Quetzalpetlatl, the abstaining one, we have come to get you. The *tlamacazqui* (priest), Quetzalcoatl, is waiting for you. You are to go be with him. She said, "Okay, grandfather messenger, let us go." As soon as she arrived and sat down beside Quetzalcoatl, they gave her pulque: four portions and one more, the fifth. (...) When

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**Cite this article:** Madajczak, Julia (2024) Sisters, liaisons, and dangerous things: A cognitive approach to a Nahua metaphor of early colonial stories. *Ancient Mesoamerica* **35**, 937–949. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956536124000129

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> they got drunk, they no longer said, "We make offerings during the day." No longer did they descend into the water. No longer did they go to stick maguey spines [in their bodies]. They did nothing at dawn. And when the day broke, they became very sad; their hearts were filled with sadness. Then Quetzalcoatl said, "Woe is me!" Right away, he sang a lament; he composed a song about how he would go away (Bierhorst 2011 [1992]:11; all translations from Nahuatl and Spanish are mine).

Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl is one of the most famous characters in Nahua stories written down alphabetically in the sixteenth century. Most of these stories were left to us by Nahuatl-speaking authors and informants whose communities aspired to be heirs of the highly civilized Toltecs of Tollan—a legendary city ruled by Topiltzin. The above-quoted *Anales de Cuauhtitlan*, a history of one of the largest cities in the Valley of Mexico, completed by an anonymous Nahua author in A.D. 1570 (Bierhorst 1998 [1992]:3–4), preserves the most comprehensive version of Topiltzin's biography. According to this source, Tollan flourished under Topiltzin's rule until the arrival of evil sorcerers who destroyed the ruler's peace and made him indulge in drinking. Following the night spent with his sister, Quetzalpetlatl, Topiltzin understood that he must leave Tollan, taking away all the riches and joy he once provided to the city. Accompanied by a retinue of his pages, he went to the seashore where he burned himself on a funeral pyre and transformed into the Morning Star (Bierhorst 1998 [1992]:28–36).

This story immediately provokes a question: what happened between Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl and his sister? What horrible transgression did they commit that eventually caused the Toltecs' downfall? Some scholars have no doubt it was incest (e.g., Carrasco 1982:34, 178; Nicholson 2001:47; Olivier 2004:265; Saurin 2002:152). Although the text of the *Anales de Cuauhtitlan* does not speak about this shameful act openly, other versions of this story suggest that what Topiltzin engaged in with his sister went beyond drinking. Dominican friar Diego Durán (2006 [1967]:vol. I, ch. I:14), in his *Libro de los dioses y ritos*, written between 1574 and 1576, cites a variant in which Topiltzin abandoned Tollan because certain sorcerers forever discredited his name by letting a prostitute named Xochiquetzal into the cell where he had been "doing penance." Given that Durán identified the ruler of Tollan with one of the apostles, he fiercely defended Topiltzin's innocence (Olivier 2004:265), whereas the Nahua original had probably implied Topiltzin and Xochiquetzal having had sex. However, for a modern Western reader, it is not just sex but incest that resonates with the tragedy that followed. Interestingly, in its most common form, twenty-first-century incest narratives still draw from the classical Greek story of Oedipus, combining royal entourage with a moral crisis and a kingdom's fall (see, for example, *A Game of Thrones* by George R. R. Martin [1996]). In the classical Greek piece, *Oedipus Rex*, by Sophocles (2011), the king abandons the city of Thebes, destroyed by a plague caused by his incest. The parallel with the tragic events of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl's life is striking. We just need to believe that Quetzalpetlatl was Quetzalcoatl's actual sister, but this is easy: a kingdom falls, the king leaves—incest just fits.

Nevertheless, in Nahua discourse recorded in early colonial alphabetic sources written in Nahuatl, kin terms surprisingly often convey symbolic meanings. Because of the circumstances that brought these sources along—the forced acculturation of their Nahua authors by European colonizers—some kin terms–based metaphors in Nahuatl are unambiguously translations of Spanish figures of speech. Still, many Nahua stories have been written down from oral accounts that preserved the original precontact vocabulary even if the writer or copyist could not grasp the full scope of their metaphoric value anymore. The symbolic meanings of kin terms that these texts feature are often entirely different from what we are used to in Indo-European languages. Carefully identified and analyzed, they can reveal narrative strata thought to be lost with the living participants of sixteenth-century Nahua culture.

The *Anales de Cuauhtitlan* describes Quetzalpetlatl with the term *hueltiuh*, glossed by Fray Alonso de Molina (1977 [1571]:vol. II, f. 111v, 157r) as *hermana mayor*, "elder sister"—a term that, as all Nahuatl terms for siblings, also extended to cousins. Based on the contextual use of *hueltiuh* in alphabetic sources, to "elder sister (or cousin)," we can add "of a man" because this term is attested only for sisters of men, whereas sisters of women are called *pih* and *iuhc* (Madajczak 2015:271–272; Olmos 2002:25). Now, who could *ihueltiuh Quetzalcoatl* be if her relation to Tollan's ruler was only metaphorical? If this term were a translation from Spanish, she would be "a fellow member of the religious order" to which Quetzalcoatl belonged. Such a connotation makes sense in the narrative, but we should not jump to premature conclusions.

This article aims to search for the original sense of the Nahuatl metaphor "man's elder sister." It approaches this goal by carefully reviewing the old Nahua stories in which the term *hueltiuh* most likely appears as a precontact metaphor. It then applies a method borrowed from cognitive linguistics to interpret the gathered material and shed new light on some Nahua stories, such as the one about Quetzalpetlatl and Topiltzin. The reason for picking such a topic is that *hueltiuh* and several other kinship terms appear abundantly in narratives about dynastic politics and sacred stories of origin. To become aware of their possible metaphorical values or—better—to grasp the implicit meanings of some of these terms translates into a fuller understanding of the precontact Nahua tradition and worldview. If rulers and their "sisters" described in Nahua annals and chronicles were not siblings, who were they to each other? Furthermore, and even more mysteriously, what were the relations between deities referred to as each other's "brothers" or "sisters"? *Anales de Cuauhtitlan*'s Quetzalpetlatl will guide us through the crowd of "men's elder sisters" populating the pages of old Nahuatl texts. Once we discover who Quetzalpetlatl was, we will unlock the Nahuatl metaphor of *hueltiuh*.

## Was Quetzalpetlatl a spy?

After the empire-shattering performance of Quetzalpetlatl, for some time, "sisters" do not play much of a role in the history recorded by the *Anales de Cuauhtitlan*. This changes

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956536124000129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

during the fifteenth-century Tepanec war, when the armies gathered by the Acolhua ruler Nezahualcoyotl go along capturing the Tepanec *altepetl* (city-states) one by one. Coatlichan, Huexotla, and Acolman, together with their rulers, meet their fate without any comment from the annalist. The fourth city is Toltitlan, and this is where the drama occurs. On the day 1 Tecpatl, the allied warriors of Acolhua, Huexotzinca, Chalca, and Tlaxcalteca, approach Toltitlan. Inside the city, its ruler, Epcoatl, awaits his fate, not knowing that the final blow will come from his wife. The lady, captured by Epcoatl probably shortly before the war, is a daughter of Cuauhtitlan's ruler, Tecocoatl. The following events make it clear that Tecocoatl or his superiors orchestrated this "kidnapping," using the Cuauhtitlan princess as a Trojan horse. "When the war first broke," the *Anales* tells us, "this lady's opinion had been the same as everyone's: that the Tepaneca were to perish" (Bierhorst 2011 [1992]:57); she then contributed to the victory of Nezahualcoyotl's forces by secretly informing her father about any war-related plan she overheard. As a result, on 1 Tecpatl, the chiefs of the allied armies know Epcoatl's every move. The princess-spy is waiting for them atop the main pyramid of Toltitlan, setting fire to the temple in a recognizable sign of the *altepetl*'s defeat.

At this point, the chaos of battle begins. Before the people of Cuauhtitlan can reach their princess, the Chalcan warriors take her captive. She is married to Epcoatl; she is unlikely to escape punishment unless she reveals her identity and role to a person in command. With her father nowhere to be seen, she turns to the *tlatoani* (ruler) of Huexotzinco, Tenocelotl: "O lord, I am your sister (*nimohueltihuatzin*) for my father, the lord and ruler Tecocoatzin of Cuauhtitlan, has left me here" (Bierhorst 2011 [1992]:58). Is she really the sister (or cousin) of Tenocelotl? If this were the case, she would not have to, most likely, introduce herself to him. Moreover, the structure of the Nahuatl phrase seems to imply that the reason for calling herself his "sister" is that her father has sent her to Toltitlan (to act as a spy). The translator of the *Anales de Cuauhtitlan*, John Bierhorst (1998 [1992]:99, n334), also sensed a metaphor here, suggesting that *nimohueltihuatzin* may mean "I am your ally." This interpretation comes close to what *hueltiuh* connotes in this context. Still, we must look at similar examples from other sources to fully understand this concept.

The Nahua annalist Domingo Chimalpahin who worked between circa 1607 and 1637 (Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin 2003 [1998]:11), recounts the story of a lady whom he calls *inhueltiuh Tequanipan tlaca*, or "the elder sister of the people of Tequanipan." This time, there is no doubt that the term "sister" is a metaphor: one cannot be a relative of the entire *altepetl*. The people of Tequanipan are wandering toward their destination in Chalco, looking for a place to settle. Eventually, they arrive in Amaquemecan, which is already well established, with several *tlatoque* (plural of *tlatoani*) ruling the land. The "elder sister" of the migrating *altepetl* is, simultaneously, a daughter of its leader. She becomes the concubine of one of the Amaquemecan's rulers and has a son with him, who is later installed as the *tlatoani* of (the now sedentary) Tequanipan (Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin 2003 [1998]:336–339). Susan Schroeder (1992:81), who analyzed this story, reflected on the possible symbolic meaning of the term *hueltiuh*, but to no avail. However, she observed that what this nameless "sister" did for the "people of Tequanipan" was to grant them both recognition from the leaders of Amaquemecan and permission to settle in their land, forming part of its administrative organization and hierarchy. Tequanipan therefore conformed to the typical pattern of alliances practiced in central Mexico. As an *altepetl* of a weaker position—late to arrive—it had to form a relationship with the already established dynasties. The Mexica of Tenochtitlan employed the same strategy when they came to Colhuacan and "mixed their blood" with the Colhuaque, thereby initiating the Mexica royal lineage. From the union of Amaquemecan's ruler and the "sister of the people of Tequanipan" came the first legitimate *tlatoani* of Tequanipan and the founder of its future dynasty. Therefore, the "sister" of an *altepetl*, or its people or leaders, was a link through which they could achieve a political goal. She established contact between her group and the "others," granting the former benefits and privileges.

The *Bancroft Dialogues*, an early seventeenth-century collection of fine speeches and conversations in Nahuatl, supports this reading of *hueltiuh*. In one of the speeches, the *tlatoani* of Tetzcoco asks the ruling couple of Tenochtitlan for a bride, referring to her as *tohueltihuatzin*—"our elder sister" (Karttunen and Lockhart 1987:120). The power hierarchy here is similar to the relationship between Tequanipan and Amaquemecan: Tetzcoco needs a Tenochcan princess to produce legitimate successors to the throne. In the same way that the "sister of the people of Tequanipan" served to strengthen the position of her *altepetl*, the "sister of the Tetzcoca" serves the Tetzcocan dynasty of which she becomes part. It is also precisely how the Colhuacan princess, married to the miserable Epcoatl of Toltitlan, could claim that she was the "sister" of Tenocelotl, one of the leaders of the allied forces gathered against the Tepanec. The relationship described by the term *hueltiuh* did not focus on whether the woman came from the same *altepetl* of which she was called "sister": whereas Tequanipan's "sister" was indeed from Tequanipan, the "sister" of the Tetzcoca came from Tenochtitlan, and the "sister" of Tenocelotl did not belong to his *altepetl*, but to the allied Colhuacan. Regardless of where they came from, however, all these women worked in favor of the city-states or dynasties of which they became "sisters." Also, as the Toltitlan example shows, the political metaphor of *hueltiuh* did not have to imply peaceful results. "Sisters" of rulers either guaranteed the status quo among the neighboring *altepetl* or, if this was of more benefit to their hometowns, destroyed the rulership of their husbands. They were mediators between two dynasties: sometimes mothers to future *tlatoque*, at other times spies. The key here was always acting to the advantage of the person or group whose metaphorical sister they were.

## Was Quetzalpetlatl a "toothed-vagina" kind of girl?

One of the most dangerous women-spies known from Nahua literature was Chalchiuhnene of Tlatelolco, wife of the ruler

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956536124000129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Moquihuix. The marriage of Chalchiuhnene and Moquihuix has already received a great deal of interest in the scholarly world, not only because it eventually led to a spectacular failure of Tlatelolco—which lost its *tlatocayotl* (the status of a state with a dynastic ruler)—but also because of many juicy details of the couple's relationship. We owe the most complete and colorful account of these events to the *Crónica Mexicayotl*, a 1609 history written down by the Mexica nobleman Hernando de Alvarado Tezozomoc, with a later contribution by Chimalpahin (Peperstraete and Kruell 2014). The *Crónica* says that "Moquihuixtli did not value his wife because she was weak, did not have a pretty face, and she was skinny, not fleshy" (Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin and Alvarado Tezozomoc 1997:136). One of the authors adds in the margin: "Chalchiuhnenetzin was a lady of awful stinky teeth, which is why the ruler Moquihuixtli never had sex with her" (Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin and Alvarado Tezozomoc 1997:136, n220). As if neglecting his matrimonial duty and dynastic obligations was not enough, the Tlatelolcan *tlatoani* showed disrespect to his wife in many other ways. He would take from her the precious gifts that she received from her royal family and give them to his concubines. He would banish her from luxury rooms and make her sleep "among the grinding stones, in a corner" (that is, where the slaves slept [Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 4, ch. 9:34]). He would beat her. He would make her wear rags. In all, he did everything to earn the miserable end he met when, after the ferocious battle with Chalchiuhnene's relatives, he fell to his death down the staircase of the Tlatelolcan pyramid (Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin and Alvarado Tezozomoc 1997:138). Had Moquihuix been cleverer, Tlatelolco could still have had *tlatocayotl* when the Spaniards came—because Chalchiuhnene was not some local princess from a mediocre *altepetl* with a small military force. She belonged to the ruling dynasty of the powerful Tenochtitlan and reported her husband's behavior directly to the great *tlatoani* Axayacatl. In fact, according to the *Crónica Mexicayotl*, Chalchiuhnene was Axayacatl's elder sister.

Stories about the fall of Tlatelolco, recorded in numerous central Mexican sources, are among those troublesome Nahua narratives that place themselves somewhere between myth and history. On the one hand, some Nahua writers weave these stories into the format of historical annals and provide them with dates in both the Christian and Mesoamerican calendar systems. Others enrich them with details, such as genealogies, names, toponyms, or numbers, reinforcing our trust in their credibility. However, this "factual" content usually intertwines with prophecies, omens, divine interventions, and other rationally inexplicable events. This mixture caused much confusion to early Mesoamericanists who forced old Nahua texts into the modern Western understanding of "history." Since then, other approaches have become more popular. One of them is to identify culturally recognizable elements and structures in the accounts, thereby getting closer, perhaps, to grasping the precontact Nahua concept of "history" or "tradition" (Graulich 1997:8; Szoblik 2020:335–336). Working within this paradigm, Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos (2011:85) finds in the story of Moquihuix's death symbolic elements characteristic of Mesoamerican sacred stories about the triumph of the Sun over its false imitator. He also contributes to our understanding of Chalchiuhnene's role in her husband's failure by classifying her as a woman equipped with a "toothed vagina."

There is no doubt that Chalchiuhnene had an exceptional vagina. Various sources, among them the *Crónica mexicana* written around 1598 by Alvarado Tezozomoc (2001:99) and the *Anales de Cuauhtitlan* (Bierhorst 2011 [1992]:68), tell us that it uttered a prophecy about the fall of Tlatelolco. The latter text immediately precedes this information with a gruesome story about Moquihuix, who used to put his entire forearm into his wife's vagina and touch her from the inside. Why would the author of the *Anales* consider this an important detail to add to the account about the 1473 war of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco? Nahua attitudes toward sex make it possible to explain his choice on two different levels. From the perspective of morality, this story can provide a post-factum justification for the Tenochcan invasion by portraying the Tlatelolcan *tlatoani* as a violator of the Aztec rule of moderate sexual behavior (Evans 1998:175, 178). On the other hand, the Nahua predilection for moderation in sex had a firm grounding in religious beliefs and body ideology. According to the Nahua, sperm carried the vital essence of a man, and fathers warned their sons not to give themselves to women too much lest they dry out and die (Madajczak 2017:376; Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 6, ch. 22, pp. 125–126). Twentieth-century ethnographic data expressly point to *tonalli* (hot animistic entity) as the essence that poured out of the body during ejaculation (López Austin 1984 [1980]:vol. I: 243). As a result, men had to approach sex with caution, knowing that it would make them weak for some time and that it could kill them in the long run.

The "toothed vagina," a cultural motif of dangerous femininity, was tightly related to the belief about the effect sex had on men. Although older Nahua sources contain almost no direct references to this trope, it was so widespread in both colonial and modern Mesoamerican societies that this absence is most likely due to editorial factors, such as the concern of the friars to leave "indecent" content out (Báez-Jorge 2008:171; on the Mesoamerican "toothed vagina," see also Báez-Jorge 2010; Balutet 2011; Gingerich and Carr 1983; López Hernández 2013–2014, among others). However, some of Nahua's sacred stories can be interpreted using the "toothed vagina" concept. For example, Guilhem Olivier employs the corpus of Mesoamerican data to read the stories on the mutilated leg of the god Tezcatlipoca in this way. According to Olivier (2004:466–471), the deity lost his foot in the volcano of Popocatepetl in a creative act of impregnation, after which the volcano started to emit smoke. Tezcatlipoca used his foot as an equivalent of the penis, penetrating the vagina of the earth with it and getting "castrated" by its fangs. Similarly, Chinchilla Mazariegos (2011:96–97) suggests that the forearm of Moquihuix put deep into Chalchiuhnene's vagina refers metaphorically to a phallus about to be bitten off (see also Graulich 2000:96). It is reminiscent of arms stuck inside

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956536124000129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the toothed vaginas of monstrous birds on the precontact Mayan stelae of Izapa and Copan that prove this motif to be of ancient Mesoamerican origin (Figures 6 and 7 in Chinchilla Mazariegos 2011:98).

Castration points to the loss of strength by the masculine victims of dangerous female figures. Castration by a "mouth," on the other hand, resonates with a metaphorical conceptualization of copulation as eating: the Nahua used the reflexive verb *mocua*, "to eat each other," with the sense of "to make love to each other" (López Hernández 2013–2014:39; Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 6, ch. 27:156). The fact that Chalchiuhnene's vagina could talk—and talked about the upcoming fall of Tlatelolco—is another argument in favor of comparing it to a sinister mouth. Devoured by the gluttonous femininity of his wife, the strength of Moquihuix vanished, and with it went the vital power that protected and maintained his *altepetl*. Consequently, the terrifying details of the royal couple's intimate relations allude to Chalchiuhnene being the cause of the destruction of both Tlatelolco and its *tlatoani* (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2011:96–99).

When we think of Chalchiuhnene as armed with her toothed vagina, crushing the masculine strength of her husband, the perspective on who the victim of this marriage was changes entirely. Reading through various accounts of the central Mexican past, Chinchilla Mazariegos (2011:99) finds other clues that lead to interpreting Chalchiuhnene as a dangerous, monstrous man-devouring female. He observes that another woman of that name, the wife of the Tetzcocan ruler Nezahualpilli, also fits into the "toothed-vagina" model of femininity, given that she used to kill her lovers right after seducing them. Katarzyna Szoblik follows this lead and discovers even more parallels between the two Chalchiuhnenes. Like the wife of Moquihuix, Nezahualpilli's spouse was the sister of a Tenochcan ruler, in this case—as a Mestizo historian Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl (2000:235) claimed in early seventeenth century—Motecuhzoma Xocoyotl. Both royal sisters married the *tlatoque* of the cities with which Tenochtitlan had some unfinished business. Tlatelolco, unhappy with being excluded from the Triple Alliance that ruled the Valley of Mexico, attempted to gain more influence over the region by threatening the dominant position of Tenochtitlan under the reign of Axayacatl. Several decades later, Tetzcoco emerged as an obstacle in Motecuhzoma's plan of centralizing the power over the sizeable Aztec state in his own hands. As Szoblik (2020:338) suggests, sending women of destructive abilities to the *altepetl* of Tlatelolco and Tetzcoco could have been part of a more extensive campaign by the rulers of Tenochtitlan to either destroy or significantly weaken these cities. Like her Tetzcocan namesake, who could attend to countless lovers, the Tlatelolcan Chalchiuhnene embodied insatiable female sexuality because her needs remained unsatisfied by her husband. Regardless of whether the Tenochcan *tlatoque* intended to crush their opponents with the magical power of the two ladies, the sixteenth-century narratives deem this motif important because it reinforces the culturally recognized scheme of war and defeat.

The relationship between Chalchiuhnene of Tlatelolco and the ruler Axayacatl is very much like the relationship between the anonymous wife of Epcoatl and the ruler Tenocelotl of Colhuacan. Both *tlatoque* placed their metaphorical sisters in foreign courts, where the women spied on their husbands, navigating toward the failure of the unsuspecting men and the simultaneous victory of the princesses' home *altepetl*. The term *hueltiuh* or, in the Spanish text of Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl's history, *hermana* (sister), did not necessarily describe the real kinship bonds between the Chalchiuhnenes and the Tenochcan *tlatoque*. In some accounts, for example, the *Anales de Cuauhtitlan*, Chalchiuhnene is Axayacatl's daughter rather than a sister (Bierhorst 2011 [1992]:68). I suggest this discrepancy arises from the Nahua tradition keepers' original use of *hueltiuh* as a metaphor. By the time this oral tradition reached authors such as Chimalpahin or Alva Ixtlilxochitl, the term had been weaved into genealogies, and early historians used it like a genuine kinship term. Yet, if we restore the symbolic meaning of *hueltiuh*, it turns out that Chalchiuhnene could have been Axayacatl's daughter and "sister" at the same time.

## Was Quetzalpetlatl a heart eater?

The masculinity-threatening Chalchiuhnenes of the stories centered around political struggles and wars had their even more terrifying counterparts in the Nahua times of origin. The story of origin known as the *Legend of the Suns*, written down by an anonymous Nahua author in 1558, introduces us to one of these bloodthirsty goddesses, Itzpapalotl (Bierhorst 2011 [1992]:92–93). She enters the scene when two Mimixcoa (deities related to the god Mixcoatl) named Xiuhnel and Mimich go hunting in the desert. There, they spot a pair of two-headed deer and begin chasing them. After a long run, the exhausted deer stop and transform into women, who tempt the two hunters by offering them food and drink. Mimich resists, but Xiuhnel summons one of the women with an already familiar term: *xihuallauh nohueltihue* (Bierhorst 2011 [1992]:93), "Come, my sister." He does not have to repeat his invitation twice. The goddess-deer hands him a cup of blood, which he drinks, and the situation becomes intimate. Suddenly, amid the passionate tête-á-tête, she changes position, jumping on top of her lover, opening his chest sacrifice-like, and eating "him" (*quicua*), or, most likely, his heart. After this narrative blow—especially shocking for Xiuhnel, as we can imagine—one of the women begins to chase the surviving hunter, Mimich, who runs into the fire. The chase continues for some time and ends when she abruptly stumbles on a barrel cactus. Mimich takes this opportunity and shoots his immobilized persecutor, now finally called by her name of Itzpapalotl, with arrows. Then, he summons the lords of fire, who help him burn her.

This story, already analyzed by countless scholars, is extremely rich in culturally meaningful details and can be read from several perspectives. It has also survived in many versions, partly because it formed part of the *Códice X*, a lost nonalphabetic source, copied and transcribed by

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956536124000129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

many early colonial authors (Castañeda de la Paz 2005). However, no version refers to the motif of the "toothed vagina" in such an overt way as the *Legend of the Suns*. Here, Itzpapalotl literally ate Xiuhnel while having sex with him. His fate was sealed from the moment he accepted the bloody potion the woman-deer offered him. As every Nahua boy learned from his father, it was unsafe to accept food or drink from suspicious women, given that it may have contained an aphrodisiac that caused excessive ejaculation, dangerously "drying" a man out (López Austin 1984 [1980]:vol. I, pp. 331–332; Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 6, ch. 22:125). When Xiuhnel drank the bloody potion, he anticipated a loss of vital powers, which came in the most brutal way imaginable. Like all the Nahua deities who fed themselves with the hearts of sacrificial victims, Itzpapalotl devoured the heart of Xiuhnel, appropriating everything that it contained: vital energy, hot *tonalli*, and maybe also consciousness, memory, and other critical functions of what we call a "mind" (López Austin 1984 [1980]:vol. II, pp. 225–233). In the double act of sex and eating, the *tzitzimitl* (a bloodthirsty female creature that would descend from the sky to prey on people), as the *Legend* calls her, "ingested" the entire vital strength of her victim. According to Nahua's beliefs, sexual intercourse could not harm her, at least not in the way it could harm the men. As an elderly lady once explained to the ruler Nezahualcoyotl, women could "receive what was being given to them" practically without limitation (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 6, ch. 21, pp. 118–119).

The Nahuatl language had a name for a "heart eater": *teyollocuani*, which meant just that. The *Crónica Mexicayotl* uses this term to describe Malinalxochitl, the patron-goddess of the Malinalca and sister (*ihueltiuh*) of Huitzilopochtli, the main god of the Mexica. The text's authors insert *teyollocuani* within a series of other epithets that revolve around harming people with magic, taking away their vitality, and possibly even causing their deaths (Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin and Alvarado Tezozomoc 1997:76–78; Graulich 1992:89–92). Among them is the term *tecotzanani* (leg taker), which was almost synonymous with "heart eater" because the Nahua believed that, like hearts, legs or calves contained a significant concentration of hot vital essence (López Austin 1984 [1980]:vol. I, pp. 185–186; Martínez González 2011:356; Olivier 2004:421–424). Alvarado Tezozomoc (2001:56) explains that a *tecotzanani* ate people's calves only by looking at them and without the victim feeling anything. In various Mesoamerican cultures, removing a man's leg symbolically equaled castrating him and, consequently, recalled the motif of a "toothed vagina" (Galinier 1984:45; Klein 2001:234–235). Both heart eaters and leg takers were present in the lives of precontact and colonial Nahua as malevolent creatures who brought diseases onto people or even killed them. In 1629, a Spanish priest—Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón—working outside the Valley of Mexico, reported that the town of Coyuca had witnessed decimating epidemics caused by *teyollocuanime* (plural of *teyollocuani*) and other sorcerers who had used ashes brought by night birds for this purpose. At the same time, the sorcerers transformed into owls so that they could receive the deadly delivery (Ruiz de Alarcón 1987:47). Malinalxochitl, too, had transformative powers; Alvarado Tezozomoc (2001:56) claims that she could turn into any bird or animal of her liking.

From the epithets with which the *Crónica Mexicayotl* referred to Malinalxochitl, we can infer that she had much in common with Itzpapalotl and the Chalchiuhnenes. Although sixteenth-century texts do not mention her using the lethal power of female sexuality, she obtained the same results—draining the vitality out of people's most essential organs—with different measures. In the times of origin, Malinalxochitl belonged to a party of various peoples led by their patron-gods to lands where they would eventually settle. As time passed, migrating groups parted from the Mexica and headed in their own directions. When the Michhuaque abandoned the party to begin their journey toward Michoacan, the Mexica were left alone with the Malinalca, whose influence on the Mexica's vital strength, as we already know, was detrimental. One night, when Malinalxochitl and her people slept, Huitzilopochtli and his group decided to save themselves by quietly walking away. When the abandoned goddess woke up, she cried bitterly, but soon, she regained her grip and led the Malinalca to their destination. As we will later see, she still had an important role to play in the Mexica's history.

A narrative recorded by a Franciscan friar Juan de Torquemada (1975 [1615]:vol. I, bk. II, ch. II, pp. 116–117) in his *Monarquía indiana* completed in 1612, fascinatingly joins motifs from the *Crónica Mexicayotl*'s story on Malinalxochitl and the adventures of Xiuhnel and Mimich described in the *Legend of the Suns*. The setting for the plot is once again vast lands through which the migrating Mexica move slowly toward future Tenochtitlan. Among them travels a woman named Quilaztli, "a great sorceress," who can transform herself into anything of her liking. One day, she turns into an eagle, sits on top of a cactus, and—mocking the famous sign that inaugurated the construction of Tenochtitlan—shows herself to two "captains": Xiuhnel and Mixcoatl. When they start to shoot her with arrows, she speaks to them: "Do not shoot me, for I am Quilaztli, your and your people's sister" (*No me tiréis que yo soy Quilaztli, vuestra hermana y de vuestro pueblo* [Torquemada 1975 [1615]:vol. I, bk. II, ch. II:117]). On another occasion, she again confronts the two men, provoking them to fight and introducing herself with four names, among them, Tzitzimicihuatl ("*tzitzimitl*-woman"). This name specifically associates Quilaztli with Itzpapalotl, whom the *Legend* also classifies as a *tzitzimitl*, whereas Quilaztli's power to transform into an eagle makes her similar to Malinalxochitl. Various scholars (e.g., Mikulska 2008:322–323; Olivier 2004:423) have already noted striking parallelism between these three goddesses. One of them, Graulich (1992:92–95), interpreted the role of Itzpapalotl, Malinalxochitl, and Quilaztli as stopping the movement of masculine, solar Chichimec or Mexica migrants. As cold and aquatic or telluric creatures, these female deities constantly desired the fiery force of *tonalli*, which they devoured, leaving their victims weak, ill, or even dead (López Austin 1984 [1980]:vol. I: 248). All three were also "sisters" of the men, whose vital

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powers they absorbed. We could not anticipate this implication from previously discussed dangerous female spies who always pushed their metaphorical brothers to victory. But did the victims of the *tzitzimime* (plural of *tzitzimitl*), immobile or dead as they were, really fail? A story that begins with "Xiuhnel and Mimich went hunting in the desert" and concludes with "Mimich shot and burned Itzpapalotl" does look like a tale of revenge on a femme fatale. However, if we decided to extract a more significant chunk from the *Legend of the Suns*, the focus would change, and the male god would turn out victorious.

Let us, then, backtrack a little in the story told by the *Legend of the Suns*. The document describes how the 400 Mimixcoa—explicitly created, as it appears, to feed the Sun by sacrificing jaguars—fail to fulfill their task. Instead of working as dutiful priests, they spend their time sleeping with women and getting drunk. They are wasting the fiery essence needed to keep the world in motion. The system does not work; someone else must take over the responsibility. Five other Mimixcoa (including one named Mixcoatl), born later by the same mother as the 400, attack the idlers, kill them, and are finally able to feed the Sun properly. Among the few Mimixcoa survivors are Xiuhnel and Mimich; the former soon gives his vital force away to Itzpapalotl (Bierhorst 2011 [1992]:92–93).

The *Anales de Cuauhtitlan* offers another version of the same story. Here, the 400 Mimixcoa are leading the Chichimec, who have just emerged from their place of origin. On their way, they encounter Itzpapalotl, who rushes toward them and eats all the 400 save for the White Mixcoatl, who escapes inside a barrel cactus. In both sources, therefore, Itzpapalotl incorporates the vital force of one or more Mimixcoa. At this point, the story in the *Anales* begins to run even more parallel to the text of the *Legend*. When Itzpapalotl seizes the cactus, Mixcoatl (in the *Legend of the Suns*, Mimich) jumps out of it and shoots her with arrows. He then calls to the dead Mimixcoa (in the *Legend of the Suns*, the lords of fire) for help, and together they burn her. Both sources now mention the creation of a *tlaquimilolli*. In Molly Bassett's words (2015:178), *tlaquimilolli* were artifacts that "bundled the complete set of things that composed the deity's transfigured body." They were relics of patron-gods, through which the deities protected the *altepetl*, securing the existence of their people and granting them, among other things, success on the battlefield (López Austin 1989 [1973]:58–59). Many Nahua sacred stories tell us of how, in times of origin, various gods and goddesses died and how their wrapped-up remains formed force-filled bundles. The *Legend of the Suns* is no different. Here, Mixcoatl takes one of the five flints that emerge from Itzpapalotl's funeral pyre and wraps it up (Bierhorst 2011 [1992]:3, 93; cf. Bassett 2015:174–176). In this way, the force possessed initially by the Mixcoa returns, via their "sister," Itzpapalotl, to the god Mixcoatl, who then carries the *tlaquimilolli* into battle as a "weapon" that grants him victory.

Similarly, the force of the Mexica and their god Huitzilopochtli, first absorbed by Malinalxochitl, then returned to them in the heart of the goddess's son, Copil. The young man, conceived when still on the road, grows up to seek revenge on Huitzilopochtli for abandoning his mother. However, the result of the fight with the invincible god of the Mexica is easy to predict: Copil dies. Huitzilopochtli cuts off his head and rips his heart out of his chest. By the god's order, one of his priests throws the heart among the sedges and reeds (Alvarado Tezozomoc 2001:55–58; Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin and Alvarado Tezozomoc 1997:76–89). Many years later, it sprouts, and when the Mexica come looking for a place to build Tenochtitlan, they see a famous scene of an eagle devouring a snake while sitting on the *tenochtli* cactus that has grown from Copil's heart (Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin and Alvarado Tezozomoc 1997:103). Consequently, the vital strength of Huitzilopochtli, unwillingly given away to Malinalxochitl during the migration stage, becomes the foundation for the sedentary *altepetl* of the Mexica.

To this corpus of stories, in which gods' "sisters" act as mediators who carry the sacred force of their divine "brothers" (or the *altepetl* of the "brothers"), we can add yet another one: the story about the birth of Huitzilopochtli. One of its versions is recorded in the monumental *Florentine Codex*, put together by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún in the years 1578–1579 from the materials written by his Nahua collaborators over the span of 30 years (Sahagún 1950–1982:vol. 1, pp. 10–15). The event occurs on the mountain of Coatepec, where the goddess Coatlicue lives with her sons, the 400 Huitznahua, and their sister (*inhueltiuh*), Coyolxauhqui. One day, when Coatlicue is sweeping, a ball of feathers falls on her and impregnates her. Her children are not happy about this; driven by shame, they decide to kill their mother. They do not know that she is not carrying an ordinary baby. Although still in Coatlicue's womb, Huitzilopochtli communicates with his ally, who informs him about every move of the 400 led by Coyolxauhqui. Finally, when the 400 come close, the mighty god emerges, all grown up, fully armed, and prepared for war. He pierces Coyolxauhqui with his fiery weapon—the *xiuhcoatl* (fire serpent)—cuts off her head, and pushes her down to the feet of Coatepec, where her body smashes into pieces. Then, in a ferocious battle, he massacres the Huitznahua, of whom only a few escape death, and appropriates their attire (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 3, ch. 1, pp. 1–5). In another version of this story, offered by the *Crónica Mexicayotl*, Huitzilopochtli eats the hearts of both the Huitznahua and Coyolxauhqui, who, in this text, is Huitzilopochtli's mother, but still the sister of the 400 (Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin and Alvarado Tezozomoc 1997:82).

The story, as told by the *Florentine Codex* and the *Crónica Mexicayotl*, contains many familiar tropes. It revolves around three main characters (one of them multiplied): the 400, the male deity related to them, and the goddess he defeats. As Cecelia Klein (1994:227) argues, the death of Coyolxauhqui at the hands of Huitzilopochtli symbolized the political success of the Mexica. This victory, as in all the above-discussed examples, brings the masculine god even more power because he appropriates the vital strength of his opponent. In the story about Malinalxochitl, Huitzilopochtli does this by providing his *altepetl* with the heart of his "sister's" son. In contrast, in the story about Coyolxauhqui, he either

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eats the hearts of his enemies or takes over their attire (the Nahua believed that the garments of rulers and deities—like their hearts—contained their *tonalli* [Olko 2014:314]). Some authors (Castañeda de la Paz 2005:195; Graulich 1992:89–94; Johansson 1999:92–96) have proposed that the narratives about the god Mixcoatl represent an ancient "Chichimec" corpus that the Mexica later reinterpreted, substituting Huitzilopochtli for the god of hunting but keeping some key elements almost intact. Therefore, even though the sister (and maybe also "sister") of the Huitznahua, Coyolxauhqui, did not suck the vital strength out of her "brothers'" veins as did the "sister" of the Mixcoa, Itzpapalotl, the grand finale is the same for all the unfortunate siblings. The male god always incorporates the force of the 400 and their "sister." In the story of Huitzilopochtli's birth, Coyolxauhqui may not eat or seduce her "brothers." Still, she implicitly fulfills the same mediating role as Itzpapalotl or Malinalxochitl in the other accounts, temporarily carrying the force of her "brothers."

## Or was Quetzalpetlatl just a seducer?

The final example that sheds light on Quetzalpetlatl and other Nahua "sisters" is a story about the origins of scorpions featuring Xochiquetzal—the beautiful goddess of flowers, fertility, and carnal love. Once upon a time, there was a man named Yappan, who wished to change into a scorpion and become so powerful that he could kill with his sting. To make this happen, he started to observe *nezahualiztli* (abstinence) (Ruiz de Alarcón 1987:206), a Nahua ritual that put people into a liminal state, making them physically similar to otherworldly beings. Because *nezahualiztli* allowed for contact with the time-space of origin—the source of all creative potential—people typically observed it during transformation-focused rites of passage (Madajczak 2024). Acting in line with the usual practice, Yappan went into seclusion and dutifully abstained from sexual relations. The person who accompanied him in his efforts was a guard named Yaotl, bearing one of the names often used for the god Tezcatlipoca. Although Ruiz de Alarcón, who wrote this story down, does not suggest this overtly, we can presume that this guard did not really support his protégé and that he only stood by his side to do his job as a trickster by messing around with Yappan's plan. Be it by the intervention of Yaotl or some other circumstances, women started to visit the secluded rock where Yappan was trying to live in chastity (to use Ruiz de Alarcón's Christian term—one of several with which this author rewrites a story told to him by his Indigenous parishioners). When he resisted the temptation, two goddesses, who feared the power this man would get if he changed into a scorpion, sent Xochiquetzal to him. She arrived at the rock and said, "My brother, Yappan, I have come. I am your sister (*nimohueltiuh*) I am Xochiquetzal" (Ruiz de Alarcón 1987:204). If the scorpion-to-be had known the story about Xiuhnel and Itzpapalotl, he would have probably been long gone before Xochiquetzal finished saying "sister." Unfortunately for him, he decided to stay. Like Itzpapalotl, Xochiquetzal climbed on top of him, and although she did not rip his heart out, she managed to break his *nezahualiztli* before it could bring the desired results. Right after the moment of sexual pleasure, Yaotl, who witnessed it, carried out the transformation by cutting off Yappan's head. Yappan became a scorpion, but at the same time, he failed: he would never be able to kill people (Ruiz de Alarcón 1987:204–205).

Xochiquetzal descended to Yappan like a proper *tzitzimitl* (Szoblik 2020:339). She came from the sky, as we might guess by the identity of one of the goddesses who sent her, Citlalcueye, identified by Ruiz de Alarcón as the Milky Way (the other goddess was Chalchiuhcueye, Water) (Ruiz de Alarcón 1987:204). Possibly, Tezcatlipoca also played some part in the plot. In another story, included in the sixteenth-century *Relación de Meztitlan* , this god helped people in a parallel way: debilitating the effects of alcohol by sacrificing its deity, Ome Tochtli (Olivier 2004:223). Yappan's adventure with Xochiquetzal, as told by Ruiz de Alarcón, contains many hints that point to the scorpion's loss of strength as the narrative's focus. Not only does he fail to complete his abstinence period, but the failure consists of engaging in sex with a *tzitzimitl*-like goddess and with her on top—precisely like the unfortunate Xiuhnel of the *Legend of the Suns*. As we already know, such carelessness ends with the life force abandoning the man's body. Finally, the text calls Xochiquetzal "Yappan's sister," activating a broad spectrum of associations, which, in this context, must lead to a toothed-vagina masculine-force-incorporating model of femininity. In the corresponding curing ritual, the physician identifies himself with Xochiquetzal and simulates sex with the patient, covering them with a garment (Ruiz de Alarcón 1987:207–208; Sigal 2011:8). In this way, the physician reenacts the origin story, "reminding" the poison that it cannot kill because its powers have once and for all been deactivated (Ruiz de Alarcón 1987:300–302). Once again, a hungry "sister" leaves her "brother" weak and incapacitated.

## "Man's sister": A model

Various "sisters" (*hueltihuan*) have paraded through this article. The "sisters" of either an *altepetl* or its ruler were princesses sent by a less important city-state to marry a powerful *tlatoani*, which provided an opportunity for a profitable alliance. The examples of the anonymous princess of Cuauhtitlan and Chalchiuhnene of Tlatelolco show that they could also act as spies during the war. Nahuatl texts describe how the Cuauhtitlan lady and Chalchiuhnene of Tlatelolco symbolically or magically destroyed their royal husbands and these rulers' *altepetl*. To grant their own people victory, the former set the main temple of sieged Toltitlan on fire, and the latter devoured the masculine strength of the Tlatelolcan ruler Moquihuix. The "toothed vagina" of Chalchiuhnene of Tlatelolco introduced yet another kind of "sister." While female spies established contact between two *altepetl* for the benefit of their metaphorical brothers, monstrous heart-eating goddesses also acted as mediators but destroyed their divine "brothers" in the process. Xiuhnel, related to the god Mixcoatl, had to die

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956536124000129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

so that Mixcoatl could subsequently fabricate a sacred bundle of the remains of Xiuhnel's "sister," Itzpapalotl. In the same vein, Huitzilopochtli's "sister," Malinalxochitl, first sucked the blood out of Huitzilopochtli's people, the Mexica, before Huitzilopochtli could use her son's heart to set the foundation for the city of Tenochtitlan. The final mediator was Xochiquetzal, the "sister" of Yappan, sent to him by goddesses who wanted to debilitate him. She fulfilled the task, bringing destruction to Yappan the scorpion by canceling his abstinence. Spies, toothed-vagina females, heart eaters, and damaging seducers. In Nahuatl texts, all these characters received the "sister" (*hueltiuh*) label. So, what did it mean to be a "man's sister" (*hueltiuh*) in the metaphorical language of the Nahua?

Cognitive linguistics provides a helpful tool to answer this question. In the book *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, George Lakoff (1987:74–76). explained how the cognitive approach differed from the insight offered by the classical theory of classification. This theory, which had also worked its way to cultural anthropology, especially structuralism, stated that people classified items as belonging to the same class based on a shared characteristic (e.g., Douglas 1999 [1975]). According to the classical approach, we should look for one common feature in metaphorical sisters' relations with their "brothers," which simply does not exist. Instead, the relationship described with the term "sister" has a range of aspects (such as *tonalli* eating, mediation, castration, immobilization, and sexual dominance), which appear in various combinations, depending on the case. Lakoff called this phenomenon a "cluster model" and explained it quite conveniently for a kinship term–oriented study such as this one, using the example of the American concept of "mother." This concept includes several cognitive models of motherhood: giving birth, contributing genetic material, raising the child, being married to the child's father, and being the child's closest female ancestor. When we say "mother," we can refer to any of these models, and usually only through context (or an added epithet) can our audience infer whether we mean "biological mother," "adoptive mother," "surrogate mother," or any other kind of mother. As a result, there is no such thing as one real or primary definition of "mother": all the models function together in the language, and each can serve as a basis to form metaphors. Lakoff (1987:76) gave two examples: the proverb "necessity is the mother of invention" uses the birth model, whereas the derived verb "to mother" arises from the nurturance or raising model. By saying "he wants his girlfriend to mother him," we do not mean that the man wants her to give birth to him (biological mother) or to be his father's wife (stepmother). However, although in this particular context, we refer to taking care of the boyfriend in a specific way, the other cognitive models of "mother" are still there, ready to be employed in the proper situation.

Cognitive linguistics has recently increasingly begun to inspire scholars working with Mesoamerican data. Building on her analysis of modern Nahua rituals, Danièle Dehouve approached Lakoff's cluster models from another angle, focusing on the relationship between two concepts that originated in rhetoric—metaphor and metonymy—but which she understands as cognitive processes. In her view, "metonymy rests on metaphor," while at the same time, "metaphor rests on metonymy" (Danièle Dehouve 2015:52; since then, Dehouve [2022] refined her understanding of metonymy and synecdoche). The latter observation leads to a similar kind of analysis as identifying various cognitive models that feed the complex concept of "mother." Dehouve demonstrated it using the example of the metaphor "man is a lion." To make this metaphor functional, one must first establish the metonymical catalog of lion attributes, such as mane, tail, fangs, courage, and ferocity. Then, one needs to select one or more attributes possessed by the man who is the object of comparison. However, we must be aware that metaphorical and metonymical processes occur only within the conceptual framework available to this particular culture. In other words, although the English-speaking world commonly considers lions courageous (while foxes are treacherous and donkeys are stubborn), these animals may have completely different attributes in other cultures. By the same token, the construction of kinship concepts, such as "mother" and "sister," will rest on different cognitive models, depending on the culture. A striking example is the Western model of the mother as a contributor of genetic material, which could not have existed among the precontact Nahua because they did not know the concept of a "gene."

Recent studies on the central Mexican graphic communication system, employed, among others, in codices, provide an exemplary analysis of a precontact Nahua concept that matches the approach of Lakoff and Dehouve. According to Katarzyna Mikulska (2020:349–353, 379–394), in the divinatory codices, patterns drawn on colored surfaces were signs that carried meaning that was additional to the objects' shape, size, or context. One of her examples is the pattern of red dots on a yellow background. Mikulska identified it in a precontact codex known as *Vaticanus B* on the following items: cut-off flesh or parts of the body, internal organs, flayed skin, bones (or to be exact, remains of rotting flesh on bones), intestines, excrement, flowers, animal beaks and mouths, animal paws, hands, feet, and female breasts. There is no single attribute that all these things have in common. Yet, each of them shares a set of characteristics with several others. Cut-off flesh, bones, internal organs, intestines, and flayed skin (seen from the inside out) lack a protecting cover (skin), so their fleshy, bloody surfaces remain exposed. Perhaps Mesoamericans perceived animal beaks, mouths, and paws in a parallel way: as delicate and skinless. Another attribute shared within the group is stench: flayed skin, excrement, pieces of rotting flesh attached to bones, and flowers emit this. According to the Nahua worldview, the first flowers, created from a piece of flesh ripped off Xochiquetzal's vagina, stank until the lord of the dead took them to his realm (*mictlan*) to wash them. Like flowers, bones, flayed skin, and internal organs were closely associated with the world of the dead, as were cut-off hands and feet, which constituted the food of Mictlantecuhtli, the ruler of *mictlan*. Finally, flowers, similarly to breasts, were parts of the female body, and both contained nectar or milk.

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Mikulska's analysis clearly shows that the graphic sign "red-dots-on-yellow" applied to a group of qualities rather than one uniform *signifié*. Like various models of the American concept of "mother," items described with the red-dots-on-yellow pattern shared some, but not all, of these qualities. Some skinless parts of the body stank; some stinking things belonged to the realm of death; some death-related items were associated with femininity; and so on. A chain of associations informed by culturally conditioned logic allowed the Nahua mind to group beaks, breasts, excrement, and flowers into one category. Obviously, we can safely consider some of the qualities listed here (such as the unpleasant smell of rotting flesh) to have originated in nature or universal human experience. Others, however—such as the association of flowers with stench, female sexual parts, and death—can only be grasped by those familiar with the corpus of Nahua sacred stories (Mikulska 2020:388–394). In the same vein, only through Nahua narratives can we understand the link between various women described as "men's sisters" (*hueltihuan*) and attempt to reconstruct the "cluster model" of *hueltiuh*.

Nahua kinship terminology formed a system, and its systemic aspect filtered into the realm of kinship-based metaphors. The metaphoric usage of the term *hueltiuh* covers only one side of the relationship between men and their sisters. In Nahuatl, a relative is almost always "someone's relative;" in this case, "sisters" have their metaphorical brothers, described with the term *oquichtiuh* ("woman's elder brother or cousin"). The *hueltiuh/oquichtiuh* pair is interesting for several reasons. Both terms have the same unusual morphological construction, in which a morpheme of unknown function, *ti*, stands between the noun root and the possessive suffix *-uh* (cf. Carochi 2001:302, n4). Moreover, Molina (1977 [1571]:vol. II, f. 111v, 157r) and Carochi (2001:302) claim that both *hueltiuh* and *oquichtiuh* refer to relatively older siblings, which the usage of these terms with their primary (i.e., nonmetaphorical) meanings in Nahuatl texts further confirms. However, in the metaphorical register, age relativity seems to disappear. As the *Florentine Codex* suggests, Coyolxauhqui is the Huitznahua's "elder sister" (*inhueltiuh*), while they, at the same time, are her "elder brothers" (*noquichtihuan*) (Sahagún 1950–1982:bk. 3, ch. 1:2). Similarly, Huitzilopochtli is the "elder brother" of his "elder sister," Malinalxochitl, and Yappan is the "elder brother" of his "elder sister," Xochiquetzal (Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin and Alvarado Tezozomoc 1997:84; Ruiz de Alarcón 1987:204). Therefore, the terms *hueltiuh* and *oquichtiuh* are parallel both morphologically and in that they describe two sides of the same metaphorical relationship. *Hueltiuh* is a woman who does her "sisterly" thing to her metaphorical elder brother, whereas *oquichtiuh* is a man who bears the consequences of the "sisterly" behavior. "Sisters" get married, spy, eat hearts, and seduce, whereas "brothers" benefit from their marriages, win wars, die, and give away their force.

We can interpret the Nahua concept of *hueltiuh* as an example of Lakoff's (1987:74–76) cluster model: there are several models of "man's sister" (rulers' wives, spies, heart-eaters, owners of toothed vaginas, and seducers). Some of these models share one or more characteristics with other models, which allows them to be arranged in a chain of logically associated concepts and finally included in the single category of *hueltiuh*. At the same time, what seems to govern the classification of various men as "women's elder brothers" is simply the fact that they are objects of the agency of *hueltihuan*. Also, the metaphorical usage of the term *oquichtiuh* in Nahuatl sources is less frequent than the metaphorical usage of *hueltiuh*. In this pair, the role of an "elder brother" seems to be secondary and passive, unlike that of his "elder sister," who takes the leading role. Consequently, it would be tempting to claim that the metaphorical relationship between *hueltiuh* and *oquichtiuh* opposed traditional Western gender roles. However, if we read the sources carefully, it will become clear that at least some of the "brothers" mentioned in this article were not that passive: political elites actively planned the marriages of their "sisters" to establish desired alliances. In the otherworld or othertime, gods used their *hueltihuan* as vehicles that helped the sacred force circulate. Although men often inspired the actions of their "sisters," and women acted as mediators of different kinds, both sides of this metaphorical relationship fulfilled important roles, and positioning them in a hierarchy could result in a degraded understanding of the metaphors *hueltiuh* and *oquichtiuh*.

## Conclusion

It is time to return to the question that started this article's review of the Nahua "sisters" (*hueltihuan*): Who was Quetzalpetlatl? Was she Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl's real sister who tempted him into an incestuous act? Although the *Anales de Cuauhtitlan* does not allude to intimacy between Quetzalpetlatl and Topiltzin, a parallel story by Durán (2006 [1967]:vol. I, ch. I:14) features Xochiquetzal, who visited Tollan's ruler to seduce him. The Nahua story might have, therefore, implied sex—but not incest. A selection of men's metaphorical sisters analyzed in this article makes it clear that Quetzalpetlatl was one of these and not Topiltzin's actual sibling. Her trickster-like mediation between different stages of the sacred past recalls the scary Malinalxochitl and Itzpapalotl of the origin stories and Yappan's Xochiquetzal. There is no doubt that Topiltzin's fault consisted primarily of interrupting his offering and abstinence. The *Anales de Cuauhtitlan* credits the arrival of the "sister" with this neglect of ritual obligations, drawing a close parallel with the origin story of the scorpion, recorded by Ruiz de Alarcón. However, in the case of Topiltzin, the stakes were much higher than the strength of a tiny animal. According to Alfredo López Austin (1989 [1973]:149–150, 182), who analyzed the biography of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl through the concept of *hombre-dios* (man-god), Topiltzin was a living receptacle of the vital force of the people of Tollan—the "heart" of his *altepetl* (García Quintana 1980:65–94; López Austin 1989 [1973]:149–150; Sullivan 1980:225–238). From this point of view, Quetzalpetlatl's intervention threatened Tollan's

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existence and, given that Tollan was the center of the world, the cosmic equilibrium (Carrasco 1982:82–90). Like Itzpapalotl, who ate Xiuhnel's heart, Quetzalpetlatl drained off Topiltzin's force, metaphorically ripping out the "heart" of Tollan and changing the cosmic order. At the turn of the eras, when domination over the universe was about to shift from the god Quetzalcoatl to Tezcatlipoca, Quetzalpetlatl was a toothed-vagina/heart-eater/seducer kind of "sister," stirring the pot (Olivier 2004:480–481).

Unpacking the Nahuatl metaphor of "man's sister" (*hueltiuh*) casts new light on the sexual transgression of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl. We now understand that Tollan did not fall because of incest but because its *tlatoani* broke his obligatory abstinence. It was not sex per se that offended gods—it was the lack of discipline in ritual. Nahua abstinence (*nezahualiztli*) was multifaceted, with sex being just one of several things avoided by those who observed it; others included seasoned food, hair hygiene, social life, clothing, and more (Madajczak 2024). In the case of Topiltzin, indulging in company, sex, and drinking led to breaking his priestly routine, through which he had sustained the world with offerings.

Defining Quetzalpetlatl as Topiltzin's "sister" was a Nahua storyteller's way of adding another sign of the imminent catastrophe to their narrative. A "sister" (*hueltiuh*) is like Chekhov's gun: once the audience spots it on the stage, they know it will fire at some point. When the Nahua audience heard that a "sister" was involved in the plot, they knew a twist was coming: someone would fail or die, a conflict would break out, or a city would fall. These violent acts then inevitably led to a new status quo: the era of Tezcatlipoca, the hegemony of Nezahualcoyotl's Tetzcoco, or the world where a scorpion's bite is curable. It is no accident that "sisters" were often on the move: they descended from the sky (like Itzpapalotl or Xochiquetzal), were sent to an enemy *altepetl*, or were brought to their "brothers" from afar. Their mobility accentuates their role as mediators. By seducing, sacrificing, spying, or inflicting damage through sorcery, "men's sisters" (*hueltihuan*) mediated change.

Recognizing *hueltiuh* as a metaphor has strong implications for our reading of some of the most famous Nahua stories concerned with ruling dynasties and deities. When discussing Chalchiuhnene of Tlatelolco, this article briefly touched on her varying kinship relations with the ruler of Tenochtitlan, Axayacatl. In some versions of the story, she is his daughter, but in others, she is his elder sister. The most influential way of explaining such discrepancies in Nahua genealogies has been Susan Gillespie's (1989) idea about the interchangeability of female kinship roles, such as mother, wife, daughter, and sister. Gillespie (1989:50–55) proposed that the narratives about Tenochtitlan's ruling dynasty were concerned with demonstrating the purity of descent, but because this concept inevitably involved marrying close kin, the stories also needed to deal with the problem of incest. One way for the Nahua authors to do it was to deny incest by splitting the female character into several individuals related differently to the man so that his wife would not be, at the same time, his mother and sister. My analysis of the term "man's elder sister" (*hueltiuh*) offers a concurrent possibility. At least some occurrences of *hueltiuh* that we encounter in old Nahuatl texts may have found their way there because they fit the role performed by the character (or because Nahua and Spanish-colonial authors treated the metaphor as an accurate kin term in their derivative works). Some primary sources chose to follow the genealogies and identify Chalchiuhnene as Axayacatl's daughter. Others, however, reached for a kinship-based metaphor that perfectly punctuated the story's significance: Chalchiuhnene was a toothed-vagina spy sent to the neighboring *altepetl* to shake the balance of the island and consequently mediate the establishment of a new hierarchy between Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco. In brief, some kinship terms that appear in Nahua genealogies may, in fact, be metaphors, making the reconstruction of dynasties harder but clarifying the sense of the recorded histories.

The most striking implication of reading the term *hueltiuh* as a metaphor is a possible reinterpretation of the relations between some Nahua gods. Following her hypothesis on the structural equivalence of female kinship roles in dynastic contexts and seeing "family" connections between gods as a projection of human relationships, Gillespie (1989:61) claimed that "the Aztec gods often appeared in male-female pairs, sometimes as husband-wife, sometimes as brother-sister, since the exact kinship bond was unimportant." Nevertheless, from the analysis presented here, it appears that—to the contrary—the chosen "kinship" term was essential for understanding the story's focus. Moreover, given that at least one Nahua kin term has just proven to appear often as a metaphor, it is, perhaps, a mistake to treat Nahua deities as a projection of a human family. The example of Coyolxauhqui shows that drawing a family tree of the Nahua gods is impossible, even based on one text. *Florentine Codex*'s version of her story identifies Coatlicue as the mother of Coyolxauhqui, the 400 Huitznahua, and Huitzilopochtli; Coyolxauhqui is called the "elder sister" of Huitznahua but not of Huitzilopochtli (technically born after her); and Huitznahua are Coyolxauhqui's elder brothers. Although the metaphorical implications of some Nahuatl kin terms used for deities are yet to be explored, I suggest that these terms may have often clarified the roles gods played in relation to humans and each other. In practice, my hypothesis requires readers of Nahuatl texts to check for a possible metaphorical meaning of each kin term they encounter.

Much of the precontact Nahua tradition has been lost to us, but there are ways to recover more than the sources tell us explicitly. Dismantling hard-to-spot Nahuatl metaphors is one of those ways. "Men's elder sisters" (*hueltiuhuan*) appear in multiple narratives focusing on cosmic or political change. They are female tricksters and mediators who brutally shake up the status quo, forcing a transition from one stage to another. They can be spies, hungry monsters armed with toothed vaginas, drinking companions, seducers, or sorcerers. After they finish their job, the world is never the same.

**Acknowledgments.** This research received funding from the National Science Center of Poland, project No. 2019/33/B/HS3/00528. I first

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956536124000129 Published online by Cambridge University Press

approached the topic of the *hueltiuh* metaphor in my doctoral dissertation; Jerome Offner helped me with his support and valuable comments at that time. Several years later, a brilliant talk by Katarzyna Mikulska inspired me to use Lakoff's method for analyzing my data. I thank both of them immensely. I am also grateful to Agnieszka Brylak, Katarzyna Mikulska, and Katarzyna Szoblik for discussing this research with me countless times and offering insightful comments on the first draft of this article. All errors are obviously my own.

**Competing interests.** The author declares none.

**Data availability statement.** The data that support the findings of this study derive from published historical documents, available at libraries worldwide.

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