CHAPTER SIX

ACTS AND VISIONS

The way in which writing was used and read in precolonial Mesoamerica differed considerably from modern practice. Pictography should not be seen as a register for silent, individual reading, but as part of a rich communicative tradition, which expressed itself in oral literature and in the plastic arts. Several sources state that the painted records accompanied memorized texts, described as ‘songs’ or ‘flowery speech’. This does not reduce the codices or lienzos to a mnemonic device, however. The pictorial statements are independent communicating devices.

Several anomalies that occur in the sequences of images can be explained as errors in a complex process of copying. We deduce from them that the painters primarily looked at the pictographic source and did not always have the story itself in mind. Then, on public occasions, specially trained performing artists, storytellers or bards would present or ‘read’ the codex or lienzo aloud.

In the Oaxacan region the development of this pictorial writing system formed part of the expansion of the ‘Mixteca-Puebla style’ during the Early Postclassic. It replaced an older system, the hieroglyphs and iconography of Classic Monte Albán and the closely related Ñuiñe style, so far mainly found in the Mixteca Baja, but by no means limited to that area.¹

Pictography also has the advantage of being understood across linguistic boundaries. So it was particularly suited for multi-ethnic realms and interaction spheres. It has a special appeal for speakers of

¹ About the Mixteca-Puebla style and the position of the pictorial manuscripts within this horizon there is abundant literature, summarized, for example, by Nicholson & Quiñones Keber 1994, and Anders & Jansen & Loo 1994. See also the pioneering interpretive study by Smith & Smith 1980. A fascinating analysis of the Classic epigraphy of Monte Albán is contained in the work of Urcid Serrano 2001, while Romero Frizzi 2003b contextualizes it in the history of Beni Zaa writing from the beginning until today. The Ñuiñe style was defined by Paddock (e.g. 1966), the term being derived from the Dzaha Dzaui name for the Mixteca Baja (Nuu Niñe in the orthography of Alvarado); after the groundbreaking work of Moser (1977), its iconography is now being studied in depth by Angel Ivan Rivera Guzmán, Laura Rodríguez Cano and Javier Urcid Serrano. For a historical overview of the development of Mixtec writing see also the volume edited by Jansen and Van Broekhoven (2008).
tone languages, such as Dzaha Dzaui, because it avoids the whole problem of how to express tone differences and changing tone patterns (the linguistic phenomenon known as sandhi).

In this context the debate among contemporary scholars about the degree of literacy in precolonial times is somewhat artificial and off the mark. These documents were not part of a wide-spread reading and writing culture, but functioned as specific registers in a much wider context of oral communication. Specialists did their reading, or rather performance, with a special gift for the verbal art and with a special training in that respect. There were people of great memorizing capacities, who knew how to tell the stories. The Franciscan Friar Motolinia states in the foreword of his chronicle (1969: 5) how he had consulted such a man, who explained to him the origin of the peoples according to the books and his own interpretation. The existence of specialists is well documented: writing and reading history was not a common capacity of all, but the work of special priests and maestros (Torquemada, book I: ch. 11). In ancient Oaxaca there were two categories of codex-painters: ‘children of the Lords’, i.e. children of noble birth, and ‘those chosen for priesthood’ (Burgoa 1934a: 210). This distinction probably paralleled the two main types of books we know: the historical narratives and the ritual-divinatory ‘Books of Wisdom’. We should not deduce from this, however, that pictography was in itself unintelligible to the people. The paintings were displayed on the walls of the palaces of the rulers and read aloud, ‘explained’, on special occasions (Burgoa 1934a: 210).

**Literary Style**

It is crucial to keep in mind that the pictorial writing functioned in a context of oral performance, as an interface between a trained storyteller and an audience. Given the relatively small scale of the village-state and the frequent interaction of the whole community in rituals, we should not think of that audience as limited to the royal family and the priests. The iconic character of codices and lienzos lends itself very well as a shared point of departure for the performer and his public: the main line of the story was clearly marked and could be followed. In more mundane circumstances, such as tribute collection, we may safely assume that not only the nobles but also the commoners recognized the stylized images and even specific elements like toponyms