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### **Bobcat Comics**

#### **Title**

How to Read an Aztec "Comic": Indigenous Knowledge, Mothers' Bodies, and Tamales in the Pot

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# HOW TO READ AN



Indigenous Knowledge,  
Mothers' Bodies &  
Tamales in the Pot

BY  
JORDAN COLLVER  
&

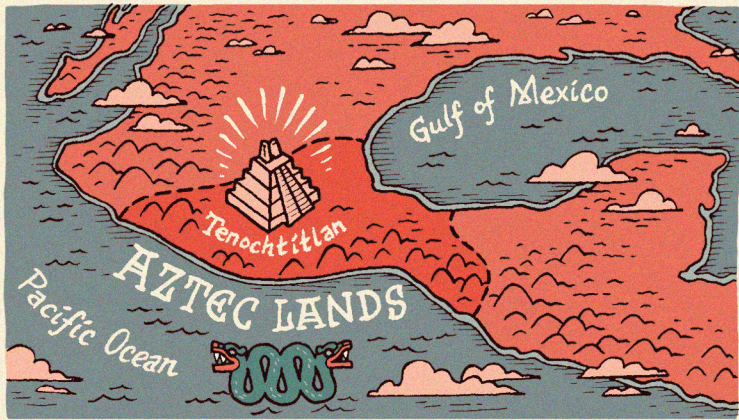
DR. FELICIA RHAPSODY LOPEZ

**BOBCAT COMICS**  
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, MERCED  
CENTER FOR THE HUMANITIES, 2022

CONTENT WARNING: PREGNANCY COMPLICATIONS AND COLONIAL VIOLENCE



**B**EFORE COLONIZATION, MANY INDIGENOUS PEOPLE SUCH AS THE **NAHUA** – THE MOST FAMOUS ARE THOSE WE CALL **AZTECS** TODAY – RECORDED SOPHISTICATED PICTORIAL WRITING SYSTEMS IN ANCIENT MANUSCRIPTS KNOWN AS **CODICES**.



THIS VISUAL LANGUAGE IN MANY WAYS FUNCTIONED LIKE EGYPTIAN HIEROGLYPHS OR SUMERIAN PICTOGRAPHS.

ONLY A HANDFUL OF THESE GLYPHIC TEXTS SURVIVE TODAY. THE SPANISH COLONIZERS DESTROYED THE CODICES BECAUSE THEY PRESERVED INDIGENOUS "PAGAN" BELIEFS.



BY BARRING THE TEACHING OF THEIR WRITTEN LANGUAGES, THE SPANISH EVENTUALLY DESTROYED THE CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE OF **HOW TO READ** THE CODICES AS WELL.



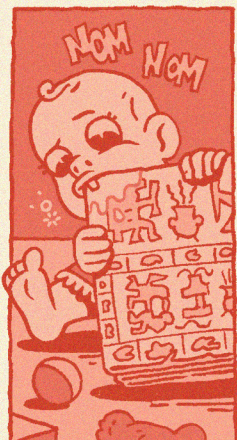
### The **CODIX BORGIA**

Most elaborately illustrated of surviving **PRE-CONTACT GLYPHIC TEXTS**.

One continuous sheet of animal hide folded into 76 pages.

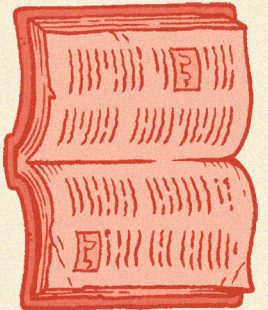
Used for **DIVINATION**, e.g. relationship prognostication according to birthday-based compatibility.

Named after Italian Cardinal **STEFANO BORGIA** who kept it in his "care" until his death. Vatican has it now.



WOMEN WERE NO LONGER ALLOWED TO WRITE TEXTS AT ALL, AND THE MEN WHO **DID** CONTINUE WRITING HAD TO ABANDON THE TRADITIONAL GLYPHS.

THEY STILL WROTE THEIR OWN LANGUAGE, BUT THEY NOW USED **OUR ALPHABET** TO DO IT.



### The **FLORENTINE CODIX**

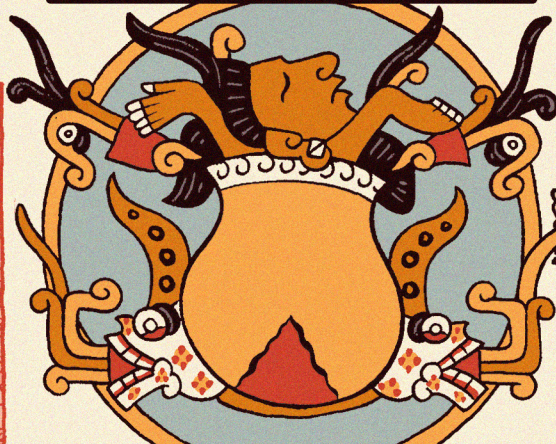
Nahua-authored **POST-CONTACT ALPHABETIC TEXT**.

Written under direction of Franciscan missionary **FRAY BERNARDINO DE SAHAGÚN** shortly after Cortes' invasion of Mexico.

Intended to catalogue Aztec customs... in order to better **CONVERT** all Nahua people.



TO THIS DAY, MANY STILL MISINTERPRET GLYPHIC IMAGES AS MERE REPRESENTATIONS. SO IF IT LOOKS LIKE IT SHOWS VIOLENCE...



...IT IS REGARDED AS EVIDENCE OF A **SAVAGE RITUAL OR TRADITION!**

*Adapted from Codex Borgia p.10 (CB10)*

GOOD HEAVENS, I DARE SAY THEY'RE **COOKING** THAT POOR FELLOW!

IT'S NO WONDER THAT MANY HAVE SEEN THIS PANEL FROM THE **CODIX BORGIA** AND JUMPED TO THE CONCLUSION OF **CANNIBALISM**.

The Indians do many idolatrous things without our understanding it...



BUT THE SYMBOLS MY LITTLE SISTER DRAWS IN A NOTE TO ME ARE NOT EVIDENCE OF GORY HUMAN-ANIMAL SACRIFICE (THAT I KNOW OF). JUST AS THESE IMAGES ARE NOT EVIDENCE OF ANYTHING SINISTER EITHER.

IT'S CHALLENGING TO DECIPHER LOGOGRAMS - WHERE IMAGES REPRESENT ENTIRE WORDS OR PHRASES - WHEN NEARLY ALL TRACES OF THE WRITING SYSTEM AND MUCH OF ITS CULTURAL CONTEXT HAS BEEN DESTROYED.

DR. FELICIA Rhapsody LOPEZ  
Mesoamerican scholar at University of California, Merced

IS THAT... A PEACH? ARE YOU HUNGRY?

AND WHAT MAKES THE CODEX BORGIA SO DIFFICULT TO NAVIGATE IS THAT IT'S ENTIRELY LOGOGRAMS.

FORTUNATELY, WE CAN FIND CLUES TO THE MEANING OF THESE LOGOGRAMS IN THE WORDS OF COLONIAL ALPHABETIC TEXTS.

THIS HELPS US TO LOOK BEYOND THE SURFACE OF THESE IMAGES TO SEE HOW BOTH THE LANGUAGE AND THE IMAGES ARE POETIC.

THE POETIC WAY NAHUA PEOPLE TALKED MAPS OVER TO THE POETRY OF THEIR VISUAL LANGUAGE!

FOR EXAMPLE, A BRIEF PASSAGE IN THE FLORENTINE CODEX (BOOK V) DESCRIBES A NAHUA OMEN...

It is said that if a man would eat the tamales stuck to the side of the pot... his spouse would have difficulty in childbirth. And also, if she would eat the stuck tamales, she would not

be able to deliver. Her baby would only stick inside of her. Because of this, people's mothers used to greatly forbid them, so that the stuck tamales would not be eaten.

THE NAHUA USED THE WORD "COMIC" (CO-MEEK) MEANING "IN THE POT" TO REFER TO THE ABDOMINAL CAVITY.

POT  
"Comic" in Nahuatl  
BELLY

BY BRINGING THESE DIFFERENT FORMS OF WRITING TOGETHER, A NAHUA WORLDVIEW EMERGES THAT IS QUITE DIFFERENT FROM THE PREVAILING INTERPRETATION.

WITH THIS CONNECTION BETWEEN THE COOKING POT AND THE MOTHER'S BODY IN MIND, LET'S TAKE A CLOSER LOOK AT A SCENE SUPPOSEDLY DEPICTING THE COOKING OF HUMAN FLESH...



AHEM!  
MOST OF US  
ARE USED TO  
READING FROM  
THE TOP...

...BUT TO READ AZTEC...

BUT IT'S NOT  
ALL BAD NEWS.  
TURNING AGAIN  
TO THE  
FLORENTINE  
CODEX,  
NEWBORN BABIES  
ARE REPEATEDLY  
CALLED "COZZCATL"  
MEANING PRECIOUS  
NECKLACE OR  
JEWELS.

AND,  
SURE ENOUGH,  
WE FIND JEWELS  
STICKING OUT OF  
POTS IN SCENES  
THROUGHOUT THE  
CODEX BORGIA -  
IN THESE CASES  
INDICATING  
FAVORABLE  
OUTCOMES FOR  
PREGNANCY!



THE "SNAKE & BROKEN POT"  
MOTIF APPEARS THROUGHOUT THE  
CODEX BORGIA, ACCOMPANYING  
SIMILARLY... UNFAVORABLE  
OUTCOMES.

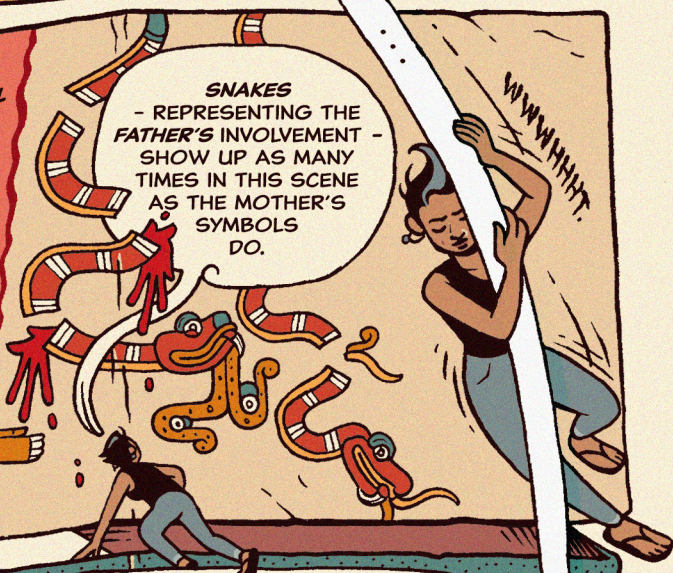
EVIDENTLY BOTH  
PARTNERS ARE EQUAL  
CONTRIBUTORS TO  
THE SUCCESS OF  
THE PREGNANCY.

BUT SNAKES AND  
POTS ALIKE ARE  
BROKEN AND  
BLEEDING.

THE CHILD'S  
EYES ARE  
CLOSED.

SNAKES  
- REPRESENTING THE  
FATHER'S INVOLVEMENT -  
SHOW UP AS MANY  
TIMES IN THIS SCENE  
AS THE MOTHER'S  
SYMBOLS  
DO.

THIS ISN'T  
CANNIBALISM...  
IT'S A TRAGIC  
MOMENT OF  
MISCARRIAGE.



THE FIGURE IS  
CHALCHIUHTLICUE, A GOD-LIKE  
"TEOTL" OF WATER STRONGLY  
CONNECTED WITH CHILDBIRTH.

PEOPLE WOULD PRAY TO HER  
DURING THE MOTHER'S LABOR.  
SHE'S OFTEN SHOWN WITH FERTILE  
WATER FLOWING FROM HER SKIRT.  
IN THIS CASE, SHE'S BESIDE A  
CONTAINER OF WATER - LIKELY  
REPRESENTING AMNIOTIC FLUID.

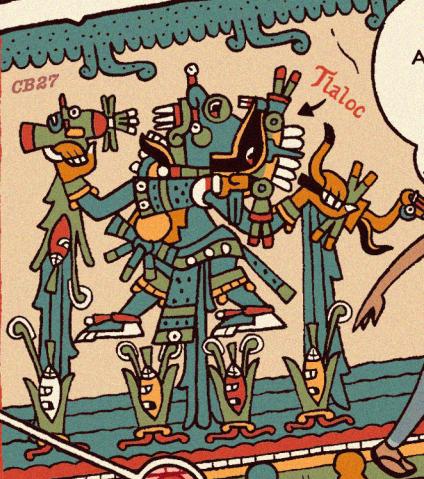
THE SMALL POT-SHAPED SYMBOLS  
SURROUNDING THE "AMNIOTIC SAC"  
ARE THE SAME AS THOSE A FEW PAGES  
LATER IN SOIL THAT TLALOC - TEOTL  
OF RAIN - IS WATERING, CAUSING  
CORN TO GROW.

IT SEEMS  
THE FLOWING  
WATER AND THE  
POT SYMBOLIZE  
FERTILITY!

BUT  
SOMETHING'S  
GONE  
WRONG...

WATERS

THIS  
WAY!



...WE NEED  
TO START  
DOWN  
HERE!

FOLLOW  
ME.

THE FIRST THING WE  
SEE ALONG THE BOTTOM OF  
THE PAGE ARE FIVE "DAY SIGNS"  
ASSOCIATED ELSEWHERE IN THE  
CODEX WITH THE CHIUATETEOH -  
SPIRITS OF WOMEN WHO HAVE  
DIED IN CHILDBIRTH.

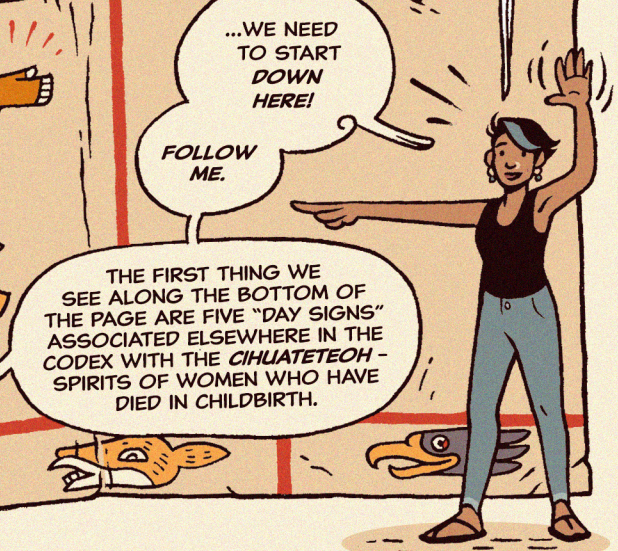
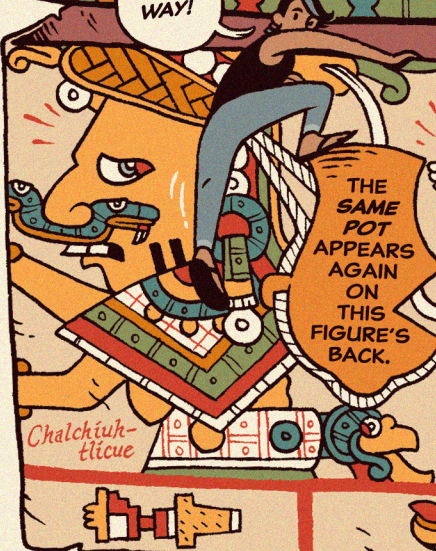
THE  
SAME  
POT  
APPEARS  
AGAIN  
ON  
THIS  
FIGURE'S  
BACK.

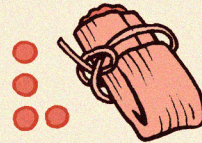
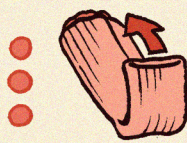
Matching pose...

color

curves

THEN CONSIDER THE STRONG  
VISUAL PARALLELS BETWEEN THE  
WOMAN, POT AND CHILD.





IT'S HARD TO KNOW WHETHER THE LINK BETWEEN THE **STUCK TAMALE** AND THE **STUCK CHILD** WAS PRACTICAL WISDOM BASED ON LIVED EXPERIENCE...



Tlaloc helping corn (as a woman) to grow (roots)

...OR IF IT WAS ROOTED IN THE NAHUA'S PRE-EXISTING BELIEF IN THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS BETWEEN HUMANS AND CORN.

BUT WHILE IT MAY SEEM STRANGE TO OUTSIDERS, IT'S IMPORTANT TO RECOGNIZE THAT THESE WEREN'T MERE "SUPERSTITIONS" AS THE SPANISH THOUGHT, OR ABSTRACT METAPHORS, AS WE MIGHT FRAME THEM. THIS WAS SIMPLY **DIETARY ADVICE**, LIKE WE OFTEN GIVE TODAY.

WHEN WE SAY, "YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT," WE JUST DON'T MEAN IT QUITE SO... **LITERALLY.**



IN FACT, WORDS LIKE "LITERAL" OR "METAPHORICAL" DON'T EVEN **EXIST** IN THE NAHUA LANGUAGE. THE STICKY QUESTION OF **TRANSLATION** IS A CONSTANT CHALLENGE, BECAUSE THE WAY OUR **LANGUAGE** WORKS DICTATES HOW WE **THINK**.



THESE TWO WORDS "MEAN" THE SAME THING, BUT THEIR ASSOCIATIONS ARE **COMPLETELY DIFFERENT.**

Adapted from Codex Tezcatlipoca p.34

SO WE HAVE INDIGENOUS CONCEPTS THAT DON'T NEATLY MAP ONTO OUR MODERN **CLEAN-CUT BINARIES** LIKE LITERAL VS. FIGURATIVE.



INSTEAD, THEIR TRUTH WAS A **MIXTURE** OF OBSERVABLE REALITY AND THINGS WE'D CALL ALLEGORY OR PERSONIFICATION.



BUT BELIEFS ABOUT THE WORLD, IN ANY GIVEN TIME AND PLACE, ARE ALWAYS **SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED.**



AND THE VIEWS AND TRADITIONS THAT OTHERS HELD DEAR WERE JUST AS **VALID** TO THEM AS THE THINGS WE BELIEVE IN OUR CULTURE NOW.



WHAT IS CLEAR IS THAT **CHILDBIRTH** WAS A **SACRED ACT** TO THE AZTECS.

AND AS WOMEN HELD KNOWLEDGE ABOUT BOTH **CHILDBIRTH AND FOOD PREPARATION...**

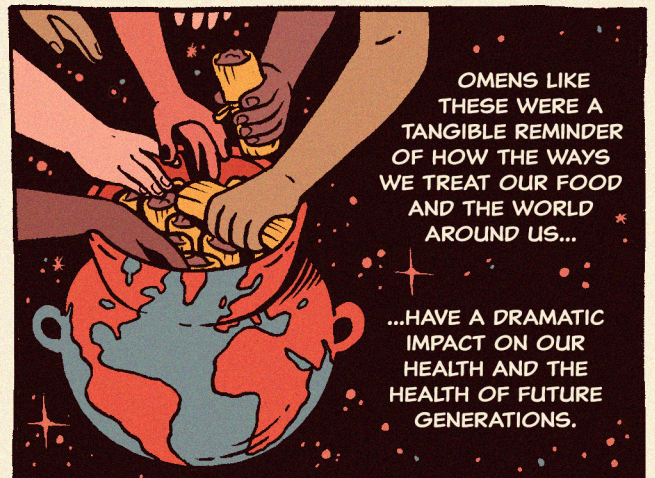


...THE **KNOWLEDGE OF WOMEN** CARRIED WEIGHT WITHIN THEIR COMMUNITIES.

← a blessing

OMENS LIKE THESE WERE A **TANGIBLE REMINDER** OF HOW THE WAYS WE TREAT OUR FOOD AND THE WORLD AROUND US...

...HAVE A **DRAMATIC IMPACT** ON OUR HEALTH AND THE HEALTH OF FUTURE GENERATIONS.



Adapted from Florentine Codex Book V: The Omens



IT TAKES A LOT OF WORK, BUT IT'S SO EXCITING ONCE YOU START TO SEE PATTERNS IN THE VISUAL GRAMMAR OF THE PAGE.

I SPEND ALL DAY JUST READING ANCIENT COMIC BOOKS AND TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHAT THEY SAY!

BUT THIS RESEARCH IS ABOUT MORE THAN JUST THE THRILL OF DECODING ANCIENT GLYPHS.

IT'S ABOUT RECOVERING AND REVIVING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE FROM COLONIAL INTERPRETATIONS.

CHALLENGING THESE (MIS)INTERPRETATIONS MATTERS. THE FALSE PERCEPTION OF AZTECS - AND THEIR DESCENDANTS - AS SAVAGES BLEEDS INTO OUR POPULAR CULTURE, OUR POLITICS...

THIS HAS DEVASTATING EFFECTS. IT MAKES MANY BELIEVE THAT THE CONQUEST WAS JUSTIFIED AND THAT THE EUROPEANS WERE DOING INDIGENOUS AMERICANS A FAVOR.

AND HISTORICAL RACISM...

...AND THE WAY WE TREAT EACH OTHER.

...HAS AN ENORMOUS INFLUENCE ON HOW RACISM LOOKS IN THE MODERN DAY.

CERTAINLY, THERE WERE SOME AZTEC LEADERS WHO WERE MILITARISTIC. YET DESPITE THE WORLD'S MANY RUTHLESS DICTATORS AND PRESIDENTS THROUGHOUT HISTORY...

...MOST ORDINARY PEOPLE DON'T WANT NEEDLESS WAR OR VIOLENCE.

BY BROADENING OUR APPROACH TO PLACE INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE, DOCUMENTS AND TRADITIONS AT THE CENTER...

...WE BROADEN OUR VIEW OF THE MESOAMERICAN PEOPLE AND WAYS OF LIFE!

THESE WERE INTELLIGENT PEOPLE WITH COMPLEX LANGUAGE AND KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS WHO - RATHER THAN BEING INVESTED IN STATE VIOLENCE OR CANNIBALISM...

...WERE DEEPLY INVESTED IN PASSING ON THE KNOWLEDGE THAT WOULD ENSURE THE WELLBEING OF THEIR FAMILIES.



The End