

Difficulties in Co-Opting a Complex Sign: Our Lady of Guadalupe as a Site of Semiotic Struggle and Entanglement

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The Cult of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the product of appropriations authored by both the Aztecs and the Roman Catholic Church, has served as a tool of empowerment, dominion, and accommodation. Central to this contested cult is an indigenous reinvention of the Virgin Mary that is simultaneously index, icon, and symbol. This study demonstrates the difficulties in attempting to selectively appropriate the desirable features of such a sign while excluding those deemed undesirable. In attempting to appropriate certain features of the Virgin it deemed desirable, the authors argue, the Church also annexed aspects of the Aztec religious tradition at odds with the teachings of Catholicism. While Catholicism's attempt to co-opt this Virgin extended the influence of the institutional Catholic Church, the authors suggest, it also undermined the integrity of the faith the Church promotes by fostering a form of popular Catholicism contrary to the teachings and practices of orthodox Catholicism. This study is grounded in data obtained through interviews conducted with pilgrims in the vicinity of the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe immediately prior to, during, and after the Virgin's annual feastday (December 12). The authors also draw upon anthropological, historical, and religious studies scholarship to make sense of the pilgrims' beliefs and place them within the broader historical and religious contexts in which they operate.

KEY CONCEPTS Appropriation, Aztecs, Codes, Co-optation, Icon, Index, Polysemy, Roman Catholicism, Signs, Socio-semiotics, Symbol

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In 1519, Hernán Cortés led a small Spanish expeditionary force into the heart of the Aztec Empire. One of the goals of the expedition was the religious conversion of the indigenous peoples of Meso-America.¹ In carrying out this missionary initiative, the Spanish conquistadors seized sites sacred to the Aztecs, destroyed the idols they found, and inserted in their place Christian images they had brought with them from Europe (Gonzalez-Crussi, 1996). The Aztecs did not passively accept the Roman Catholic religion their Spanish conquerors sought to impose upon them, however, nor did they outright reject it. Instead, they actively transformed Catholicism even as they converted to it. The Aztecs did so by appropriating Catholicism's most popular saint, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and giving Her² a new name, a new history, and new religious meanings that responded to their socio-cultural needs and reflected their historical experience. In response to the popularity of this Aztec version of the Virgin, the Church has attempted to co-opt the Virgin and claim Her as its own.

The cult³ that has developed around this reinvented Virgin, commonly referred to as Our Lady of Guadalupe, is a site of on-going semiotic struggle in which elements of Aztec and European, Christian and non-Christian religious and cultural systems meet, mingle, combine, and conflict with one another. It has served as a unifying force and source of empowerment for the diverse peoples of Meso-America (Anzaldua, 1996; Corona, 1996; Guerrero, 1996), a tool of conquest and oppression that exploits those same people (Peterson, 1992; Poole, 1995), and a syncretistic blending that mediates between the traditions of the pre-contact Meso-American Aztec religion and European Catholicism (Bowen, 1998). And, it has provided a context for the continuation of some Aztec religious traditions and for the extension of the Catholic Church's power into the Western Hemisphere, where approximately 512 million of the world's 1 billion nominal Catholics now live (Brunner, 2001).

This study contributes to a growing understanding of how human conceptions and reconceptions of religious entities change over time and from culture to culture. Within the context of Western culture, such studies have examined the social construction – symbolically and rhetorically – of the God of the monotheistic religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (Armstrong, 1993; Miles, 1995); of Jesus (Allen, 1998; Bell, 1983; Pagels, 1979; Pelikan, 1985); of Satan (Pagels, 1995); and of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Pelikan, 1996; Zimdars-Swartz, 1991). The development of such an understanding, we believe, does not diminish the spiritual value or discount the supernatural dimension that such religious entities might possess, but rather enhances our understanding of the human response to, and understanding of, such.

This study demonstrates the difficulties in attempting to selectively appropriate the desirable features of a sign while excluding those deemed undesirable. We suggest that the Church, in attempting to appropriate certain features of the Virgin it deemed desirable, also annexed aspects of the Aztec religious tradition at odds with the teachings of Catholicism. In this way, we argue, the Church's co-optation of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which extended the influence of the institutional Catholic Church, also undermined the very faith that the Church seeks to promote. According to Smith (1995), most examinations of appropriation ignore the potential that the object of appropriation has to influence significantly the agent authoring the appropriation. This potential is the focus of our study. In particular, we examine how the product of co-optation can run counter to its purpose. We begin by explaining the theory and methods used in this study. We then explain how previous Catholic appropriations set

the stage for the Aztec reinvention of the Virgin Mary. Next, we describe how the Aztecs accomplished this reinvention through narrative and we identify the main semiotic features of the Virgin as sign. We go on to describe how the Church co-opted this reinvented Virgin and the consequences of this co-optation. We conclude by pointing out some of the implications of this study and future directions for related research.

THEORY

Socio-semiotics is a field of communication inquiry that focuses upon how meaning is produced, shared, and contested by those who make and use signs (Gottdiener, 1995; Hodge & Kress, 1988). This extension of semiotic theory sees signs as shaped by, and shaping, the socio-cultural worlds to which they belong. For this reason, as Gottdiener (1995) notes, socio-semiotics "takes as its object of analysis the articulation of signs between systems and exo-semiotic processes" (p. 25). In this section, we explain the features of socio-semiotic theory relevant to this study.

Signs

The smallest unit of meaning is the *sign*, defined as anything capable of representing something else (Eco, 1976). According to a typology first developed by Peirce (1991), there are three primary types. *Icons* are signs that are meaningful because of their resemblance to what they represent. *Indices* are meaningful because they have some existential or natural connection with what they represent. *Symbols* acquire meaning through shared cultural convention. The meanings ascribed to icons and indices are relatively fixed. The meanings assigned to symbols, however, are fluid and thus subject to change and contestation. For this reason, Gottdiener (1995) states that they "are not only symbolic expressions but also expressive symbols that are utilized as *tools* to facilitate social processes" (p. 27; emphasis in the original). One means of changing/contesting the meaning of symbols is through the process of appropriation.

Appropriation

As defined by Leeds-Hurwitz (1993), the process of appropriation is "the taking of a sign in use by one culture for use in another culture, giving it new meaning in the process" (p. 168). Appropriation is neither assimilation, which is "the relatively straightforward acquisition of a sign by one culture from another" (p. 168), nor is it a form of syncretism, which "involves the blending of two traditions, so that a whole new set of meanings is formed" (p. 169). Two kinds of appropriation are relevant to this chapter. The first of these, oppositional appropriation, provides marginalized groups a semiotic means of offering resistance to, and commentary upon, the broader socio-cultural processes that affect their lives. The second, co-optation, is a form of appropriation used by a dominant and/or mainstream culture as a means of containing and taming expressions of resistance and opposition. Both forms of appropriation redefine signs. Through appropriation, signs can be made to carry multiple, and even conflicting, meanings (Barthes, 1983; Gottdiener, 1995; Turner, 1967). This polysemy is made possible when conflicting codes are applied to the same sign.

Codes

According to semiotic theory, much of a sign's meaning is derived from its

relationship to other signs. Such relationships are governed by *codes*. As defined by Fiske (1987), "A code is a rule-governed system of signs, whose rules and conventions are shared amongst members of a culture, and which is used to generate and circulate meanings in and for that culture" (p. 4). Codes are comprised, then, of a set of signs and a body of rules that ascribe meaning to those signs and govern their use. The language we use is a good example of a semiotic code. Its vocabulary constitutes the code's content, its grammar the code's set of rules. Through appropriation, a sign is annexed from one code into another. This does not mean, of course, that the sign is divorced from the original code. Instead, it might well be included in, and governed by, both codes. The appropriation by 1970s British punks of the safety pin as an oppositional fashion accessory and form of body adornment (Hebdige, 1979) did not preclude its continued use as a means of securing diapers. Appropriation can be effected through a number of means. Those appropriations that are the focus of this study were brought about via the use of narrative, affirmation, and honorifics, all of which have helped redefine Our Lady of Guadalupe according to the codes of the Aztec and Catholic religious traditions.

METHOD

In charting those appropriations instrumental in the development of the Cult of Our Lady of Guadalupe, we draw upon anthropological, historical, and religious studies scholarship. In exploring how these appropriations continue to shape the religious lives of contemporary Meso-American adherents of the cult, interviews were conducted with pilgrims in the vicinity of the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe immediately prior to, during, and after the Virgin's annual feastday (December 12). In all, six days were spent at the research site. The interviews were conducted by a team of six native Spanish speakers working under the direction of the authors. Two of the interviewers have training and experience in conducting social scientific interviews.⁴ The other four are professionals who conduct field research and interviews for the Mexican television network Televisa.⁵

The research team conducted 41 interviews with 75 pilgrims: 45 men and 30 women. Twelve interviews were conducted with groups of pilgrims, five with couples, and 24 with individuals. The interviews, which averaged from 20 to 30 minutes, were conducted outside the basilica, on the plaza that fronts it, and atop Tepeyac (the hill upon which Juan Diego claimed he experienced his visions). Pilgrims were never interrupted while entering a church or at prayer. Attempts were made to conduct interviews with men and women, young and old, individuals, couples, and groups. Given the crowded, chaotic circumstances under which the research team worked (over 4 million people visited the basilica grounds during festival time when we worked there, 1997), interviewees were chosen as opportunities presented themselves. In order to preserve their privacy, they are referred to by gender/age and not by name.

In conducting interviews, members of the research team followed the interview schedule developed by this study's authors (see Appendix). The questions were designed to elicit information about why pilgrims had come to the shrine; what communicative, social, and religious practices they engaged in prior to and during their visit; and the beliefs driving those practices. The interviewers were encouraged, however, to ask any additional probing questions they deemed necessary to clarify or expand upon answers the pilgrims provided. The interviewers also took notes regarding the conditions under which the interviews were conducted and what

happened during them (e.g., they noted if a pilgrim cried or laughed when answering a question). The interviews were recorded, translated,⁶ and transcribed. The quotes cited in this article are representative and used to illustrate common responses.

At the end of each day, the interviewers and the authors gathered together for a brief, informal discussion of that day's interviewing. Common themes and unexpected findings were identified. This practice allowed for modifications of the questions being asked. For example, in response to numerous heterodox (from the perspective of orthodox Catholicism) answers on the part of pilgrims who identified themselves as Catholics, we added a few additional questions, such as: "What does it mean to be Catholic?" At the conclusion of the interviewing fieldwork, the research team met for a final, formal debriefing. In this meeting, which was recorded and transcribed, the interviewers identified patterns and irregularities they had noticed throughout the interviewing process. In addition to the interviews, the lead author obtained additional material in the form of photographs, fieldnotes,⁷ and videos.

In charting the elements of a semiotic code—its content and rules—one looks for patterns. In examining the English language as a linguistic code, for example, its content would be organized according to shared commonalities. Thus, adjectives would be grouped with other adjectives, nouns with nouns, etc. Observing the patterned use of these verbal signs would allow one to identify the language's rules. In much the same way, we sought to make sense of the religio-semiotic codes that are central to this study. For this reason, our analysis of the pilgrims' interviews was guided by the principles of Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method (see also Charmaz, 1983; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Lindlof, 1995).

Preliminary interpretation and coding of the data collected occurred during the debriefings held at the end of each day in which interviews were conducted. After the completion of the fieldwork, the authors listened to the tapes and read through the transcripts, in whole or in part, numerous times, looking for recurring themes, illustrative stories, counter-examples, and expressions of and insights about the pilgrims' beliefs regarding Our Lady of Guadalupe. The authors initially evaluated the data independently of one another and then later compared their preliminary findings. Any differences were resolved by "clarifying the logic, taking out nonrelevant properties, integrating elaborating details of properties into the major outlines of categories and . . . reduction" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 110). Only toward the end of this process did we consult the literature mentioned earlier as a means making sense of the pilgrims' beliefs and practices and placing them within the broader historical and religious contexts in which they operate.

SETTING THE STAGE

In discussing the myriad madonnas revered by Italian Catholics, Carroll (1992) observes:

While the Church's view may be that the term Mary refers to the single individual who was the Virgin-Mother of Jesus Christ, Italian Catholics clearly worship a range of madonnas. While these different madonnas may indeed be associated vaguely with the official Mary, each madonna nevertheless has a separate identity, and each is the object of distinct cultic devotion. (p. 59)

The development of the Virgin Mary as a sign capable of adaptation to diverse cultural contexts has its origins in the policies and practices of the late-Roman Era Church, which produced multiple madonnas in Italy and throughout the Catholic world. The existence of so many Marys established a precedent for the creation of additional local versions of the Blessed Virgin. This precedent made it possible for the Aztecs to produce their own version of the Virgin within the context of the Catholic Marian code. It also provided a basis for the Church's subsequent attempt to co-opt this new Virgin.

The code has its origins in the Catholic Church's longstanding policy of appropriating the customs of recent and potential converts. This policy was explicitly expressed in a letter written in 601 by Pope Gregory the Great, in which the pope advised Abbot Mellitus how to go about converting the English. Pope Gregory counseled that, whenever possible, the abbot and his fellow missionaries should appropriate places sacred to local peoples and incorporate indigenous religious customs into the institutional practices of the Church (Bede, 1990).⁸ In keeping with Pope Gregory's advice, the missionaries who expanded the sphere of Church influence beyond the boundaries of the old Roman empire replaced local deities with Catholic saints, erected churches on the sites of pre-Christian shrines, and gave Christian meanings to the rituals and symbols of indigenous religions. The missionaries appropriated these indigenous signs and recoded them in Catholic terms. Pope Gregory's advice reflected the successful experience of the Church in Christianizing practices once associated with the non-Christian religious traditions that had flourished within the Roman Empire (Chadwick, 1993). The most popular of these were associated with various mother-goddesses. Partly in response to competition from these cults, and partly from a resigned resignation regarding the long-entrenched local customs associated with them, the Church co-opted their most popular beliefs, images, and rituals and incorporated them into an emerging Cult of Mary, which then subsumed or outright replaced the mother-goddess cults the Church had plundered.

At the same time, these co-optations forced a radical redefinition of the Church's attitude toward, and teachings about, the Virgin Mary. Through the appropriation of titles associated with various mother-goddesses, the Blessed Virgin Mary was redefined as the "Queen of Heaven" and "Mother of God." These titles, and the theology that developed to support them, elevated the Virgin Mary to the top of the Catholic hierarchy of saints. This exalted position contrasts strongly with the scant attention paid Her in the Christian Bible and the general indifference with which the Church had treated Her during the first four centuries of its existence. This fourth century reinvention of the Virgin Mary was not simply a recoding of the Virgin, however; it was an important step in the development of a new Marian code in which She was defined as a powerful and malleable maternal figure. As Roman Catholicism spread, so too did the Cult of Mary. This cult helped make Catholicism attractive to peoples whose indigenous religions possessed potent female deities. Following the precedent established during the late-Roman era, the Cult of Mary absorbed many of the local mother-goddess cults the Church encountered and appropriated their most popular features. As a consequence, the Blessed Virgin Mary was repeatedly reinvented. It was within the context of this adaptable Marian code that the Virgin Mary was reinvented in Central Mexico as Our Lady of Guadalupe.

REINVENTING THE VIRGIN

For those outside the Church's center of power, claiming to have experienced a

Marian apparition has proven to be an effective means of reinventing the Virgin Mary. A Marian apparition is defined as an event in which a seer claims to have had a visionary encounter with the Blessed Virgin Mary. According to Zimdars-Swartz (1991):

An apparition is best understood as a specific kind of vision in which a person or being not normally within the visionary's perceptual range appears to that person, not in a world apart as in a dream, and not as a modification of a concrete object as in the case of a weeping icon or moving statue, but as a part of the environment, without apparent connection to verifiable visual stimuli.
(p. 4)

Among the most famous and influential of the thousands of apparitions reported during the Catholic Church's 2,000 year long history are those Juan Diego claimed to have experienced. This story provided the Aztecs with both a means and a rationale for their own reinvention of the Virgin.

Narrative as a Tool of Appropriation: The Story of Juan Diego

The earliest account of Juan Diego's visions is provided by the *Nican Mopohua*, written in the Aztec language of Nahuatl sometime between 1548 and 1560 (Wahlig, 1997).⁹ In 1531, according to the *Nican Mopohua* (Barber, 1996), a recent Aztec convert to Roman Catholicism, Juan Diego, was traveling home one day when he heard a woman singing atop Tepeyac hill. When he went to investigate, the supernaturally "radiant" woman he found there introduced Herself as the Mother of God. She asked Juan Diego to go to the local bishop and instruct him to build a church for Her atop the hill. Dutifully, Juan Diego went to the bishop, who casually dismissed him and his story. The woman, however, reappeared to Juan Diego and prompted him to prod the bishop. In response to Juan Diego's continued persistence, the bishop asked for some proof of the visions. Again, the woman appeared to Juan Diego. When informed of the bishop's request, She directed him to pick some nearby flowers, which were blooming out-of-season, gather them in his cloak, and take them directly to the bishop. In the presence of the bishop, Juan Diego opened his cloak and the flowers fell out, revealing an image of the woman imprinted miraculously upon the cloak. This image is reputed to be the same one currently displayed at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City.

This story set the pattern for subsequent successful Marian apparitional claims,¹⁰ the key features of which are: an unverifiable vision (or series of visions), the connection of the vision to a specific place, and an innocuous request by the Virgin (e.g., build a church, pray more, repent sins). Nothing in the story challenges core Church teachings. Nor is there an overt challenge to Church authorities. Whether Juan Diego actually experienced the apparitional encounters he reported, or thought he did, is irrelevant to this study. What is relevant is the influence his claims have had. Within a decade after he first reported his visions, 10 million Aztecs and related peoples converted to Catholicism; in the previous decade, there were fewer than a million converts (Father Maximilian, 1997). This rapid and widespread embrace of Catholicism, the fastest and largest unforced conversion in the history of Christianity, was not an embrace of the Catholic Faith *per se*, but rather a conversion to a particular version of the Faith, one associated in the popular mind with the woman of Juan

Diego's visions. In asserting that he had spoken with the Mother of God, Juan Diego claimed for himself – and by extension, for the Aztecs in general – spiritual equality with, and perhaps even superiority to, the Spanish. He did so, however, in a way that simultaneously affirmed and challenged the authority of the Catholic Church. By petitioning the bishop, he publicly acknowledged that prelate's spiritual authority and the authority of the Church. And yet, in claiming visionary encounters with the Mother of God, Juan Diego claimed direct access to the Blessed Virgin through a channel of spiritual communication not under the control of the bishop or the Church.

Visions as a tool of empowerment had been used by female mystics during the Middle Ages who, as Petroff (1994) observes, were regarded by the Church as lacking "the authority, and the authoritative language, to communicate spiritual truths" (p. 13) because they were women. However, by sharing their visionary experiences, Finke (1993) notes, "The women claimed the power to shape the meaning and form of their experiences" (p. 44). Their visions provided them with a supernatural legitimization for speaking out on religious matters. Similarly, the story of Juan Diego's visions provided the Aztecs with the spiritual authority to shape their religious experience in ways that appealed to them and not their European oppressors. Like the women of medieval Europe, the Aztecs lacked direct access to Church power. Juan Diego's alleged visions, however, enabled him to by-pass the Church hierarchy and claim for himself and his people unimpeded access to the Mother of God. This was a brilliant, though perhaps unintentional, rhetorical strategy. Though the Church rarely gives official approval to such visions, it could not outright reject the possibility that Juan Diego might have spoken with the Mother of God since the Church itself teaches that apparitional encounters of this kind do occasionally occur. Moreover, Juan Diego claimed to speak not for himself or for the Aztecs but rather on behalf of the Mother of God. If this claim were true, any request made by the Mother of God had to be taken seriously by the Church, as did the person whom She found worthy enough to serve as Her messenger. In this way, Juan Diego's story legitimized the Virgin of Guadalupe and the development of a cult devoted to Her.

The Virgin that is the focus of this cultic devotion, and of Church attempts to co-opt Her, is a complex sign that is simultaneously index, icon, and symbol. Juan Diego's story provided a narrative rationale for the appropriations that have defined Our Lady of Guadalupe. His story redefined the sacred character of Tepeyac by indexically connecting the hill with an indigenous version of the Mother of God, rather than the imported Virgin that the Spaniards had placed there. The story offered a miraculous explanation that inscribed the image of this Virgin, whose physical features and mode of dress iconically resembled those of the Aztecs and not their conquerors, with special spiritual significance. This same supernatural explanation also legitimized an image with strong symbolic ties to Aztec religious traditions at odds with those of the Church. This semiotic complexity has made the Church's appropriation of the Virgin a difficult one to manage.

The Virgin as Index

The seizure of shrines associated with Aztec deities was a regular feature of the Spanish conquistadors' campaign to convert the Aztecs (Gonzalez-Crussi, 1996). This was in keeping with the policy articulated by Pope Gregory mentioned earlier. One of the shrines the Spanish seized, situated atop a small hill not far from Tenochtitlán (now Mexico City), was devoted to the Aztec mother-goddess Tonantzin. The Spanish

destroyed the idol of Tonantzin they found at the shrine and replaced it with an image of the Virgin Mary they had brought with them from Spain. This imposition of a European version of the Blessed Virgin differed from Church appropriations discussed previously, which had typically incorporated images, rituals, and other features of indigenous mother-goddess cults into the Church's Cult of Mary. With the exception of the seizure of established sacred places, however, the Spanish sought to eradicate all vestiges of the Aztec's indigenous religious traditions.

In claiming he encountered the Mother of God atop Tepeyac, however, Juan Diego redefined the hill's spiritual importance. Tepeyac's sacredness was no longer coded solely in terms of longstanding Aztec tradition, nor was it deemed sacred because of its forced connection with the European Madonna. Instead, the hill was coded as sacred because of a new episode in the spiritual history of the Aztecs: it was the place where the Mother of God had spoken directly to an Aztec. In this way, Her (alleged) presence at Tepeyac indexically connected the hill to Our Lady of Guadalupe in much the same way that a place is connected to an historical personage associated with it (e.g., Waterloo with Napoleon). The Virgin belonged to their land. In this way, Juan Diego provided the Aztecs with justification for exiling the European Virgin the Spanish had placed there and replacing Her with an indigenous Virgin who had more in common with them than with their oppressors. The Virgin's connection to the site has made it the center of Her cult's spiritual geography and a primary destination of devotional pilgrimage. The modern Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe attracts over 20 million pilgrims annually; only the Vatican attracts more Catholic pilgrims ("Marian shrines," 1996).

The Virgin as Icon

Pilgrims visit the basilica not only because of where it is, but also because of what it has. The image of Our Lady of Guadalupe said to have been miraculously imprinted upon Juan Diego's cloak is displayed there. The woman depicted in this image differs from the Virgin the Spaniards had brought with them. She dresses and looks like an Aztec maiden of the early 16th century. She has brown skin, Meso-American features, and is clothed in a turquoise tunic and a rose colored robe. In short, Our Lady of Guadalupe looks like the Aztecs and not like their European oppressors. The iconic resemblance between themselves and the woman depicted in that image was frequently noted by the contemporary Mexican pilgrims interviewed for this study. The following excerpts are typical:

- "She's very beautiful. She's dark-skinned just like us, like a little Indian, like us" (man, late-20s/early-30s);
- "She is dark-skinned. She has long black hair. And Her eyes are brown" (a young woman);
- "She's a vision who is sort of dark-skinned" (man, late-20s/early-30s);
- "She's dark-skinned and She's just beautiful to us" (woman, mid-60s);
- "I guess the main characteristic is that She is dark-skinned" (man, late-30s).

Pilgrims were thoughtful regarding the importance to them of the Virgin's dark skin. When asked what the Virgin looked like, the following pilgrim, a man in his mid-20s, responded:

Well, just the way we see Her: dark-skinned, beautiful, just the way we see Her. There's no other way to see Her. Like the priest says, She represents us. She has to be dark-skinned. She cannot be white, because She represents us.

As expressed by this pilgrim, the Virgin is regarded as being capable of representing his people precisely because She resembles them.

The iconic resemblance of Our Lady of Guadalupe's features also renders Her more approachable to contemporary Meso-Americans than the alien Virgin the Spanish had brought with them. The intimacy fostered by this approachability is evident in the following interview excerpt:

I treat Her as *tu* instead of *usted*¹¹ because, I don't know, it's the way I feel I should talk to Her, in a friendly way, because that's what She is to us, not only a mother but also a friend. (man, late-20s/early-30s)

Another man, in his late-40s, described his close relationship with the Virgin in this way:

I talk with Her as though She were my mother. I tell Her my problems, my needs, anything that crosses my mind. I talk to Her and I ask for help, guidance, for wisdom, because I know She sees me as a son. She is our mother, and so that's how She sees us, and that's why I ask Her for all that guidance and support and protection. (During this portion of the interview, the man was crying.)

In addition to Her connection with and resemblance to the peoples of Meso-America, Our Lady of Guadalupe also incorporates within Her image the symbolic language of their cultural and spiritual ancestors, the Aztecs.

The Virgin as Symbol(ic)

The image of Our Lady of Guadalupe is much more than a mere depiction of the woman Juan Diego claimed to have seen in his visions. It is also a complex collection of floral symbols, astronomical imagery, and other signs that are distinctively Aztec (Ascherman, 1997; Barber, 1997a, 1997b; Castillo, 1996; Gonzalez-Crussi, 1996; Guerrero, 1996). These symbols reinforce the indexical and iconic connections between Our Lady of Guadalupe and Her Meso-American adherents. They also tie the Virgin to the non-Christian religious traditions of the pre-contact Aztecs. In this section, we touch upon only a few of the many Aztec symbols the image contains.

The floral designs that adorn Our Lady of Guadalupe's tunic are symbolic as well as decorative (Barber, 1997a, 1997b; Guerrero, 1996). In accordance with the conventions of Aztec glyphs (standardized pictographic designs used by the Aztecs to convey symbolic meanings) the flowers are rendered with a flatness that allows viewers to see them in full. One of the flowers included in the image, the quincunx, appears only once. It is positioned over the Virgin's womb. According to Barber (1997b), this flower represented:

the four compass directions of the world, with heaven and the underworld vertically encountering earth in the center, in the "navel" of the world, or, to

use the metaphor, in the navel of the moon, as they call the Valley of Mexico.
(p. 72)

The placement of this flower over the woman's womb signifies that She bears an important child who possesses strong ties to the cultural and geographic center of the Meso-American world. That the Virgin is pregnant is also indicated by the black sash She wears around Her waste, an Aztec symbol of pregnancy (Castillo, 1996; Gonzalez-Crussi, 1996). Located just below the sash is another floral symbol, the nagvioli. According to Castillo (1996), this flower "represented Huitzilopochtli, the great ferocious sun god of the Aztecs" (p. xix). Our Lady of Guadalupe is thus symbolically linked to Coatlicue, an aspect of the goddess Tonantzin, who was the mother of Huitzilopochtli. This link acknowledges Her connection with the goddess She is supposed to have supplanted.

Also included among the image's floral imagery are nine large, triangular, heart-shaped flowers—the Mexican magnolia—which were traditionally used to represent the nine levels of the Aztec underworld. In Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, the name for these flowers is *yolloxochitl*. As explained by Barber (1997a), "*Yollotl*, is 'heart' in Nahuatl, and *xochitl*, 'flower'" (p. 76). According to Barber, "*Yolloxochitl* was an Aztec metaphor for the palpitating heart torn from the body of sacrificial victims" (p.76). Human sacrifice played a prominent role in the pre-Christian Aztec religion. Barber goes on to state that *yolloxochitl* can also be "read as another glyph, too: *tepetl*, hill, and precisely, Tepeyac Hill" (p. 76), the hill upon which Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared to Juan Diego and the location of the shrine of Tonantzin that had been appropriated by the Spanish missionaries. This flower, then, ties the Virgin to Tepeyac, the hill's previous pre-Christian tenant, and to ritual practices valued by the Aztecs.

Some of the flowers that adorn the tunic of Our Lady of Guadalupe are connected with the Aztecs' rich astronomical symbolism. According to Barber (1997b), the eight-petaled flowers:

can be identified with a Nahuatl glyph for Venus, the Morning and Evening Star. Venus as Morning Star was associated with their god and culture-hero, Quetzalcoatl, who after his self-immolation was taken up into heaven as the morning star. (p. 73)

(The similarity between the resurrected Jesus proclaimed by Spanish missionaries and their own risen god, Quetzalcoatl, was not lost on the Aztecs.) The image's astronomical symbolism is not limited to flowers that adorn the Virgin's tunic. There are also solar, lunar, and stellar symbols. The most significant of these, with respect to this study, is the crescent moon upon which the Virgin is situated. To the Aztecs, this symbol represented the Valley of Mexico, their geographical, cultural, and spiritual center. According to the conventions of their code, the placement of Our Lady of Guadalupe upon this crescent moon symbolizes that She is rooted in, and has arisen from, their culture, geography, and spiritual traditions. This symbol complements the iconic and indexical connections the Virgin has to the land and peoples of Meso-America.

Except for this lunar symbol, none of the pilgrims interviewed for this study made reference to the Aztec symbols just discussed. Instead, they described beliefs they hold and practices they engage in that were once directly linked to these symbols. These

beliefs and practices – which were transferred to, and are now anchored in, the Virgin as sign – persist in the absence of informed knowledge on the part of contemporary Meso-Americans of the codes that once governed them. This lack of knowledge is similar to that of most contemporary American Christians regarding the fertility cult codes that had once governed such popular customs as the colored eggs and gift-giving bunnies now associated with Easter.

CO-OPTING THE VIRGIN

Understandably, the Church has not been passive regarding Our Lady of Guadalupe and the large cult following She has attracted. Initially, Juan Diego's claims, as well as the beliefs and practices that developed in response to them, were met with much resistance on the part of the Church (Ascheman, 1997). According to Brother Francis Mary (1997), the Franciscan missionaries who were working in central Mexico "were very cautious about supporting any devotion attributed to an Indian [sic] which might be misinterpreted as a carry-over from worship of one of their pagan deities" (p. 173). This caution was echoed by the Vatican. Juan Diego reported his visions in 1531. It was not until 1666, 135 years later, that Church officials in Rome began their investigation. Another 88 years passed before the Vatican, in 1754, deemed Juan Diego's visions worthy of faith. This delayed response illustrates the Church's reluctance to render a positive verdict regarding any apparitional claim. Indeed, of the thousands of Marian apparitions reported during the Church's 2000 year history, only 14 have been deemed worthy of "human faith" by the institutional Church (Horn, 1997).¹² When extended, such recognition provides the Church with a mechanism for co-opting apparitional entities that attract a large and sustained cult following. In defining an apparition as a manifestation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Church annexes the apparitional Virgin into its Marian code and defines Her as a local version of the universal Virgin Mary. For the informed faithful, this definition brings with it a whole theology and set of interpretive apparati that are in accord with the teachings of the Church.

Once it officially affirmed Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Church embraced Her with a great show of public enthusiasm. Over the years, the Church has assigned to Her such honorific titles as Patroness of Latin America and Empress of All the Americas. Her sanctuary has been designated a basilica and attached permanently to the Basilica of St. John. "To appreciate this honor," Brother Francis Mary (1997) explains, "one must realize that the Lateran Basilica is the second most important Catholic Church in the world after St. Peter's in Rome" (p. 174). The full extent of the Church's support for Our Lady of Guadalupe was made clear during a controversy that erupted in the mid-1990s involving the prelate in whose care the Virgin's image and shrine had been placed, Guillermo Schulenburg, the Abbot of the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe (DePalma, 1996). In an interview reported in the Cuernavaca based journal *Ixtus, Espiritu y Cultura*, the abbot "allegedly declared that the apparition was fruit of religious syncretism and that Juan Diego had just been a symbol, therefore questioning his historical existence" (Corona, 1996, p. 23). In contrast to the abbot, who was removed from his post, Pope John Paul II has expressed continued confidence in Juan Diego's historicity and the truth of his claims. In January of 1999, during his fourth visit to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the pope proclaimed Juan Diego a saint (Ortiz, 1999).

In championing Our Lady of Guadalupe through such affirmation and honorifics,

the Church ties itself to Her and—by extension—ties itself to Her adherents, with whom She is iconically and indexically connected. Throughout its history, the Church has deliberately cultivated such ties. In doing so, it emphasized the indexical connection of the universal Church to local places through the promotion of pilgrimage practices that celebrate an event, a saint, or a sacred item closely linked to a pilgrimage site. It has established iconic connections by encouraging artists to depict the Virgin Mary in ways that resemble local people and appeal to their aesthetic sensibility (Pelikan, 1996; Sullivan, 1996). Indeed, the Marian code is indifferent to superficial changes of representation or place. Appropriating local Virgins and defining them in Marian terms serves the proselytizing purpose of the Church. Depicting the Blessed Virgin in different ways and associating Her with different places does not require that the Church change any of its core beliefs or accommodate itself to beliefs that contradict its own. The Church has gone so far as to articulate a theological justification¹³ for these and other local adaptations to, and appropriations from, local cultures (*Catechism*, 2000; Guerrero, 1996).

POPULAR "CATHOLICISM"

It is difficult to selectively appropriate a sign's desirable features while excluding features deemed undesirable. Complex signs cannot be imported from one religious tradition to another divorced from the web of older meanings, related practices, and companion signs with which they had once been associated. These become entangled with the tradition into which they are imported. The Cult of Our Lady of Guadalupe is a mix of traditional Catholicism and non-Christian elements. Such a mixture is characteristic of popular Catholicism. Popular Catholicism is comprised of beliefs and practices that develop outside the Church's core traditions and apart from the rigorous control of Church officials. The Church has sanctioned some expressions of popular Catholic piety, such as the Rosary and the Stations of the Cross. Others are not sanctioned, and some are condemned, because they incorporate indigenous religious traditions at odds with the teaching of the Church. Church policy holds that it is the responsibility of local bishops to purify the popular Catholicism expressed within their dioceses and to bring it into conformance with the beliefs and practices of orthodox Catholicism (*Catechism*, 2000). In practice, however, bishops tend to tolerate a certain amount of heterodoxy. This tolerance reflects Pope Gregory's pragmatic advice regarding how best to deal with the most popular and enduring features of indigenous religious traditions. Bishops who too strictly regulate popular piety run the risk of alienating the faithful and driving them from the Church.

The popular Catholic piety expressed by the pilgrims interviewed for this study reflects a continuation of Aztec religious traditions mixed with the traditions of the Catholic faith. Catholic practices—such as attending Mass, saying the Rosary, and wearing religious medals—are coupled with dances that can be traced back to the pre-contact era. In one such dance, an infant is held aloft in a sacrificial posture. This act recalls the child sacrifices once made at Tepeyac to the goddess Our Lady of Guadalupe is supposed to have displaced, Tonantzin. This displacement, though, has never been complete. For more than a generation after Juan Diego first reported his visionary encounters with the woman atop Tepeyac, Aztec "worshippers called her Tonantzin as well as Guadalupe" (Bowen, 1988, p. 164; see also Anzaldúa, 1996). Vestiges of non-Christian devotion to the Virgin persist. Indeed, two of the pilgrims interviewed for this study explicitly identified themselves as "believers" in Our Lady of Guadalupe

and emphasized that they were not Catholics. (The other pilgrims, however, all defined themselves as Catholic.)

The first Aztec adherents of Our Lady of Guadalupe attributed to Her many of the same titles and traits they had previously attributed to Tonantzin. They defined Our Lady of Guadalupe in accordance with their own mother-goddess traditions. Even as the Aztecs fashioned an approachable version of the Mother of God who resembled them, they also ascribed powers to Her that elevated their version of the Virgin to a position equal to that held by God, whom the Catholic Church has traditionally defined in masculine terms. Unlike appropriations authored by the Church, which were deliberately carried out in accordance with an explicitly defined policy, this continuation of beliefs and practices associated with the indigenous goddess was not done by design; rather, it was the product of long ingrained religious habits continued in the absence of extensive formal training in the Catholic faith. The continuation of these habits defined Our Lady of Guadalupe and provided a mechanism for the incorporation of certain Aztec beliefs within the context of Her cult.

Central to these Aztec beliefs is a dualism that values the feminine as well as the masculine. As explained by Incasa (1997), the Aztecs "worshipped a God of duality – masculine and feminine – the principle of all things" (p. 121; see also Guerrero, 1996; Miller & Swift, 1976). This dualism is explicit in the following description of one pilgrim's prayer life:

The truth is we tend to pray to Her when we are sick; we come to Her. Sometimes we forget Her. But if we are sick, then we quickly come to Her. We also pray to Our Lord Jesus, and we sort of share prayers for both of them. (a man in his late 20s/early-30s)

Another pilgrim, a woman in her mid-30s, described God and Our Lady of Guadalupe as dual providers who complement one another: "I am very grateful to Her, because thanks to God and thanks to Our Lady of Guadalupe, we were able to do the things and to get the things we need in our lives." This view of the Virgin effectively, if not intentionally, raises Her to a position equal to God (who as traditionally conceived by the Catholic Church is thought of in masculine terms)

Indeed, pilgrims ascribed to the Virgin creative and miraculous powers that the Church teaches are possessed by God alone. According to a man in his mid- to late-60s, "And the truth is we just have to be thankful to Her because She gives us life." Seeing Our Lady of Guadalupe as a source of life is yet another vestige of Aztec dualism, which sees creation as the collaborative act of complementary masculine and feminine entities. Another reflection of atavistic Aztec dualism expressed by the pilgrims is the belief that Our Lady of Guadalupe is capable of miraculous intervention. According to one young woman, "We know She makes miracles because we have faith in Her. We know that any problem we have She can make a miracle for us. She can help us. She can be our benefactor." Pilgrims offered numerous accounts of the miraculous things they said the Virgin had done for them: alcoholics found sobriety, sick people became well, unemployed people obtained work. This conception of the Virgin contradicts the teaching of the Church, which holds that only God has the power to suspend or supersede the laws of nature. According to the Church, miracles associated with the Virgin are granted by God through Her intercession (Attwater, 1956). The pilgrims interviewed for this study, however, described Our Lady of Guadalupe as a powerful

benefactor and protector to whom they could turn in time of need, a feminine caregiver who possesses the kind of power the Catholic Church ascribes exclusively to its masculine conception of God. God the Father *and* Our Lady of Guadalupe are seen as creators and providers. In this way, the pilgrims describe a Virgin that is in many ways a reinvention of the very goddess whom She is said to have replaced.

In extending its recognition to Our Lady of Guadalupe, and annexing Her to its larger Marian Cult, the Church did more than tie itself to appealing aspects of Her iconicity and indexicality. It also absorbed associated Aztec beliefs, such as those described above, at odds with the teachings of the Church. This presents special problems for the Church. Unlike Judaism, the Catholic Church actively seeks converts to the faith it proclaims. Indeed, the Church defines its primary mission as missionary (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2000). And, unlike the religious traditions of ancient Rome and modern India, the faith the Church proclaims is not welcoming of additional gods or of new, and sometimes seemingly contradictory, beliefs and practices. In *Dominus Iesus* (2000), the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reiterated the Church's view that, while other religious traditions, Christian and non-Christian, might possess some measure of truth, only the Catholic Church possess the complete truth; and, the Catholic offers the only sure path to salvation. In dialogue with other religions, the document goes on to say, the Church cannot compromise its core beliefs. From the Church's perspective, salvation is tied to its religious beliefs and practices. What the Church seeks to do, then, is to gain and keep adherents who believe and practice what the Church teaches. In using co-optive appropriations as a proselytizing tool, however, the Church risks gaining numerous nominal Catholics who adhere to beliefs and engage in practices at odds with those of the Church. In this way, the Church seeks to extend its power by claiming adherents and resources while at the same time promoting a popular "Catholicism" that is at odds with the very purpose informing the Church's missionary initiatives.

CONCLUSION

We have examined how the product of co-optive appropriation can serve to undermine the appropriation's purpose. We have done so by suggesting that complex signs, such as the Virgin of Guadalupe, can include features that make them a desirable object of co-optation coupled with other features that have the potential to oppose the purpose for which the co-optation was undertaken. We contend that those who manipulate signs are often manipulated by them in turn. Successful co-optations do not always serve the ends of the co-opters. In particular, we have shown how beliefs and practices associated with one aspect of a sign are transferred along with iconic and indexical features.

As we pointed out earlier, the Church has a long history of using appropriations of various kinds as a proselytizing tool. In the past, this use has caused the Church to refine its theology to adjust for such transfers. The Marian code is both a product of, and a means of accomplishing, appropriations from mother-goddess cults. Today, the Catholic Church claims over 114 million adherents in Africa and another 106 million in Asia (Brunner, 2001). As the Church expands beyond its traditional sphere of influence, it will no doubt attempt to appropriate the most popular features of local cults it encounters. In doing so, we suggest, it will strive to increase its potential acceptance by tying itself to these cults' more popular features. And, it will also annex aspects of these cults at odds with the Church's teaching. In dealing with these, the

Church has two options. It can further refine its Marian code, as it did during the fourth century; or, it can practice a tacit toleration, as it does with the more popular of the current Marian cults, such as that of Our Lady of Guadalupe. In either case, the Church will have promoted, or at the very least allowed, a popular Catholicism similar to that which informs the religious lives of the pilgrims we interviewed. Indeed, as Pelikan (1996) points out, it is in the lived experience of such people that appropriations and their consequences are played out.

In this article, we have focused primarily upon the affect that the Church's co-optation of that Virgin has had in promoting a popular Catholicism at odds with orthodox Catholicism. Our treatment of Meso-American appropriation has been necessarily limited. This dimension of the Cult of Our Lady of Guadalupe, however, is deserving of serious and sustained examination. We suggest that those who use appropriation as a means of opposition are also subject to results that run counter to their purpose. It is possible that they too might annex aspects of the system they are resisting even as they attempt to transform that system through the recoding of its signs. We also suggest that the contrary results of successful appropriations can be found in a wide variety of contexts. The twenty-first century promises to be a time of unprecedented encounters between various cultural, economic, political, religious, and social systems. Many of these encounters will likely involve appropriations and co-optations of complex signs that will eventually prove to undermine the goals of those who make use of them. Examining in these other contexts the process of appropriating a complex sign we have outlined will add to the understanding of that process.

NOTES

¹As articulated by a soldier who accompanied Cortés (Díaz, 1963; original work, 16th century).

²Though not insisted upon by the Church or scholarly convention, we capitalize the pronouns used to refer to Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Blessed Virgin Mary out of respect for adherents of the Virgin's cult, who often do so.

³Our use of the term "cult" conforms to the conventional usage of the term in anthropological and theological literature to denote a complex of beliefs and ritual practices that has a particular focus. Within Catholicism, such foci include devotions to Mary, to local and universal saints, etc. This usage differs from the popular use of "cult," which has a negative connotation.

⁴Rafael Obregon (Ph.D., Pennsylvania State University) and Yolanda Uresti (M.A., Ohio University).

⁵Carmen Rosiles Arrendondo, Jannet Velencia Flores, Veronica Mondragon, and Marissa Hernandez Perez. Their time was made available for this study through the generosity of Heriberto Lopez of Televisa.

⁶The interviews were translated into English by Rafael Obregon, who was one of the interviewers. Having only one translator helped to ensure a uniform consistency in the quality of the translations.

⁷These were written during time spent at the research site (which averaged ten hours per day). Each evening, additional notes were made regarding the day's events.

⁸Included in Bede's (1990) *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. The letter was written in 601; Bede's *History* in 731.

⁹Authorship of the Nican Mopohua is traditionally ascribed to Antonio Valeriano, a well-educated Aztec nobleman, who recorded the facts as he knew them less than a generation after the visions were said to have occurred (Wahlig, 1997). Some scholars question Valeriano's

authorship (Poole, 1995).

¹⁰Such as those associated with Lourdes, France and Fatima, Portugal.

¹¹In Spanish, *tu* is the familiar form of you, *usted* the formal. *Tu* connotes a close relationship and is frequently used with friends; *usted* emphasizes social distance.

¹²According to Boucher (1994), the Church uses the following criteria to evaluate the worthiness of apparitions:

- 1) The facts of the case must be free of error.
- 2) The person(s) receiving the messages must be psychologically balanced, honest, moral, sincere, and respectful of church authority.
- 3) Doctrinal errors may not be attributed to God, Our Lady, or a saint.
- 4) Theological and spiritual doctrines must be free of error.
- 5) Moneymaking cannot in any way be involved in the events.
- 6) Healthy religious devotion and spiritual fruits must result, with no evidence of collective outcry or activity. (p. 103)

Another criterion used by the Church, according to Carroll (1992), "is that the apparition experience must have ceased, or at least become something more in the nature of private inspiration" (p. 54).

¹³Inculturation: the theological term for the Roman Catholic belief that the seeds of the Christian Gospel are sown in every culture, for which reason it is manifested differently in different places.

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APPENDIX

Interview Schedule

- 1) Have you been to the basilica?
- 2) Where do you come from?
- 3) Is this your first visit? If no:
 - a) When was your first visit?
 - b) How often do you visit?
- 4) With whom did you come?
- 5) Do you know of any other sites where the Virgin Mary has appeared? If yes:
 - a) How did you learn about these sites?
 - b) Do you honor other apparitions or manifestations of the Blessed Virgin Mary?
 - c) Do you honor other saints?
- 6) Are you Catholic? If no:
 - a) Do you believe in the Virgin?
 - b) What is your belief?
- 7) Why do you have a devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe?
- 8) How did you first learn about Our Lady of Guadalupe?
- 9) Have you talked with any of your friends about Our Lady of Guadalupe? If yes:
 - a) With whom?
 - b) About what?
 - c) When?
 - d) Will you encourage/discourage others to come?
- 10) What kind of relationship do you have with Our Lady of Guadalupe? Possible probes:
 - a) Do you pray to Her?
 - b) If so, how?
 - c) Does She answer your prayers?
 - d) If so, how?
- 11) Do you believe the story that says Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared to Juan Diego?
- 12) What can you tell us about the story?
- 13) What does Our Lady of Guadalupe look like?
- 14) How do you honor Our Lady of Guadalupe at home?
- 15) Do you have a shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe (at home and/or work)?
- 16) Do you feel any connection with the other pilgrims visiting the basilica?
- 17) Did you have a special reason for coming to the basilica today?
- 18) What benefits do you expect to derive from visiting the basilica?
- 19) Was your visit what you expected it would be?
 - a) Why?
 - b) Why not?
- 20) Do you plan to purchase (or have you purchased) any religious articles or souvenirs? If so:
 - a) What?
 - b) Why?
 - c) For whom?
 - d) How do you plan to use them?
- 21) Is there anything else you would like to tell us about Our Lady of Guadalupe?

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