CHAPTER FOUR

THE RITUAL PRACTICE OF TIME OF THE 52-YEAR CALENDAR OF THE POSTCLASSIC AZTEC CIVILISATION

It is from the Nahuatl-speaking Nahua culture called Aztec, or Mexica⁠¹ as they called themselves; primary data of the ritual practice of time of the 52-year calendar are still in existence. I do not claim, however, that the Mesoamerican 52-year calendar or its associated ritual practices only existed in Aztec or Nahua society and culture.

The term “Aztec”⁠² derives from *aztecatl,* “person from Aztlán”. Aztlán—which can be paraphrased as “the white place” or “the place of the herons” in Nahuatl—was the designation for their place of origin. The Aztecs constituted a part of the last Nahua faction whom invaded the Basin of Mexico after the decline of the Toltecs (probably around 1100 AD) after leaving their place of origin (Aztlán or Chicomoztoc).³ Not only their name but in addition their identity was hence transformed from *chichimec⁠⁴* when the Aztecs founded the city Tenochtitlan in 1325 AD (1 Calli according to their 52-year calendar), today known as Mexico City, on a few islands at the western part of the Tetzcoco lake in the valley of Mexico. This became the capital of their transient realm in the northern and central part of Mexico from 1325 AD to 1521 AD (López Austin 2001; Quiñones Keber 2002: 17). A Triple Alliance called *excan tlatoloyan* (“tribunal of three places”)—comprising the cities Tenochtitlan, Tetzcoco and Tlacopan—was established in 1428 AD by the regents Itzcoatl of Tenochtitlan, Nezahualcóyotl of Tetzcoco and Totoquihuatzin of Tlacopan. The political and military confedera-

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¹ The name “Mexica” (*Meschica-Tenochea*) was given to the Aztecs by their patron deity, Huitzilopochtli, during their long migration from Aztlán.

² The Prussian scholar Alexander von Humboldt and the American historian William H. Prescott introduced the word “Aztec” to the public in the early nineteenth century. I apply the term “Aztec” instead of “Mexica” despite the fact that several scholars, since Robert Barlow in 1949, have pointed out that this designation is incorrect.


⁴ The ethnonym *Chichimec* derive from Nahuatl *chichimecatl* (plural, *chichimeca*) e.g. people or nomadic tribes from the north of Mesoamerica cf. Karttunen (1992: 48).
tion of the Triple Alliance created a hegemonic rule in Mesoamerica in the late postclassic period. It was under the authority of three *tlatoque* (sing. *tlatoani*) who represented the three principal groups of the alliance. The military advanced Aztecs dominated the Triple Alliance, and their city Tenochtitlan became the supreme capital of a short-lived but geo-politically expansive empire until the Spanish conquest. Contemporary reports by Spanish ethnographer missionaries depict a politically hierarchical and socially differentiated structure (Lockhart 1992: 94-110). The city (*altepetl*) was governed as a realm (*tlatocayotl*) under the reign of the *tlatoani*. The political, social, judicial and religious organisation and institutions were complex with a range of councils, officials and religious specialists carrying out different jurisdictional, economical, administrative, military and religious duties. Millions of Nahua descendants, many speaking the language Nahuatl which became the lingua franca of multilingual Mesoamerica in the late postclassic and the early colonial period, of the Aztec empire live in various places in Middle America today. But a contemporary ritual practice of time of the 52-year calendar is not known.

1. *The Cyclic 52-Year Calendar and the Aztec 52-Year Calendar Ritual of 1507 AD (Ome Acatl, 2 Reed)*

Many of the Mesoamerican calendars consist of a series of interlinking cycles. Scholars categorise the largest cyclical calendar in Mesoamerica as the Calendar Round of 52 vague years. The Calendar Round incorporates

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6 The term *tlatoani* is a nominalised term, formed by the verb *tl-a-itoa* ‘(something) say’ and the suffix *ni*, and can be translated as “someone who have something to say” or “a speaker”.
7 Nahuatl does not contain a word for “empire”. The establishment of the empire is not recorded in the Aztec annals. Their political system was based on the *altepetl* (Gibson 1971: 378–379; Boone 2000: 221; 223). An *altepetl* is a designation of a state, a socio-political unit or a community, which organised the Nahua. Cf. Lockhart about the *altepetl* (1992: 14-58).
8 The backround information of the postclassic Aztec society is based upon Alfredo López Austin’s excellent survey of Aztec history and society (2001).
9 According to SIL (Summer Institute of Linguistics): [http://www.sil.org/americas/mexico/24i-Population.htm](http://www.sil.org/americas/mexico/24i-Population.htm). c. 2 million Nahuatl speakers live in the Federal District (Mexico City, D.F.), in Durango, Guerrero, Michoacán, Morelos, Oaxaca, Puebla, Jalisco, Nayarit, San Luis Potosí, Tabasco, Tlaxcala, Sonora, Sinaloa and Veracruz i Mexico, but also in El Salvador.