MESOAMERICAN WOMEN’S INDIGENOUS SPIRITUALITY

Decolonizing Religious Beliefs

Sylvia Marcos

Using documents, declarations, and proposals from the 2002 First Indigenous Women’s Summit of the Americas, Marcos discusses the ways in which indigenous women are simultaneously working for social justice and creating an “indigenous spirituality.” This indigenous spirituality differs not only from the hegemonic influences of women’s largely Christian, Catholic background but also from more recent influences of feminist and Latin American ecofeminist liberation theologies. Marcos draws on her work with women in Mexico’s indigenous worlds and systematizes the principles that have emerged from a distinctively indigenous cosmovision and cosmology. As the author shows, native women’s fight for social justice is also a “de-colonial” effort in which indigenous women in the Americas are actively recapturing ancestral spiritualities in order to throw off the mantle of colonial religion, gender oppression, and elitism.

The indigenous women’s movement has started to propose its own “indigenous spirituality.” Documents, declarations, and proposals that were generated at the First Indigenous Women’s Summit of the Americas, as well as at other key meetings that have gathered since, 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 ecofeminist liberation theologies. Participants’ discourses, live presentations, and addresses brought to light other expressions of their religious background. Catholicism—as a colonizing enterprise—has deeply permeated the indigenous traditions of the Americas, making it almost impossible to
separate “pure” indigenous religious traditions from Catholic images, rites, and symbols. Analyzing writings that stemmed from the 2002 summit allows me to delve deeper into the epistemic characteristics of native religions that set them radically apart from contemporary Christianity, revealing the initiative and expressions currently emerging from the indigenous women’s movement in the Americas.

Drawing on several years of interactions 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 cosmovision and cosmology. Religious references to indigenous spirituality are inspired by ancestral traditions re-created today as the women struggle for social justice. The inspiration for their social justice activism is often anchored in these beliefs, which 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 the “cracks of epistemic differences,” 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


2 Historically, identification with “indigenous” ethnicity, traditions, languages, and attire has elicited elite derision throughout the Americas. The emergence of active indigenous movements all over the Latin American world, however, has opened new spaces for “positive” discrimination. In other words, political and economic spaces now exist that have been reserved for indigenous identities. As a middle-class intellectual and university professor who never suffered the discriminations and offensive behaviors to which the indigenous peoples have been constantly exposed since European conquest and colonial times, my ethical stand is to refrain from either “speaking on behalf” or taking advantage of any preferential treatment now available. It happens sometimes though that I am assimilated to my indigenous friends, and when this is the case, I feel extremely honored.

3 Although Rigoberta Menchú is a controversial figure within the pan-Mayan movement, her initiatives on behalf of indigenous struggles in the Americas are significant. Her strategies are sometimes questionable, but she has undoubtedly become an icon of the capacities of indigenous women to transcend the suffering, limitation, and discrimination that result from not only their gender but also their class and ethnicity. Texts from the summit reveal her Mayan philosophical background and allow us to better understand situations in which her involvement has been criticized. Elsewhere, I explore how feminist theoreticians and/or religious scholars have analyzed her contributions. See Sylvia Marcos and Marguerite Waller, eds., Dialogue and Difference: Feminisms Challenge Globalization (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 151–52.
Pauline Tiongia, a Maori elder from New Zealand. The meeting hosted approximately four hundred indigenous women representing most countries and many indigenous communities. 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 Multicultural from Nicaragua’s indigenous university, the Universidad de las Regiones Autónomas de la Costa Caribe Nicaraguense. 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’s participation; (4) indigenous development and globalization; and (5) human rights and indigenous rights. During the group meetings, women shared their thoughts, perspectives, and experiences concerning spirituality, gender, education, empowerment, development, and their relationships to international funding and cooperation agencies. These discussions, which were transcribed and lightly edited, constituted the basic documents for the summit meeting.

The importance of research being both led and designed by the same subjects (objects) of research inquiry cannot be overemphasized. Asymmetrical power relations between urban women and indigenous peasant women are evident throughout the Latin American continent. Urban women have access to higher education, professional positions, and economic resources, and usually they are whose voices, proposals, and projects for research find support. The summit, however, selected its participants from a pool of strong indigenous

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4 There are numerous definitions of the term indigenous. For example, Linita Manu’atu, writing on Tongan and other Pacific islands peoples, notes that “indigenous refers to the First Peoples who settled in Aotearoa (New Zealand), United States, Canada, and so on.” Maori people refer to themselves as Tangata Whenua: “First Nations or simply the People” (“Katoanga Fiaha: A Pedagogical Site for Tongan Students,” Educational Philosophy and Theory 32, no. 1 [2000]: 73–80, quotations on 80). According to Kay Warren and Jean Jackson, writing in their introduction to Indigenous Movements, Self-representation, and the State in Latin America ([Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002], 11), “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.” According to the United Nations, “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,” Doc. UN, ICN.41 Sub.2/1989/33 Add. 3 paragraph 4, in Rincones de Coyoacan 5 [February–March 1994], Convention n. 169 of the ILO of United Nations).
women who were already functioning in leadership roles: senators, regidoras, congresswomen, heads of social organizations, and 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. As I mentioned, one of the main themes of the summit was “gender from the indigenous women’s vision,” a much-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 to serve as 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, intersecting with every other issue addressed at the summit. It was so prominent that a study of summit documents, voted on by consensus, reveals the priorities of the contemporary struggles, concerns, and agendas of indigenous groups in the Americas. The documents set indigenous spirituality as an origin and a motor for the recreation of collectivities and for the emergence of a new pan-indigenous, collective subject in which women’s leadership is emerging and potentially growing, defining the women as outspoken, strong, and clear agents for change.

As recently as a few years ago, the term indigenous women was a pejorative that indigenous peoples themselves had never used to name a self-constituted identity. Now, indigenous women denotes a collective subjectivity, a social actor that indigenous women themselves have created through their political and spiritual practices. As workshop leader and consultant to indigenous women’s organizations from several ethnic groups of Mexico and Latin America, I have witnessed their ties, their collective identification, and the strength of their spiritual and cosmological references.

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 boasting the greatest numbers of Catholics in the world. Among indigenous social movements, claiming the right to develop and define their own spirituality is a novel attitude, yet one that indigenous people voice with increasing

5 During the past twenty years, the Catholic population has been decreasing consistently. Today in Mexico, roughly 82 percent of the population identifies as Catholic in contrast to 96.5 percent two decades ago. Among the impoverished and dispossessed of Mexico are many Catholics, among whom stand sixty-two distinct indigenous groups in the country.
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 sequel of Catholic colonization and rejecting the contempt and disdain with which the Catholic majority views their spirituality, beliefs, and practices. An example of the mainstream Catholic perspective toward the indigenous peoples appears in the “Message of the Bishops to the Summit” below.

Despite conflicting perspectives held by scholars and other commentators, indigenous social movements are the most visible transformational force in the Latin American continent. Indigenous peoples no longer accept the image that was imposed on them from the exterior. 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 for them to survive is to reinvent themselves, re-creating their identity while maintaining their differences. 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 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.” Whatever the possible explanations for the genesis of this pan-indigenous 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.” Indigenous women are claiming this ancestral wisdom, cosmovision, and spirituality, but theirs is a selective process and they are contesting issues within tradition that constrain or hamper their space as women. Meanwhile, those who have an enhanced position as women within their spiritual ancestral communities are held onto dearly, with the community ensuring their survival.

Addressing the Mexican Congress in March 2002, Comandanta Esther, a Zapatista leader from the southern state of Chiapas, expressed the concern of indigenous women in this way: “I want to explain the situation of women as

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6 This theme resounds around the world with other indigenous peoples. See the Maori claims in Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (New York: Zed Books, 1999).
7 José Gil Olmos, interview with Alain Touraine, “Mexico en riesgo de caer en el caos y caciquismo,” *La Jornada*, November 6, 2000, 3.
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.” 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.” Comandanta Esther was expressing the inevitable struggle for change that indigenous women face, while also demanding respect for their agency. They—those directly involved—have 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 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.” 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 indigenous women express, 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 summit, the following is particularly emblematic:

We re-evaluate spirituality as the main axis of culture. (Memoria 61)

The participants of the First Indigenous Women 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

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11 Ibid.
12 “Revaloramos la espiritualidad como el eje principal de la cultura.” Memoria de la Primera Cumbre de Mujeres Indígenas de América (Mexico: Fundación Rigoberto Menchú Tum, 2003), 32. 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, all translations are mine. All future references to the Memoria are made parenthetically in the text.
for the equilibrium and harmony within ourselves as well as the other
surrounding beings. (Memoria 60)13

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. (Memoria 19)14

What Does Indigenous Spirituality Mean?

When I first approached the documents of the summit, I was surprised
by their frequent use of the self-elected term spirituality. Its meaning in this
context is by no means self-evident, and has little to do with what the word usu-
ally represents 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 traditions that ar-
rived 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.”15 This stance is strongly influenced by an approach that
espouses transnational sociopolitical 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 cosmovision that pervades the
worlds of indigenous women.

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

13 “Las participantes de la Primera Cumbre de Mujeres Indígenas de América consideramos:
que la espiritualidad está ligada al sentido comunitario de la visión cósmica de la vida, donde los
seres se interrelacionan y se complementan en su existencia. Que la espiritualidad es la búsqueda
del equilibrio y la armonía con nosotros mismos y con los demás” (Memoria 31).

14 “Demandamos de las diferentes iglesias y religiones respetar las creencias y culturas
de los Pueblos Indígenas sin imponernos ninguna práctica religiosa que contravenga nuestra
espiritualidad.”

15 “Las mujeres indígenas mexicanas . . . tomamos nuestras decisiones para ejercer libremente
nuestra espiritualidad que es diferente a una religión y de igual manera se respeta la creencia de
cada quien.” Mensaje de las Mujeres Indígenas Mexicanas a los Monseñores de la Comisión Espisco-
pal de Obispos, December 1–2, 2002, Oaxaca, Mexico, 1, copy in author’s possession.
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. Worse, indigenous women were taking the lead and gaining a public presence. Rumors that reproductive rights were being discussed on the summit’s agenda also sparked concern among the bishops, and Catholic authorities spoke out against indigenous agitation. They felt pressed to send a “message” and a warning, noting that “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.”

This patronizing and discriminatory message was sent to the summit by the Episcopal Commission for Indigenous (Comisión Episcopal de Indígenas). Paternalistic throughout, the tone of the message is one of admonition and condescension toward the indigenous “subject.” It assumes that rationality and truth are the private domain of bishops. They feel 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) emerged from a collective meeting. In this document, the thirty-eight representatives of Mexican indigenous communities expressed their plight in the following words:

“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.”

They continued, declaring that “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.”19 Additionally, they were determined to “reconfirm the principles that inspire us to recover and strengthen reciprocity, complementarity, duality, to regain equilibrium,” but reassured the bishops, “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.”20 This last sentence makes a veiled reference to centuries of colonial and postcolonial oppression. First the colonizers and then the modern state, both with Church approval, denied 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 mestizos.

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 asked directly what I thought about the use of a particular term, I ventured an opinion. After they discussed it, they decided not to go with my suggestion. The significance here is that my opinion was treated not as authoritative but simply equally worthy of consideration. To them, I was a supportive “non-indigenous” 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. Women there 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. Editing 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” counted as any other, as it should in a consensus-building process.

In addition to the constraints posed by the multiplicity of their languages,

19 “Las mujeres indígenas mexicanas somos mayores de edad y tomamos nuestras decisiones para ejercer libremente nuestra espiritualidad que es diferente a una religion . . . nos sentimos con derecho a ejercer . . . nuestra religiosidad como pueblos indígenas” (ibid., 1–2).
20 “Reconfirmamos nuestros principios que nos inspiran a recuperar y fortalecer . . . la reciprocidad, complementariedad, dualidad para recuperar el equilibrio”; “No se preocupen, las estamos analizando [los usos y costumbres que atentan contra la dignidad y los derechos humanos], porque también creemos que nos ilumina la luz de la razón y la justicia” (ibid., 1).
women at the summit 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 women’s insistence that they are 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 the (male) bishops and archbishops know better than the (female) 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 to 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 at a recent United Nations meeting with Vatican representatives.21

Decolonizing Epistemology

Several authors have argued that decolonizing efforts should be grounded at the epistemological level.22 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.”23

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,” so the voices and positions of the indigenous may bypass the opaque lenses of philosophical ethnocentricity. This deepening

21 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, 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 antireligious stand.

22 Mignolo, “From Central Asia to the Caucasus and Anatolia”; Madina Tlostanova, “Why Cut the Feet in Order to Fit the Western Shoes?: Non-European Soviet Ex-colonies and the Modern Colonial Gender System,” Ms. (Moscow) (2007); and Marcos, “The Borders Within.”

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 María Estela Jocón, 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” (Memoria, 274–75). 24 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.” 25 A de-colonial thinking grounded in another epistemological stand is required.

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.” 26 Duality is the centerpiece of spirituality understood as a cosmic vision of life. Duality—not dualism—is a pervasive perception in indigenous thought and spirituality. The pervasiveness of a perception without equivalent in Western thought could, perhaps, largely explain the persistent barrier to penetrating and comprehending indigenous worlds. According to Mesoamerican cosmology, 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 bipolar 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 (for example, the image of a white-bearded man 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,

24 “Ellas cuestionan mucho el hecho de que tienes que cuestionar tu cultura. Lo que no nos gusta es la imposición, que te digan lo que tienes que hacer, cuando tu tienes el poder de decidir sobre ti. No es que la otra . . . feminista venga y me de las herramientas para hacerlo: que me puede ayudar, que puede caminar conmigo, . . . pero que no me imponga. Eso es lo que tal vez muchas mujeres feministas han hecho, imponer.”


“god.” Yet Ometeotl does not mean “two gods” but rather “god Two” or, better, “divinity of Duality.” The name results from the fusion of Omechihuatl (cihuatl meaning woman or lady) and Ometecuhtli (tecuhtli, 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 was 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 cosmovision.27 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, the place of humans in the cosmos. One of our most eminent ethnohistorians, Alfredo Lopez Austin, refers to this commonality of perceptions, conceptions, and forms of action as the núcleo duro, the “hard core” of Mesoamerican cultures.28

Duality, defined as a complementary duality of opposites, is the essential ordering force of the universe and is also reflected in the ordering of time. Time is marked by two calendars, one ritual based and the other astronomical. The ritual calendar is linked to the human gestational cycle. The other is an agricultural calendar that prescribes the periods for seeding, sowing, and planting corn. Maize (corn) is conceived of as the earthly matter from which all beings in the universe are made.29 Human gestation and agricultural cycles are understood within this concept of time-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 each other. Mutually exclusive categories are not part of the epistemic background of this worldview, whose plasticity is still reflected in the ways indigenous women deal with life and conflict. They seldom remain mired in a position that would deny the opposite. Their philosophical background allows them both to resist impositions and 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 nonintelligibility to

27 Sylvia Marcos, *Taken from the Lips: Gender and Eros in Mesoamerica* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).
29 Marcos, *Taken from the Lips*.
outsiders, and it 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 community betrayal. Only recently have indigenous women themselves started the process of unveiling. From my position as an outsider, I felt pressed to seek permission of Nubia, a Tepoztlán Nahua indigenous leader, 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 questions without her explicit previous agreement. Presently, some 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.

The people incarnating living indigenous traditions have played almost no part in the formation of academic theories. They were rarely consulted, but neither did they care to validate or invalidate the views of the so-called experts who had officially “defined” their worlds. Silence was their weapon of survival. Only recently have they learned to use, critically and autonomously, whatever knowledge has been collected about them. The women explained that they want to “systematize the oral traditions of our peoples through the elders’ knowledge and practices” (Memoria 62).

Duality and Gender

In the indigenous Mesoamerican world, gender is constructed within the pervasive concept of duality. 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, lightning, and clouds; living beings, such as animals, plants, and humans; and even to periods of time, such as days, months, and years. All 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 order-

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30 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.

31 “Sistematizar la tradición oral de nuestros Pueblos a través de los conocimientos y practicas de nuestros ancianos y ancianas” (Memoria 33).

32 Marcos, “Embodied Religious Thought,” and Marcos, Taken from the Lips.

33 Alfredo Lopez Austin, The Human Body and Ideology (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988).
ing force that creates a coherent reference for indigenous peoples, the knitting thread that weaves together all apparent disparities.4

The documents from the summit foreground and help 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 Doc. Género 6)*

Everything is ruled by the concept of duality, certainly, men and women. *(Memoria 231)*5

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. *(Summit Doc. Género 6)*6

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

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5 “Hablar del concepto de género supone remitirse al concepto de dualidad manejado desde la cosmovisión indígena . . . ya que todo el universo se rige en términos de dualidad: el cielo y la tierra, la noche y el día, la tristeza y la felicidad, se complementan el uno al otro.” Documento “Género desde la Visión de las Mujeres Indígenas,” Universidad de las Regiones Autónomas de la Costa Caribe Nicaragüense, URACCAN, Centro de estudios e Información de la mujer multiétnica CEIMM, Documento Primera Cumbre Internacional de Mujeres Indígenas, 2002, Ms.1–43, 6 (hereafter cited in text as *Summit Doc. Género*), copy in author’s possession; and “Todo se rige en términos de Dualidad, indudablemente, el hombre y la mujer” (Memoria 231).

6 “La dualidad es algo que se vive, que se da . . . nos la enseñan en la espiritualidad y lo vivimos en la ceremonia, lo vivimos cuando vemos familias en las que las mujeres y los hombres, el papa y la mama deciden” (Candida Jimenez, Mixe indigenous woman, *Summit Doc. Género 6*).
a bit shaky now” (Summit Doc. Género 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, noting that “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.”

However, beyond the reticence or even outright negations of the contemporary and lived practices of inherited philosophical principles, 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.

As another summit document explains, “Today, there are big differences between the condition 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” (Memoria 133).

The summit document dedicated to gender has the subtitle De los aportes de las mujeres indígenas al feminismo (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

37 “La Dualidad hoy en día es cuestionante, es un signo de interrogación grandísimo, porque como teoría existe en nuestra cosmovisión y en nuestras costumbres, como teoría, pero en la practica se ven muchas situaciones donde solamente el hombre decide. . . . Los medios de comunicación, la escuela y muchos otros elementos han influido para que ese principio de la Dualidad esté un poquito tambaleant.”

38 “Los principios filosóficos que yo recuperaría de mi cultura son la equidad, la complementariedad entre hombres y mujeres, entre mujeres y mujeres, entre hombres y hombres. . . . Actualmente esa famosa complementariedad de la cultura maya no existe.” Quoted in Bastian Duarte and Angela Ixkic, “Conversación con Alma Lopez, Autoridad Guatemalteca: La Doble Mirada del Género y la Etnicidad,” in Estudios Latinoamericanos, nueva época, 9, no. 18 (2002): 176–82, quotation on 178.

39 “En la actualidad existen grandes diferencias entre la situación de la mujer con relación a la del hombre, no significa que siempre fue así, en este caso existe al posibilidad de retomar las raíces y recuperar el espacio que le corresponde a la mujer basado en la cosmovisión indígena.”
mentioned already” (Summit Doc. Género 31). It also proposes, “to all indigenous peoples and women’s movements a revision of cultural patterns . . . with the objective of propitiating gender relations based on equilibrium” (Summit Doc. Género 37). Duality, equilibrium, and harmony are among the basic principles of their feminist practices. Indigenous women claim that the demands for equality by the other feminist movements could better be interpreted within their spirituality and cosmovision as a search for equilibrium.

**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 reestablishing 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.

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

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40 “Puntualizar algunos visiones de equilibrio, dualidad y armonía, con todas las implicaciones anteriormente citadas.”

41 “A todos los Pueblos Indígenas y movimientos de mujeres indígenas, revisión de los patrones culturales con capacidad autocrítica, con el fin de propiciar unas relaciones de género basadas en el equilibrio.”

42 Lopez Austin, *Human Body and Ideology*. 
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 Doc. Género 6)43

Equilibrium means taking care of life . . . when community values of our environment and social community are respected, there is equilibrium. (Memoria 132)44

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. (Memoria 231)45

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.

The Spirituality of Immanence

In the fluid, dual universe of indigenous spiritualities, the sacred domain is pervasive. Strong continuities exist between the natural and supernatural worlds, whose sacred beings are interconnected closely with humans, who in turn propitiate this interdependence in all their activities. Enacting this principle, at the summit, every single activity started with an embodied ritual. The women from Latin American indigenous communities wake up early in the morning. I had 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 moving, for those days, in an indigenous universe. 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 our fancy four-star hotel, which had never before been taken over by the indigenous world. Nothing ever started, at this United Nations protocol, without rhythmic sounds and chants, offerings to the four corners of the world, of “copal” (a sort of Mexican incense), 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 lived in the flowers 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

43 “Se entiende así la practica de enfoque de género como una relación respetuosa, . . . de balance, de equilibrio-lo que en occidente sería de equidad.”
44 “El equilibrio es velar por la vida. . . . Cuando los valores de la comunidad, de nuestro medio social y de nuestro entorno son respetados hay equilibrio.”
45 “Entre extremo y extremo se encuentra el centro. Los extremos de la escala, así como su centro, no son cualidades absolutas, sino dependen de multitud de factores . . . variables y en absoluto exactos . . . [la Dualidad] es el equilibrio, en su maxima expresión.”
the world. This concept of God has met with increasing criticism, particularly among ecofeminist and process theologians. 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. (Memoria 128)

Ivone Gevara, a Brazilian ecofeminist 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.”

Ecofeminist 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” (Memoria 60).

Similarly, they explain “that the indigenous women of different cultures and civilizations of Abya Yala do not forget that they are daughters of the land, of the


47 “La visión cósmica de la vida es estar conectado con el entorno y todo los que hay en el entorno tiene vida, por lo que adquiere un valor SAGRADO: encontramos tierra cerros, planicies, cuevas, plantas, animales, piedras, agua, aire, luna, sol, estrellas. La espiritualidad nace de esta visión y concepción en la que todos los seres que hay en la Madre Naturaleza tienen vida y se interrelacionan. La espiritualidad está ligada al sentido comunitario, donde los seres se interrelacionan y se complementan.”


49 “Retomamos la cosmovisión indígena o ciencia de los Pueblos indígenas, reconociendo a los ancianos y ancianas como portadores de sabiduría ancestral” (Memoria 31).
sun, of the wind and of fire and that their continuous relation[s] with the cosmic elements strengthen their political participation in favor of indigenous women and indigenous peoples” (*Memoria* 63).50

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.

**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.51 In Mesoamerican spiritual traditions, however, the body has characteristics that vastly differ from those of the Western anatomical or biological body. 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 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.

**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. Furthermore, 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

50 “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” (*Memoria* 34).
by indigenous women. From their perspective, it is not only feminine and masculine that are complementary. As Comandanta Esther insisted in her address to the Mexican Congress, 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. 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. The “I” cannot be abstracted from its surroundings. There is a permanent transit between the inside and the outside. Carlos Lenkesdorf 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 (Memoria 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 is 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.

“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” (Memoria 134). Additionally, “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” (Memoria 135). Ultimately, “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

52 Lopez Austin, Human Body and Ideology.
55 “En la Espiritualidad de los pueblos indigenas se recupera el valor importante de la naturaleza y el ser humano . . . la perdida de esta relación ha desatado una serie de desequilibrios en el mundo.”
56 “Una espiritualidad cosmica y consciente conduce al equilibrio, a la armonía. . . . Como mujeres tenemos la fuerza, la energía capaz de cambiar rumbo hacia una mejor vida comunitaria.”
Marcos: Mesoamerican Women’s Indigenous Spirituality

Doc. Género 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, binational, 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 one another concerning the value of recovering their own spiritualities and cosmologies. In recent years, indigenous peoples have intensified 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 re-create 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 domain. “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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