

A DECLARATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM¹

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On behalf of the Nahuas of Ixcacuatitla, Chicontepec, Veracruz.
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Let all hear!

These our sacred words, beliefs, and practices (*tomasehualteotlatol*)³ are very beautiful, and although we have combined with them some aspects of those of the Catholic

¹ The original declaration is untitled. It appeared originally in Spanish and Nahuatl in *The Nahua Newsletter* No. 30 (2000): 2-5. I'd like to thank both Arturo Gómez Martínez and Alan R. Sandstrom, the editor of the *Nahua Newsletter*, for their permission to publish this translation of Gómez Martínez's declaration.

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³ *Tomasehualteotlatol* is a component of *tlanetokilli* which occurs throughout this piece. The word "*tlanetokilli*" derives from the verb "*neltoca*," which means "to believe something." According to Gómez Martínez, *tlanetokilli* refers to "a system of beliefs, faith, devotion and worship that is directed towards deities by means of rituals and offerings" (Arturo Gómez Martínez, *Tlanetokilli: La espiritualidad de los nahuas chocontepecanos*. México: Ediciones del programa de Desarrollo cultural de la huasteca, 2002, p. 11.) However, native Nahuatl-speaker and ethnographer Abelardo de la Cruz writes, although some authors translate *tlanetloquilli* as "religion," it is in fact quite "distant from its western counterpart.

Church, they are nevertheless *our* ancestral heritage.⁴ We have our own ways of devotion, giving thanks, and paying respect (*totlaneltokil*), and these are rooted fundamentally in maize and its cultivation. Yet we also perform devotions to water, wind, fire, and earth. We regard all of these – maize, water, wind, fire and earth – as sacred manifestations and expressions of s/he who give us life and sustenance. And it is for this reason that we conduct rituals with them in mind, that we pray to them, and that we offer them our foods and the lives of birds.⁵ We know that our deities (*totiotzitzih*) are powerful, invisible and intangible. We know that they inhabit

Rather than see their beliefs as part of a religion the Nahua conceptualize it as ancestral belief, linked to both tangible and intangible objects” (Abelardo de la Cruz, “The Value of El Costumbre and Christianity in the Discourse of Nahua Catechists from the Huasteca Region in Veracruz, Mexico, 1970s-2010s” in David Tavárez (ed), *Words and Worlds Turned Around: Indigenous Christianities in Colonial Latin America*, University Press Colorado, 2017: 267-288, 272). He adds, “*El costumbre* includes a search for balance among the elements in nature, gratefulness for agricultural produce, and petitions on behalf of the collective good” (Cruz, *op. cit.*, 272). Therefore, despite *neltoca*’s being translated as “to believe,” I would caution against an intellectualist interpretation of *tlaneltokilli* that stresses belief and faith and urge instead that we understand it in praxiological terms, i.e., as first and foremost as set of ceremonial and ritual practices or ways of acting in the world.

In order to preserve and recognize this difference, Huastecan Nahua refer to their religious beliefs, rituals, and lifeways in Spanish as “*el costumbre*” or “*los costumbres*,” i.e., as “the custom” or “the customs.” By replacing the conventional Spanish article “la” in “la costumbre” with their own article “el,” they appropriate the word as their own and distinguish their religious lifeways from those of Catholics and evangelicals. In sum, *tlaneltokilli* refers not to belief alone but also a system of practical ceremonies or rituals such as speaking to deities, singing, dancing, burning copal incense, gifting food and other comestibles to deities, offering the blood of live fowls, building elaborate altars (called “*mesas*” in Spanish) and cutting colorful paper figures of deities. For additional discussion of *tlaneltokilli*, see Alan R. Sandstrom and Pamela Effrein Sandstrom, *Pilgrimage to Broken Mountain*. Denver: University Press of Colorado, 2023.

Tomasehualteotlatol contains the word “*masehual*” meaning “common” or “indigenous.” Contemporary Nahuas refer to all indigenous peoples of Mexico as “*masehualmeh*” (plural, *masehualli*, singl). In pre-Conquest Nahuatl, it referred to commoners as opposed to noble persons. See <https://nahuatl.uoregon.edu/content/macehualli>.

⁴ Gómez Martínez here acknowledges the syncretic nature of contemporary Nahua religious lifeways, which have incorporated aspects of Catholicism yet still retain a pre-Conquest, indigenous core. The Nahuas’s pragmatic approach undercuts any orthodoxy. Cruz adds, perhaps paradoxically for western readers, that many Nahuas accept Christianity while at the same time also “practicing *costumbre*. *El Costumbre* is a religion that tends to be sympathetic of other religions – unlike Christianity. So they do not see them as mutually exclusive” (Cruz, *op. cit.*, 268).

⁵ Gómez Martínez here refers to the practice of gifting the life-energy contained with foodstuffs (such as tamales) and live chickens to deities and to “s/he who gives us life.”

different parts of the cosmos, and we know that they go about observing our behavior and our works, and that they punish us when we behave badly or when we do not offer them ceremonies.⁶ These deities created us, and they created the world and all that exists in it. And in return, they require that we reciprocate with them by gifting them a small portion of what we produce as well as a little music, copal incense, foodstuffs, and dancing.⁷ These are the reasons that we, the indigenous peoples of Mexico, celebrate rituals. So that the deities are not angered, so that they do not send punishments; we respect them and we believe in them. And we do so despite the fact that the Catholic priests, the Jehovah's Witnesses and other religions criticize, rebuke, and quarrel with us.⁸ However, our deities are the ones who help us most. After all, they are the ones who send the rains so that the earth will be fertile and so that the plants will grow and provide us with healthy fruits and vegetables, thus keeping us from suffering hardship and hunger. It is therefore important that we respect our ancient traditions devoted to the deities so that we do not provoke the ire of the deities and so that the deities continue helping us. It is critical that those who care for *Chicomexochitl* (7 Flower) do not abandon him; that they offer him rituals, foodstuffs, music, flowers, and dancing.⁹ There are people who persecute us for our religious customs and

⁶ Nahua deities are aspects of a single life-force called *totiotzin* (literally, "our honored deity"), the impersonal, all-encompassing pantheistic life-force comprising and energizing the universe and all its inhabitants. Although invisible and intangible, Nahua deities do not occupy a distinct ontological "supernatural" world distinct from the natural world. There being no nature vs. supernature distinction, the deities are all around us in maize plants, springs, caves, hills, fire, wind, etc. Their being intangible and invisible marks their epistemological, not their ontological status. As Gómez Martínez makes clear below, Chicontepec Nahua access these deities via cut-paper figures (*teixiptlahuan*) that embody and make deities directly present to humans. For further discussion of Nahua pantheism, see Gómez Martínez (2002) and Sandstrom and Sandstrom (2023).

⁷ Dancing, music (singing and instrumental), copal incense, and foodstuffs (such soft drinks, aguardiente, cookies, and tamales) contain life-energy which Nahuas reciprocally gift to deities to give thanks for and give in exchange for their having been created as well as for such benefits as rain and crop fertility. In doing so, they also help guarantee the circulation of life-energy and future agricultural fertility.

⁸ Protestant evangelicals are also guilty of abuse. Nahuas (and other indigenous peoples) who follow traditional indigenous religious ways (*los costumbres*) are persecuted by those who do not follow them, be they indigenous or not.

⁹ Chicomexochitl (7 Flower) is the male aspect of the maize deity, while Macuilxochitl (5 Flower) is the female aspect. Both are said to be "the owners (*dueños*) of maize." They consist of the life-force – *chicahualiztli* – which is contained within maize and which is transferred to humans upon eating maize, and which humans in return gift back to the deities so that maize may be reborn as the next maize crop. Just as the deities feed humans so likewise humans feed the deities. Humans and deities exist in a symbiotic relationship.

practices (*totlaneltokil*), but we should ignore them, because we, too, have the right to practice and express our faith. They criticize our customs, arguing that our gods (*totiotzitzah*) do not really consume the foods we offer them.¹⁰ However, these critics are not paying attention, they are ill-informed. Our god (*toteco*) wants reciprocity from us. We should not only ask from him but we must also offer him a little of what we receive in return. You fellow indigenous peoples know that if the deities receive our gifts and if we communicate with them by means of copal incense smoke, music, and prayers – that is if we perform our devotions properly – then the deities will bring rain when we ask for rain and will protect our harvest.

Our traditions, customs, and practices (*totlaneltokilli*) are beautiful. The most obvious evidence of this is our colorful, cut-paper figures of deities and other nonhuman spirit beings (*espíritus*) who are helpers of the principal deities.¹¹ It is also imperative that we respect our sacred places. The hills, springs, caves and ancient (archaeological) ruins are sensitive places.¹² We have to reinvigorate our ceremonies (*tlaneltokil*) by conveying the knowledge of how to conduct them, because in this way we will preserve them as much as possible in their original form (albeit with modifications). We must ourselves begin to respect and value our beliefs and lifeways. That is the only thing that we have left as indigenous people. If we do not do it, then non-indigenous persons will not do so, either.

These our traditional medicine and the entire indigenous system of treating disease (*masehualpahtli*) are very important, very good, since we indigenous people (*masehualmeh*) have our own culture and methods of curing. It is always good that we consult our indigenous curers, since they can cure us of spiritual illnesses.¹³ Being

¹⁰ Such critics point out that the foods offered remain wholly present and intact after allegedly being consumed by deities. The Nahuas respond that the deities consume the “spiritual” or life-energy essence contained within foodstuffs, say tamales, while leaving behind the tamales’ material form. Being consumed by deities renders the remaining tamales tasteless and odorless.

¹¹ For extensive discussion of the sacrality of paper (*amatl*) and the ritual use of colored, cut-paper figures by contemporary Huastecan Nahuas and their Otomí (Ñähñu) and Tepehua (Hamasiipiní) neighbors, see Alan R. Sandstrom and Pamela Effrein Sandstrom, *Traditional Papermaking and Paper Cult Figures of Mexico*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986. The cut-paper figures are *teixiptlahuan* that embody and make present the corresponding deities, and in so doing make them immediately available for human-deity communication and reciprocal gifting. Cruz contends “the cult of paper” is “an essential component of Nahuas theogony” (Cruz, *op. cit.*, 272). See also Gómez Martínez (2002).

¹² They are “sensitive” because as living beings they communicate and interact with humans, and also experience love, care, neglect, anger, harm, respect and disrespect.

¹³ Such spiritual illnesses include a *susto* (“soul fright” or “soul loss”) which occurs as a consequence of a person’s tonalli life-force abandoning their body due commonly to some traumatic experience. The

based upon different beliefs and thus not knowing anything about these types of illnesses, allopathic (non-indigenous) medicine cannot cure them.

We indigenous people (*timasehualmeh*) should combine the medicines of the Western medical professional with those of the indigenous curer (*masehualtepahtiketl, curandero*) in order to obtain the best results and return to health quickly.¹⁴ When we feel ill, we should consult those persons who are able to divine the cause of illnesses by casting maize kernels. They are qualified to tell us how we ought to proceed, if it be an indigenous curing ceremony or visiting a (Western) medical clinic.

We must respect and carry on the rituals that we celebrate so that they are not lost, for they are part of our identity. In addition, they greatly help us in certain ways such as bringing together our ways of thinking and our ways of mutual respect. By means of traditional wedding ceremonies, a priest or respected elder (*huehuetlacatl*) weaves together and unites the family in marriage. *Elotlamanaliztli*, the ceremony of the young ear of maize (*elotl*), is very beautiful and with it we give thanks for the young ears of maize to the deities but principally to earth and to water. The ritual that aims at requesting rain called *atlatlacualiztli* must also be celebrated, since without rain there will be no crops and the sun will kill us.

To these, the deities whom we configure with ceremonial cut-paper figures, we must respect and render devotion. As for those who criticize us, let's not pay attention to them. Finally, even though some of these critics are indigenous, they do not understand what we are doing. They profess religions which are not their own and which they do not understand. What's more, they are indeed poorer than we are, for they do not realize that these alien religions are using and exploiting them.

These, the deities configured using colorful cut-paper, we must care for, respect, incense, and offer foodstuffs and music.¹⁵ As for those of who have a "*xochicalli* or

patient consequently suffers from extreme loss of appetite, depression, restless sleep, and lethargy. *Susto* is cured by a ritual cleansing of the patient and by the curandero's beckoning the patient's tonalli to return to the patient's body.

¹⁴ As this passage suggests, Huastecan Nahuas embrace a pragmatic attitude towards such matters. They go with what works, be it indigenous or not. Cruz comments that Nahua *el costumbre* is generally open to admitting new deities even if the deities originate in non-indigenous religions. The Nahuatl word for ceremony is "*campeca*." Cruz speculates that it may derive from the expression, "*ica nopeca*" ("in case it works"). This expression is used while carrying out a ritual (Cruz, *op. cit.*, p. 270).

The Nahuatl word for western medicine is "*coyotepahtihketl*" which combines the words "*coyotl*" ("coyote") and *pahtihketl* ("medicine"). Nahuatl speakers commonly refer to any people non-indigenous peoples and indigenous as "coyomel" or coyotes since they behave like coyotes who steal, lie, cheat and do not participate in reciprocal relationships.

¹⁵ See note #11. Spoken words, singing, music, copal incense smoke, aguardiente, soft drinks, cookies, tobacco, and tamales all serve as life-energy-containing foodstuffs which humans offer to deities, deities

house of *costumbre*” (“flower house or house of ceremonies”), care for it, cleanse it, and decorate it; and as for those who do not have one, build one, regardless of whether it be constructed of wood or concrete.

consume, and which nourish deities. This is an essential part of the reciprocal exchange of life-energies between humans and deities that keeps the cosmos alive and processing.