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# Subversive Spirituality: Political Contributions of Ancestral Cosmologies Decolonizing Religious Beliefs

**Abstract:** References to an indigenous spirituality pervade contemporary Meso-american socio-political movements' struggles. Indigenous peoples are preserving and recreating ancient traditions through the sociopolitical changes in which they are immersed. Most of their demands, as well as their criticism of colonialism, are rooted in ancestral cosmologies. A review of the demands and critiques expressed at the key meeting *First Indigenous Women's Summit of the Americas* are analyzed here. Salient philosophical and epistemological underpinnings will be analyzed taking as a source the diverse discourses, live presentations as well as publications emerging from this ground-breaking first indigenous women's meeting in Oaxaca, Mexico.

**Keywords:** gender duality, equilibrium, gender fluidity, embodied thought, collectivity, earth interconnectedness, indigenous spirituality, eco-feminist theology, decolonizing epistemology

The indigenous women's movement has started to propose its own 'indigenous spirituality.' The basic documents, final declarations, and collective proposals from the *First Indigenous Women's Summit of the Americas*, as well as other key meetings, reveal an indigenous spiritual component that differs from the hegemonic influences of the largely Christian, Catholic background of the women's respective countries. The principles of this indigenous spirituality also depart from the more recent influences of feminist and Latin American eco-feminist liberation theologies. The participants' discourses, live presentations, and addresses brought to light other expressions of their religious backgrounds.

Drawing on several years of interaction and work with women in Mexico's indigenous worlds, my intention in this essay is to systematize the principles that have begun to emerge from a distinctive cosmivision and cosmology. Religious references to an indigenous spirituality are inspired by ancestral traditions re-created today as the women struggle for social justice. The inspiration for their fight for social justice is often anchored in these beliefs. They stem from ritual, liturgical, and collective worlds of worship that, though often hidden under Catholic Christian imagery, reflect a significant divergence from Christianity, revealing their epistemic particularity. Working, as some authors have suggested,

from ‘cracks of epistemic differences,’ (Mignolo 2007, 111) I characterize the indigenous women’s movement as undertaking a ‘de-colonial’ effort. These women are actively recapturing ancestral spiritualities in order to decolonize the religious universes they were forced to adopt during the historical colonial enterprise.

The *First Indigenous Women’s Summit of the Americas* was a United Nations meeting that took place in December 2002. It was promoted and organized by a collective of indigenous leaders of international reputation, such as Rigoberta Menchú, Myrna Cunningham, Calixta Gabriel, and other regional indigenous women from communities in the Americas. They were joined by Pauline Tiongia, an elder from a Maori community in New Zealand. The meeting consisted of around 400 indigenous women representing most countries and many indigenous communities.<sup>1</sup> In attendance were women from remote and isolated places such as the delta of the Orinoco River in Venezuela, where there are no roads, and the Amazon River basin. Prior to the summit, the organizers arranged a series of focus groups designed by the *Centro de Estudios e Información de la Mujer Multiétnica* (CEIMM) from the *Universidad de las Regiones Autónomas de la Costa Caribe Nicaraguense* (URACCAN), Nicaragua’s indigenous university. The focus groups’ methodology aimed at bringing together indigenous women representatives of the whole region to foster discussions on five main areas of interest: 1. spirituality, education, and culture; 2. gender from the perspective of indigenous women; 3. leadership, empowerment, and indigenous women participation; 4. indigenous development and globalization; 5. human rights and indigenous rights.

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<sup>1</sup> There are numerous definitions of the term, ‘indigenous.’ To give just a few examples, according to Linita Manu’atu (2000, 80), writing on Tongan and other Pacific islands peoples: ‘Indigenous refers to the First Peoples who settled in Aotearoa (New Zealand), United States, Canada, and so on. Other definitions that have been proposed are Tangata Whenua, First Nations or simply the People’. According to Kay Warren’s writings on Guatemala, ‘indigenous ... is itself, of course, a historical product of European colonialism that masks enormous variations in history, culture, community, and relations with those who are considered non-indigenous’ (Warren 1998, 112). The UN ILO Convention, No. 169, specifies: ‘... indigenous communities, peoples, and nations are those groups who have a continuous history that originates from earlier stages to the presence of the invasion and colonization. Groups that develop in their territories or part of it, and consider themselves different to other sectors of the society that are now dominant. These groups are today subaltern sectors and they are decided to preserve, develop, and transmit to the future generations their ancestral territories and their ethnic identity. These characteristics are fundamental to their existential continuity as peoples, in relationship with their own cultural, social, institutional, and legal systems’ (‘Movimientos étnicos y legislación internacional’, UN. Doc./ICN.41/Sub.2/1989/33 (1989), add.3 §4, in *Rincones de Coyoacan* 5, February-March 1994. UN ILO Convention No. 169).

The selected women were invited to gather and participate in several of these preliminary focus groups around the region. During group interactions, they expressed their own thoughts, perspectives, and experiences concerning spirituality, gender, education, empowerment, development, and their relationships to international funding and cooperation agencies. The groups' discussions, which were transcribed and lightly edited, constituted the basic documents for the summit meeting.

The importance of research led and designed by the same subjects, that is objects, of research inquiry cannot be overemphasized. The asymmetrical power relations between urban women and indigenous peasant women are evident throughout the Latin American continent. It is urban woman who have access to higher education, professional positions, and economic resources. Usually, it is they whose voices, proposals, and projects for research find support. The summit selected its participants from a pool of indigenous women who are political leaders: senators, 'regidoras', congresswomen, heads of social organizations, leaders of political grassroots groups. All these women had many years of experience exercising political and social influence and leadership. The summit offered them a space where they could express their experiences and priorities in their own voices, without the mediations and interpretations of the area's elite and hegemonic institutions. One of the main themes was 'gender from the indigenous women's vision.' This was and is still a debated issue that has sometimes created barriers between mainstream feminism and the indigenous women's movement. I had the privilege of being invited to be one of the few 'non-indigenous' women participants at the meeting and also a consultant for their gender and empowerment documents. The organizers knew of my research on early Mesoamerican cosmology and activist work and expressed the desire to hear the opinion of a feminist who has respect for indigenous cultures.

The theme of indigenous spirituality was transversal and intersected with every other issue addressed at the summit. A study of the documents from the summit, voted on by consensus, reveals the priorities of the contemporary struggles, concerns, and agendas of indigenous groups in the Americas. The documents see 'indigenous spirituality' as origin and motor for the re-creation of collectivities and for the emergence of a new pan-indigenous, collective subject in which women's leadership is emerging and potentially growing, defining women as outspoken, strong, and clear agents for change.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 'Indigenous women of different cultures and civilizations of Abya Yala should not forget they are daughters of the land, the sun, the wind, and fire and their continuous relation with the cosmos element will strengthen their political participation in favor of indigenous women' (*Summit* 2003, 67). '...this process is a joint effort among indigenous women of the different peoples,

The term ‘indigenous women’ had no positive connotations as recently as a few years ago. It had never been used to name a self-constituted identity by the indigenous peoples themselves. Now, as I could observe, it is the token for a collective subjectivity, a social actor that has been created by the indigenous women themselves through their political and spiritual practices.

## 1 The modernity of ancient spirituality

The Latin American continent has long been known as a stronghold of Catholicism. Even today, the Vatican counts Latin America as one of the regions that boast the greatest numbers of Catholics in the world.<sup>3</sup> Among indigenous social movements, claiming the right to develop and define their own spirituality is a novel attitude, yet one that is voiced with increasing intensity.<sup>4</sup> Beyond claiming a right to food and shelter, a decent livelihood, and ownership of their territory and its resources, the indigenous are turning an internal gaze toward their traditional culture. They are also daring to question the most ingrained sequels of Catholic colonization, rejecting the contempt and disdain with which their spirituality, beliefs, and practices are held by the Catholic majority. We will see an example of the mainstream Catholic perspective toward the indigenous peoples in the ‘Message of the Bishops to the Summit’, below.

Despite conflicting perspectives held by scholars and other commentators, the indigenous social movements are the most visible transformational force in the Latin American continent (Gil Olmos 2000a). The indigenous peoples no longer accept the image that was imposed on them from the outside. They want to create their own identity; they refuse to be museum objects. It is not a question of reviving the past. Indigenous cultures are alive, and the only way

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among different generations, including non-indigenous women that support the effort of indigenous women’ (*Summit* 2003, 71). ‘...it is necessary that all women recognize themselves as women at the spiritual level of our bodies, minds, knowledge, and experience’ (*Summit* 2003, 71). ‘Our political participation also requests that we reinforce and we be proud of the cultures of indigenous peoples’ (*Summit* 2003, 67).

**3** During the last 20 years, the percentage of Catholics has been decreasing consistently. In Mexico, we see now that roughly only 82% percent of the population identifies as Catholic in contrast to the 96.5% of two decades ago. The main domain of Catholic believers had been the impoverished and dispossessed of Mexico. Among them stand the 62 distinct indigenous peoples in the country.

**4** This theme resounds around the world with other indigenous peoples. See the Maori claims (Tuhiwai Smith 1999).

for them to survive is to reinvent themselves, recreating their identity while maintaining their differences (Gil Olmos 2000b).

The work of anthropologist Kay Warren offers insights into the genealogy of the pan-indigenous collective subject. What Warren calls the *pan-Mayan collective identity* was forged out of the peoples' need to survive the aggressions of the state in Guatemala. As the distinct ethnic groups were threatened with cultural annihilation, their guides, philosopher-leaders, formulated a collective identity drawn from their inherited oral, mythic, and religious traditions. As Warren explains, the bearers of cultural wisdom began to set forth an 'assertion of a common past which has been suppressed and fragmented by European colonialism and the emergence of modern liberal states. In this view, cultural revitalization reunites the past with the present as a political force' (Warren, Jackson 2002, 11). Whatever the possible explanations for the genesis of this pan-Mayan collective social subject might be, it engenders a political collectivity, and one of its central claims is often based on its own self-defined 'indigenous spirituality.'

As for indigenous women,<sup>5</sup> they are claiming this ancestral wisdom, cosmopolitanism, and spirituality. Theirs is a selective process. Issues within tradition that constrain or hamper their space as women are being contested. Meanwhile, those which have enhanced their position as women within their spiritual ancestral communities are held onto dearly, their survival supported and ensured by the community.

Addressing the Mexican Congress in March 2002, *Comandanta* Esther, a Zapatista leader from the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, expressed the concern of indigenous women in this way: 'I want to explain the situation of women as we live it in our communities ... as girls they think we are not valuable ... as women mistreated ... also women have to carry water, walking two to three hours holding a vessel and a child in their arms' (Marcos 2005a, 103). After speaking of her daily sufferings under indigenous customary law, she added: 'I am not telling you this so you pity us. We have struggled to change this and we will continue doing it' (Marcos 2005a, 103). She was expressing the inevitable struggle for change that indigenous women face, but she was also demanding respect for their agency. They, those directly involved, have to be the ones to lead the process of change. There is no need for pity and still less for instructions from outsiders on how to defend their rights as women. This would be another

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<sup>5</sup> The summit included women originating from most Latin American countries, as we see in the excerpts of their presentations and documents. That also means that we are looking at at least a couple of hundred of ethnic groups/identities. They refer to the region as *Abya Yala*, their own, reclaimed term to refer to 'America'. This multiplicity of ethnic identities at the summit chose to refer to themselves as 'indigenous women'.

form of imposition, however well meant it might be. *Comandanta* Esther's discourse should convince those intellectuals removed from the daily life of indigenous peoples that culture is not monolithic, not static. 'We want recognition for our way of dressing, of talking, of governing, of organizing, of praying, of working collectively, of respecting the earth, of understanding nature as something we are part of' (Marcos 2005a, 103). In consonance with many indigenous women who have raised their voices in recent years, she wants both to transform and to preserve her culture. This is the background of the demands for social justice expressed by indigenous women, against which we must view the declarations and claims for 'indigenous spirituality' that emerged from the *First Indigenous Women's Summit of the Americas*.

Among the thematic resolutions proposed and passed by consensus at the First Summit, the following are particularly emblematic:

We re-evaluate spirituality as the main axis of culture (*Summit* 2003, 61).<sup>6</sup>

The participants of the First Indigenous Women's Summit of the Americas resolve: that spirituality is an indivisible part of the community. It is a cosmic vision of life shared by everyone and wherein all beings are interrelated and complementary in their existence. Spirituality is a search for the equilibrium and harmony within ourselves as well as the other surrounding beings (*Summit* 2003, 60).

We demand of different churches and religions to respect the beliefs and cultures of Indigenous peoples without imposing on us any religious practice that conflicts with our spirituality (*Summit* 2003, 19).

## 2 What does Indigenous spirituality mean?

When I first approached the documents of the summit, I was surprised by the frequent use of the self-elected term *spirituality*. Its meaning in this context is by no means self-evident and hence needs to be decoded. It has little to do with what the word usually means in the Christian traditions, in which I include all denominations. When the indigenous women use the word 'spirituality,' they give it a meaning that clearly sets it apart from Catholic and other Christian tra-

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<sup>6</sup> Quotations from the *Memoria*, the raw materials and transcriptions from focus groups, and documents from the summit vary in translation. Some of the documents are translated into English as part of the document, in which case the Spanish translation of a particular section has a different page number from the English. In some cases, the Spanish was not translated in the documents; this is particularly the case for the position statements, whereas the declarations and plans of actions are often in both Spanish and English in the documents. Unless otherwise noted, I am responsible for all translations.

ditions that arrived in the Americas at the time of the conquest and the ensuing colonization: ‘We indigenous Mexican women ... take our decision to practice freely our spirituality that is different from a religion but in the same manner we respect everyone else’s beliefs’ (*Summit* 2002a, 1).

This stance is strongly influenced by an approach that espouses transnational socio-political practices. Indigenous movements and in particular the women in them are being increasingly exposed to a globalizing world. The presence of a Maori elder at the summit, as well as the frequent participation of Mexican indigenous women in indigenous peoples’ meetings around the world, have favored new attitudes of openness, understanding, and coalition beyond their own traditional cultural boundaries. Through the lens of indigenous spirituality, we can glimpse the cosmivision that pervades the worlds of indigenous women.

### 3 The bishops’ message at the summit and the women’s response

Reports about the summit’s preparatory sessions, combined with the public status of its main organizer, indigenous Nobel Peace Prize laureate Rigoberta Menchú, gained the attention of the Mexican bishops. They apparently feared that the indigenous worlds, which they regard as part of their domain, were getting out of control. Moreover, it was not only the indigenous peoples but the indigenous *women* who were taking the lead and gaining a public presence. There were also rumors about so-called ‘reproductive rights’ being discussed on the summit’s agenda. Catholic authorities spoke out against indigenous agitation. They felt pressed to send a ‘message’ and a warning:

The Summit touches on indigenous peoples’ spirituality, education and culture from perspectives such as traditional knowledge, loss and re-construction of collective and individual identities, and also from indigenous women’s spirituality *from a perspective totally distant from the cultural and spiritual reality of the diverse ethnic groups that form our (sic) indigenous peoples* (*Mensaje* 2002, 2, my emphasis).<sup>7</sup>

This patronizing and discriminatory message was sent to the summit by the *Comisión Episcopal de Indígenas*, the Episcopal Commission for the Indigenous. The message is paternalistic throughout. Its tone is one of admonition of and condescension toward the indigenous ‘subjects.’ It assumes that rationality and truth

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<sup>7</sup> The bishops’ message is a MS given to journalists at the summit. It does not, unfortunately, exist in a printed published format.

are the private domain of bishops. They feel that it is their obligation to lead their immature indigenous women subjects, that is, to teach them, guide them, and scold them when they think they are wrong. The reader gets the sense that, to the bishops, this collectivity of women is dangerously straying from the indigenous peoples as the bishops define them.

The indigenous women's response, *Mensaje de las Mujeres Indígenas Mexicanas a los Monseñores de la Comisión Episcopal de Indígenas* (Summit 2002a) emerged from a collective meeting within the framework of the summit.<sup>8</sup> In this document, the thirty-eight representatives of Mexican indigenous communities expressed their plight in the following words:<sup>9</sup>

Now we can manifest openly our spirituality. Our ancestors were obliged to hide it ... It is evident that evangelization was an imposition and that on top of our temples and ceremonial centers churches were built (Summit 2002a, 1).

We Mexican Indigenous women are adults and we take over our right to practice freely our spirituality that is different from a religion ... we feel that we have the right to our religiosity as indigenous peoples (Summit 2002a, 1–2).

We reconfirm the principles that inspire us to recover and strengthen reciprocity, complementarity, duality, to regain equilibrium (Summit 2002a, 1).

Do not worry, we are analyzing them [the customary law practices that could hamper human rights], because we believe that the light of reason and justice also illuminates us, and certain things should not be permitted (Summit 2002a, 1).

This last sentence makes a veiled reference to centuries of colonial and post-colonial oppression. First the colonizers, and then the modern state, both with the Church's approval, denied the indigenous peoples the qualification of *gente de razón* ('people with the capacity of reason'). Even today, in some parts of Mexico, this qualification is reserved for whites and persons of mixed blood.

As a voluntary, 'only listening' participant of this collectivity of thirty-eight *Mujeres Indígenas Mexicanas*, I paid careful attention to all the discussions. These speakers of several indigenous languages groped for an adequate Spanish wording to convey the ideas sustaining their formal response to the monolingual bishops. At one point, when I was asked directly what I thought about the use of a particular term, I ventured an opinion. After they discussed it, they decided not

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<sup>8</sup> The summit included women from many Latin American countries. The Mexican Indigenous Women's Meeting was exclusively a meeting of Mexican women to which I was invited to participate as a non-indigenous participant, to collectively draft the response to the bishops' message. Only in this meeting was I asked to give opinions and vote as a non-indigenous Mexican woman.

<sup>9</sup> The document was produced collectively after hours of proposals and debate. It was finally agreed on by a consensus vote, the only way to be truly 'democratic' among indigenous peoples. Like the bishops' message, it exists only in MS form and is not published in a wider format.



to go with my suggestion. The significance here is that my opinion was treated not as authoritative, but simply as worthy of consideration as any other. In their own classification, I was a ‘non-indigenous’ supportive feminist. Fortunately, long gone were the days when an urban mestizo university woman could impose an idea or even a word.

The women’s discussions were horizontally collective. The women present represented the majority of the Mexican ethnic communities. Their native languages included Nahuatl, Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Tojolabal, Chol, Zapotec, Mixe, Mazatec, Mixtec, and Purepecha, among others. The gathering was an expression of the new collective subject that is taking the lead in struggles for social justice. Notwithstanding traditional ethnic divides among them, all the women involved chose to emphasize their commonalities and identify themselves as Mexican indigenous women. Despite some language barriers, their discussions of ideas and words have stayed with me. They struggled with Spanish as they forged the language of their text. The editing of the document took all of us into the early hours of the next day. It was finally passed by consensus, in which my vote as ‘non-indigenous’<sup>10</sup> counted as any other, as it should in a consensus building process.

In addition to the constraints posed by the multiplicity of their languages, they expressed the deeply pressing dilemma of having to deal with a religious institution that, in spite of its evangelical roots, has traditionally been misogynistic, as well as, for the most part, culturally and ethnically prejudiced against indigenous worlds. The insistence of the women on being *adults* (*‘las mujeres indígenas mexicanas somos mayores de edad’*) is a response to the assumption implicit in the bishops’ message, namely, that not only women but also indigenous peoples in general are minors and, as such, in need of strict guidance and reprimand. The ecclesiastical message also implies that they, the (male) bishops and archbishops, know better than the indigenous social activists themselves what it means to be ‘indigenous’ in contemporary Mexico.

Considering the cautious reverence paid to Catholic authorities by most Mexicans – whether they are believers or not – the indigenous women’s response is a significant expression of a newly gained spirit of autonomy and self-determination. The women’s declaration, in both tone and content, also speaks of the erosion of the Church’s dominion over indigenous worlds. These poor, unschooled women have shown themselves to be braver and less submissive than some feminist negotiators.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. n. 9, above.

<sup>11</sup> During several UN meetings of the reproductive rights network here in Mexico and in New York, I consistently noticed that many feminist activists, journalists, and academic researchers,

## 4 Decolonizing epistemology

Several authors have argued that decolonizing efforts should be grounded at the epistemological level (Mignolo 2007; Tlostanova 2007; Marcos 2005b). When speaking of the future of feminism, Judith Butler recommends a ‘privileging of epistemology’ as an urgent next step in our commitments. She also reminds us that ‘there is no register for “audibility” referring to the difficulties of reaching out, understanding, and respecting “Other” subaltern epistemic worlds’ (Butler 2004).

The following analysis of some basic characteristics of indigenous spirituality is an invitation to understand it in its own terms. It is an effort toward widening the ‘register for audibility.’ This deepening of understanding will facilitate a less domineering and imposing relationship with women not only in society and politics but also in the spiritual indigenous domains. As an indigenous woman from *Moloj Mayib’*, a political Mayan women’s organization, complained regarding her encounter with feminists:

they question us very much, they insist that we should question our culture ... what we do not accept is their imposition, that they tell us what we have to do, when we have the power to decide by ourselves. (I do not mean) ... that the feminist comes and shares tools with us and we are able to do it: that she could support me, that she can walk by my side ... but she should not impose on me. This is what many feminist women have done, be imposing (Maria Estela Jocón in *Summit* 2003, 274–275).

The opinion of this indigenous woman is confirmed by Gayatri Spivak’s critique of ‘the international feminist tendency to matronize the Southern woman as belonging to gender oppressive second-class cultures’ (Spivak 1999, 407). A decolonial thinking grounded in another epistemological stand is required.

## 5 A world constructed by fluid dual oppositions, beyond mutually exclusive categories

To be able to comprehend contemporary ‘indigenous spirituality’, it is important to review some of the tenets of Mesoamerican ancestral ‘embodied thought’

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though not necessarily Catholic believers, manifested a mix of fear and respectful reverence when in proximity of ecclesiastical garments and other paraphernalia of church officials, which prevented them from effectively negotiating with the Vatican representatives, despite their deep ingrained anti-clerical stand.

which are often referred to in the summit's proceedings (*Summit* 2003; cf. also Marcos 1998).

Duality is the centerpiece of spirituality understood as a cosmic vision of life.<sup>12</sup> Duality – not dualism – is a pervasive perception in indigenous thought and spirituality. The pervasiveness of a perception without equivalent prevalence in Western thought could, perhaps, in itself largely explain the persistent barrier to penetrating and understanding indigenous worlds.

According to Mesoamerican cosmology as present in many narratives today,<sup>13</sup> the dual unity of the feminine and masculine is fundamental to the creation of the cosmos, as well as its (re)generation, and sustenance. The fusion of feminine and masculine in one bi-polar principle is a recurring feature of almost every Mesoamerican community today. Divinities themselves are gendered: feminine and masculine. There is no concept of a virile god (e.g. the image of a man with a white beard as the Christian God has sometimes been represented), but rather a mother/father dual protector-creator. In Nahua culture, this dual god/goddess is called *Ometeotl*, from *ome*, 'two,' and *teotl*, 'god.' Yet *Ometeotl* does not mean 'two gods' but rather 'god Two' or, better, 'divinity of Duality.' The name results from the fusion of *Omecihuatl* (*cihuatl* meaning woman or lady) and *Ometecuhtli* (*tecuhltli*, man or lord), that is, 'of the Lady and of the Lord of Duality'.

The protecting *Ometeotl* has to be alternately placated and sustained. Like all divine beings, it is not conceived as purely beneficial. Rather, it oscillated – like all other dualities – between opposite poles and thus could be supportive or destructive. In addition, a multiplicity of goddesses and gods entered into diverse relations of reciprocity with the people. Elsewhere I have dealt more comprehensively with the gods and goddesses of the Mesoamerican cosmivision (Marcos 2006). Scholars recognize that the religiosity of the entire Mesoamerican region is pregnant with similar symbolic meanings, rituals, and myths concerning the condition of the supernatural beings and the place of humans in the cosmos. One of Mesoamerica's most eminent ethno-historians, Alfredo Lopez Austin, refers to this commonality of perceptions, conceptions, and forms of action as the *núcleo duro*, the 'hard core' of Mesoamerican cultures (Lopez Austin 2001).

Duality, defined as a complementary pairing of opposites, is the essential ordering force of the universe and is also reflected in the ordering of time. Time is

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<sup>12</sup> E.g. '...duality is a very important element in our cosmivision, it is important that duality is inscribed in our spirituality because it is the main axis of our life' (*Summit* 2003, 4).

<sup>13</sup> Many examples of these narratives can be found in *Summit* 2003.

marked by two calendars, one ritual-based and the other astronomical. The ritual calendar is linked to the human gestation cycle, that is, the time needed for a baby to be formed inside the mother's womb. The other is an agricultural calendar that prescribes the periods for cultivating corn. Maize (corn) is conceived of as the earthly matter from which all beings in the universe are made (Marcos 2006). Human gestation and agricultural cycles are understood within this concept of duality, as are feminine and masculine, but dualities extend far beyond these spheres. For instance, life and death, above and below, light and dark, and beneficence and malevolence are considered dual aspects of the same reality. Neither pole invalidates the other. Both are in constant mutual interaction, flowing into one another. Mutually exclusive categories are not part of the epistemic background of this worldview, whose plasticity is still reflected in the way indigenous women deal with life and conflict. These women seldom remain mired in a position that would deny its opposite. Their philosophical background allows them to resist impositions and at the same time to appropriate modern elements into their spirituality. Fluidity and selectivity in adopting novel attitudes and values speak of the ongoing reconfiguration of their world of reference.

The principle of fluid duality has held indigenous worlds together over the centuries. It has been both concealed and protected by its non-intelligibility to outsiders, and the indigenous world has guarded this 'subaltern Other' from inimical incursions into their native philosophical depths. The 'hard core' of indigenous cultures has been a well-kept secret. Even today, among many native communities in the Americas, exposing this concealed background to outsiders is considered a betrayal of the community.<sup>14</sup> It is only recently that the unveiling has started to be done directly by the indigenous women themselves. From my position as an outsider, I felt pressed to seek permission of Nubia, a Tepoztlán Nahua indigenous leader, for whether I could interview her about her beliefs, conception of duality, and ritual in the ceremonies of her village. She accepted but did not allow me to ask my questions without her explicit previous agreement. Presently, indigenous women and men are becoming vocal carriers of their religious and philosophical heritage and have agreed to vocalize their heritage, to share it with the outside world. Only recently have they learned to use, critically and autonomously, whatever knowledge has been collected about

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**14** Inés Talamantes, a Native American Professor of Religious Studies who does ethnography on her own Mescalero Apache culture, once confided to me that she was forbidden by her community to reveal the deep meanings of their ceremonies.

them. The women explained that they want to ‘systematize the oral traditions of our peoples through the elders’ knowledge and practices’ (*Summit* 2003, 62).<sup>15</sup>

## 6 Duality and gender

In the indigenous Mesoamerican world, gender is constructed within the pervasive concept of duality (Marcos 1998, 2006). Gender, that is, the masculine/feminine duality, is the root metaphor for the whole cosmos. Everything is identified as either feminine or masculine, and this applies to natural phenomena such as rain, hail, lightening, clouds; living beings, i.e., animals, plants and humans; and even to periods of time, such as days, months, and years (Lopez Austin 1988). All of these entities have a feminine or masculine ‘breath’ or ‘weight.’ It is evident, then, that this perception of gender corresponds to a duality of complementary opposites, a duality, in turn, that is the fabric of the cosmos. Duality is the linking and ordering force that creates a coherent reference for indigenous peoples, the knitting thread that weaves together all apparent disparities (Quezada 1997; Marcos 1993).

The documents from the summit foreground and help to explain the concept that duality is also a basic referent of indigenous spirituality:

To speak of the gender concept presupposes the concept of duality emerging from the indigenous cosmovision ...the whole universe is ruled by duality: the sky and earth, night and day, sadness and happiness, they complement each other. The one cannot exist without the other (*Summit* 2002b, 6).

Everything is ruled by the concept of duality, certainly, men and women (*Summit* 2003, 231).

Duality is something we live through, it is there... we learn of it within our spirituality and we live it in ceremonies, we live it when we see that in our families women and men, mother and father take the decisions (Candida Jimenez, Mixe indigenous woman, *Summit* 2002b, 6).

Yet, despite the reverential espousal of the ancestral concept of gender duality and complementarity, contemporary indigenous women express some reticence

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<sup>15</sup> The elders in many indigenous communities, especially the Mayan ones here referred to, are both women and men, depending on the areas where they are considered the maximum authorities. In the summit documents, we read the voices of women claiming that the elders be in charge of systematizing their oral traditions; they are referring to women elders. Cf. Marcos 2006, ch. 8, considering the ethno historical recuperation of the *llamatlatolli*, discourses of the old wise women in the Nahua region.

and even rejection of some aspects of it. Their arguments are based on how it is lived today in many indigenous communities. For example, in the document of the summit dedicated to ‘Gender from the vision of indigenous women,’ Maria Estela Jocón, a Mayan Guatemalan wise woman, remarks that duality today,

is something we should question, it is a big question mark, because as theory it is present in our cosmovision and in our customary laws, as theory, but in practice you see many situations where only the man decides ... mass media, schools, and many other issues have influenced this principle of Duality so it is a bit shaky now (*Summit 2002b*, 7).

Alma Lopez, a young indigenous self-identified feminist, who is a Regidora in her community, believes that the concept of duality of complementary opposites has been lost:

The philosophical principles that I would recover from my culture would be equity, and complementarity between women and men, women and women, and between men and men. Today the controversial complementarity of Mayan culture does not exist (*Duarte 2002*, 278).

However, beyond the reticence or even outright negations of the contemporary and lived practices of inherited philosophical principles, the indigenous women are still claiming them, still want to be inspired by them, and propose to re-inscribe them in their contemporary struggles for gender justice. They deem it necessary not only to recapture their ancestral cultural roots and beliefs but also to think of them as a potent resource in their quest for gender justice and equity:

Today there are big differences between the conditions of women in relation to that of men. This does not mean that it was always like this. In this case there is the possibility of returning to our roots and recovering the space that is due to women, based on indigenous cosmovision (*Summit 2003*, 133).

The summit document dedicated to gender has the subtitle: *De los aportes de las mujeres indígenas al feminismo*, ‘The Indigenous Women’s Contributions to Feminism’. In this portion of the document, too, the women cast off their role as recipients of a feminism imposed on them by outside forces and instead proclaim that their feminist vision has contributions to offer to other feminist approaches. Among their contributions to feminism are the innovative concepts of *parity, duality, and equilibrium*. The first paragraph explains that

some key aspects from indigenous movements have to be emphasized. They are the concepts of duality, equilibrium and harmony with all the implications we have mentioned already (*Summit 2002b*, 31).

It also proposes,

[t]o all indigenous peoples and women's movements a revision of cultural patterns... with the objective of propitiating gender relations based on equilibrium (*Summit 2002b*, 37).

Duality, equilibrium, and harmony are among the basic principles of their feminist practices. Indigenous women claim that the demands for equality by *other* feminist movements could better be interpreted within their spirituality and cosmology as a search for equilibrium.

## 7 Equilibrium as gender equity

Equilibrium, as conceived in indigenous spirituality, is not the static repose of two equal weights or masses. Rather, it is a force that constantly modifies the relation between dual or opposite pairs. Like duality itself, equilibrium, or balance, permeates not only relations between men and women but also relations among deities, between deities and humans, and among elements of nature. The constant search for this balance was vital to the preservation of order in every area, from daily life to the activity of the cosmos. Equilibrium is as fundamental as duality itself.

Duality, thus, is not a binary ordering of 'static poles.' Balance in this view can best be understood as an agent that constantly modifies the terms of dualities and thereby bestows a singular quality on the complementary pairs of opposites that permeate all indigenous thought (as seen in the summit documents and declarations). Equilibrium is constantly re-establishing its own balance. It endows duality with a flexibility or plasticity that makes it flow, impeding stratification. There is not an exclusively feminine or exclusively masculine being. Rather, beings possess these forces in different nuances or combinations. The imperceptible 'load' or 'charge' that all beings have – whether rocks, animals, or people – is feminine or masculine. Frequently, entities possess both feminine and masculine capacities simultaneously in different gradations that perpetually change and shift (Lopez Austin 1988).

The gender documents were direct transcriptions from the focus group discussions. The following rich and spontaneous evaluations of equilibrium express the indigenous manner of conceiving gender equity:

We understand the practice of gender perspective to be a respectful relationship... of balance, of equilibrium – what in the western world would be equity (*Summit 2002b*, 6).

Equilibrium means taking care of life ... when community values of our environment and social community are respected, there is equilibrium (*Summit 2003*, 132).

Between one extreme and the other there is a center. The extremes and their center are not absolute, but depend on a multiplicity of factors ... variable and not at all exact ... [Duality] is equilibrium at its maximum expression (*Summit 2003*, 231).

Indigenous women refer to equilibrium as the attainable ideal for the whole cosmos, and as the best way to express their own views on gender equity.

## 8 Subversive spirituality (of immanence)

In the fluid, dual universe of indigenous spiritualities, the domain of the sacred is all-pervasive. There are strong continuities between the natural and the supernatural worlds, whose sacred beings are closely interconnected with humans who in turn propitiate this interdependence in all their activities. Thus political struggle is a part of their spiritual activities.

Enacting this principle, at the summit every single activity started with an embodied ritual. The women from Latin American indigenous communities woke up early in the morning. I was given a room on the second floor, directly above the room of Rigoberta Menchú. The sounds of the early morning sacred ritual were a reminder that I was hosted, for those days, in an indigenous universe. The processions and chants were led by a couple of Mayan ritual specialists: a woman and a man. We prayed and walked through the gardens and premises of the hotel where we were hosted. A fancy four-star hotel that had never witnessed anything like this was taken over by the indigenous world. Nothing ever started, at this United Nations meeting, without rhythmic sounds and chants, without offerings to the four corners of the world of 'copal' (a sort of Mexican incense), fruits, flowers, and colored candles. The sacred indigenous world was there present with us; we could feel it. It was alive in the atmosphere and within each of the participants. It was also in the flowers, candles, and fruits and in the rhythmic repetition of words.

In striking contrast with indigenous spirituality, the dominant tradition in Christian theology stresses 'classical theism,' defined as centered on a metaphysical concept of God as ontologically transcendent and independent from the world. This concept of God has met with increasing criticism, particularly among eco-feminist and process theologians (Keller 1986; Gevara 2001). In indigenous spirituality, the relationship to the supernatural world lies elsewhere:



The cosmic vision of life is to be connected with the surroundings, and all the surroundings have life, so they become SACRED: we encounter earth, mountains, valleys, caves, plants, animals, stones, water, air, moon, sun, stars. Spirituality is born from this perspective and conception in which all beings that exist in Mother Nature have life and are interrelated. Spirituality is linked to a sense of COMMUNITY in which all beings are interrelated and complementary (*Summit* 2003, 128).

Ivone Gevara, a Brazilian eco-feminist theologian, recalls how an Aymara indigenous woman responded to Gevara's theological perspective: 'With eco-feminism I am not ashamed anymore of expressing beliefs from my own culture. I do not need to emphasize that they have Christian elements for them to be considered good ... they simply are valuable' (Gevara 2001, 21).

Eco-feminist theology promotes complex and novel positions centered on a respect for Earth and reverence for nature. Many indigenous women perceive this feminist theology to be easier to understand and closer to the standpoint of their indigenous spirituality than Catholic theism. These bridges between Christian and indigenous spiritualities become more intelligible when we reflect on the main characteristics that shape indigenous spirituality's relationship to nature: its divine dimensions, the personification of deities in humans, the fluidity between immanent and transcendent, and the fusion with the supernatural that women can and should enact. There is no exclusive relationship to a transcendent being called God; there is no mistrust of the flesh and the body; there is sanctity in matter:

We recover indigenous cosmovision as our 'scientific heritage,' recognizing the elders as ancient carriers of wisdom (*Summit* 2003, 60).

*Retomamos la cosmovisión indígena o ciencia de los Pueblos indígenas, reconociendo a los ancianos y ancianas como portadores de sabiduría ancestral ...* (*Summit* 2003, 31).

That the indigenous women of different cultures and civilizations of Abya Yala do not forget that they are daughters of the land, of the sun, of the wind and of fire and that their continuous relation with the cosmic elements strengthen their political participation in favor of indigenous women and indigenous peoples (*Summit* 2003, 63).

*Que las mujeres indígenas de las diferentes culturas y civilizaciones de Abya Yala no se olviden que son hijas de la tierra del sol, del viento y del fuego y que su relación continua con los elementos cosmogónicos fortalecerán su participación política a favor de las Mujeres indígenas y de los Pueblos indígenas* (*Summit* 2003, 34).

The woman's body, a fluid and permeable corporeality, is conflated with Earth as a sacred place; they regard themselves as an integral part of this sacred Earth. The spirit is not the opposite of matter and neither is the soul of the flesh.

## 9 Embodied religious thought

According to dominant Western epistemic traditions, the very concept of body is formed in opposition to mind. The body is defined as the place of biological data, of the material, of the immanent. Since the seventeenth century, the body has also been conceptualized as that which marks the boundaries between the interior self and the external world (Bordo, Jaggar 1989, 4). In Mesoamerican spiritual traditions, on the other hand, the body has characteristics that vastly differ from those of the Western anatomical or biological body. In the Mesoamerican view, exterior and interior are not separated by the hermetic barrier of the skin. Between the outside and the inside, permanent and continuous exchange occurs. To gain a keener understanding of how the body is conceptualized in indigenous traditions, we must think of it as a vortex, in a whirling, spiral-like movement that fuses and expels, absorbs and discards, and through this motion is in permanent contact with all elements in the cosmos (Lopez Austin 1988).

## 10 A spirituality of collectivity and the interconnectedness of all beings

For indigenous peoples, then, the world is not ‘out there,’ established outside of and apart from them. It is within them and even ‘through’ them. Actions and their circumstances are much more interwoven than is the case in Western thought, in which the ‘I’ can be analytically abstracted from its surroundings. Further, the body’s porosity reflects the essential porosity of the cosmos, a permeability of the entire ‘material’ world that defines an order of existence characterized by a continuous interchange between the material and the immaterial. The cosmos literally emerges, in this conceptualization, as the complement of a permeable corporeality. It is from this very ample perspective that the controversial term ‘complementarity’ should be revisited according to its usage by indigenous women. From their perspective, it is not only feminine and masculine that are said to be ‘complementary,’ but, as the Zapatista *Comandanta* Esther insisted in her address to the Mexican Parliament, complementarity embraces everything in nature. She explained that Earth is life, is nature, and we are all part of it. This simple phrase expresses the interconnectedness of all beings in the Mesoamerican cosmos (Lopez Austin 1988). Beings are not separable from one another. This principle engenders a very particular form of human collectivity with little tendency to individuation. This sense of connectedness has been found consistently within contemporary indigenous medical systems and also

in the first historical primary sources (Lopez Austin 1988). The 'I' cannot be abstracted from its surroundings. There is a permanent transit between the inside and the outside (Marcos 1998). Lenkesdorf (1999) interprets an expression of the Tojolabal language (a Mayan language of Chiapas): '*Lajan, lajan aytik.*' The phrase literally means *estamos parejos* ('we are all even'), but should be understood as 'we are all subjects.' Lenkesdorf holds that this phrase conveys the 'intersubjectivity' basic to Tojolabal culture.

'Spirituality,' say the women at the summit, is born from this vision and concept according to which all beings that exist in Mother Nature are interrelated. Spirituality is linked to a communitarian sense for which all beings are interrelated and complement each other in their existence (*Summit* 2003, 128).

Among the examples of several pervasive spiritual and cosmological references reproduced by the indigenous women of the Americas, this one seems to be at the core: the interconnectedness of everyone and everything in the universe. The intersubjective nature of men and women, interconnected with earth, sky, plants, and planets. This is how we must understand the defense of the Earth 'that gives us life, that is the nature that we are,' as *Comandanta* Esther explained to the legislators (Esther 2001). 'Indigenous peoples' spirituality,' the summit document declares, 'revives the value of nature and humans in this century. The loss of this interrelationship has caused a disequilibrium and disorder in the world' (*Summit* 2003, 134). 'A cosmic and conscious spirituality aids to re-establish equilibrium and harmony ... as women we have the strength, the energy capable of changing the course for a better communal life' (*Summit* 2003, 135).

Spirituality emerges from traditional wisdom, but the document also stresses that, 'we have to be conscious of the richness of the worldwide cultural diversities' (*Summit* 2002b, 31). Here again, we perceive a characteristic of openness, a 'transnational' consciousness that has been influenced by women's movements and feminist practices.

Indigenous ethnicities are not self-enclosed but rather envision themselves in active interaction with a world of differences: national, bi-national, and transnational. The international indigenous movements are building bridges all over the world and gaining momentum. There is a growing transnational language of cultural rights espoused by the 'indigenous' worldwide. They all acknowledge the damage that diverse colonialisms have done to their worldviews and have begun to echo each other concerning the value of recovering their own spiritualities and cosmologies.<sup>16</sup> In recent years, indigenous peoples have intensified

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<sup>16</sup> See Kepa 2006; Tuhiwai Smith 1999; Siem 2005; Palomo et al. 2003; Manu'atu 2000; Champagne, Abu-Saad, 2005; Villebrun 2005.

their struggle to break free from the chains of colonialism and its oppressive spiritual legacy. Indigenous women's initiatives to recover their ancestral religious legacy constitute a decolonizing effort. Through a deconstruction of past captivities, they recreate a horizon of ancestrally inspired spirituality. They lay claim to an ethics of recovery while rejecting the violence and subjugation suffered by their ancestors within the religious and cultural domains. 'We only come to ask for justice,' the organized indigenous women have repeatedly declared. Yes, justice is their demand: material, social, and political justice. They also seek recognition of and respect for their cosmological beliefs as an integral part of their feminist vision.

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