



MONTCLAIR STATE
UNIVERSITY

Montclair State University
**Montclair State University Digital
Commons**

Department of English Faculty Scholarship and
Creative Works

Department of English

Spring 1984

An Aztec "Song of Anguish": The Shape of Performance

Willard Gingerich

Montclair State University, gingerichw@montclair.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/english-facpubs>



Part of the [Indigenous Studies Commons](#)

MSU Digital Commons Citation

Gingerich, Willard, "An Aztec "Song of Anguish": The Shape of Performance" (1984). *Department of English Faculty Scholarship and Creative Works*. 62.

<https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/english-facpubs/62>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at Montclair State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Department of English Faculty Scholarship and Creative Works by an authorized administrator of Montclair State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@montclair.edu.

An Aztec "Song of Anguish": The Shape of Performance

Author(s): WILLARD GINGERICH

Source: *Southwest Review*, SPRING 1984, Vol. 69, No. 2 (SPRING 1984), pp. 201-209

Published by: Southern Methodist University

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/43469642>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Southwest Review*

JSTOR

An Aztec "Song of Anguish":

The Shape of Performance

WILLARD GINGERICH

THE STUDY OF THE PRECOLONIAL and colonial ethnohistorical record of New Spain (now Mexico, Central America, and the western United States) is important to Native American research in North America for two interrelated reasons: first, the textual record of transcription and observation begins there, in the Nahuatl and Spanish language documents of the last three quarters of the sixteenth century, and second, there is such a wealth of it. The role of these documents, therefore, is to provide the only extensive witness we have, outside the archeological record, to authentically pre-Columbian indigenous life in North America and then, through both these earliest documents and the later ones, to provide historical and regional perspective on the oral literary traditions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Native American cultures caught within the westerly flow of Anglo-European "destiny." The so-called Southwest, for example, is southwest of nothing but Boston, New York, and Washington; in the perspective of the other history, the Native ethnohistorical tradition, it lies in a north-south axis whose foci are Tenochtitlan, Tula, Teotihuacán, Paquime, Hawikuh, Chaco Canyon, and Mesa Verde. Diachronic perspective must supplement the many fine synchronic studies of Native American ethnopoetics now available if we are ever to grasp something like the full range and power of Native North American oral technique and tradition. It is, then, in the spirit of these observations that the following brief description of one aspect of Nahua (Aztec) performance practice is offered.

A great deal is known from these colonial records about the performance of oral literary texts among the cities and towns of the central Mexican altiplano around the now-vanished Lake Texcoco. From sources such as Motolinía, Pedro de Gante, Durán, Sahagún, Mendieta, Pomar, Acosta, Clavijero, Hernandez, and others we know that the Nahuas en-

joyed a vastly rich tradition of dance and song in religious, lyrical, and mytho-historical modes. The Nahuatl dictionary of Siméon (1977; derived from Molina, 1571) lists forty-six terms directly derivative from *cuica*, "to sing," including *cuicatlamatiliztli*, "the science of song," or "musical art," and the host of generic and taxonomic terms related to poetic song found scattered through numerous texts testify further to a sophisticated and extensive aesthetic. Robert Stevenson, whose *Music in Aztec and Inca Territory* (1968) is still the basic introduction for any study of Aztec music practice and instrumentation, draws four conclusions from his examination of the musical terminology found in Molina's dictionary (Stevenson, 106-7):

1. The term *cuicatlamatiliztli* was the only Nahuatl word approximating a generic term for music (Stevenson was evidently not familiar with the metaphoric mode of *diphrase*, in old Nahuatl, whereby abstractions were suggested through doubled images: for example, *in xochitl in cuicatl*, "flower, song" or poetry; *in iconemiliztli in nepechtecaliztli*, "the orphan's life, the bowing [of the head]" or humility);
2. There was no single verb meaning *to play an instrument* and no separate noun meaning *player* or *musician*;
3. The language, however, "was immensely rich in specific nouns" related to kinds of song, for example, *tlapitzaualiztli*, "song sung by a soprano," *tecuiqueualiztli*, "song sung to compliment someone," and *tecuicqueualiztli*, "song sung to insult someone," *tecuicatiliztli*, "song given to another," *tozquitl*, "the singing voice," *tlacolcuicatl*, "song of lament," *ontecuicatl*, "duet," *naubtecuicatl*, "organ song," and *tlatlaliqui*, "composer";
4. The Nahuatl language was similarly prolific in verbal designations for specific musical activity: *-yamancacuica*, "sing softly," *-yeccacuica*, "sing finely," *-tlapitza*, "play a flute or other wind instrument," *-mecaueuetzotzona*, "play a stringed instrument," and *-lanquiquizcuica*, "sing while whistling."

Motolinía, particularly in his *Memoriales*, gives us two chapters on dance and music that, because of their date (ca. 1540) and the author's musical training, are invaluable. There were two classes of dance among the Nahuas, he reports, the *netotiliztli*, which "properly means 'dance of joy' by means of which the Indians in their private festivals find solace and take their pleasure, the lords and principal citizens in their houses and weddings" (Motolinía, 386), and the *maceualiztli*, "which properly means 'merit or just desert'. . . . They took this dance to be a work of

{spiritual] merit, as we say one gains merit by one of the works of charity, of penance and the other virtues" (Motolinía, 386). The root of this latter word, *maceual-*, and its derivatives, is extremely complex in Nahuatl, touching on concepts as seemingly diverse as the quality of personal fate determined by the calendrical influences attendant to one's birth, and the name for a common laboring person, *maceualli*; but Motolinía makes it clear that as a generic name it covers all those species of dance which served a fundamentally ritualistic or religious function.

In these [dances] they not only called upon and honored and praised their gods with hymns of the voice, but also with the heart and all the senses of the body, the which to do well they employed many remembrances, in certain shakings of the head, of the arms, and of the feet, so that with the whole body they labored to call and serve the gods (Motolinía, 386).

These *maceualiztli* dances were primarily performed in conjunction with the eighteen "monthly" festivals of the Nahua religious year, often massive occasions at which a thousand and "sometimes more than two thousand" dancers would gather in the plazas of larger towns to dance and sing in perfect harmony and coordination.

When one lowers the left arm and raises the right, so at the same time and in the same beat do all, in such manner that the drums and the song and the dancers all carry their measure in concert: all are in harmony, one differs from the other not a jot, by which those good dancers of Spain who have seen it are greatly amazed, and hold in great esteem the dances of these natives (Motolinía, 385).

The fundamental instruments for these dances were the drums, which were of two types. The first, the *buehuetl*, was a large bass drum usually tall enough to be played by a standing drummer. Motolinía (383) describes the *buehuetl* as "tall and round, thicker than a man, five hands high, hollowed out within and carved and painted without; over the mouth they placed a deerskin, tanned and tightly stretched." The *buehuetl* was always played with the hands. No instrument was more revered and honored in Aztec culture than these large, venerable drums, whose tones accompanied temple rituals and private dance and poetry entertainments alike. The bodies of most *buehuetl* drums were carved

from the trunk of the *abuebuete* tree, though they were sometimes made of oak, walnut, and clay, and one poetic text refers to a gold *buebuetl*, though this is likely figurative. The other principal type of drum, the *teponaztli*, was hollowed from one solid piece of wood approximately two to three feet long and played with rubber-tipped drumsticks against two tongues or keys facing one another along the length of the drum. The *teponaztli* was ordinarily played on a raised stand or held under one arm of the drummer. Durán (290) notes that in many cities the *teponaztli* "was honored as a god, given offerings and made ceremonies as a divine thing." The two wooden tongues of the *teponaztli* were carefully tuned to emit differing pitches, but not always at the same interval.

In museum exemplars studied to date, the tongues emit notes a major second to a fifth apart. Which intervals, however, did the instrument makers prefer? Seconds? Fifths? So far as the fourteen *teponaztlis* tabulated by Castañeda and Mendoza are concerned, minor thirds prove the favorites. Six *teponaztlis* in the group sound this interval, including the instrument reputedly used by the Tlaxcalans when they went into battle with Cortés against the Aztecs. . . . Three each produce the interval of a fifth, and another trio emit major sounds. Only one *teponaztli* emits a major third and only one sounds a perfect fourth (Stevenson, 64).

Sahagún provides the most complete inventory of Aztec instruments in Book 8 of the Florentine Codex, and in the illustration accompanying that text we see, in addition to the two drums and the rubber drum hammers, the ubiquitous *ayacachili* or gourd rattle, the *atecocolli* or conch shell trumpet, flutes, and *omichicahuaztli* or bone rasp, and the *ayotl*, turtle-shell clappers and/or rattles.

Motolinía declares that every nobleman kept his own "chapel" (*capilla*) of singers and composers, Sahagún reports that the ruler of Tenochtitlan maintained a large residence called *Mixcoacalli*, "Twin Cloud House," for his singer-dancers next to his palace (Sahagún, 8:45), and Durán dedicates an entire chapter to the institution of the *cuicacalli* or "House of Song" which was found in all cities: "Nothing was taught there to youths and maidens but singing, dancing, and the playing of musical instruments. Attendance at these schools was so important and the law [requiring attendance] was kept so rigorously that any absence was considered almost a crime of lèse majesté. Special punishments were inflicted on those who failed to attend" (289). With this much attention

dedicated to musical and dance training, it is no wonder that Motolinía was impressed with the almost mystical coordination of a thousand ritual dancers, and no wonder that Sahagún's informants should further declare that "If the singers did something amiss—perchance a *teponaztli* drum or a *buebuetl* drum was out of tune, or perhaps the chanter ruined the song, or the leader ruined the dance—then the ruler commanded that they place in jail whoever had committed the offense; they imprisoned him and he died" (Sahagún, 8:56).

All of this adds up to an impressive and rigorous performance tradition, but how does it affect the structure of any given Nahuatl song? Perhaps what we know and what we do not know about Nahua song structure can best be suggested by outlining one of the most intriguing mysteries of Nahua poetics, the drumming notations of the *Cantares Mexicanos* manuscript. This eighty-five-folio manuscript, now in the Biblioteca Nacional of Mexico City, is the single most extensive edition of Nahuatl lyrical song known. Bearing dates from 1536 to 1597, it appears to be the copy of redactions made largely in the 1550s and 1560s. Incredibly, after a century of critical scrutiny we still cannot always be sure where an individual song begins and ends in the manuscript, but internally it offers three rather sweeping genre divisions into *Eagle, War, or Enemy Songs*, *Spring Songs*, and *Songs of Anguish*, or the *icnocuicatl*—with which I finally arrive at my title. To date no one has claimed to identify a metrical structure for any of these (we do not know for sure, yet, if Nahuatl recognizes anything corresponding to a foot or a line), and they seem to be semantically based forms. All three genres are remarkable for their frequent use of vocables, their repetitive formulaic quality, and their almost complete lack of a narrative line. We do know that they all were sung to instrumental accompaniment because the manuscript frequently supplies brief drumming notations at the opening of each song. For example, on the bottom half of folio 26 verso the introduction reads, "Here begins the *teponaztli* song. TICO, TICO, TOCO, TOTO and going to its end the song TIQUITI TIQUITI TITI." Every notation is made of combinations of these four syllables, TI, TO, QUI, CO, some anonymous scribe's homemade response to the need for performance transcription. Clearly we are being told something about the correlation between the drum and the text, but what?

I know of no Nahuatl scholar who has not at some time meditated

to distraction on the meaning of these innocuous little notations, too consistent and artificial not to harbor some precise intention. Numerous theories have been offered (Garibay, 1953, I, 168-9; Mendoza, 1956; Nowotny, 1956; Stevenson, 1968), none convincingly, and I do not propose to settle the issue here, but will mention briefly two careful and articulate—and mutually exclusive—analyses which have recently come to my attention. Richard Haly, in an unpublished manuscript based largely on studies of contemporary Nahuatl songs, argues that “the drumbeat and basic pitch are the prosodic markers of Classical Nahuatl poetry and the drumbeat and linguistic stress coincide” (10). Using Robinson’s classification of micro-, meso-, and macro-segments within Nahuatl clause structure, Haly identifies the macro-segment as the basic unit of Nahuatl “verse.” The macro-segment is a clustering of one to eight words and sentence-words that function together and take a single strong accent on the penultimate syllable: *in tlapalihuixòchitl on cuepóntoc*, “the colored feather flowers lie blooming there.” Then by setting the TI of the drum notations to correspond to the stressed syllables of the macro-segment clause, Haly claims a correspondence between the individual drumbeats and the linguistic stresses of the verse.

John Bierhorst, whose complete paleograph and translation of the Cantares manuscript is forthcoming from Stanford University Press and certain to be a signal event in ethno poetic studies, proposes a more musical hypothesis. He sets forth as axiomatic two propositions about the drum notations: (1) “the syllables TI, TO, CO, and QUI form a kind of solfège, or vocalise, that corresponds to the cadence of the drum,” and (2) “this vocalise must account for both pitch and rhythm” (124). He further postulates that the vowels *i* and *o* represent the two pitches of the *teponaztli* drum and the consonants *t* and *k* indicate the rhythm in something like the pattern of single-, double-, and triple-tonguing used by woodwind players. From this combination he is able to generate a complex series of notational rules which almost always correspond with the notations actually found in the text. But on the matter of correspondence between drumming and voice, Bierhorst believes “little or nothing can be stated with certainty. . . . It would certainly be difficult, if not impossible, to recite a heterorhythmic chant while beating out one of the metrical cadences described,” and “of the drumming instructions connected with actual songs in the manuscript, none can be safely recommended for self-accompaniment.” His final judgment is that the

chant itself was nonmetrical even though the drum cadences are metrical, and any one-to-one correspondence between drumbeat and linguistic stress is therefore impossible.

Crucial to any discussion of these drum notations is a brief passage on folio 7 recto of the Cantares manuscript, which tells us how the *buebuetl* is played, if only we can translate it right. I am familiar with four widely differing translations of this passage (Garibay, 1953, II, and 1966, II; Stevenson, 1968; Bierhorst, manuscript; Haly, manuscript) and offer the following rather synthetic version of my own:

And thus is the *buebuetl* played: As a verse is ending, and during the verse three TI's (beats) fall. And just in its beginning is one TI. And so it repeats, then it falls in the center of the drum, [and] the hand just continues [playing in the center]. And then three [beats] in the middle [between the center and edge of the drumhead] and again [the hand] comes quickly out to the edge of the drum. Nevertheless, one must see the hands of a singer who knows how to play in this fashion.

Roughly, I take this to mean that each verse unit begins with one high beat, or TI, on the outer edge of the drumhead, moves to the lowest note at the center of the drumhead for the body of the verse, and then closes with three intermediate beats and a final, higher TI again at the drum's edge. Lacking a tape recorder, as Dell Hymes has pointed out, in ethnopoetic studies one needs a theory; but in Nahuatl studies, even with the tightest theory, one must still struggle for a reasonably perceptive translation. My version is buttressed, indeed inspired, by Motolinía's observation that "from the border to the center the *buebuetl* played a perfect fifth, and they played it from one point and note to another, rising and falling, harmonizing and inclining the drum to their songs" (383).

Gathering together, then, the threads of this broad introduction, and braiding them roughly together, leaving unresolved these disputed issues such as what is a "verse" in Nahuatl lyrical song and how many notes can be played on the head of a *buebuetl*, we might say the following about the *icnocuicatl* song found on folio 35 of the Cantares manuscript, a sentimental favorite of mine and attributed in the manuscript to the region of Chalco, on the western slopes of Mt. Popocatepetl. Whatever Heideggerian *dasein* or Baudelairean ennui it may appear to suggest, it was nevertheless performed and probably composed by anonymous

salaried professional singers for the entertainment and diversion of noblemen who hosted the performances in their large private patios and dressed for the occasion in headdresses of quetzal feathers, ear plugs and lip plugs of gold, crystal, or turquoise, collars and arm bands of gold and jade, sandals of ocelot fur, holding feather banners set in gold with which to fan themselves in one hand and scented flowers in the other. Doubtless the singers also danced within that category of dance known as *netotiliztli*, for the solace and comfort of lords in their homes. This song is not, clearly, in honor of any particular festival or deity (though obliquely it praises *Xochipilli*, the god of Dance and Song), so it cannot be for a *maceualiztli* dance. Probably the lounging noblemen chanted along as they smoked and sipped hot chocolate, while the singers bemoaned the suffering labor of all existence, the angst of facing death's oblivion.

How the variable tones of the drum blended with or counterpointed the song in such a performance, we can still only hypothesize. If pushed, I would fall with those who maintain that Nahuatl chant practice would not likely contradict what is known about most other North American chant, namely that the song is nonmetrical in any latinate syllable-counting sense (by either accents or vowel lengths) even though the drumming may be highly metrical.

NAHUATL ICNOCUICATL SONG

From the region of Chalco

I weep, I despair, reminded always that we will leave
the gracious songs, the gracious flowers; let's
now take our pleasure, *ohuaya*, let's now sing our
songs; we all go, we all perish so quickly, *ohuaya*.

Perhaps among us, friends, this is not known? *yehuaya*;
the heart suffers, fills with fury, *yeehuaya*; no
one is born twice, no one is twice a child; only
once do we pass across the earth, *ohuaya*.

May we be, however briefly, within and near the people
here on the earth; never to be again, I will never
know pleasure, I will never know happiness, *ohuaya*.



Where does my heart [my being] live? yehuaya; where is my true house? Where is my true home? I am poor and miserable on this earth, ohuaya.

Are you miserable, heart? yehuaya; do not grieve here over this earth; this was my day-sign [destiny], ohuaya, it was known, ohuiyahue, huixahue, there in the place where my merit was fixed, it was known how I would be made man on the earth, ix xama, ihuiye, ehuaya; so my heart says, true loveliness can be lived nowhere, ohuaya.

What does God [Dios] say? "No one lives truly, no one can endure on this earth," yiao, yiao, ayia, a ayo, ohuaya.

Oaya, I must leave the gracious flowers, aya, I must descend to Quenonamican, huiya, O only a brief time and only borrowed do we have the grace of song.

CANTARES MEXICANOS
Folio 35, recto and verso

While the paragraphing above retains the visual form of the original text, Nahuatl lyrics seem to cluster in non-narrative songs of eight "stanzas" each; therefore, stanza 5 should probably be separated here into two sections.