

ZAPOTEC PHILOSOPHY: STRUCTURE AND FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS

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ABSTRACT: The present article aims to present a synthesis of the structure and fundamental concepts of Zapotec philosophy through the study of some cosmogonies and foundational myths found among the Mixtecs, Mayans, and Zapotecs, as well as the linguistic study of key terms recorded by Father Córdova in his *Vocabulary of the Zapotec Language* (1578). The fundamental concepts that structure the thought of the *binnigulaza* –people (*binni*) of ancient (*gula*) light (*za*)– are darkness and light, synthesized in the phrase *xi-quèla* (light-darkness), as the absolute unity unified and differentiated by a third articulating element, the vital breath (*pe-tào*), which sustains the perpetual movement (*quèla na-zàa*) of opposites (light-night, fire-water) to maintain the balance of the primordial forces (light-darkness/fire-water) and make life possible. In conclusion, the essay argues that the complementary and differential relationship of darkness-light/fire-water is the foundation that upholds the philosophy of the Zapotecs.

RESUMEN: El presente artículo tiene como objetivo exponer una síntesis de la estructura y los conceptos fundamentales de la filosofía zapoteca mediante el estudio de algunas cosmogonías y mitos fundacionales presentes entre los pueblos mixteca, maya y zapoteca, así como a través del análisis lingüístico de términos clave registrados por fray Juan de Córdova en su *Vocabulario en lengua zapoteca* (1578).

Keywords: *Zapotec Philosophy; Binnigulaza; Zapotecs of Oaxaca; Isthmus of Tehuantepec.*

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1. The Study of Language as a Method for the Reconstruction of the Philosophical Thought of the Zapotecs

This article employs an interdisciplinary methodology that combines "decolonial hermeneutics" (González-Romero 2021) stemming from the decolonial turn proposed by Nelson Maldonado Torres (2008), "whose origin lies in horror at the 'world of death' created by colonization" (Maldonado-Torres 2008, p. 63), and a way to resist the "coloniality of being" (Maldonado-Torres 2007) through a Zapotec philosophy. To achieve this goal, I will utilize to some extent "language philology" (Cruz 1946; de la Cruz 1994, 2007; Belmar 2015) for the linguistic study of some words provided by the *Vocabulario en lengua çapoteca* by Juan de Córdova (1578). The work draws from a decolonial perspective by being cautious of the translations offered by Córdova—and particularly of certain words influenced by the late-medieval Christianity of the 16th century. To do so, I will analyze some words, review their translations and analytical breakdowns to compare the translations with Zapotec from the Isthmus and, whenever possible, with Proto-Zapotec. However, this will not entail a detailed philological study of the Zapotec language but rather means I'll apply philology to the study and "breakdown of some words to reconstruct the semantics and thus the embedded thought in the language" (Braque 1993, Swadesh 1978, 1960).

The work also seeks to recover some cosmogonic myths of the Mayas, Mixtecs, and Zapotecs to complement the "philological study of the Zapotec language" (Cruz 1946; De la Cruz 1994, 2007; Belmar 2015), which is considered a method that aims to achieve "a profound understanding of the language and literature whose philosophy is sought to be unraveled" (De la Cruz 1994) by comparing its current semantics with the Zapotec language of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, Mexico.² This work proposes that part of the cultural reconstruction of critical thought in ancestral cultures can be accomplished through the linguistic analysis of the Zapotec vocabulary by Juan de Córdova (1942 [1578]). In this way, I will conduct a study of the language, supported by "philology as a method for the reconstruction of Zapotec thought" (De la Cruz 1994), with the intention of "recovering the validity and sense of the traditions, even mythical ones, which should undergo a suitable philosophical hermeneutics" (Dussel 2015,

² It is worth mentioning that the author of this work is a native speaker of his mother tongue, Zapotec, specifically the variant spoken in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, particularly in San Pedro Comitancillo, Oaxaca, Mexico.

p. 93) to affirm them, reevaluate them, and elevate them to a dignified and necessary philosophical interpretation. "The method of interpretation (hermeneutics) is philosophical; the text or story may be mythical, poetic, or non-philosophical, but the result of the interpretation is hermeneutically a philosophical work" (Dussel 2015, p. 93).

2. Structure and Fundamental Concepts of Zapotec Philosophy

The present article is a synthesis of the ideas developed in the extensive book titled, *The Philosophy of the Zapotecs: Towards a Transmodern Global Inter-Philosophical Dialogue*, soon to be published. Based on the results of the research conducted, I consider that the philosophical structure of the Zapotec world is unitary (obscurity: primordial unity) and dual (obscurity-light), composed of two elemental forces: obscurity (*quèla*) and light (*xilla*, *peà-nij*) articulated around a third energy or vital breath (*petào*) that gave rise to everything that exists in the universe, in the cosmos, and the existing life on the planet. To arrive at this concept, located in the phraseme *xi-quèla*, or *cilla-quèla*, light-obscurity, I had to start from the analysis of myths about darkness-light, fire-water, sun-moon, etc., found among the Mayas, Mixtecs, and Zapotecs. A significant portion of these myths was recovered by Miguel Bartolomé (2021), who tells us that "day and night, light and obscurity, fire and water, sun and moon, constitute a very ancient archetype that appears in various mythologies worldwide, making it a universal theme" (Bartolomé 2021, p. 29).

In the precolonial *Vindobonensis Codex of the Mixtecs* concerning cosmogonic myths on page 52, it can be interpreted that in "the year and day of darkness and gloom, before there were days or years, the whole world was in great obscurity, everything was chaos and confusion" (Krickeberg 2022 [1968], p. 138). In the beginning, "everything was darkness and then came the light" (Ortiz 2006). From darkness emerges light -the primordial counterpart of obscurity- and with it time-space, days, and nights. "The Mixtec origin myth follows this scheme: at first there was darkness, for then light would come, in the midst of confusion the primeval gods arrive, who will give birth to the other gods" (Terrazas-Tello 2017, p. 88). Friar Gregorio García tells us that "on the Day of darkness and gloom, before there were Days or Years, the world being in great obscurity, everything was a chaos and confusion" (García 1729 [1607], p. 327).

The Maya-Quiché tale from the *Popol Vuh* (2019 [1701-1703]) tells us: "Everything was suspended, in complete calm, without moving, with nothing

existing, neither time nor space [...]. There was still nothing together, nothing made any sound, everything was immobile [...]. There was only silence, rest in darkness [...]. Then [came] the Word [...]. And everything was made in the midst of darkness" (Popol Vuh 2019 [1701-1703]), pp. 21- 22). Víctor de la Cruz gathered some oral accounts in his book *Ti Libana Nuchsschi'lu* (A Hidden Marital Discourse); in which important foundational myths are collected to celebrate the marriage of man (sun-light-fire) and woman (moon-darkness-water) in Zapotec culture.

It is the original darkness. The air is going to blow, and it is here where the light comes. She, our mother, binds this marriage. They entered, raised their faces, and found the light of the creative breath. Ha! Only then did they find it, intelligence guided them until they beheld the sky and reached where God is (Orozco cited by De la Cruz 2007, p. 146).

From "the original darkness. The air is going to blow, and it is here where the light comes" (Orozco cited by De la Cruz 2007, p. 146) emerges the earth and life. In this cosmogonic context, I understand the air as the creator's breath, the vital energy that emerges with the birth of light, the living fire. I propose the following scheme: from darkness will emerge light, and from light, the vital breath. The wind or vital energy is associated with the appearance of the sun. However, the "light of the creator's breath" (De la Cruz 2007, p. 154) comes from the primordial darkness. So, what is darkness? and how to understand its pre-original qualities before the emergence of light and vital energy.

In Nahuatl philosophy, there is a self-generating force that appears implied in the term "*moyocoyatzin*: *Ayac oquiyocux*: 'no one made or invented it; *ayac oquipic*: 'no one gave it being or form [...], *Moyocoyani* 'the one who invents himself" (León-Portilla, 1977 [1956], p. 165, p. 170), Darkness is the uncaused energy that gives origin to everything, but it itself has no origin, beginning, or end. I can say that darkness 'no one invented or gave it form; it exists beyond all time and place' (León-Portilla, 1977 [1956], p. 170), as it contains time and space within itself before the creation of everything.

The notion of darkness is found in the Zapotec word "*quèla*" or "*quèela*" as recorded by Friar Córdova in the ancient Zapotec of the Oaxaca Valley, meaning "to be the being of anything" (folio 377, column 3) or "night the night" (folio 283, column 2). In studies conducted by the Zapotec philosopher Gregorio López y López (1955, 1947), readers are told that "*quèla*," or "*guenda*" and/or "*guela*" as

is pronounced in the Istmo Zapotec, is darkness or depth, meaning something that is deep, great, profound, or far from light. Additionally, López y López tells us that "guenda" is "a unitary and absolute whole in which things are found as parts [...], the unity from which all things emerge" (López y López 1955, p. 89).

The primordial darkness is seen as a unitary whole that contains everything and where all originates, being the original unity and the principle from which everything emerges. It is described as an "unfathomable energy" (López y López 1961, p. 15) or an "eternal source of creative power" (León-Portilla 1979 [1956], p. 177). The darkness represented by the term "*quèla*" contains the "idea of motherhood: the gravity of things manifesting everywhere. The principle is mother, she is "the mother of all things in labor"... an unfathomable energy that produces, gives birth, and generates all things. Therefore, "Guenda gives birth to everything; it gives birth to actions, thoughts, gives birth to the world and to God. Moreover, what can we talk about if not what being gives birth to? Even more: being (guenda) also gives birth to language itself, gives birth to the word, gives birth to the logos" (López y López 1961, p. 16) gives birth to light.

Our wise Zapotec, Wilfrido C. Cruz, was probably the first and only one to say that darkness (*quéla*) and light (*cilla*) are the metaphysical foundation of Zapotec mentality. The "words *cilla* and *guéela* constitute the pillars of a transcendental dualism in Zapotec mythology" (Cruz 1946, p. 58) that encompasses both their actions and their being. The relationship between darkness and light is, in my view, the philosophical foundation of the Zapotecs. This is what I will argue throughout this article.

3. Darkness and Light. Essence and fundamental concepts.

Let's examine darkness as the first primordial force that gives rise to everything. Gregorio López y López, in a small text titled Zapotec Philosophy (1955), initially presents some of the central concepts of *binnigulaza* thought. One of them is the notion of *quèla*, *guèla* or *guenda*, as it is called in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, which basically means darkness, night, but also connotes depth and unknowingness. In Juan de Córdova's vocabulary, I find the term *quèla* as "to be the being of anything" (folio 377, column 3), although the linguistic function of "*quèla*" is to serve as a "nominative" and "verbal noun" according to the *Arte de la lengua zapoteca* (2023 [1578]). But what does it mean to be the being of anything? As I can see in this complex translation, the words "being" and "the

being" appear twice, as two constitutive moments of the same unit associated with primordial darkness.

I want to propose a hypothesis of reading here, and I believe that the first being (*quèla* or *guenda*) is associated with darkness, and the "being" (*cilla* or *pèanij*) is linked to light. The unity of both shows the essence of anything. Darkness is being or the essence of the being of anything. In modern Zapotec from the Isthmus, it is said *xiya-guéla* (*xilla-quèla*) or *xerá-guéla* when the night is ending, clearing, or becoming light during the dawn process. Our hypothesis is that darkness is being (the primordial essence) and the "being" is the light that constitutes the fundamental unity (*xilla-quèla*) of darkness cleared by the sun at dawn. This is what I will argue in the following pages.

For Gregorio López y López, the absolute and total notion, the deepest and most universal, the most abstract and general concept found within Zapotec thought is expressed by the term "GUENDA" (López y López 1955, p. 4) or "*quèla*" as recorded by Córdova in the Oaxaca Valley. López y López arrived at this reconstruction of "*guenda*" through the analysis of the language, noting that this term is used in many linguistic expressions such as *guenda-nabani*, *guenda-róo*, etc. Córdova, in his work *Arte del idioma zapoteco* (1886 [1578]), emphasizes the importance of "*quèla*" by stating that it serves as a "nominative" and "verbal name" given that "*quela*, has countless meanings and such strength that wherever it is employed, it carries meanings along with it, and brings everything together" (Córdova 1886 [1578]), p. 106). In the *Arte del idioma zapoteco*, Córdova notes that "*quela*" primarily means "until" or "until that" (Córdova 1886 [1578]), p. 106) or "it signifies the being of man or his property, xiquela peni" (Córdova 1886 [1578]), p. 106).

"Why is *quèla* or *guenda* considered the deepest and most universal notion found in the Zapotec thought? And how is being related to darkness?" I searched in Córdova's vocabulary and found that *quèla* or *quèela* means "at night" (folio 117, column 1), it also means "property or essence of anything" (folio 330, column 2) or "essence or being" (folio 187, column 3). Darkness is being, the unity from which everything is born and originates. But what is darkness? It is the deep, the profound, where light cannot reach and therefore remains as an incomprehensible, deep, unknown zone.

The darkness is the originating unity from which everything is born, the being, the principle from which everything sprouts, emerging into the light. But what is this being and how does it relate to darkness? One of the few words recorded by

Father Córdova for "being" is "*titacacani*," which was translated as "being" (folio 377, column 3). "Now, the access we have to delve into the semantics of this word is the Zapotec language, and we are going to attempt to break down the word in the following way: *ti-taca-cani* or *pita càca-ni* according to Córdova's analytical separation". It was found that "*titacaca*" was recorded as "happen something by occurring" (folio 389, column 3) or "occur" (folio 005, column 2). The lexical unit "*taca*" was translated as "power verb. s[cilicet]. power to make give" (folio 318, column 2), and in the variant of Zapotec spoken in Comitancillo, Oaxaca, Mexico, it is said "*ràca*" or "*gàca*," which means "to do." The linguistic unit "*taca*" was also recorded as "being or becoming. s[cilicet]. thread. Fis" (folio 217, column 1), or with the action of "throw the ball or bounce" (folio 059, column 3) or "to engender being with union" (folio 166, column 4). The particle "*ti*" or "*pi*" as referred to by Córdova in the analytical separation of the word, "*pi*" or "*bi*" as it has been vocalized in the Zapotec of the Isthmus, means air or wind, related to vital breath (*pi*, *pee*).

Meanwhile, the following lexical unit *cani* has several equivalents, such as "for, beyond, or too much". s[cilicet]. *es*" (folio 321, column 4) or "more" (folio 259, column 3), *tacaca* means "to get used to or use something" (folio 008, column 2), perhaps related to what is done or the action of doing or being. The first semantic link I find in the root *taca* or *ràca* of the verb "to be" is "to do," and doing encompasses the concepts of "[...] to be able to do to give" (folio 318, column 2); being is power, ability, and giving. In the Proto-Zapoteco of Kaufman, the particle *taca* was reconstructed as follows: "akka (N,C,S;Ch) vC to be able, to be capable//to be possible; to happen, to occur, to become//to happen" (Kaufman 2016 [1993], p. 11). Being and power are related, like the force to do, move, happen, or occur something. Let's remember that the term *titaca+cani*, which translates to "being" (folio 377, column 4), has other equivalents; for example, *tita-càca* is recorded as "to happen as an event" (folio 389, column 3), it is also found as "to occur" (folio 005, column 2) or that which happens, occurs, or appears.

Semantically, being is associated with doing, with the power to give, as the action of happening, occurring, or what appears as fact or given. Thus, the lexical unit "*càni*" also refers to being and doing, and when it is combined with the expression "*ni-càca-ni*," it is translated as "that which is to come, what is to be" (folio 422, column 1). In the variant of Zapotec spoken in Comitancillo, "*ni-càca-ni*" has been sonorized as "*ni-gàa-cani*," which is understood as that which must be done or what should be done, carried out at the moment or in the future of an

action; it once again indicates the action of doing something, the power to do, give, or carry out an act. Being here is associated with the power to do or the impulse to make something happen. Now, the lexical unit "*taca*," which I mentioned has been sonorized as "*ràca*" in the Zapotec of Comitancillo and refers to doing or accomplishing something, has also been sonorized as the expression "*nàca*," which in the variant of Zapotec spoken in the Isthmus means "I" or "what I am." The root "*nà*" or "*naa*" as recorded by Córdova means "mom mother of child" (folio 255, column 4) and interestingly, the beginning of being, of the self or what I am, is the mother, so "*naa*" was recorded as "I" (folio 236, column 3). In the Zapotec of Comitancillo, the particle "*naa*" has been sonorized as "*ñaa*," whose semantic equivalence is "mother."

Gregorio López y López, in his analysis of "*guenda*" or "*quèla*," tells us that the "Principle is mother, is gozaana of all things [...], motherhood: the pregnancy of things manifesting everywhere. The always imminent birth [...], revealed at every step its inexhaustible energy impregnating things with unprecedented violence" (López y López 1955, p. 90). This inexhaustible energy of the always imminent birth, or what always does or gives, can be found in the term "*táca-ca-tija*," which translates as "to endure always or infinitely something" (folio 148, column 2). *Tàca* has been sonorized in the Zapotec of Comitancillo as "*ràca*" or "*nàca*," which means to do (*ràca*) or I am (*nàca*), and the lexical unit "*ca-tija*" has been sonorized as "*catija*," which means that which is repeated, over and over, and I find it in the vocabulary as "enduringly" (folio 310, column 4), "enduring thing" (folio 310, column 4), or simply "perpetually or continuously" (folio 411, column 3); by adding both grammatical units, "*táca*" (to be or to do) and "*catija*" (enduringly), I could translate it as that which perpetually [*catija*] or continuously is [*táca*] or is done [*táca*] enduringly [*catija*], the "inexhaustible energy" (López y López 1961, p. 15) or "eternal source of creative power" (León-Portilla 1979 [1956], p. 177) of what continuously does, gives, grants, or bestows. The term "*nicatija*" means "infinite without end" (folio 234, column 1) or "enduring thing thus" (folio 148, column 2). The maternal principle is the force that gives, does, and accomplishes; it is energy, power, force of giving, birthing, engendering. The one who gives birth is the mother, the womb of the earth, the primordial darkness.

For example, the terms *xi+àa* or *xi+na-yàa* are translated as "to be iterum, the being that each one or creation has, and it is also taken as essence." (folio 377, column 4), the being is what each person has in their making, in their constitution, that is, the essence or essential part of anything. In the *Arte del idioma zapoteco*,

Córdova tells us that "to say, the being of one, they say. *xijnacapeni*. L. *xiquelapeni*" (Córdova 1886 [1578], p. 42). Therefore, the term *xi+n+àca-ni* is translated by Córdova as "to be the essence of anything" (folio 377, column 3), that is, the essence that constitutes anything. In Comitancillo Zapotec, *xi+n+àca-ni* has been sonorized to *xhi-nácani*, and is used to ask what does that mean. Thus, 'being' is the maternal principle (*xi* or *chij*), the clean essence (*na-yàa*) with which things are made. However, in this complex linguistic construction *xi+na-yàa* include not only being, darkness (*quèla*), but the-being, light, (*péa-nij* or *cilla*), its primordial counterpart, the sun, the clarity (*na-yàa*) of what is clear (*chij-yàa*) in the primordial darkness. Now, the term *xi+n+àca-ni*, which has the same semantic equivalence as *quèla* (darkness), is translated by Córdova as "to be the essence of anything" (folio 377, column 3). The particle *xi*,³ I consider it as the linguistic apocope of the lexical unit *chij*, which is translated as "day" (folio 138, column 4) or "time generally" (folio 400, column 4). For example, the morpheme *yy* has the same sonorization and the same semantic equivalence "day" (folio 138, column 4), *chèe* is also "day" (folio 138, column 4) and *copijcha*, which refers to the sun, is also translated as "day" (folio 138, column 4).

As for the morpheme *yàa*, it is translated as "recent thing or fresh" (folio 359, column 3), referring to what is green, fresh, like the clarity of dawn. In the variant of Zapotec from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, it is used to indicate what is clean (*na-yàa*), also what is high (*na-yaà*), up, meaning towards the sun, the generator of clarity and the clearing of darkness at dawn. From now on, in all linguistic constructions of being (darkness) and the-being (light), we will see the following lexical particles: *xi*, *chij*, *chee*, *xee*, *ci-lla*, or *chij-yàa*, as grammatical particles that refer to light, clarity, and dawn. In this sense, the particles *xi*, *chij*, *chèe* or *xèe*, and *cilla*, signify day, clarity, dawn, associated with the sun (*copijcha*), and it can be understood that the-being is the principle of light that opens, clears the original darkness at dawn.

The particles *xi* or *chij*, *chèe* or *xee*, *xi-lla* or *cilla*, are used to translate "day," and when the particle *xi* is combined with the morpheme *tèe*, I find *xi+tée* indicates "origin" (folio 295, column 1) or "beginning of everything" (folio 327, column 4), undoubtedly associated with dawn, the clearing of darkness by the sunlight. David

³ According to Velma Picket (2013), the particle "*xi*" evolved into "*xti*," serving as a possessive prefix. For us, "*xi*" can be a contraction of "*chij*"; "*xi*," "*ci*," "*yy*" can be contractions of "*chij*," and "*xee*" of "*chèe*." The terms "*xi-lla*" or "*cilla*" are used to translate as "day." The day or the dawn associated with the day is the origin or principle.

Tavares tells us that "the majority of the manuals used *xila* or *xilla*. This term could mean 'clarity', 'gift', 'cotton', or 'feather'" (Tavares 2022, p. 109) linked to the clarity or brightness of the sun and feathers with altitude. The morpheme *tee* has several equivalences, in this translation context I choose "ash" (folio 105, column 2); in Comitancillo Zapotec, *xi-tèe* is said to the ash left by embers, that is, what remains after the fire. The origin is associated with dawn, with the emergence of light, the clearing of darkness. The term *xi+lláa* has several meanings, some of its equivalences are "heat generally" (folio 068, column 2) or "heat of the sun that has in itself" (folio 068, column 2), and it is related to the principle (*xi*) of clarity, of what is clean (*llàa* or *yàa*) generated at dawn by the sun. The generating force of dawn was recorded by Father Córdova as [*coqui-*]*cilla-tào*, [*coqui-*] *xèe-tào*, or *coquixèe coquicilla*, which all have the same translation "infinite and beginningless god. They called him without knowing who" (folio 140, column 4). The lexical unit *coqui* was recorded as "lord of caste" (folio 377, column 2) or "great lord" (folio 377, column 2). Whereas the particle *xèe* appears with the following equivalences: "totally" (folio 407, column 2) or "eternal thing or eternal" (folio 192, column 3). According to Eduard Seler, "*xee* and *cilla* are synonymous. They are regularly used together as a compound, with the meaning of 'principle,' 'origin'." (Seler 2001, p. 16).

The morpheme *çoo* was translated as "time generally" (folio 400, column 4), and *quij* is "fire" (248, column 4) or "fire" (folio 201, column 3). The term *ci-llàa* or as I currently say in Comitancillo Zapotec *chij-yàa* is a clear day, *chij* is "time generally" (folio 400, column 4) or "day" (folio 138, column 4), and *yàa* is "recent or fresh thing" (folio 359, column 3), meaning a recent, fresh day, or the recent time of dawn. And the augmentative ending *tào* means "very, very early, very truly, very big, very morning" (folio 277, column 4), referring to the greatness, the supreme, and the sacredness of dawn, the clearing of the night. David Tavares tells us that "tao means 'great, sacred, grand'" (Tavares 2022, p. 140). By collecting the meanings of Zapotec, I can say that *co-quij* is the lord (*co* or *çoo*) of fire (*quij*), of the great (*tào*) day (*chij*), clean, clear (*yàa*). It is the great (*tào*) lord (*co* or *çoo*) of the time (*chij*) fresh, new, clean (*yàa*) of the dawn (*ci-llàa* or *chij-yàa*), considered a god, "totally" (folio 407, column 2), great, generator of time, fire, heat, day, and clarity.

Victor de la Cruz (2007) locates said luminosity or "the creator principle: *Lòo Copijcha* (sun-face)" (De la Cruz 2007, p. 138) in the face/eye (*lòo*) of the sun (*copijcha*). Linguist Eduard Seler defined the solar star as "the creator deity that is

also the soul, the spirit, the living principle of all things and the lord of the morning [...] and of the twilight of the evening, who is also designated by the interpreter as the first light that illuminated the earth" (Seler 2001, pp. 16-17), cleared the night and gave clarity to the world. There are two primordial forces that sustain the order and structure of Zapotec philosophy: darkness and light. Darkness, which becomes a pre-creator energy that "contains everything within itself" (Lara-González 2004) where "everything was in complete calm, there was no time, no space, and nothing was standing" (Popol Vuh 2019 [1701-1703]). From the "original darkness, light is born" (Ortiz 2006) as some interpret page 52 of the *Codex Vindobonensis*. A first force, darkness, associated with primordial waters, the moon, women and fertility, will have preeminence, since being is feminine, it is the force that gives birth, sprouts, because from it light is born, the clarity of the world. In the primordial darkness there was still no time, space, light, etc., but everything was contained in it as "the germ of all things" (Popol Vuh 2019 [1701-1703]). As the cosmogony of the Mixtecs has told us, in the "beginning there was darkness, so that later the light would come," (Terrazas-Tello 2017, p. 88).

There are two sacred forces or energies that constitute the metaphysical support of the entire Zapotec thought system. On one hand, we have the primordial darkness, associated with primordial waters, women, fertility, the humid, and childbirth. And on the other hand, we have the light, associated with the sun, the fire of life, men, virility, the dry, and procreation. This is "the creator deity or the androgynous god that unfolds into creative duality" (De la Cruz 2007, p. 143) to engender and generate life. There are two elemental forces: *pitào cozáana*, associated with the father fire, and *pitào huichàana*, related to the mother of primordial waters. I find that *cozáana* has the following equivalences: "creator or maker of all animals" (folio 098, column 3), "mother who begets or gives birth" (folio 252, column 3), or "begetter who begets or gives birth" (folio 167, column 1).

The term *pi+tào co+zàana* is translated as "creator or maker of all animals" (folio 098, column 3), "god of hunting" (folio 141, column 1), or "god of the animals to whom hunters and fishermen sacrificed so they would help them" (folio 141, column 1). Eduard Seler believes that "*Pitào Coozáana* or *Coozáana tào* can be translated as the engenderer or supreme father" (Seler 2001), associated with the sun, light, the man who hunts for sustenance, and "*Pitào huicaana* as 'goddess of generation,' the supreme partner of the sun" (Seler 2001). I found that *huichaana* is recorded as "creator of men and fish in this way" (folio 098, column 3) and "god

or goddess of children or of generation to whom women in labor offered sacrifices" (folio 141, column 1), related to primordial waters. Thus, for example, the lexical unit *huechaana* can also be understood as "water, the element of water" (folio 014, column 2), the humid, the woman.

While *Pitào Coozàana* is associated with the sun, the sustainer of all, *copijcha*, which was translated as "solar planet" (folio 383, column 1) or "day" (folio 138, column 4) and *huechaana* associated with primordial waters, or *cocijo*, "god[ess] of the rains" (folio 141, column 2), of the primordial waters, *niça* means "water" (folio 014, column 2). Water (*niza*) is associated with darkness (*quèla*) and the sun (*copijcha*) or fire (*chij*) with light. Interestingly, light, in its linguistic construction, integrates darkness (*quèla*) as a nominalizer; for example, *pianij-quela nayànij* or [*pianij-quela*] *xianij* is "light" (folio 249, column 2), which means that from darkness (*quela*) comes light (*pianij*), the clarity (*nayànij*) of the light of dawn (*pianij*), or the light (*pianij*) clears the darkness (*quela*) to illuminate (*xianij*) with its light. "The king star forms the day and the night; it generates with its apparent course over the horizon, time; it is the author of the life of all beings that fill the earth" (Cruz 1946, p. 49).

Fire-water and light-darkness are the two primary forces that engender and generate everything. The relationship fire-water, light-darkness is the essential unity that structures and orders the philosophy of the Zapotecs. Where we can see the union of both primary forces or energies, *quèla*, associated with darkness, and *chij*, *xi* or *na-yàa* at the beginning (*xi*), to the clean (*na-yàa*), to the clarity of the sun (*copijcha*), is in the following linguistic construction: *xi+quela-na+yàa* which is translated as "essence of man or thing" (folio 187, column 3), "being once more, the being that each one has or is made, and also taken as essence" (folio 377, column 4).

The term *quela* or *quèla*, as I have mentioned in previous pages, is "night the night" (folio 283, column 2) or "at night" (folio 117, column 1). While the last lexical unit *nayànij* was recorded as "luminous thing" (folio 248, column 4), "illuminated" (folio 024, column 3), "radiant" (folio 356, column 2), "shining thing" (folio 350, column 1) or "white thing with radiance" (folio 056, column 1). If I further divide the word *nayànij* into three morphemes *na-yà-nij*, I can say that the particle *na* or *náa*, means "mom mother of child" (folio 255, column 4) or principle and support; the particle *yà*, in the context of this translation, may be a suffix of adverbial derivation, and can be used to add or determine the clarity, the green, or the freshness of anything, undoubtedly associated with dawn. Córdova simply

translates *ya* or *yàa* –without delving into– as "bath of fire or heat like an oven" (folio 419, column 1) or "fresh recent meat or fish or such" (folio 200, column 3). The particle *nij*, was recorded as "murmur of people that sounds and is not understood what they say or is" (folio 278, column 2), specifically it is the "root of the verb speak" (De la Cruz 2007) which alludes to speaking or the action of speaking, manifesting or saying something in that process of clarity that produces light.

For example, if I divide the expression *nayà+nij* into two particles: *nayà* or *nayàa* means "clean thing water, clothing, glass, or mat, etc." (folio 245, column 4), "clear thing not turbid" (folio 077, column 2), "white or clear thing" (folio 056, column 1), and when it is "white thing with brilliance" (folio 056, column 1) it appears or is shown, all thanks to it, as "form or figure" (folio 199, column 3) like a "new thing" (folio 284, column 3), "pretty thing" (folio 246, column 2) or as "beautiful thing" (folio 053, column 3). And the root *nij* or *nñij*, as I have said refers to speech and day, so the clean is also in speech, in the word, in understanding.

It is important remember that the word "light" was recorded by Córdova as *pianij*, or more properly as *pea-nij*. The particle *pea* has many equivalences, including "style, mode, or manner, or custom" (folio 190, column 2) or as "property or being of any object" (folio 330, column 2), and in this context of translation, it can be understood as the being of anything, or the essence (*pea*) of speech (*nij*). Now, if I subdivide the lexical unit *pe-a* into two more elementary particles, *pe* or *pee* is "wind or air" (folio 425, column 4), "soul or spirit" (folio 022, column 4) or "spirit or breath" (folio 186, column 4), the suffix *-a* accompanies the lexeme *pe-a* to indicate, in a grammatical function, that this force or breath is the essence or way of being of someone. And the lexeme "*nij* is the root of the verb 'to speak'" (De la Cruz 2007). So, light is the force or impulse of speaking, of clarifying, clearing with words. Light is also integrated in the linguistic construction of life, where *ti+çòo-pàni-a* means "to have life" (folio 425, column 3), and *ti+çòo-nàa-ya* has the same translation "to have life" (folio 425, column 3).

The particle *ti* serves in this context of translation as a habitual prefix to particularize or delimit something, for example in the Zapotec variant of Comitancillo, *ti-huachij*, it means one (*ti*) afternoon (*huachij*); the lexical unit *çòo* is "generally time" (folio 400, column 4) or "what usually happens" (folio 189, column 2), and in the *Arte del idioma zapoteco* (1886 [1578]), Córdova tells us that *çòo*, in its grammatical function, is a temporal adverb, *pàni-a* or *pea-nij* is to live or light, so *napani* means "resurrected or alive" (folio 357, column 3). The term

napani not only indicates the living, but also when involved in the linguistic construction of light and speech, it means "sharp or diligent" (folio 015, column 1) in understanding, in thought, in speech. In both cases, the lexical units *pàni-a* and *nàa-ya* refer to life, and in our context of translation of the Zapotec of the Isthmus, to cleanliness (*nàa-ya*), to the clarity opened by light (*pea-nij*). In the Zapotec variant of Comitancillo, *bèa-nij*, it means to see or look, indicating that the look or seeing is possible in the clearing, in the cleanliness (*nàa-ya*) opened by light; *xe-yáani-guéla* is translated as the night is clearing, it's dawn. Light is associated not only with speech, but also with life and seeing in the cleared, in the clarity of dawn. Life, speech, and seeing are possible thanks to the clarity of light that clears the darkness.

In the beginning, let us remember that it is "the original darkness [after it]. The air will blow, and it is here where the light comes." (Orozco, cited by De la Cruz 2007, p. 146). The air or vital breath is associated, as I have shown, with the light. However, in our view, following the scheme indicated by the *Popol Vuh* and the *Codex Vindobonensis*, first there is darkness and then comes light, and from it, vital breath is born or comes along with it. Light is a manifestation of the energy of life, of vital heat. Therefore, the third concept in the philosophy of the Zapotecs that articulates both is the term *Pe-tào* or *Pi-tào*. *Pe-tào* is "the breath of life, the basic force in living beings that drives to remain and preserve life" (Cruz 1935a, 1935b, 1946, De la Cruz 2007; Marcus 2008).

Francisco de Burgoa interprets the lexical unit *pi-tào* as the "soul of the world" (Burgoa 1989 II [1674]) or the "great breath" (Cruz 1935a, 1946) that sustains all things with life. In Zapotec philosophy, everything "that breathes and speaks has life. Life is breath and breath is air. According to the Zapotecs, this element is essential for the existence of all beings and so important that from a transcendental, psychic, and mythological point of view" (Cruz 1946, p. 126). In Córdova's vocabulary, *pi-tào* appears as "true living God" (folio 140, column 4) from his Christian perspective. Although Joyce Marcus (2008) considers that "*pe-tào* or *pi-tào*, is not a God with Christian properties, but an animated vital force that is in all things." Breaking down *pe-tào*, I can say that *pe* or *pee* is "breath" (folio 022, column 2) "spirit or breath" (folio 186, column 4) or "soul of someone" (folio 029, column 2). In the Isthmus Zapotec, the lexical unit *pe* or *pèe* has been sonorized into *be* or *bi*, which colloquially means air or wind. In fact, the grammatical root that generally implies mobility and action in animals, plants, and

all natural beings and phenomena "is pe, pi, be, bi, a name for air, breathing, the element that animates everything that lives or moves" (Cruz 1946, p. 47).

The intensification particle "tào" was recorded as "very, very before, very truly, very big, very early morning" (folio 277, column 4), which functions as a grammatical augmentative ending to indicate that something is very big, superior, high, or supreme. If I gather the senses of both morphemes, pe+tào or pi+tào literally means breath (pe) supreme (tào), "great breath" (Wilfrido 1935a, 1946) or, by semantic transposition, energy/impulse (pe) sacred (tào). For example, I can see more clearly, in the lexical unit penepàa, the conceptualization of pe-tào as energy/breath that propels or moves something, which was translated by Córdova with the following meanings: "life - the vital principle, in the animal, or in the man who moves and gives life" (folio 425, column 3), "spirit - the one that gives life to what lives and gives it motivating virtue and being" (folio 186, column 4), "polr of our heart" (folio 323, column 3) or "pulse - that which makes it beat, which is the virtue" (folio 333, column 2). But it was also recorded in Córdova's vocabulary as "generative virtue in women" (folio 427, column 2), "motivating and vegetative virtue" (folio 427, column 2), "power or generative or productive force that every seed has" (folio 323, column 3) or simply as "virtue of any natural thing that gives it being" (folio 427, column 3).

Pe-tào is the great (*tào*) being (*pe*), the great breath, the supreme spirit that animates all things to emerge, to remain alive, it is the vital principle that keeps all things alive created by the relationship of darkness/light in the cosmos and fire/water on the earth. *Pe-tào* is the great breath contained in the primordial darkness, which when producing light, generates the vital breath of all things. *Pe-tào* is what holds together, in a moving trinity, the darkness and the light; the vital breath (*pe-tào*) is the third co-primeval element that puts in differential and complementary relationship darkness (*quèla*) and light (*pea-nij*). Mathematically, darkness would be the One, the cosmic egg that contains everything, and light would be the Two, the cosmic unfolding of light, to generate the Three, the breath, the vital energy contained in the original darkness and that becomes manifest or visible when light emerges. The vital breath is the third binding force that simultaneously unites and separates light and darkness, generating life. Conceptually, darkness could be the Tloque Nahuac that Francisco Javier Clavijero translated as "one who has everything within himself" (Clavijero 1917, p. 254). From the darkness that "has everything within itself," light emerges, and

from this emerges the great vital breath that sustains and maintains life, which is why I speak of "the light of the creator breath" (De la Cruz 2007, p. 146).

Philosophically, darkness represents stillness, as stated in the *Popol Vuh*, where it is mentioned that initially "everything was in complete calm, there was no time and space, and nothing was standing" (2019 [1701-1703]); and from this stillness emerges movement, that is, light, heat, and from it, emerges the relationship that keeps together the opposition between darkness and light. In other words, it is the relationship (vital breath) that keeps movement (light) in stillness (darkness). Stillness (darkness-*quèla*) generates movement (light-*chij*), and this produces the relationship (vital order-*pe-tào*) that keeps united, but not completely together, both supreme forces (darkness/light) to sustain the energy of the cosmos and the vital order on earth. The fundamental unity of both forces can be seen in *chij, quèla* which Córdova translates as "day and night" (folio 138, column 4), light and darkness. That is why when both sacred energies, light and darkness, are united, it is called *xi+quela* or *chij-quèla*, which is translated as "being the being of anything" (folio 377, column 3). And when the being of light (*xi, cij, cilla, pea-nij*) and the being of darkness (*quèla*) are united with the great (*tào*) impulse (*pe/pèe*), or the vital breath (*pe-tào*), in this complex linguistic construction *xi+quela n+àca %dios*, it means "being the being of god" (folio 377, column 3), but not the Judeo-Christian God of Córdova, but the absolute unity, the third binding force, the vital breath (*pe-tào*) that unites and separates in movement the mother darkness/water and the father light/fire.

The vital breath (*pe-tào*) is what maintains the harmony of the opposing forces (*chij-quèla*), the balance of the vital order (*pe-tào*) that darkness (*quèla*) and light (*xi, cij, xilla, chèe, péanij*) have creatively generated in the universe and on planet Earth. The lexical unit *pe-tào* also signifies movement, which, along with light (*pej-nij*), moves and sustains things. *Quela nazàa* or *quela cànazàa* are translated as "movement," *quèla* is being or principle of action, doing, giving, and *nazàa* or *cànazàa* in the Zapotec language of the Isthmus means to walk or what is walking, what is in motion, in other words, alive (*na-pèa-nij*), or that which has life (*pe-tào*), life and movement have the same linguistic construction, *lé-cana-zàa* is "to live," what moves has life.

The third basic element is the breath (*pe* or *pèe*) or movement (*quela nazàa*), also recorded by Córdova as *xòo*, meaning "impetus" (folio 231, column 1), "earthquake" (folio 395, column 4), or more accurately as "effort of man with which he works, or vigor," (folio 083, column 4); in other words, the principle, the

force that moves and sustains everything. Therefore, we can talk about *pe-tào xòo*, the great (*tào*) breath (*pe* or *pèe*), of the force (*xòo*), of vital movement (*pe-tào xòo*), and since vital energy is contained in the primordial darkness and in the light that makes it emerge, I can speak of *pe-tào quèla* (dark energy) and *pe-tào copijcha* (light energy) and *pe-tào xòo* (energy of movement) as the fundamental forces that constitute the vital order of life.

An example of the relationship between darkness (*quèla*) and light (*peaj-nij*) can be seen in the linguistic construction of the word for "thought" in the Zapotec language. The term "*quela-ticij-lào-ni*," which translates to "thought like this" (folio 309, column 4), breaks down as follows: "*quela*" refers to darkness, "*ticij*" can be interpreted as a day, and "*lào-ni*" as in the eye in the center. Through semantic transposition, I could understand "*quela-ticij-lào-ni*" as putting the eye, the gaze, at the center of darkness and light, representing the essence from which all things are made. In the Zapotec language of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the word for thought is "*guenda-na-beá-ni*," or following the schema of the language from the Oaxaca Valley as written in the 16th century by Córdova, "*quèla-pea-nij*," which combines darkness (*quèla*) and light (*peanij*).

A philosophical interpretation of these two terms, "*quèla-peanij*," which construct the concept of thought, allows us to say that thought is made of darkness (*quèla*) - the deep, the incomprehensible - and light (*peanij*), which seeks to clarify the incomprehensible within the word, in the heart. Thought in the Zapotec language of the Isthmus consists of two forces: darkness (*quèla*) and light (*pèa-nij*) that create life (*na-pèa-nij*), but also enable seeing (*pèa-nij*) and speaking (*nij*). The clarification (*na-yàa*) of the darkness (*quèla*), the profound, the unknown, allows for seeing (*pèa-nij*), speaking (*pèa-nij*), and living (*na-pèa-nij*). Thought is the light of darkness that illuminates, cleanses, and clarifies, shining with the dawn (*ci-llà, xi-llà quèla*) life (*na-pea-nij*), sight (*pea-nij*), and speech (*nij*). Thought is what clears away (*na-yàa*) the darkness (*quèla*) to illuminate, brighten, clarify with light (*pea-nij*) in the clarity (*na-yàa*).

The wise individuals entrusted with understanding and interpreting the deepest part (*quèla* or *guenda*), the heart (*làchi*), and the organizing principles of the cosmos, nature, and mankind were called "natural philosophers" by Bernardino de Sahagún in the General History of the Things of New Spain (De Sahagún 1829 [1545], p. 341). These "nature sages" (Matus 1994, p. 27), as our Zapotec intellectual Macario Matus referred to them, played a fundamental role in the lives of the communities. Natural philosophers had profound knowledge of

the cosmos, Mother Earth, and human beings; they were considered wise, in other words, philosophers. Juan de Córdova recorded in the vocabulary the term "*peni tana-chij*" as "lover of philosophy" (folio 196, column 4), where "*peni*" is person, "*tana*" or "*nàna*" as rendered in the Comitancillo variant of Zapotec signifies to know or be aware, and "*chij*" as I have previously established is day, time, or light. Therefore, a philosopher is a person (*peni*) who knows (*tana*) about the day, light, or time (*chij*) or is a person (*peni*) of light, of the day (*chij*) who knows (*tana* or *nàna*).

Another complex linguistic construction, "*[peni-]na+còo-pèa-làchi quela na+ciña o pènilàchi-qui+chijño ticha-q[ue]che-là-yòo*," translates as "wise philosopher" (folio 196, column 4), where "*peni*" is the person who "*na+còo-pèa*" in the Comitancillo variant of Zapotec means "*na-gòo-bèa*," or one who measures or has the measure of things, in this case, the heart, the will, the desire (*làchi*) to keenly (*na+ciña*) know or be aware of the being or essence (*quela*) of all things. Analogously, the philosopher is the person (*peni*) who has the will or desire (*làchi*) to know (*tana* or *nàna*) through the light (*chij*), the word (*ticha*) of all peoples (*q[ue]che*) of the earth (*là-yòo*).

In Proto-Zapotec, Fernández de Miranda (1995) reconstructs "**'za* (A, R, VA) *day*" (Fernández de Miranda 1995, 205), "*tza* (N, C, S; Ch) *s di*a//*" (Kaufman 2016 [1993], p. 48), and "**'za* (A, R, VA) *to walk*" (Fernández de Miranda 1995, p. 205). In the reconstruction of the word for sun in Proto-Zapotec, the particle "*tza*" also appears in its linguistic reconstruction as "*ko+ kwit za* (N, C, S, W; Ch) *s sun//sun; di*a//*" (Kaufman 2016 [1993], p. 48). Analytically, "*ko+ kwitza*" phonologically pairs with the Zapotec of the Oaxaca Valley as "*co[ko]-pij[kwi]-cha[tza]*" or "*co-pij-cha*," or "*go[ko]-bi[kwi]-cha[tza]*" or "*go-bi-cha*" in the variant of the Isthmus Zapotec; remember that the particle "*cha*" (*tza*) in Córdova's vocabulary means "all day" (folio 403, column 4). The morpheme "*tza*" or "*zà*" also comes in the linguistic construction of the sun ("*co-pij-cha*" or "*co-pij-tza*") where the particle "*tza*" or "*zà*" is day, undoubtedly referring to the sun, the philosophical foundation of time, day, walking, clarity, light; therefore, I maintain that the root "*tza*" is the day linked to the sun, in other words, the light. Therefore, I interpret "*binni-gula-za*" as the elderly people (*binni*) of the day (*za*), of the light (*za*), in other words, the wise old people, philosophers who have walked in time, in the light; hence the philosophy of the Zapotecs is essentially a philosophy of light.

4. Conclusions

Darkness is the energy that contains everything, it is the "original unity where everything is born" (López y López 1961) and from it, as stated in the precolonial *codex Vindobonensis and the Popol Vuh* (2019 [1701-1703]), comes light, its primordial partner that will accompany it to create everything that exists. Darkness (*quèla*) represents rest, and from rest arises movement, in other words, light (*xilla*, *peajnij*), heat, and from it, the vital breath (*pe-tào*) appears, maintaining the complementary and differential opposition between darkness and light. Rest (darkness) generates movement (light) and this produces the relationship, the vital order (*pe-tào*) that keeps unity, but not completely merged, both supreme forces (darkness/light) to sustain the energy of the cosmos and the vital order on Earth. *Pe-tào* is the great breath contained in the primordial darkness, which, by generating light, produces the vital force (*pe-tào*) of all things. *Pe-tào* is the vital energy that keeps unity, in a moving trinity, darkness and light; the life impulse (*pe-tào*) is the third elemental force that puts the complementary and differential relationship between darkness (*quèla*) and light (*pea-nij*) as the foundation of Zapotec philosophy.

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