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The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Mexican National Symbol

Eric R. Wolf

Eric Wolf (1923–99) was one of the most significant American anthropologists of the 20th century, serving as a leading advocate and clear exponent of a scholarly, politically accountable historical materialist approach and advancing the study of peasant or agrarian societies. He conducted fieldwork in both Latin America and Europe. Wolf gives central place to power (1999) and to historicizing (rather than abstracting or idealizing) culture, his book on the consequences for “the people without history” of European expansion (1982) has been particularly influential. Wolf’s approach is evident already in this early interpretation of a master symbol (in Ortner’s terms, a summarizing key symbol) that gained national importance in Mexico. The essay illuminates both the nature of such a symbol and the process of syncretism (cultural mixing). Wolf suggests how the imposition of Christianity was “localized” to provide continuity with pre-Hispanic (Aztec) religion, yet in such a manner as to conceal the continuity from the conquerors. He thus draws close links between religious practices, social change, resistance, and state power—themes to be pursued in Part IV.

Wolf also provides an insightful analysis of the Virgin as a mother-figure, thus implicitly illustrating that symbols can become especially powerful when they draw on both deep psychological and social structural dimensions (a point explicitly articulated in Turner 1967). Interestingly, Wolf draws on two kinds of mother-images which figure longing and rebellion, respectively. The Guadalupe symbol links the psychological sources with the struggle for class and national deliverance and dignity. For a powerful psychoanalytic interpretation of the Virgin in a different cultural context (Italy), see Parsons (1969), as well as subsequent work by Carroll (1986).

Occasionally, we encounter a symbol which seems to enshrine the major hopes and aspirations of an entire society. Such a master symbol is represented by the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico’s patron saint. During the Mexican War of Independence against Spain, her image preceded the insurgents into battle.¹ Emiliano Zapata and his agrarian rebels fought under her emblem in the Great Revolution of 1910.² Today, her image adorns houses fronts and interiors, churches and home altars, bull rings and gambling dens, taxis and buses, restaurants and houses of ill repute. She is celebrated in popular song and verse. Her shrine at Tepeyac, immediately north of Mexico City, is visited each year by hundreds of thousands of pilgrims, ranging from the inhabitants of far-off Indian villages to the members of socialist trade union locals. “Nothing to be seen in Canada or Europe,” says F. S. C. Northrop, “equals it in the volume or the vitality of its moving quality or in the depth of its spirit of religious devotion.”³

In this paper, I should like to discuss this Mexican master symbol, and the ideology which surrounds it. In making use of the term “master symbol,” I do not wish to imply that belief in the symbol is common to all Mexicans. We are not dealing here with an element of a putative national character, defined as a common denominator of all Mexican nations. It is no longer legitimate to assume “that any member of the [national] group will exhibit certain regularities of behavior which are common in high degree among the other members of the society.”⁴ Nations, like other complex societies, must, however, “possess cultural forms or mechanisms which groups involved in the same over-all web of relationships can use in their formal and informal dealings with each other.”⁵ Such forms develop historically, hand in hand with other processes which lead to the formation of nations, and social groups which are caught up in these processes must become “acclimated” to their usage.⁶ Only where such forms exist, can communication and coordinated behavior be established among the constituent groups of such a society. They provide the cultural idiom of behavior and ideal representations through which different groups of the same society can pursue and manipulate their different fates within a coordinated framework. This paper, then, deals with one such cultural form, operating on the symbolic level. The study of this symbol seems particularly rewarding, since it is not restricted to one set of social ties, but refers to a very wide range of social relationships.

The image of the Guadalupe and her shrine at Tepeyac are surrounded by an origin myth.⁷ According to this myth, the Virgin Mary appeared to Juan Diego, a Christianized Indian of commoner status, and addressed him in Nahautl. The encounter took place on the Hill of Tepeyac in the year 1531, ten years after the Spanish Conquest of Tenochtitlan. The Virgin commanded Juan Diego to seek out the archbishop of Mexico and to inform him of her desire to see a church built in her honor on Tepeyac Hill. After Juan Diego was twice unsuccessful in his efforts to carry out her
order, the Virgin wrought a miracle. She bade Juan Diego pick roses in a sterile spot where normally only desert plants could grow, gathered the roses into the Indian's cloak, and told him to present cloak and roses to the incredulous archbishop. When Juan Diego unfolded his cloak before the bishop, the image of the Virgin was miraculously stamped upon it. The bishop acknowledged the miracle, and ordered a shrine built where Mary had appeared to her humble servant.

The shrine, rebuilt several times in centuries to follow, is today a basilica, the third highest kind of church in Western Christendom. Above the central altar hangs Juan Diego's cloak with the miraculous image. It shows a young woman without child, her head lowered demurely in her shawl. She wears an open crown and flowing gown, and stands upon a half moon symbolizing the Immaculate Conception.

The shrine of Guadalupe was, however, not the first religious structure built on Tepeyac; nor was Guadalupe the first female supernatural associated with the hill. In pre-Hispanic times, Tepeyac had housed a temple to the earth and fertility goddess Tonantzin, Our Lady Mother, who — like the Guadalupe — was associated with the moon. Temple, like basilica, was the center of large-scale pilgrimages. That the veneration accorded the Guadalupe drew inspiration from the earlier worship of Tonantzin is attested by several Spanish friars. F. Bernardino de Sahagún, writing fifty years after the Conquest, says:

Now that the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe has been built there, they call her Tonantzin too.... The term refers... to that ancient Tonantzin and this state of affairs should be remedied, because the proper name of the Mother of God is not Tonantzin, but Dios and Nauztin. It seems to be a satanic device to mask idolatry... and they come from far away to visit that Tonantzin, as much as before; a devotion which is also suspect because there are many churches of Our Lady everywhere and they do not go to them; and they come from faraway lands to this Tonantzin as of old.8

F. Martín de León wrote in a similar vein:

On the hill where Our Lady of Guadalupe is they adored the idol of a goddess they called Tonantzin, which means Our Mother, and this is also the name they give Our Lady and they always say they are going to Tonantzin or they are celebrating Tonantzin and many of them understand this in the old way and not in the modern way...9

The syncretism was still alive in the seventeenth century. F. Jacinto de la Serna, in discussing the pilgrimages to the Guadalupe at Tepeyac, noted: "...it is the purpose of the wicked to [worship] the goddess and not the Most Holy Virgin, or both together."

Increasingly popular during the sixteenth century, the Guadalupe cult gathered emotional impetus during the seventeenth. During this century appear the first known pictorial representations of the Guadalupe, apart from the miraculous original; the first poems are written in her honor; and the first sermons announce the transcendental implications of her supernatural appearance in Mexico and among Mexicans.11 Historians have long tended to neglect the seventeenth century which seemed "a kind of Dark Age in Mexico." Yet "this quiet time was of the utmost importance in the development of Mexican Society."12

During this century, the institution of the hacienda comes to dominate Mexican life.13 During this century, also, "New Spain is ceasing to be ‘new’ and to be ‘Spain.’"14 These new experiences require a new cultural idiom, and in the Guadalupe cult, the component segments of Mexican colonial society encountered cultural forms in which they could express their parallel interests and longings.

The primary purpose of this paper is not, however, to trace the history of the Guadalupe symbol. It is concerned rather with its functional aspects, its roots and reference to the major social relationships of Mexican society. The first set of relationships which I would like to single out for consideration are the ties of kinship, and the emotions generated in the play of relationships within families. I want to suggest that some of the meanings of the Virgin symbol in general, and of the Guadalupe symbol in particular, derive from these emotions. I say "some meanings" and I use the
The Virgin of Guadalupe is a symbol that represents a goddess they called Tonantzin or Our Lady of Guadalupe as a mother figure. This goddess is still alive in the seventeenth-century image, as Tonantzin in the Serranía de la Serna, in images to the Guadalupe at the Plaza de la Constitución, it is the purpose of the family to worship and honor the goddess and not be afraid or both together. The cult of the Guadalupe during the sixteenth century was a symbol of the indigenous peoples of Mexico, apart from the colonial period. The first poems are the first songs, and the first sermons are the first sermons to express the sentiments of the Mexican people. Historians have long debated the history of the Guadalupe legend, which was the most important of the Mexican people, and the institution of the hciente Mexican life. During the colonial period, Spain was a colonial power, but the Mexican people began to express their cultural identity and the component segments of the community encountered cultural and natural phenomena. The Indian family pattern is consistent with the behavior towards the Guadalupe, noted by John Bushnell in the Matlatzinc-speaking community of San Juan Atzingo in the Valley of Toluca. The image of the Virgin is addressed in passionate terms as a source of warmth and love, and the pulque or century plant beer drunk on ceremonial occasions is identified with her milk. Bushnell postulates that here the Guadalupe is identified with the mother as a source of early satisfactions, never again experienced after separation from the mother and emergence into social adulthood. As such, the Guadalupe embodies a longing to return to the pristine state in which hunger and unsatisfactory social relations are minimized. The second family pattern is also consistent with a symbolic identification of Virgin and mother, yet this time within a context of adult male dominance and sexual assertion, discharged against submissive females and children. In this second context, the Guadalupe symbol is charged with the energy of rebellion against the father. Her image is the embodiment of hope in a victorious outcome of the struggle between generations.

This struggle leads to a further extension of the symbolism. Successful rebellion against power figures is equated with the promise of life; defeat with the promise of death. As John A. Mackay has suggested, there thus takes place a further symbolic identification of the Virgin with life; of defeat and death with the crucified Christ. In Mexican artistic tradition, as in Hispanic artistic tradition in general, Christ is never depicted as an adult man, but always either as a helpless child, or more often as a figure beaten, tortured, defeated and killed. In this symbolic equation we are touching upon some of the roots both of the passionate affirmation of faith in the Virgin, and of the fascination with death which characterizes Baroque Christianity in general, and Mexican Catholicism in particular. The Guadalupe stands for life, for hope, for health; Christ on the cross, for despair and for death. Supernatural mother and natural mother are thus equated symbolically, as are earthly and otherworldly hopes and desires. These hopes center on the provision of food and emotional warmth in the first case, in the successful waging of the Oedipal struggle in the other.

Family relations are, however, only one element in the formation of the Guadalupe symbol. Their analysis does little to explain the Guadalupe as such. They merely illuminate the female and maternal attributes of the more widespread Virgin symbol. The Guadalupe is important to Mexicans not only because she is a supernatural mother, but also because she embodies their major political and religious aspirations.

To the Indian groups, the symbol is more than an embodiment of life and hope; it restores to them the hopes of salvation. We must not forget that the Spanish Conquest signifies not only military defeat, but the defeat
also of the old gods and the decline of the old ritual. The apparition of the Guadalupe to an Indian commoner thus represents on one level the return of Tonantzin. As Tannenbaum has well said, "The Church... gave the Indian an opportunity not merely to save his life, but also to save his faith in his own gods." On another level, the myth of the apparition served as a symbolic testimony that the Indian, as much as the Spaniard, was capable of being saved, capable of receiving Christianity. This must be understood against the background of the bitter theological and political argument which followed the Conquest and divided churchmen, officials, and conquerors into those who held that the Indian was incapable of conversion, thus inhuman, and therefore a fit subject of political and economic exploitation; and those who held that the Indian was human, capable of conversion and that this exploitation had to be tempered by the demands of the Catholic faith and of orderly civil processes of government. The myth of the Guadalupe thus validates the Indian's right to legal defense, orderly government, to citizenships to supernatural salvation, but also to salvation from random oppression.

But if the Guadalupe guaranteed a rightful place to the Indians in the new social system of New Spain, the myth also held appeal to the large group of dispossessed who arose in New Spain as illegitimate offspring of Spanish fathers and Indian mothers, or through impoverishment, acculturation or loss of status within the Indian or Spanish group. For such people, there was for a long time no proper place in the social order. Their very right to exist was questioned in their inability to command the full rights of citizenship and legal protection. Where Spaniard and Indian stood squarely within the law, they inhabited the interstices and margins of constituted society. These groups acquired influence and wealth in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but were yet barred from social recognition and power by the prevailing economic, social and political order. To them, the Guadalupe myth came to represent not merely the guarantee of their assured place in heaven, but the guarantee of their place in society here and now. On the political plane, the wish for a return to a paradise of early satisfactions of food and warmth, a life without defeat, sickness or death, gave rise to a political wish for a Mexican paradise, in which the illegitimate sons would possess the country, and the irresponsible Spanish overlords, who never acknowledged the social responsibilities of their patriarchy, would be driven from the land.

In the writings of seventeenth century ecclesiastics, the Guadalupe becomes the harbinger of this new order. In the book by Miguel Sánchez, published in 1648, the Spanish Conquest of New Spain is justified solely on the grounds that it allowed the Virgin to become manifest in her chosen country, and to found in Mexico a new paradise. Just as Israel had been chosen to produce Christ, so Mexico had been chosen to produce Guadalupe. Sánchez equates her with the apocalyptic woman of the Revelation of John (12:1), "arrayed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars" who is to realize the prophecy of Deuteronomy 8:7-10 and lead the Mexicans into the Promised Land. Colonial Mexico thus becomes the desert of Sinai; Independent Mexico the land of milk and honey. F. Francisco de Florencia, writing in 1688, coined the slogan which made Mexico not merely another chosen nation, but the Chosen Nation: *non fecit taliter omni nationi*, words which still adorn the portals of the basilica, and shine forth in electric light bulbs at night. And on the eve of Mexican independence, Servando Teresa de Mier elaborates still further the Guadalupan myth by claiming that Mexico had been converted to Christianity long before the Spanish Conquest. The apostle Saint Thomas had brought the image of Guadalupe-Tonantzin to the New World as a symbol of his mission, just as Saint James had converted Spain with the image of the Virgin of the Pillar. The Spanish Conquest was therefore historically unnecessary, and should be erased from the annals of history. In this perspective, the Mexican War of Independence marks the final realization of the apocalyptic promise. The banner of the Guadalupe leads the insurgents; and their cause is referred to as "her law." In this ultimate extension of the symbol, the promise of life held out by the supernatural mother has become the promise of an independent Mexico,
satisfactions of food and drink; sickness; political wish for a Mexican the illegitimate sons would responsibly, and the irresponsible who never acknowledged abilities of their paternal family, in the land.

The seventeenth century ecclesiastical calendar becomes the harbinger of the maternal cult. In the book by Miguel de la Cueva, published in 1648, the Spanish convert is justified solely on the condition of the Virgin to become the mother of a new country, and to found an empire. Just as Israel had been a chosen people, so Mexico had been chosen by Guadalupe. Sánchez equates the Mexican woman of the Revelations, arrayed with the sun, with the moon, and upon her head a sun, who is to realize the prophecy 8:7-10 and lead the promised Land. Colonists from the desert of Sinai; Indios of milk and honey. F. B. Silsbee, in writing in 1688, coined the term “Miahuatl” de Mexico not merely for Mexico but the Chosen Nation: “Mi-aims to words which are the “basilica, and shine like stars at night. And on the thrones, Serrando Teresa de Guadalupe. Further the Guadalupan Mexico had been consecrated before the Spanish Royalty. The Saint Thomas had Guadalupe-Tomazintla, as a symbol of his mission, just as Did in the East, Mexico with the Pillar. The Spanish have historically unneeded from the annals of Europe, the Mexican War of Independence, the final realization of the nation. The banner of the independent insurgents; and their legal law.” In this ultimate symbol, the promise of an independent Mexico,

The Guadalupe symbol thus links together family, politics and religion; colonial past and independent present; Indian and Mexican. It reflects the salient social relationships of Mexican life, and embodies the emotions which they generate. It provides a cultural idiom through which the tenor and emotions of these relationships can be expressed. It is, ultimately, a way of talking about Mexico: a “collective representation” of Mexican society.

NOTES
1. Niceto de Zamacona, Historia de México (Barcelona-Mexico, 1878-82), VI, 253.
8. Bernardino de Sahagún, Historia general de las cosas de nueva España (Mexico, 1938), I, lib. 6.
11. Francisco de la Maza, El guadalupismo mexicano (Mexico, 1953), pp. 12-14, 143, 30, 33, 82.

14. de la Maza, p. 41.
15. María Elvira Bermúdez, La vida familiar del mexicano (Mexico, 1953), chapters 2 and 3.
20. Silvio Zavala, La filosofía en la conquista de América (Mexico, 1947).

23 de la Maza, pp. 39–40, 43–9, 64.
