Over the course of time, the Nahua of the Huasteca region in Veracruz, Mexico, have selected a new religious concept as a way to differentiate Christianity from their ancient religion. *El costumbre*, “the custom,” as it is commonly called, is the concept employed by Nahuas today to label their religion according to their conventions. This concept may draw one’s attention, but it can also go unnoticed by some researchers. *El costumbre* is constituted by beliefs in deities from nature, in ceremonial practices in which sacred numens are worshipped, and in the active participation through which Nahuas show their faith. This chapter, which focuses on the perspective of the originary peoples of the Huasteca region, provides an overview of major changes and continuities that have shaped *el costumbre* and other religious observances over the past four decades in several Nahuatl-speaking communities in Chicontepec, Veracruz.

The municipality of Chicontepec comprises several Nahua communities. Each community is constituted as a single unit and has its own local authorities, similar to municipal governance. However, Tepoxteco and Chapictla are a single congregación, or agrarian unit, as they share the same ejidos (communal lands) and ejido officials, headquartered in Tepoxteco (figure 11.2).

Most of the communities govern themselves through the traditional set of legal and political practices known as usos y costumbres. Mexican civil law is also an option open to them, even though it has little practical value. These communities have no current political conflicts; to the contrary, they act in coordination regarding
mutual aid and communal labor. These communities have always been isolated in terms of Catholic religiosity, as priests come to them to preach as visitors; since they do not speak Nahuatl, the inhabitants do not take the priests’ efforts seriously. Each community has about 1,000 residents; most people over age fifty only speak Nahuatl, and those who are fifty and younger speak both Nahuatl and Spanish.

I was born in Chicontepec, a Nahua community in the Huasteca region of Veracruz. Because I have been able to share life experiences and interact with the Nahua in my community, I understand to some extent their attitude with regard to Christianity: we accept it, but without ceasing to believe in our first religion. Many children born in these communities grow up with the idea that it is natural to believe in these two religions and that it has always been so. From the point of view of Nahua catechists, it is good that a person believes in Christianity and el costumbre at the same time because el costumbre is a religion that tends to be sympathetic to other religions. However, this is an obstacle for those who are members of Christendom, since their goal is to have Nahua believe in only one god.

Even though I live in an urban environment today, I remain in contact with my parents, who live in Tepoxteco. I live in a city, where I can work as an educator and conduct research on both ancient and contemporary Nahuatl. When I am in my
place of origin, I work with the people of nearby communities on anthropological and linguistic research, with the main objective of preserving our culture and revitalizing the Nahuatl language. This project is rooted in an emic perspective, as I was born in the communities I study and began my research while working on an MA degree at the Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas. This work is derived from the second chapter of my MA thesis, and the interviews published in this chapter are the opinions of contemporary Nahuas.

NAHUA RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN THE COMMUNITIES OF CHICONTEPEC

I begin with a survey of several key concepts that describe how social and kinship relations take place in Nahua communities. These terms must be mentioned for contextual reasons, as they will help us ease into an overview of religiosity in Huastec Nahua communities. In her Nahuatl dictionary, the scholar Frances Karttunen (1992, 127) reported that *macehualli* was “a common man, a commoner” in preconquest Nahua society. However, by the late sixteenth century it had come to refer to an indigenous person. Nahua people today call themselves *macehualli* (people), and they call men or women who come to the region from urban settlements *coyotl* and *xinolah*, respectively (Báez 2004). When new attempts to Christianize some Nahua communities took shape in the 1970s, a new and influential concept arrived that is currently replacing the word *macehualli*: that of *el cristiano*, “the Christian.” The Nahua who practice *el costumbre* and do not go to Christian chapels also know each other as “Christians,” as shown in the two examples I share here: ¿Canin itztoz nopa criztianoh? “Where may that person be?” and ¿Canin itztozceh nopa criztianohs? “Where may those people be?”

From an indigenous perspective, a Christian can be a believer in the Catholic Church and may also identify as a Catholic, but it can also be the case that a *cristiano* does not practice anything of Christianity and, on the contrary, may practice and praise all the *campeca* carried out as part of *el costumbre*. On the issue of gender, it is very common to use the terms *tlacatl* for a male and *cihuatl* for a woman. Elders and married people are not addressed by their birth names. Given this situation, there exist a number of ways to refer to such a person. First, it is possible to simply say *totlayi* for “Mr.” and *toahui* for “Mrs.,” but if a common family tie exists, one may employ a second option, which is *tocomaleh* or *tocomaleh*, derived from the Spanish “*compadre*” (godfather), and *tocomaleh*, from “*comadre*” (godmother). Nahuas maintain a very close relationship with the people of the community, and calling people by their real names sometimes denotes a lack of respect.

As to religious practices, the Nahua refer to the word “priest” as *totahztin*, and it is the same word used for the “father” of a family, who would be called *notatah*, “my
father.” In the case of the Virgin Mary, something similar occurs, for she is known as *tonantzin*, which is also how the mother in a nuclear family is addressed, as *non-anan*, “my mother.” Moreover, the Christian god is better known as *toteucco*, which I translate as “the owner of us,” but also as *totiotzin*, “our god.” In *el costumbre*, deities are called *toteuccohuan* or *totiotzitzin*, “the owners of us” or “our gods.” It can clearly be seen that the singular is used to refer to the Christian god but that Nahua deities are addressed in the plural because of the manifold deities that exist in Nahua religion today. Deities of nature are also intensely worshipped, and they are part of *el costumbre* and of those called *toteuccohuan* because they are the owners of natural forces, so the Nahuas also worship them. These include deities such as *Cintli iteucco*, “Owner of Maize,” and *atl iteucco*, “Owner of Water.” The concept of *toteucco* is more closely associated with the Christian god; since Christianity does not have more than one deity, Nahuas use the singular form *toteucco* for him. However, since *el costumbre* is open to having new divine entities, even from different religions, the Christian god came into it as a new deity.

The Nahua ceremonies performed during various months of the year are called *campeca*. This is a religious concept with great relevance, since all the rituals are usually referred to in the same way, although some have specific designations, such as *atlatlacualtiliztli* (a request for rain). The word *campeca* still has an uncertain origin, but it may be derived from the words *ica nopeca*, “in case it works.” This expression is used while carrying out a ritual. The main idea is that although the Nahua hope that a ceremony will yield the desired effects, they do not know whether carrying out the ceremony will indeed be enough to please the deities. Thus, *ica nopeca*, an expression of humility, indicates that a ceremony is always intended to be a remedy but that it is not infallible. Moreover, the term *tlaneltoquilli* refers to Nahua beliefs in a very broad way. While some researchers prefer to use it, in Nahua communities *el costumbre* is mentioned more often than *tlaneltoquilli*. In the Nahua communities of Chicontepec, if Nahua women or men are asked what religion they believe in, the answer will be *el costumbre*, but it is also possible that they may respond, “I believe in the Catholic Church, but I practice *el costumbre*” (see also Báez-Jorge and Lupo 2010, 162).

One of the practices the Catholic Church brought and the Nahua adopted in their ceremonies were prayers to Christian saints. Nonetheless, instead of continuing that practice, the Nahua decided to pray to their dead more often than to the new god or saints. Nahuas do not pray to their deities, perhaps because they do not consider them dead entities, and thus the Nahua prefer to hold a dialogue with them as living ones. The *motiocihua* concept, consisting of *tio* (which comes from *teotl*, “deity”) and *chihua*, “to make or do,” which literally means “to make someone a god,” is used by catechists of the Catholic Church when they pray to God or the
Christian saints. However, the Nahuas who carry out this practice only say such prayers when a person dies.

Until today, Nahuas have persisted in safeguarding their ancient religion because of the constant interference of Christianity (Stresser-Péan 2009). The originary peoples from the communities of Tepoxteco and Chapictla remember how the process of conversion took place during the Christianization period in the 1970s. One of the linguistic loans that still remains is nimocristianochihua, meaning “I turn into a Christian.” I believe that at the start of what was the latest in a series of efforts at catechesis, Nahuas knew well that the new religion diverged from their earlier one. Initially, few people in the community decided to fully accept the new faith, perhaps because Nahua religious practices were conceptualized as demonic and also because fear was introduced through notions such as condemnation and salvation. For communities that kept a religion almost isolated from contact with any other religion at the time, the conversion process became a long apostolic race and also a competition on the part of the catechists.

The cult of maize is one of the essential components of el costumbre. The Nahuas of Chicontepec maintain a strong religious connection with maize. Maize is more than a seed, more than a source of food in Nahua religion; it is primarily a deity. It is not easy for outsiders to understand this cult as a cultural expression. However, there is a parallel between both religions, as maize stands for the image and blood of Nahua man just as in Christianity the Eucharist stands for the body and blood of Christ. Nahua Catholics know that Christian dogma forbids them from supporting other religions, particularly the religion the church attempted to eradicate. Nonetheless, the Nahuas who have managed to resist a full conversion refute this idea by arguing that they are free to embrace and believe in other religions but without ending their belief in their first one. The cult of paper is another essential component of Nahua theogony in the Huasteca region. When Nahuas perform a ceremony, they represent their deities in paper form, and several researchers have described each of the deities from the Nahuatl pantheon that are represented in this way (see Sandstrom 1991; Stresser-Péan 2009).

I contend that the notion of tlaneltoquilli, which some authors translate as “religion,” means something like “belief” and that it is distant from its Western counterpart. Rather than see their belief as part of a religion, the Nahuas conceptualize it as an ancestral belief, linked to both tangible and intangible objects. We can approach this term by addressing other Nahua notions related to religion. For the Nahuas, malhuilli means “something sacred,” and this could be either having a valued object or practicing a ceremony. When a campeca takes place, it must be carried out with great care; it must be ascertained that all goes well. It must always be done properly, since if for any reason the campeca is not completed in a thorough way, serious
problems may emerge because of a lack of respect, and hence the petitions that were made will not yield good results. A deity is also considered malhuilli, and having a conversation with the deities is also sacred; thus, a ritual specialist is the only one empowered to lead a ceremony. The names for a ritual specialist tend to vary according to the region, but in general and for the purposes of this study, I use the name huehuehtlacatl, “elder.”

In the religion of el costumbre, the term espíritu, “spirit,” does not have a broad application as it occurs in Christianity. When the Nahuas employ this word, they always link it to a Christian concept. In el costumbre, tonalli is more frequently mentioned. This concept has to do with a person’s emotional state and is also associated with the notion of “soul.” If a person is in good health, it means that he or she has a good tonalli, and when the person’s tonalli is not well, he or she must seek a cure through a healing ritual called ochpanaliztli. This ritual is performed to bring a person’s physical status into balance. We Nahuas think we have a tonalli, which is like the soul and which works while we are alive. When people die, their souls may still wander around the community. Although the soul is conceived as a Christian concept and the tonalli as a Nahua one, these may be similar, but each is thought about from the perspective of its religion of origin.

Nahua religiosity may be better understood in the communities of the Huasteca in Veracruz because they have less contact with people from large urban settlements. The more remote these communities are from urban civilization, as is the case for the towns of Chicontepec, the more they safeguard beliefs of pre-Hispanic origin. By remaining almost intact despite its coexistence with Christianity, the religion of el costumbre manages to set itself apart from the rest, for this religion includes a search for balance among the elements in nature, gratefulness for agricultural produce, and petitions on behalf of the collective good. Day after day, Christianity tries to achieve a spiritual conquest, but the Nahuas have succeeded in their negotiations with, and in their persuasion of, agents of Christian conversion. As they practice el costumbre, the Nahuas confirm that Nahua people are merely one component of Nahua religion. The worship of deities emphasizes the respect Nahuas have for them and their belief that it is the gods who direct and organize their living.

A Nahua person is just a single piece of the Nahua universe. Each element of nature is connected to all the others. In the Nahua universe, all elements of nature are intertwined, and therefore what exists in nature belongs to a homogeneous whole. Christian elements may also be included in Nahua religion, but what happens in many cases is that at the time they were incorporated, these elements were given a divergent use and meaning from that of their religion of origin. One of the clearest examples is the Christian saint John the Baptist, who after being transferred into Nahua religion is now considered the deity of water. I believe that when faced
with Christian religious transfers, Nahua religion absorbs, repurposes, and resignifies them and that it employs this mechanism as a defense weapon to avoid displacement and shift.

**EL COSTUMBRE AND CHRISTIANITY IN CONTACT IN NAHUA COMMUNITIES**

The paper cuttings prepared by local people during the celebration of a collective ceremony in the Chicontepec communities are an essential component for maintaining Nahua religion. The low intensity and effectiveness of colonial evangelization in some regions allowed for the existence of many elements that remained from the indigenous religiosity and worldview, particularly those concerning agriculture and the cult of entities in nature (Gómez Martínez 2002). The *huehuehtlacatl* is the most respected person in town, the leader when a ceremony is carried out, and he is in charge of making the paper cuttings, which must be ready to be used during an offering. The images in these paper cuttings are the deities of nature who are worshipped. Essentially, they are the pure replicas of *totontcohuatlan* or *totiotzitzin*, and during a ceremony the Nahua give them offerings to ask for social well-being or to thank them. Alan Sandstrom, an expert on the cult of paper cutouts, completed a description and classification of the deities that are part of the spiritual pantheon in the Nahua communities of Ixhuatlán de Madero, a municipality near Chicontepec, and his work details the diversity of deities that still exist in Nahua communities. The work of Sandstrom (1991) helps explain the connections that exist today between the Nahua people of Chicontepec and the cult of Nahua deities represented on paper.

Both in Ixhuatlan de Madero and in the municipality of Chicontepec, maize is one of the fruits of the earth that is worshipped today by the Nahua people. The deity of maize, also represented on paper, is known as Chicomexochitl. Several narratives in Nahua communities describe how Chicomexochitl had an origin and came to be the maize god. In the *atlatlacualtiliztli* or *elotlamanaliztli* ceremony, the maize god is represented as a pair of infants who symbolize a sacred duality. At the time of the offering, accompanied by traditional music, women dress up the effigy of Chicomexochitl, sing lullabies to it, and dance a few steps with it. I believe the Nahua’s veneration of Chicomexochitl is also a way of reaffirming the connection with the deities, which establishes a connection between mundane and sacred. Do Nahua thought and its connection with nature have any sense beyond what we can imagine?

Two types of rituals are practiced in the Nahua communities of Chicontepec; the first consists of private rituals (Reyes García 1960, 41). These types of rituals
are carried out in the family home, where a ritual specialist called a *tepahtihquetl*, “healer,” comes in and holds a cure for the family to ward off evil airs and help family members enjoy good health. Healing rituals may counteract a disease or a spell cast by someone. Even when this is not the case, they are carried out to prevent any possible harm, for whatever the cause may be, deities must always be given offerings. Such practices purify family members and assist them with their daily activities. The second type of rituals includes collective ones: they set families aside and consist of communal religious ceremonies whose objective is to promote people’s emotional well-being and good health. They also feature petitions on behalf of nature so the gods may provide water to the fields and drive out storms and so agricultural produce is harvested during a good season. The ceremony named *elotlamanaliztli* is to thank the deities by means of offerings for the product of agricultural fields. There are many survivals in this ceremony, as one can attest the presence of religious components of Nahua origin. Moreover, all the people in a community are involved, even if they follow the Christian church.

Another important example is the interpretation of a phenomenon that may take place after carrying out the ceremonies for the god of maize. This is a phenomenon not only of Mesoamerican origin, to which each culture group has given an endless set of meanings. I refer to what is called *cualo metzli* or *cualo tonatiuh*，“the eclipse of the moon” or “the eclipse of the sun” in Nahuatl. When one of these natural phenomena occurs, for the Nahua it is a sign that harvests will be scarce and that there will be pests and disease in the communities. Hence, Nahua beliefs are still valid, for people have their own way of explaining natural phenomena and linking them to agricultural work and community life (Trejo Barrientos 2014).

The Nahua today have a strong belief in what is good and what is evil. The Catholic religion came with the mission of displacing Nahua religion. In the communities of Chicontepec, a process of amalgamation of good and evil took place within Nahua religion. Eschewing a belief in a theory of duality—based on the fact that Christianity has two entities, which are, separately, good or bad—Nahuas believed that a deity was good and bad at the same time, and they believed even more in their gods, even if they realized that the new Christian god was praiseworthy. However, the notion of evil was also made known to the Nahua. Under the influence of Christianity, in Nahua religion a concept with a demonic meaning was strengthened: *tlahueliloc*, “Malevolent, Wicked One,” which was conceptualized in the communities of Chicontepec as the Devil. The Devil was also turned into a deity whose characteristics were not solely malevolent ones, as is the case for other Nahua deities. This numen joined the Nahua pantheon as a deity of bad fate; therefore, the Nahua today grant it a measure of respect, and it has also become a focus for worship. People who raise cattle make offerings for their animals’ well-being.
because it is thought that cattle exist because of the generous kindness of the *tla-hueliloc*, and therefore “they pray that he may increase the number of cattle and material wealth” (Báez-Jorge and Gómez Martínez 1998, 55). Thus, I believe that the Christian religion did not replace local deities for the Nahua, but that it came to incorporate Christian saints and concepts within the Nahua belief system.

All Nahuas from the communities of Chicontepec probably regard themselves as Christians. However, only a minority goes to church and practices Catholicism, while the Nahuas continue to practice the rituals of *el costumbre*. What should this be called? Is it a mixture of both religions that have clashed, the result of a merger? Or do both religions subsist separately but, when practiced, set themselves apart from each other though minor components? For Christianity and *el costumbre*, it has not yet been possible to establish a clear boundary that specifies where one ends and the other begins, but it is possible to note the origin of each of their elements through the constant interaction between both religions. While Christianity forbids professing other religions, *el costumbre* opens the door to a belief in other religions to help reinforce the local religious system and provide it with more elements. Community members know that Christianity is a new religion and that their ancestors left them their ancient religion, *el costumbre*, which Nahuas, catechists, and ritual specialists have been able to preserve, despite its close proximity to Christianity.

To learn about the value of Nahua religion today, the analysis of one ceremony should suffice. In this case, it can be seen that Nahua religion continues to retain its value and that Christian elements can be observed. One cannot have a ritual ceremony today without the presence of both religions, even if conceived from within *el costumbre*. When a catechist practices the *motiochihualiztli* ceremony, he or she goes to the community, wherever the family is mourning. At this time the *motiochiuhquetl* arrives and begins to pray before the deceased, who is lying in front of the altar. In this ceremony the *rezandero* (a commonly used Spanish borrowing into Nahuatl, meaning “prayer leader”) greets Nahua and Christian deities and asks them to receive a soul that has ended its life on earth. The *rezandero* begins to pray in front of the deceased and later offers food to the deities so they will receive this dead person. All family members meet with the *rezandero*, and they say Christian prayers together. During the ceremony, incense and holy water is offered, while relatives put inside the coffin all the belongings the deceased used while he or she was alive. Finally, in a funeral procession, all family members take the deceased to the cemetery for burial. In this ceremony one sees the tangible value for the Nahua of a farewell to a dead person that contains all the elements of Nahua religion. One can also appreciate how elements from Christianity and Nahua religion are mixed together to give this ceremony greater cohesion, as these two systems hold each other by the hand to meet the objective of saying farewell to the deceased.
NAHUA CATECHISTS IN COEXISTENCE WITH CHRISTIANITY

I now turn to an analysis of the opinions of Nahua catechists regarding Christianity and Nahua religion. First, a widely held opinion is that the two religions are completely different because Christianity is governed by the Bible and Nahua religion is governed by the experiences a generation has had, which are transmitted to the next generation. Moreover, the Christian religion believes in deities who resemble humans and denies divine qualities to other deities that are not part of Christianity. In contrast, Nahua religion believes in deities that keep guard over elements of nature; it incorporates, if necessary, deities from another religion and integrates them into the Nahua pantheon. In the communities of Chicontepec, each religion has begun to adopt elements from the other to coexist with members of the community and to avoid segmentation as a result of a change in beliefs.

Three catechists who were instructed to catechize members of their own communities reside in the municipality of Chicontepec (Veracruz), in the towns of Tepoxteco and Chapichtla. At the beginning of the 1980s these communities continued to believe in the deities of nature, with a few notions about Christianity, which was taught in Chicontepec, the municipality’s head town. A group of religious individuals, along with Nahua people, arrived in these communities to tell them about Christianity. After a few months and a series of permissions and prohibitions, people from both communities accepted the Christian faith and built Christian shrines to continue their worship. Having accepted the new religion, Fulgencio Martínez Antonia, Cenobio Martínez Rosas, and Juan Bautista Martínez—all young people at the time—decided they would receive instruction to catechize the members of their community. Currently, these catechists are more than sixty years old. They have taken their evangelizing mission to members of their community, but in their own way. In the eyes of the Catholic clergy, they have acted with disrespect by departing from the law of God; but from the perspective of the Nahua in their communities, they have acted properly, since they continue to respect, value, and believe in the Nahua religion.

Hence, catechists think that Christianity and Nahua religion are no longer contradictory and that gradually they complement each other. The value of Christianity and Nahua religion remains, and little by little, each begins to accept elements from the other. Since the beginning of catechesis and through the intervention of catechists who still believe in the religion of their ancestors, the visible result today is that the Nahua knew how to best negotiate this evangelization. Instead of resulting in a religious shift, the process began with acceptance and continued with the incorporation of elements from Christianity into Nahua religion. That is why today, in the Chicontepec communities, there is an optimal coexistence
between religious systems and why good social relations among community members were maintained.

After the religious labor catechists undertook when they began their evangelizing mission, they were invited to pray in some private ceremonies, such as funeral ceremonies. Catechists came to accompany families who lost a loved one, and from this the motiochibualiztli emerged. In this ceremony, prayers are made to say farewell to the deceased. The prayers recited are of Christian origin, but the ceremonial practice is of Nahua origin. In this new ritual with Christian elements, it can be seen that the two religions are in contact and that cultural transfers between each other begin to occur.

My field research was carried out in April 2014, during Holy Week. The first interview was conducted in Tepoxteco at the house of Fulgencio Martínez Antonia, a Catholic catechist with over thirty years of service who has taken up the task of preaching the word of God to his neighbors. In spite of the years spent in his ministry, he continues to believe in the native religion of his ancestors. I then went to the community of Chapictla, where I interviewed three catechists, two men and a woman. The first, Cenobio Martínez Rosas, who lives with his wife and children, has been a catechist of the Catholic Church since 1981 and has completed thirty-three years of ministry service. In addition, he acts as a rezandero at funerals held in nearby indigenous towns. The second is the catechist and rezandero Juan Bautista Martínez, and the third is his wife, Magdalena Hernández Dolores, a rezandero and tetliquixtihquetl. This husband and wife shared their perspective on their role when they pray in private homes. It is important to know the opinion of these catechists and rezanderos, since the time in which they have worked as specialists corresponds to the time when Christianity came to their home communities and made contact with their local religion.

At the same time newly converted catechists began their ministry in the Catholic Church, the Nahua who practiced local religion began to hire them to pray to their dead. At first, the church objected to the catechists’ participation in funeral ceremonies because it was a practice from Nahua religion. Moreover, there was the risk that the participants would cast aside the Christian faith, since they were recent converts. The catechists tried to obey the orders of their new religion. Nevertheless, when their labor and presence were made public and since they felt connected to the requests from members of their community, they began to conduct clandestine prayers for individual families and were eventually known as motiochiubquetl (rezandero, singular) and motiochibuanib (rezanderos, plural).

At burial ceremonies or on the anniversary of a person’s death, the presence of a rezandero is indispensable; both cases combine Christian and Nahua religious practices. The rezandero says nine rosaries in the course of a day, eight in the individual’s
house and the ninth at the cemetery. At the start of the ceremony, the rezandero prostrates himself before the altar and salutes God, the Virgin Mary, and the other saints and then finally asks the deities of nature to accept an offering (commonly, the sacrifice of three hens) to honor the deceased. While the tequipanohuanih, “assistants,” cook the offering, the rezandero begins to decorate the altar and then recreates the image of the deceased using the clothes she or he wore in life. The representation of the deceased may be lying down or sitting on a chair. Food is then placed on the altar before the image of the deceased, and the rezandero is ready to carry out at midnight the Christian practice of “the lifting of the cross.”

In the early 1990s, the parish in the head town of Chicontepec granted Nahua rezanderos permission to carry out their Christian duties in funeral ceremonies without limiting them to the practice of their local religion. When they learned that the practices they carried out were beginning to be valued, some rezanderos who had performed their activities clandestinely continued to work, but with greater dedication; and more rezanderos joined in the traditional prayers. In contrast, the catechists and rezanderos who were influenced more by the Christian doctrine decided not to return to the practices of their ancient religion, as was the case for the catechist Fulgencio Martínez Antonia. This is what he said when I asked him in my interview how Christianity had arrived in his community:

Huauhcauhquiya nepa axticmatiyayah nepa tlamanntl, totoahhuan quipiayah tlanetoquill pan nepa chequecameh, nepa xocheh, totomeh, itsquilomeh, miac tlamanntl chequecameh tlahnexchihuah miac. Teipan maz nicanica Chicomexochitl. Ahcic tonatiuh, ahcico tlamanchtill pan tlahcuiolloli libroh tetoichihualli, techneltih catlin yecahuac totoiztin, tlen quinequi, quipiya hueyi chicalhualitztl tlamanchtill, huan quinon tohihuantin titlaneltocauqeht paneca tiquiexh tiquietzin ma techpalehui, ye ohtli tiquiexh ohtli, axticnequiexh ticnopolozcheh, tiquiexh tlamaquixtilli. (Martínez Antonia 2014)

Long ago we did not know [the things of the church]. Our parents believed in the winds, flowers, birds, ants, in many types of winds, and they made great ceremonies. Later, closer to here [today], in Chicomexochitl the day came, the teaching called “Catholic” came, the blessed book taught us which is the true god and what he wants. He has great strength in his teaching, and so we believed in him because we want God to help us, and therefore we believed in that path. We do not want to damn ourselves, we want forgiveness.

After the Catholic Church came to the community of Chapictla through the actions of the evangelizers, the catechist Cenobio Martínez Rosas was one of the converts who, despite actively participating and interacting with church members,
never abandoned the religion of his ancestors (figure 11.3). Rather, as a way to enrich his ancient religion, he adopted and incorporated practices from Christian liturgy, such as saying the Rosary, and he immediately transferred those practices to the funeral ceremonies. This was what he stated when I asked his opinion about his work and about being known and hired as a traditional rezandero in most towns near his village of birth:

Na nechtemoah porque tohhuantin titequitih pan capillah, nopa no ceyoc carrerah; huan tlen para ni motiochihuah, miac ayoccanah quinequih quiittazceh ni costumbres, ayoccanah quineltocah, pero para na nochi nicneltoca ni costumbres, totatah-huan techpohuiliyayah queniuhiqui tiitztozceh nicanin: nochi ma ticneltocacan, huan yeca nechtemoah. (Martínez Rosas 2014).

They seek me out because we work in the chapel. With regard to praying, many people no longer want to see the costumbres, they no longer believe in them, but as for me, I believe in el costumbre. Our parents told us how we will be here [in the world] and that we must believe in all [religions], and therefore they look for me.

**Figure 11.3.** Cenobio Martínez Rosas and his wife. Photo by Abelardo de la Cruz.
The parents of this catechist gave him the foundations of their first religion, which exist and must be followed in any religion, and that is why he continues some practices from Nahuá religion even though he is a catechist. Cenobio Martínez Rosas began his discourse by outlining a difference between his Christian ministry and the religion of *el costumbre*. He mentioned that they are very different paths and that because of the influence of Christianity, some people no longer believe in or value the ancient religion.

The statements analyzed below come from interviews with Juan Bautista Martínez and Magdalena Hernández Dolores (figure 11.4). I asked Juan Bautista Martínez his views on how some people in his community continue to believe in both *el costumbre* and the Catholic Church, and he argued: *puez, puez, igual, na niquitta para mero cualli porque tochicomexochiub, tlen ticoncauh millah, ica yanopa tiviviroab, ica yanopa ticmacah alimentoh tocuerpoh* (Martínez 2014), “okay, okay, the same, I think this is fine because our Chicomechitl, the one we go place in the *milpa*, ‘agricultural field,’ we live by means of it, we give sustenance to our bodies with it.” Juan Bautista thinks it is fine if community members continue to believe in the gods of their ancestors and keep practicing the ceremonies of the Nahuá religion.
Chicomexochitl remains the most important deity for their community because it is through him that they live, and he is the one who provides them with food.

Later, I asked Magdalena Hernández Dolores her opinion about the importance of Chicomexochitl in the lives of the Nahua, and she said:

Quemman quitocah pilcintzin no ticvelaroah no titlapopochhuiliah. Ticliyah nopa maícito como totlacayo, como toalimento, axcanah techcauhtehua, nopa quilliah Chicomexochitl, quennopa tictoah. No ticlazamatiliah Toteucco Dios, ma tech-bendiciaro, para to cuerpo para juerzah, quennopa. (Hernández Dolores 2014)

When they plant maize, we also hold a vigil for it, we also perfume it with smoke. We say that the tender maize is like our body, like our food, he does not leave us, we call him Chicomexochitl, that is how we call him. We also give thanks to our god so he may bless us, for our body’s sake, for energy’s sake, in that way.

In her argument, Magdalena Hernández Dolores talks about the respect Nahua people have for maize, the original representation of Chicomexochitl. She also makes an analogy as to what maize means for her and for most Nahua. Maize is seen as the body of a Nahua person, and, at the same time, it turns into sacred food. Finally, during the planting season, she asks God to bless the maize and also asks for bodily and emotional well-being. This couple and their relationship with Christianity, aside from mixing religious practices from both faiths, have continued to assign a special value to their first religion. Otherwise, they would no longer see maize as a sacred element and worry that people from their community may stop believing in the ancient religion.

The people from both communities, who are witnesses to the double religiosity maintained by rezanderos and catechists, are the recipients of an assimilation effect because they replicate their religion and thus provide for the continuity and transformation of the ancient religion. Still, people who have more contact with the Christian faith, a minority group of devout Christians who do not participate in indigenous ceremonies, fully accept the rituals performed during the year at the xochicalli, “house of flowers.” In addition, the people who are in permanent contact with el costumbre do accept the blessings Jesus Christ and other Catholic saints bring. They do not reject the new religion, but nevertheless they have limited involvement in the town’s Christian chapel.

THE VALUE OF NAHUA RELIGION FOR THE CATECHISTS
When one investigates the religiosity of catechists and rezanderos in both communities, as they speak about it themselves, and when one understands their opinion
regarding the indigenous religion they have followed for more than three decades, it is possible to know accurately the current religious status of the communities of Tepoxteco and Chapictla. Fulgencio had Nahuatl-speaking parents who educated him in a traditional way, and he attended elementary school for a few years. Everything he learned was based on his own experiences. His parents passed along their devotion to *el costumbre*, inherited from the ancestors, which he was to keep, respect, and continue, according to tradition. This is what he said:

> Quemman nicucuetzin nieliyaya axcanah nechilqueh notatahhuan canica ma nitlaneltocan, zan, zan niquittayaya tlachque quichihuayayah, mopiyopahtiyayah, quicuiyayah xihuitl, moochpanah huan tlaipitzah huan tlacotonah ica tecciztli, quihtoahnopa quitl cualli para axtimococoz, pero na zan niquittayaya, axcanah nicchihuayaya yoxcanah nicneltocayaya, za nictlachiliyaya. (Martínez Antonia 2014)

When I was little, my parents did not tell me what religion I should believe in, and only, only, I saw what they did. They used chickens for healing, took herbs, they swept and puffed, and they cured themselves with [chicken] eggs. They said that it was good, so one would not get sick, but I just saw it, I neither did it nor believed in it, I just saw it.

This fragment explains the meaning the old devotion held for his parents:

> Nepa notatahhuan quiihtohuayayah yahcaya nopa yehyectzin, nopa cualli nopa ohtli, para naman timochocoah zancheh, ticchihuah nemaihtolli para ma huetzi atl, para ma oncatlen titlacuazceh, iuhquinon quiihtohuayayah totatahhuan. (Martínez Antonia 2014)

My parents said that this was good, that path was a good one for getting together, for making prayers so that rain would fall, so that we would have that which we ate, so my parents said.

As an adult, after getting married, seeing that their neighbors came to the xochicalli to participate in ceremonies honoring Chicomexochitl, and remembering everything his parents had told him about his first religion, he went voluntarily to the ceremonies performed in the community. This is what he said:

> Quemman ya nihueyixqui, ya nimotlanquihuan niqutta cequin yohuix nouhquiya peuhqui niyahu, huan quena nopeyoh niyohuiyaya, nouhquiya nitzlachixtoya nopeyoh tlachque quichihuayayah: piyomictiyayah, mihtotiyayah huan quichihuayayah tlaculli, mihtotiah, tlapopochhuiah, tlahtoah, momaihtoah, yanopa naman na niquittayaya inon tlamantli. (Martínez Antonia 2014)
When I grew up, when I became an adult and I saw that some people go there [to the xochicalli], I also started going, and yes, I would go there, I had observed what it was that they did there: they would kill chickens, dance, and prepare food, they would dance, perfume things with smoke, pray, say prayers, I saw those things.

After the arrival of Christianity in the community, he found it a good refuge in which he could develop his faith, as he stated that “God touched his heart,” and hence he was converted into a devout Christian. Later, while working as a catechist, he began to participate in the ministries of the Catholic Church until he was appointed coordinator of the community chapel. From that moment on, he has had a good relationship with the parish priests in the municipal head town. He has continued to abide by the Christian gospel and has served the community by officiating at ordinary celebrations on Sundays, the rough equivalent of a mass. Finally, he gives communion and speeches so neighbors and friends in the community can receive the Christian sacraments. As a catechist, he performs his office for church services but is also regarded by villagers as a motiocubiquetl, as he carries out religious activities in the community chapel. However, for private ceremonies, people choose to hire traditional rezanderos.

Through his evangelization work, Fulgencio began to notice that the community is split regarding religion. Half of the population has shifted toward Christianity, actively participating in the commandments of the Catholic Church. The other half has not stopped practicing ancestral devotions, and they continue to worship pre-Hispanic deities. They maintain a close relationship with, and keep their respect for, nature, land, water, rain, fire, and maize. They conduct ceremonies to ask for rain and perform acts of gratitude for good harvests. This is Fulgencio’s opinion:

Quemman na niquisita para macchuiłme nahuix onca, nahuix on xochicalli huan nahuix capillah, pues, nimopenzaaro axcanah queniuhqui, nouhquiya yehyectzin, iuhquinon quinpaquiltia mishhuantin. (Martínez Antonia 2014)

When I see people going to both parts, they go to the xochicalli and also to the chapel, then I think that there is nothing wrong with it, this is also good, that is what they like to do.

As to his perspective on the development of people’s beliefs in Tepoxteco, he states that he fully approves of the Christian religion in every way but that he is not consumed by jealousy because other people who have not converted to the Catholic religion opt to pursue the continuity and transformation of traditional devotions. Moreover, if it is their choice, they can opt to believe in either religion or in both.
Quena, na nictlepanitotta ome tlallamiquiliztli: nepa xochicalli, quena nicteltoca porque tocinihuah, tohuampoyohuan quichihuah ce campeca para ma tlaahuetzi, zan tequitl mocihhua inon, tlan iuhqui axiuhiquit totiotzin quinittta para quena momaihtoah; tlan monelchihuiliyah para ma tlaahuetzi, pues, quena cualli. (Martínez Antonia 2014)

Yes, I have respect for these two ways of thinking: the xochicalli [Chicomexochitl], I do believe in it because our brothers, our comrades, carry out ceremonies so that it may rain. It is not known if there will be any results, whether it is right or not, but the god sees that they do pray. If they indeed do make efforts so that it will rain, then yes, that is fine.

During his childhood, Cenobio Martínez Rosas grew as part of his family, and his first contact with any religion was with el costumbre. He was born and raised in harmony with the beliefs of his own culture. His parents taught him to appreciate the ancient beliefs, to participate in the offerings in honor of Chicomexochitl, and to have respect for the various ceremonies practiced in the xochicalli. The arrival of the Christian church in Chapictla was not enough for him to abandon his way of thinking about his first religion because his parents strengthened in him the idea that he would always believe in it, even if he also followed another religion. Therefore, he accepted Christianity. Cenobio’s parents probably knew that at any moment they would be urged to abandon their traditional beliefs. This is what Cenobio expressed about what his parents gave him when he was a child:

Quemman nieliyaya niyoquihipl quena no niyohuiyaya pan xochicalli huan yeca no nopayoh titlachixtiy auqueh, porque quen tictoah, antes ayiccanah tiquixmatiyayah ni tlamachtliztli antes tinellciayayah pan, ni naman, ni tlatalculiltliztli, totatahuan techilliayyah huan no techhiutcaiyyah, huan no tiquittayyah quenihuhiquit tlatalciatliah nopa costumbres, quemihuhiquit tlatalculiltiayyah ni Chicomexochicintzin, quen tictliah Chicomexochicintzin huan axquemman tiquilcahuazceh, maz que tixmatih ni tlamachtliztli pero ni no ceyoc, huan tlen ni tlatalculiltliztli na nochi nineltoca. (Martínez Rosas 2014)

When I was a child, I would also go to the xochicalli, and therefore we began to believe in it because, as we say, we did not know the [Catholic] teachings back then. Before, we believed in that, in the ceremonies, our parents would tell us about them and would take us, and we also saw how they gave offerings for our costumbres, how they gave offerings to the child Seven Flower, as we call him, Chicomexochicintzin, and we will never forget him, even if we know these [Catholic] teachings, but this is different, and as for the ceremonies, I believe in all of them.
During his work as catechist and rezandero, Cenobio has managed to safeguard and combine both faiths, mainly at funerals and on the anniversaries of someone’s death. He began his ministry in a way that resembles Fulgencio's career, with the exception that, for both of them, Catholic ministry has played a more pronounced role. Cenobio participated actively as a minister in his community, then began working as a rezandero in the homes of local residents and also in nearby towns. Cenobio commented on the importance performing his services as rezandero holds for him, about the food offerings, and he stated that his calling resulted from parental advice:

Monequi ma ticchihuacan atl, ma tictiochihuacan, para dios iconehuan ma momahtequican, para titlacuazcch timomahahtectoqueh, huan nouhquiya ma axcanah tiquintlachaultican ca nopa tlatalizcch tlaispan o costumbres, nopa no totatahhuan antes quiitztoquehya, ma tiquinmacacan manoh, solamente Dios ya quimati tlan cualli o axcualli. Tohhuantin ticchihuah lo que tlen quiitztoqueh totatahhuan huan yon pampa totahtzin axcanah hueli techprohibirhuilia. (Martínez Rosas 2014)

One needs to prepare the water [by muddling grass leaves], one must bless it so that God’s children wash their hands and eat with clean hands. One must not scold them when they go make an offering at the altar or when they perform their costumbres, this is what our ancestors did. One should give them freedom. Only God knows whether this is right or wrong. We do what our parents saw [what they practiced], and not even the [Christian] priest can forbid us from doing it.

Each of the towns of Chicontepec has at least one catechist and one rezandero. In the communities closest to Chapictla, although they do have a rezandero and their residents will not allow any interference from local religion and observe only Catholic practices, Cenobio is the one who goes and performs ritual labor during the year. He was asked why he was so often hired for funerals, given that there are rezanderos in each town he services. Cenobio stated that he is held in great esteem by his indigenous brothers. According to him, he is hired because he continues to believe in, practice, and make allowances for the costumbres of the ancestors because they told him how one must live and act in this world. In both interviews, the two catechists mentioned their belief in the Christian doctrine. Fulgencio believes in Christianity in a more active way; Cenobio combines practices from both religions in his prayers, even though he also follows Catholic practices. In contrast, Juan Bautista was one of the first converts to the Christian religion when Christianity arrived in his home community, and in 1990 he became a catechist, along with Cenobio Martínez Rosas. Subsequently, in 2000 Juan Bautista took the position of rezandero, and he involved his wife, Magdalena Hernández, in both offices from the beginning. She accompanies her husband’s praying and singing when he performs...
CONCLUSION

The Nahuas of the communities of Chicontepec carry out their religious life in close contact with the Christian religion, and even though such contact started recently, they continue to protect their religion so it will last for many more years, as perhaps the Christian religion will continue to encircle Nahua religion. Today, the Nahuas have managed to negotiate the coexistence of their religion with the practice of Christianity. What is exhilarating about this situation is that, to preserve their religion, the Nahuas have often accepted elements drawn from Christianity while Nahua religion continues to expand. The role performed by catechists, rezanderos, and Nahua ritual specialists is essential because through their ceremonies they continue to practice all the elements of the local religion, with some elements drawn from the Christian one. Through the opinions of catechists, it is possible to make a preliminary diagnosis of the vitality of Nahua religion and of the value community members attribute to it. In the motiocchihualiztli ceremony, one is able to see how catechists merge and incorporate Christian elements within Nahua religion in the practice of funeral ceremonies. I believe that through the practice of various private or collective ceremonies in these communities, Nahua religion continues to maintain the strength and vitality it requires to survive for many years to come. Finally, people are the key resource in the Nahua communities of the Huasteca region of Veracruz because these people have embraced the task of preserving Nahua religion until today through their own way of understanding their lives, working, and thinking.

NOTES

The research leading to these results received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union’s Seventh Framework Program (FP7/2007–2013)/ERC grant agreement no. 312795. This chapter was translated from the Spanish by David Tavárez.

1. Translator’s note: As borrowed into Nahuatl, the Spanish term el costumbre has a distinctive mismatch in gender agreement between article and noun, which distinguishes its semantics from that of la costumbre, “custom.”

2. Translator’s note: A translation of the Spanish term pueblos originarios, used here instead of “indigenous peoples,” just as “First Peoples” is widely used in Canada and the United States.
3. Translator’s note: While a common translation for *compadre* and *comadre* is “godfather” and “godmother,” in Nahua and Spanish ritual kinship, both terms refer to a couple who becomes, in social and pragmatic terms, the co-parents of a child and may take the role of the nuclear-family parents, if needed.

4. Translator’s note: *Toteuco* may have been derived from *totecuiyo*, “our sovereign,” which was used in Nahuatl catechesis to refer to God and Jesus Christ, while *totiotzin* is composed of a first-person plural possessive *to-*, the word *teotl*, “deity,” and the honorific suffix *-tzin*.

5. Translator’s note: Literally, “the moon is eaten” or “the sun is eaten,” a metaphor for eclipses commonly employed in Nahua and other Mesoamerican languages.

6. Magdalena Hernández Dolores is in charge of the *tlatliquixtiliztli* ceremony, which is done to put out the fire that animated the dead person so that he or she can rest and go peacefully to Mictlan, the Underworld.

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