"The Good Government of the Ancients": Some Colonial Attitudes About Precontact Nahua Society

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Colonial Nahuatl Church Texts

Like writings in a number of other native languages of the Spanish Indies, almost all colonial Nahuatl texts are associated with two institutions: the indigenous city-state and the church. Records generated by the former have dominated current research utilizing indigenous-language materials, while the latter is still largely unexplored and unknown even by specialists. These two main divisions of the Nahuatl corpus share a number of important similarities and deserve more attention than they have received.

One of the least-known facts about Nahuatl church texts is that there are so many of them. Extant publications in the vernaculars of the Spanish Indies (for example, Nahuatl in Mexico, Quechua and Aymara in Andean South America, and Tagalog in the Philippines) number approximately 330. Nahuatl has by far the largest share of the total, a little more than a third. More significantly, there is at least one extant Nahuatl imprint for every decade from the 1540s to the 1990s. No other language in the Americas, local or introduced, can boast of such a long and uninterrupted presence in the world of publications. Even when Nahua notaries ceased keeping records in their own language at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, Mexican presses still kept producing various Nahuatl materials.
The thousands of pages of printed text are dwarfed by an even larger body of handwritten materials. Among the many church manuscripts in just the Biblioteca Nacional de México is an early colonial sermonary which contains 888 pages; there are others almost as large. These publications and manuscripts include dictionaries, grammars, confessional guides, books of Christian doctrine, manuals for priests, sermonaries, collections of pre-Hispanic and Christian religious songs, and the first major ethnographic work of the Americas, the Florentine Codex. At the very least, ecclesiastical texts in Nahuatl—like their mundane counterparts—constitute an immense corpus of indigenous-language writings.

Ecclesiastical and mundane documents also share far more than just large numbers of extant examples. Authors and readers of both types of texts came from the indigenous world. It seems self-evident that this would be the case for documents generated by a particular indigenous community’s notaries, but it is also becoming increasingly obvious that this was true for many church writings as well. One of the most significant colonial Nahuatl publications was a sermonary of 1606; the person who officially took responsibility for its contents (the author of record) was a noted Franciscan expert in Nahuatl, fray Juan Bautista. In his prologue to the book Bautista lists the literate, trilingual (Nahuatl/Latin/Spanish) Nahua who played a role in its creation. He mentions eight of them by name. Some of them were heavily involved in all phases of the book’s production; they served as scribes and translators, provided Spanish and Latin glosses for the Nahuatl text, and even worked in the printshop to ensure that the written text was not garbled when set in type.

The most ambitious, extensive, and unique handwritten Nahuatl text was a massive twelve-book work known today as the Florentine Codex. The Franciscan fray Bernardino de Sahagún was what might be called the editor-in-chief, but this sixteenth-century study of the pre-Hispanic Nahua world and the conquest of Mexico Tenochtitlan (the site of today’s Mexico City) was actually written by trilingual Nahua like those who produced “Bautista’s” sermonary. Sahagún explicitly names the Nahua authors and scribes of the Florentine Codex. In fact, the very person that Sahagún called his principal and most learned Nahua collaborator on it was the glossator of the sermonary of 1606, don Antonio Valeriano.

Many of the most significant Nahuatl imprints were explicitly directed towards a Nahua readership. For example, at the beginning of a work published in 1569 the famous Nahuatl expert, fray Alonso de Molina, explained in plain words who were the readers of his
Comienza la doctrina cristiana en lengua Mexicana.

widely-used small and large confessional manuals:

I thought that I would write you these two confessional manuals. The first rather long, necessary for you, with which I will assist you a little concerning your salvation. And the second, small confessional manual, will belong to your confessor, so that he will understand properly your Nahuatl language. The first confessional manual, which belongs to you, is more necessary for you, so that your soul always will be happy and enriched through our Lord God.3

Throughout the work he assumes literacy among some members of Nahua society. This is also true of some other key imprints as well.4 In addition, literate indigenous people who helped produce church texts can be found elsewhere in Mesoamerica and the rest of the Spanish Indies. The bilingual Tagalog printer and writer, Tomás Pinpin, is an excellent example of this (see Chapter 7 in this volume).

The line between mundane and ecclesiastical writings blurs even further when one considers the nature of many texts and how they are studied. There presently exist at least two copies, dated 1552, of confraternity rules written by Molina5; however, the handwriting is that of a local Nahua notary, not of Molina. These works outline regulations to be followed by a Nahua municipality. It would be a mistake to assign the rules exclusively to either the colonial church or the altepetl; they belong to both, and in fact such overlapping between the secular and the religious spheres was common throughout Mesoamerica and beyond. Furthermore, some church writings are also invaluable sources for the study of notarial documents. The most consistently used Nahuatl text from the sixteenth to
the twentieth centuries, printed or manuscript, is Molina’s Spanish-Nahuatl/Nahuatl-Spanish dictionary of 1571. Hernando de Ribas, one of the trilingual Nahuas alluded to above, helped compose it. In spite of the fact that the two compilers were a Spanish cleric and a church-educated Nahu, the dictionary is often indispensable when modern scholars attempt to find the meaning of secular terms in notarial records. Thus, ecclesiastical texts are relevant to the study of mundane documentation. Scholars working on secular texts in other indigenous languages, such as Mixtec, also make great use of dictionaries generated by clerics with the assistance of native speakers.

Yet for all the similarities between the two, church texts obviously differ from mundane writings in the emphasis they place on certain subjects and how they treat them. For example, church writings typically put greater stress on sexual improprieties. This could be looked at as a rough division of labor, since land sales or the selection of municipal officers take up far more space in notarial texts than they do in ecclesiastical ones. The exact way such subjects are handled is also different. In general, notarial documents are quite specific as to time, place, and circumstance, while church texts are usually quite general in their examples, questions and admonitions. Ultimately such differences can be attributed to the respective positions of the writers and the groups they represented. In spite of some intermingling of the civil and ecclesiastical spheres, Nahuat notaries mainly wrote about many of the details of running their communities because they were officers of the local altepetl. As the guardians and interpreters of the officially-approved, colony-wide system of religious belief and morality, clerics and their aides were left to describe in general terms normative behaviors and beliefs. As a consequence, a confessional manual may speak of categories of sexual misconduct, while a petition in Nahuatl directed to colonial authorities may accuse a particular priest of specific unsavory acts committed against named individuals in a certain time and place.

At first it may seem rather disappointing to move from the immediacy and ever-varying details of the notarial record to the moralizing and repetitious generalities of ecclesiastical texts. Yet the single most compelling reason for these characteristics of church sources—the need to fit into a single ideological mold—is also responsible for one of their enduring contributions to scholars studying indigenous-language documents. Content and form in official religious writings were inseparable: priests needed to exercise great care in what was said in order to ensure that the proper messages were imparted. Hence, gifted clerics with the assistance of bilingual and trilingual
indigenous collaborators produced many dictionaries and grammars, themselves invaluable tools for all present-day investigators. This also explains the inclusion of glosses in key Nahuatl imprints which explain grammatical, or sometimes cultural, dimensions of words and phrases used in the body of the text. The most significant single contribution in this area was by don Antonio Valeriano, the Nahua who provided the Spanish and Latin glosses of the Nahuatl text in Bautista's sermonary of 1606. All the major guides to the indigenous languages of colonial Mesoamerica came from those more closely associated with the ecclesiastical, not secular, sectors of colonial society.

Closely related to this clerical obsession with precise speech was a concern with persuasive speech and high rhetoric. It may seem ironic, but the church was the single agency most responsible for the written preservation of the traditional huehuetlahtolli ("speech of the elders" or "ancient discourse") of the Nahua. The most celebrated part of the Florentine Codex mentioned above is Book Six, dedicated to "Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy." There was even a publication devoted to illustrating this pre-Hispanic high speech. In 1600 there appeared under Bautista's name a book called (appropriately) Huehuetlahtolli. I provide a sample here of its opening lines, dedicated to illustrating what a father says to his son when he admonishes him to be good:

Nopiltze, nocozque, noquetzalë, otiyol otitlacat, otrimotlalticpacq'xtico in itlalticpactzico in Totecuiyo omitznomocolili, omitznomopiquili, omitzmotlacatilibi in ipalnemohuani Dios. Auh mixco mocpac otlalchixque in timonanhu in timottahuan, yhuan im mahuihuan, im motlahuan, im mohuayolque, omixco mocpac tlachixque, ochocaque, otlaocoxque mopampatzinco: ynic otiyol, inic otitlacat in tlalticpac.

O my child, O my jewel, O my precious feather, you have come to life and been born, you have emerged onto the earth of our Lord; God the Giver of Life has created you for someone, forged and given birth to you. We your mothers and fathers have looked into your face, and your aunts and uncles, your relatives, have looked into your face, cried and been sad on your account, that you have come to life and been born on earth.
These and other samples of such speech (many of them contained in more routine texts like confessional manuals and sermonaries) deserve close study. Oftentimes they are the direct result of the close collaboration between clerics and those literate indigenous people who guided and instructed them in the finer points of traditional discourse. Examples are not confined to Nahuatl sources. Mixtec books of Christian doctrine of 1567 and 1568 also contain numerous features of the polite high speech of the time. Even if it were only for the study of indigenous rhetorical traditions, many church texts deserve to be given far more attention than they have received.

Furthermore, the content of all types of church texts, and not just their form, can be creatively explored. Perhaps only in Inquisition records can one find an equal preoccupation with describing and promoting normative behavior in such sensitive and private areas of colonial indigenous life as those of sexual activity and proscribed non-Christian religious beliefs and practices. Scholars have often used church texts to describe pre-Hispanic religion, for example, and the assumptions and attitudes expressed by clerical observers are often so patently obvious that some of the hostile and biased reporting one finds there can be easily filtered out. Sources in Spanish (sometimes translations of indigenous-language texts) have traditionally served for these purposes. Nonetheless, much more could be done with texts in the languages themselves where the original terminology is often used to name, describe, and explain the preconquest gods and the practices associated with them. This approach merits further scholarly investigation from those working in other types of indigenous-language texts than it has received.

Finally, ecclesiastical writings put a great emphasis on describing and proscribing attitudes and behaviors; this is useful when studying the cultural/intellectual dimensions of colonial Mexico. I discuss below how by the later sixteenth century Nahuas and Hispanics coincided in their appraisal of a previous "Golden Age," even though each side had different reasons for bemoaning its loss, and definitely had different periods of time in mind. Ecclesiastical texts typically explicitly articulate (what their composers consider) proper behaviors and beliefs and, therefore, are invaluable sources for tracing the evolution of the "Golden Age" sentiment. In addition, because many times the authors are Nahuas and Hispanics, the attitudes expressed are often neither purely Nahua nor purely Spanish, but a combination of the two, i.e., Mexican. Thus, church texts in Nahuatl and other indigenous languages may help illuminate not only the colonial past but also the living present.
"The Gods of Your Ancestors"

The writings of the friars who led the Christianization of Nahua Mexico constitute much of the formally expressed, self-conscious, well-articulated early Spanish attitudes towards pre-Hispanic Nahua society. The first officially authorized group of evangelizing clerics was "Los Doce" (the Twelve) Franciscans who came in 1524, followed by the first Dominicans in 1526 and later the Augustinians in 1533. As religious professionals their attitudes were decisively colored by their ferocious battles to obliterate all non-Christian beliefs; as people educated in the European manner they tended to defend their actions through the medium of writing. A common theme running throughout the colonial period is an officially fierce hostility to all non-Christian religious beliefs and practices. Like its precontact counterparts Catholicism was supported by the state, but unlike the indigenous city-states of Mesoamerica the new Spanish-dominated colony refused to incorporate the old gods into the new official religion. Christianity in the colony brooked no rivals.

This hostility is well-expressed by the following three friars, each the author of record of a major publication in Nahuatl during the early years of the seventeenth century and each a representative of one of the three orders mentioned above. The first is a Dominican, fray Martín de León, whose Camino del Cielo (Road of Heaven, 1611) was an eclectic manual which contained numerous details about precontact beliefs and practices so that priests could uproot them:

> ic neci, ca in izquintin in inteteohuan, in amocohuan, in quimoteotiaya, in huitzilopochtli, copil, quetzalpatzactli, toçancol, quetzalcohuatl, tepuztecatl, yhuan huel oc miequintin tetica quiximaya quimoteotiaya ça çan tlacame, ye o moch mimicque, Mictla layhiyohuia, auh icuac oc nemia tlalticpac mococoaya, ciahuia, choc-aya, mamanaya...moch ahuilli, camanalli, çaçanilli, àtle ipan pouhqui.

Thus it is clear, the gods of your ancestors that they worshipped were so many--Huitzilopochtli, Copil, Quetzalpatzactli, Toçancol, Quetzalcohuatl, Tepuztecatl, and the many others they fashioned with stone and adored--[they] were just men, all have died already, are suffering in hell, and when they still lived on earth they were ill, tired, weeping,
discontented. All [this] is frivolous, a joke, fables, counting as nothing.\textsuperscript{10}

The second selection is from a noted Augustinian writer, fray Juan de Mijangos, whose *Espejo Divino* (Divine Mirror, 1607) of almost 600 pages of polished Nahuatl presented basic Christian tenets in the form of a dialogue between a Nahua father and his son. Here “Augustin” explains to his son “Ioan” how things were in the time before Christianity:

*Xiquitztimotlali (nopiltze) xiquilnamiqui intla otiquincaquili mocolhuan, in quenin cèca huey netlacuitlahuiloya in ye huecauh nemilizpan, in nican amochan amotlalpan, quenin mahuizchichihualoya in momuiztli, inihquac mahuiztililoya, tenyotiloya, neteotiloya in ahmo neteotiloni, ahmo yectenehualoni, ahmo mahuiztililoni, in çan tlayelittalon Diabolo Tlacatecolotl, in oncan teomachoya, in ahmo yectenehualoni Tzitzimitl, inihquac ahmo iximachoya in nelli mahuiztililoni, nelli neTeotiloni toTecuiyo Dios.*

Ponder, my son, and remember if you heard what your grandfathers said, how very great care was taken in life long ago here in your home and land, how the altars of the idols were marvelously adorned, when the detestable Devil, unworthy of worship [or] praise [or] honor, was honored, famed, and worshipped. There was regarded as divine the Air Spirit, unworthy of praise, when our Lord God was not recognized [as] truly worthy of respect and adoration.\textsuperscript{11}

The last selection is from the sermonary (1606) of a Franciscan, fray Juan Bautista. It is a direct attack on traditional beliefs regarding certain heavenly phenomena:

*Contra los que dizzen qualo in Tonatiuh, qualo in Metztli al Eclypsi del Sol, y de la Luna. Ma xicyehuacaquican notlaçopilhuane, ca in itechpa in Tonatiuh miectlamantli yc mixcuepque, yc motlapololtique in huehuetque, in ilamatque in amoculhuan, auh cequintin amehuantin nohma yc*
anmotlapololtia in intlahtol, in inçaçanil, in
imixpopoyotiliztahtol catca, in quiteilhuiya, inic
tetlatlaquechiliyayah...in huel nelli mutquitica
iztlacatlahtoll... İzcatqui in quiteilhuiya in huexuetque.
In axcan ommani Tonatiuh, ye yc nauhtetl Tonatiuh,
yhuá ye yc nauhtlamátiuhua t tlatipac.... Inic cêtetl màca
Tonatiuh in ihquac nèça tlaca (quil) tlacamichitíq
apachiuhque, yhuá aneneztíq...Inic ontetl Tonatiuh
(quilmach) ipa elicatocohuac, in ihquac nencah (quilmach)
quauhtla quintepenuato in echecatl, yhuan (quil)
ocomatique: ahu quihtohuayah in oçomatí (quil)
tollacapohuan. Inic etetl Tonatiuh (quilmach) impan
tlequiauh in ihquac nencah. Auh (quil) in axcan mani
Tonatiuh, ytocá Tonacatonatiuh...yehica (quil)
necliltonollo, netlamachtilo. Inin izquitlamatli, ca muchi
iztlacatlahtoll.

Against those that say “the sun is eaten,” “the moon is
eaten,” for an eclipse of the sun and the moon. My dear
children, listen attentively, for concerning the sun
the old men and old women, your ancestors, bewilder-
ded and confused themselves with many things,
and some of you still confuse yourselves with their
words and tales, with what were their words of
blindness that they used to tell people, with the
truly and completely false words with which they
used to tell people fables. Here is what the old men
used to say to people. Now there is a sun, the fourth
sun, and there have been four [of them] on earth.
When there was the first sun the people (it is said)
were inundated. They became large fish and small.
In the time of the second sun (it is said) there were
sweeping winds, and (it is said) the wind drove
those who lived then into the mountains, and (it is
said) they became monkeys; and they used to say
the monkeys (it is said) are people like us. The third
sun (it is said) rained fire on those who then lived.
And (it is said) the present-day sun is called “Our
sun of sustenance,” because (it is said) there are
riches and prosperity. These many things are all
false words. 12
One of the most renowned early European scholars of Nahuatl and Nahua commented in 1576 that the rites and ceremonies of “idolatry” permeated all aspects of pre-Hispanic Nahua society. Given the expressed hostility of clerics to all the religious beliefs and practices of precontact Mesoamerica, one would expect a thorough condemnation of every feature of that society. However, some clerical specialists in the language and culture of the Nahua came to look with great favor on many aspects of the flourishing culture Spaniards found, conquered and colonized in the early sixteenth century. Why they came to hold those views is the subject of this chapter.

“No One Used To Get Drunk”

One of the most fervent battles of the colonial church was against Nahua idolatry. Another was against alleged “Indian drunkenness.” A late sixteenth-century Franciscan chronicler echoed contemporary attitudes when he wrote of “vino y tabernas, el mal que hacen á los indios” (wine and taverns, the damage they do to the Indians). The damage allegedly included friends killing friends, husbands killing wives, married and unmarried women selling themselves to get a drink, and people giving themselves entirely over to idleness, games, and playing the guitar. A century later a chronicler of the same order asserted that drunkenness was “la perdición total de los Naturales in sus vidas, en sus haziendas, y en sus almas” (the total ruination of the Natives in their lives, property, and souls). The blame for such a sorry state of affairs was placed at the feet of—postconquest Christian society! The same late seventeenth-century writer also asserted in no uncertain terms that “el vicio de beber” (the vice of drinking) was so hated and severely punished in the time of idolatry that even a king would have his own wife stoned to death (the same punishment for adultery) for excessive drinking. It was only after the conquest that Nahua, nobles and commoners alike, began to drink without restrain.

The assertion that preconquest Nahua society strictly regulated drinking and postconquest colonial society loosened all restraints on it was a staple of church literature long before the late seventeenth century. In the same sermonary by Bautista which condemned beliefs regarding the “four suns” is a spirited condemnation of colonial drunkenness and praise of the pre-Hispanic situation. The discussion of drinking and the need to respect priests is tied into the theme of community solidarity against outsiders. Many of the synonyms in
the original have been retained in order to convey the traditional Nahua preference for this rhetorical device:

_Auh intla quinequi Castiltecatl, ahoço Mestizoton, in amehuātin anquineltilizque, anquintestigotilizque in intententlapiquiliz in inneteilhuiil, yhuicpa in teoyutica amottatzin in amechpalehuii...ahmo monequi yc motequipachoz: ca ñcatqui in itetlahotolti, oncatqui in itetentlapiqui, yehuatl in cueltlaxti, bota, bota, bota, cuero, cuero, cuero: ca yehuatl amechtlahontli, ca yehuatl amechquayhuinti....Omotlahueliltic in nican Nueua España....Ca in ye huecauh in intlatetoquilizpan in amoculhuan, in amachtotonhuan, ayaxcan miya in Vino, ayac ihuintia, ayac xoconiqua. Ipampa mahuiztic yc quimoyacaniliya t imaltepeuh, auh tetecuhitin tlahoquite ouiquihuyuque in impetu, in imipal, vmpa caxiltique in Cihatlampa, (a la parte del mediodia) yhuan in Mictlampa: (la parte del Norte) auh in axcā ye muchi tlacatl qui, ye muchi tlacatl tlahuana, auh ahmo çan tlapohualtin in tequitlahuana, in xoconiqui: auh yehuatl ipampa yc ammomahuizpolohua, yhuan yc ammahuizpololo, yehuatl yc ammotolinia._

And if some Spaniard or a miserable little mestizo wants you to verify and be a witness for their false testimony and accusations about your spiritual fathers who help you, it is not necessary to be upset, for behold his instrument of making people talk, behold his instrument of making people give false testimony, it is the tanned leather [wine skin], the leather wine bag, leather wine bag, leather wine bag, the wine skin, wine skin, wine skin, for it makes you talk, it makes you faintheaded. O woe are you here in New Spain! For long ago in the time of idolatry of your ancestors wine was hardly drunk, no one used to get inebriated, no one used to get drunk. Wherefore they honorably led their cities, and the lords and rulers enlarged their kingdoms, they made them reach “Towards Where the Women Are” (to the south) and “Towards Dead-People Place” (the north). And now everyone drinks, everyone gets inebriated, and those who drink too much
alcohol and get drunk are countless, and because of it you defame each other, and thus you are defamed, thus you mistreat each other.\textsuperscript{18}

So that any priest using the sermonary as a model for presenting this material would not miss the intent of this passage, the following marginalia was included: "\textit{O desuenturada tierra, particularmête, &c. El buen goyinro de los antiguos, porque à penas auia borrachos} (O unfortunate land, particularly, etc. The good government of the ancients, because there were hardly [any] drunkards).\textsuperscript{19}

Not all comparisons painted the preconquest past in such bright colors. Elsewhere in the same sermonary the author states that the lords and rulers used to oppress their subjects, but "\textit{inin ca ahmo huey tetzahuiltl, ca ayamo quimiximachiliya in Dios}" (as for this, it is not a great marvel, for they did not yet know [the Christian] God).\textsuperscript{20} While the past may have been bad, the present was even worse. Even though the common people now were "\textit{in Dios itlaneltocacatzitzihuan, in itetlacamatcatzitzihuan}" (the believers in and obyers of God), the Nahua upper classes treated them even worse than did "\textit{in tlateotecanime in onemich, in oyaque, in opoliuhque, in Mictlan tlaihiyohuitoque}" (the idolaters who came to live [here], went, perished, and are suffering in hell).\textsuperscript{21}

These favorable or mixed reviews of the precontact Nahua past are particularly striking in that they were not the earliest reactions of the European clerics who first came to Nahua Mexico. One of the Franciscans who made up the contingent of "\textit{Los Doce}" in 1524 wrote sometime between 1536 and 1543 in much less flattering terms about preconquest Nahua attitudes towards alcoholic beverages. While discussing a particular part of Nahua Mexico where there were "\textit{indios quitados de vicios y que no bebían vino}" (Indians removed of vices and that did not use to drink wine), he remarks that this was a great surprise to Spaniards and natives alike for "\textit{en todos los hombres y mujeres adultos era cosa general embeodarse}" (in all the adult men and women it used to be a general thing to get drunk).\textsuperscript{22} His descriptions of intemperate precontact drinking (especially that connected with the numerous non-Christian festivals) betray no admiration for the preconquest past.\textsuperscript{23} Yet this initial reaction did not become the predominant colonial opinion regarding the pre-Hispanic Nahua world. The circumstances responsible for changing revulsion to approval are detailed in the following section.
"What Your Grandfathers Trained You In"

Fray Bernardino de Sahagún of the Franciscan order arrived in New Spain in 1529, barely five years after the conquest of present-day Mexico City. Seven years later he was one of the first teachers in the Franciscan-sponsored Holy Cross College of Tlatilolco in the Valley of Mexico. The college was dedicated to providing a good European-style education to the most promising young Nahua who served as interpreters and aides to the early clerical evangelizers of New Spain. Among the many Nahua Sahagún taught was the future governor of the Nahua wards of Mexico City and noted Latinist, don Antonio Valeriano. By the late 1540s Sahagún and some of his most accomplished trilingual (Latin/Nahuatl/Spanish) students from the college had begun a massive work in Nahuatl and Spanish on preconquest society. His work went through several versions; in its most finished form it has come down to us in twelve books known as the Florentine Codex. While Sahagún functioned as general editor and supervisor of the project, his former students actually composed the work, and they tended to present the preconquest past in the most favorable way possible. Far more than any other body of work, the Florentine Codex influenced all later views on the immediate preconquest past as preferable to the colonial present. Sahagún’s own views on this subject thus become very important.

Sahagún’s attitudes towards Nahua underwent a significant change between the time he arrived in 1529 and the 1570s (he died in 1590). By 1576 he had a perspective on Nahua colonial life and the immediate pre-Hispanic situation which explains why he and many others often idealized the past. When the Spaniards first came it was necessary to destroy all idolatrous things, including “las costumbres de la república que estaban mezcaladas con ritos de idolatría y acompañadas con ceremonias idolátricas, que había casi en todas las costumbres que tenía la república” (the customs of the republic that used to be mixed with idolatrous rites and accompanied with idolatrous ceremonies, that there used to be in almost all the customs that the republic had). The problem was that when the Spaniards destroyed idolatry they also destroyed a (supposedly) well-ordered and proper society. Sahagún’s own words to this effect are telling:

> ellos derrocaron y echaron por tierra todas las costumbres y maneras de regir que tenían estos naturales, y quisieron reducirlos a la manera de vivir de España, así en las cosas divinas como en las humanas, teniendo entendido que eran
idólatras y bárbaros, perdióse todo el regimiento que tenían.

They [the Spaniards] overthrew and destroyed all the customs and ways of governing that these natives used to have, and they wanted to reduce them to the Spanish way of living, both in divine things and human ones, having understood that they were idolatrous and barbarous, [as a consequence] all the [good] government they used to have was lost.

Thus the key to understanding his attitude about the preconquest past lies in his stance towards the acculturating Spanish present.

Sahagún’s views on Hispanization are clear. From the 1540s to the 1570s there is evidence of an initial massive impact of Spanish language and society on Nahuas. This is most sensitively reflected in the many hundreds, if not thousands, of Spanish words adopted by Nahuas to describe and label the new things, people, beliefs, and behaviors introduced by colonial rule.27 At the beginning of this period Sahagún was unequivocally in favor of Nahuas adopting the “Spanish way of living.” In the prosaic but revealing words of a 1540 sermon (of which we have a copy made in 1548), he clearly states:

That which the Spanish people eat, because it is good food, that with which they are raised, they are strong and pure and wise. Indeed, good food helps them. You will become the same way if you eat their food, and if you are careful with your bodies as they are. Raise Spanish maize [wheat] so that you may eat Spanish tortillas [bread]. Raise sheep, pigs, cattle, for their flesh is good. May you not eat the flesh of dogs, mice, skunks, etc. For it is not edible. You will not eat what the Spanish people do not eat, for they know well what is edible.28

Sahagún offers a very different assessment of Hispanization some forty years later in 1579:

Because there are Spaniards among you I shall inform you in a few words how not to lose good judgment about them. If you will live as Spaniards, or if you wish to speak as they speak, it all makes
them laugh. I have said that you are not to care much about the array of Spaniards, nor their food, nor their drink; nor are you to imitate the way they speak, nor are you to imitate the way they live. Only this is especially necessary for you: what your grandfathers trained you in, as is said above. As to the Christian life, imitate the good Christians, those of righteous life who live according to God’s commandments, who do not get drunk, who do not steal, who do not mock one. As to your array, as I have said, you are not to wear [Spanish-style] shirts, to wear [Spanish-style] knee pants, to wear [Spanish-style] hats, to wear [Spanish-style] shoes. This is all my discourse about prudence as to your bodies.29

Nahua dissatisfaction is beautifully captured by the following excerpt from language lessons originally written by a Nahua for Franciscans. The writer drew on the ancient traditions of the huehuetlahtolli or "ancient speech" in order to create a series of vignettes about marriage, the death of a king, a young boy greeting a priest, etc., to demonstrate every nuance of the polite, indirect and metaphorical Nahuatl of the upper classes. Included in the formulaic but lively sketches is the speech of an elderly woman who compliments a younger woman on how she has raised her children. The contrast between a desirable preconquest past and an undesirable Hispanic present is evident when she praises how strictly children were disciplined in the past:

Oh, this is how the ancients who left us behind lived and ordered things; they took very great care. But how we raise our children today is a very different thing; bad behavior is no longer feared, for they no longer fear adultery, theft, drunkenness, and other kinds of bad behavior, because it is no longer punished as it used to be punished long ago, when they forthwith hanged...and destroyed people.30

Not surprisingly, the above sentiments (like others cited previously) were penned sometime during the 1570s, after the first great wave of Spanish influences had affected Nahuas. During the same period, others also decried changes in Nahua society. The noted
Franciscan chronicler, fray Gerónimo de Mendieta, remarked in 1570 on the bad influence of the Spanish language on Nahuatl in the course of praising the language skills of Sahagún and his fellow Franciscan, fray Alonso de Molina:

"entiendo que ninguno de ellos calará tanto los secretos y propiedad de la dicha lengua cuanto estos dos que la sacaron del natural hablar de los viejos, y los mozos ya comienzan a barbarizar en ella."

I understand that none of them [other non-native speakers of Nahuatl] will penetrate into the secrets and propriety of the said language as much as these two who took it out of the natural speech of the ancients, and the young people already are beginning to [speak] barbarously in it.31

Molina arrived as a young boy to Mexico in the 1520s and learned Nahuatl fluently while playing with Nahua children. He began working with the Franciscans as an interpreter and aide while still a child, and later joined the order. He was the first author to include praise of the preconquest past in a mainstream church publication. In a *doctrina* of 1578 Molina sternly admonished his Nahuas audience to respect the sixth commandment. He praised a preconquest practice, evidently hoping that by doing so colonial Nahua would be encouraged to seriously heed the prohibition against adultery: "in aquique tetlaximaya, omaxac quinquatepipitziniaya" (in the crossroads they used to break with stones the heads of those who committed adultery).32 By the 1570s both Nahua and Spaniards felt compelled to react to and analyze the cumulative effects of the changes that had transformed colonial Nahua society.

The reasons why Nahua might be dissatisfied with their colonial situation are both obvious and not so obvious. The introductory study to a modern version of the above mentioned language lessons explains the state of mind of those Nahua who served as the principal aides, teachers and collaborators of the priests:

"The looking back to a Golden Age when everything was done right and austerity and severity prevailed, in contrast to one's own sad days, when no one obeys or has respect, is characteristic of the time two or three generations after the conquest more than
other times, of high nobles more than commoners, and especially of the nobles of the former imperial centers more than those of other towns. It was the nostalgic dynastic nobles of Tetzcohco and Tenochtitlan who convinced Spaniards that before the conquest hardly anyone drank pulque, and all adulterers were forthwith stoned to death. The writer [of the language lessons]...has caught the Golden Age sentiment of his time to perfection.33

The motives of the Spanish clerics who participated in the same "Golden Age sentiment" are less apparent. Unlike their Nahua counterparts they would seem to have been on the winning side of the colonial situation and, therefore, more inclined to unrestrained feelings of triumph rather than to a yearning nostalgia for "the good old days." Something more than the (perhaps peculiar) ideological bent of Sahagún must have been responsible for his change of attitude and that of others towards the precontact past and Hispanic present.

Nahua nostalgia found a ready audience in growing numbers of the regular clergy34 for both international and local reasons. A type of Golden Age sentiment espoused by friars already had appeared in Spain by the late sixteenth century. The following excerpt is from a Spanish seronymous printed at the turn of the century:

Nunca el mundo ha estado peor que agora; más codicioso, más deshonesto, más loco y altivo; nunca los señores más absolutos y aun disolutos; los caballeros más cobardes, y aun sin honra; nunca los ricos más crueles, ávaros; los mercaderes más tramposos; los clérigos más perdidos; los frailes más derramados; las mujeres más libres y desvergonzadas; los hijos más disobedientes; los padres más remisos; [etc.]...Y los predicadores, ¿vivimos en sana paz, estimados, queridos, regalados, ofrendados, nadie nos quiere mal, todos nos ponen sobre la cabeza?

The world has never been worse than now; more greedy, more dishonest, more crazy and arrogant; never the lords more despotic and even dissolute; the gentlemen more cowardly, and even without honor; never the rich people more cruel, miserly; the merchants more crooked; the clerics more lost; the
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friars more extravagant; the women more loose and shameless; the children more disobedient; the parents more remiss; [etc.] And the preachers, do we live in healthy peace, esteemed, loved, regaled, offered to, nobody hates us, everyone honors us?

Local factors also played a powerful role in making friar-intellectuals receptive to corresponding Nahua feelings. European friars were obviously not enamored with the pagan past, but they did have a strong attachment to the immediate postconquest decades when colonial pre-Hispanic traditions were the strongest. The perceptive Franciscan chronicler Mendieta points to the period from the 1530s to the 1560s as being “el tiempo dorado y flor de la Nueva España” (the golden age and flower of New Spain). He self-servingly asserts that this was true in both the ecclesiastical and secular spheres, but what he actually is referring to is the “golden age” of the regular clergy in Nahua Mexico, and particularly of his own order. Once the orders (led by the Franciscans) had established themselves in the many hundreds of Nahua communities through the indoctrination of young noble children, they enjoyed for a few decades an unrivaled supremacy in pastoral activities among Christianized Nahua. During the first decades of the colony local Hispanic society was relatively weak and incapable of producing secular clerics in sufficient numbers and with the necessary training to displace the first-arriving friars. As a consequence, the Franciscans, Dominicans and Augustinians rightfully could claim for some years that for all practical purposes, they were the church in Nahua Mexico.

The friars’ greatest triumphs coincided with the earliest years of the colonial altepetl (Nahua city-state) when precontact traditions and discipline were the strongest. They also occurred when Nahua numbered in the millions and Spaniards only in the thousands. Friars like Mendieta would later idealize this period, in part because they had come at a time when there was the largest number of “Indians” to be divided among the smallest number of Spanish claimants like themselves. The all-important question of how to exploit Nahua labor is closely related to this whole situation. The system of encomienda (lifetime grants of the labor and tribute of entire Nahua communities to individual Spaniards) and repartimiento (temporary assignments by royal officials of smaller groups of Nahua to individual Spanish employers) prevailed during the period in question. Encomienda was dominant until the 1550s, when repartimiento began. Both systems built on, and in part maintained,
pre-Hispanic practices; the altepetl could function much as it had in the late preconquest period and still satisfy colonial demands. Just as whole communities or large groups worked together as a unit in the encomienda and repartimiento systems, they also came initially in the largest possible units and numbers to be baptized, indoctrinated, and subjected to the full gamut of Christian rites. From the point of view of the first friars (and of the early holders of encomiendas) the first decades of the colony were an unparalleled golden era.37

This ideal state of affairs did not last long. By the 1570s European-introduced diseases and increasing contact with Spaniards had greatly reduced Nahua numbers and changed Nahua communities. They were no longer as able or amenable as they had been earlier to satisfy the demands of any Spaniard, lay or clerical. At the same time that indigenous Mexico was drastically decreasing in size (from perhaps 25 million in 1519 to about 1 million at the beginning of the seventeenth century), local Hispanic society was growing. More and more locally-born secular clerics were appearing; by the 1570s they had begun in earnest their long and generally successful campaign to replace the regular clergy in most Nahua parishes. From the 1570s on, the regular clergy often perceived itself as being in a slow but irreversible defensive retreat. Their best years seemed to lay behind them, and all that was left was to ponder what had gone so terribly wrong.

There was never any question about whether conquest, colonization and Christianization were correct. Christianization had only been possible because of conquest and colonization, so these foundations of Hispanization were never blamed for the increasingly sad condition of the orders and their work in colonial Nahua communities. The problem, as observers like Mendieta perceived it, lay in both colonial Nahua and colonial Hispanic society. Mendieta asserted that Nahua society had become too Hispanicized following conquest and Christianization due to the malevolent influences of "bad" Spaniards, mestizos, mulattos and blacks. The rigor and moral code of preconquest society had gradually eroded as increasingly large numbers of these (allegedly) degenerate people spread out into every nook and cranny of the Nahua-speaking world. He also stated that the problem with local Spanish society was that after the 1560s the political leaders of colonial Mexico had inexplicably cast aside the founding fathers of the church in Nahua Mexico, generally favoring the secular clergy over the regulars (and all--in his view of course--to the detriment of Christian Nahua).
Mendieta's (and others’) solution was simple but hopelessly unrealistic: exclude the secular clergy from the Nahua parishes and isolate Nahuas from contact with everyone in Hispanic society except for members of the regular clergy. In a certain sense this was a call to return to the earliest days of the colony when the regular clergy had almost unlimited access to Nahua communities and few rivals. Such calls are always destined to be heard but politely ignored by bureaucrats and others interested in more pragmatic and immediate concerns. In the face of change the orders stood firm theoretically, but in practical terms they kept losing ground to the seculars and to changes in Nahua communities until the end of the colonial period.38 This would reach such extremes that a late seventeenth-century Franciscan chronicler would write about the Nahuas of his day that “el amor que tenían a los Religiosos los antiguos, lo han convertido en odio los modernos” (the love that the ancients had for the religious [the friars], the moderns have converted into hatred).39

“Los Indios Viejos”

A valuable by-product of the Golden Age sentiment I have described was the increasingly favorable attention paid to the language and culture of pre-Hispanic Nahua Mexico. In 1600 an unusual book appeared in Mexico City entitled Huehuetlahtolli (“ancient speech or discourse” or “words of the elders”). It contains almost 80 folios of traditional oratory, some with only a thin veneer of Christianity, and gives eloquent testimony to the heights that ancient rhetoric had reached. The author speaks of finding some “platicas que los Indios antiguos hazian a sus hijos y hijas” (speeches that the ancient Indians used to make to their sons and daughters). Considering that the young Nahuas of his time were wretched in so many respects and that the “Indios viejos” (old Indians) had such good “crianca, vrbanidad, respecto, cortesia, buen termino y elegancia en el hablar” (manners, urbanity, respect, courtesy, good bearing and elegance in speaking), he decided to bring those speeches to light.40 Whatever his motives were, the effort he made was not wasted. His generation, and those that have followed, have benefitted from such attempts to record and preserve examples of the pre-Hispanic Nahua world. They help shed yet a little more light on Nahua language and culture that might otherwise have been lost, the kind of light of understanding that is so eloquently described in this translation by a modern scholar of some lines from the Florentine Codex:
"Good Government of the Ancients"

Grant me, Lord, a little light,
Be it no more than a glowworm giveth
Which goeth about by night,
To guide me through this life,
Wherein are many things on which to stumble,
And many things at which to laugh,
And others like unto a stony path
Along which one goeth leaping.\(^{41}\)

Ye ixquich/That is all.

Notes

1. I refer here to the period up to, and including, 1821 (the date of independence for most regions of the Spanish Indies).
2. I came across a copy of this on microfilm during the course of my own research on colonial Nahuatl publications. It convinced me that my original idea of covering all printed and handwritten church sources was impossible.
3. Molina 1984: 6 verso; this is a photoreproduction of the second edition of 1569.
4. Mijangos 1607 and León 1611.
6. I must stress here that I am speaking strictly about Nahuatl-language writings.
7. Bautista 1600: 1 recto.
8. Burkhart 1989 is the most advanced current example of this.
9. The information in this introduction is taken from my dissertation. I have included footnotes here whenever I cover something not mentioned there.
10. León 1611: 12 recto. Unless otherwise noted, all Nahuatl and Spanish citations followed by a translation are mine. Where I am using someone else's translation I simply give the English version. I give all citations in the same form as I found them (abbreviations, variants in spellings, etc.) except where not supported by my Word 5 program. All brackets mine unless otherwise indicated.
11. Mijangos 1607: 421.
12. Bautista 1606: 196-7. I here acknowledge the generous help of Arthur J. O. Anderson with the translation although I accept all responsibility for any of its deficiencies. The initial sentence that is not in italics was in the margin but helps to explain the whole passage.
13. Sahagún 1982: 579. This section was originally written in 1576.
15. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 95.
18. Bautista 1606, 49.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 692.
21. Ibid., 693.
23. Ibid., 19-20, and passim.
24. Francisco Cervantes de Salazar wrote a series of Latin dialogues in 1554 to fulfill part of the requirements for a degree in the newly (1553) opened University of Mexico in Mexico City. Two experienced locals show a newcomer around the capital of New Spain, and explain that in the Tlatilolco area "Hay un colegio donde los indios aprenden a hablar y escribir en latín. Tienen un maestro de su propia nación, llamado Antonio Valeriano, en nada inferior a nuestros gramáticos, muy instruido en la fe cristiana, y aficionadísimo a la elocuencia" (There is a college where the Indians learn to speak and write Latin. They have a teacher of their own nation, called Antonio Valeriano, in nothing inferior to our grammarians, well instructed in the Christian faith, and very attached to eloquence)[Cervantes de Salazar 1975: 55]. My translation from the Spanish. For a short description of Valeriano’s tenure as governor of Mexico City, see Gibson 1964: 169-70. Valeriano also is responsible for the italicized Spanish glosses in the citation to which note 10 refers.
25. I say this with some reservations because the composers of this work had their own biases which could work in the opposite direction. Sometimes they exaggerated the negative qualities of the Mexica (the particular Nahua subethnic group to which "Montezuma" belonged and the main subject of Sahagún’s research) because their own communities had suffered under pre-Hispanic Mexico rule.
27. For a more extended look at this sensitive indicator of Hispanization, see Karttunen and Lockhart 1976. This is updated in some particulars in Lockhart 1992: 261-325.
28. Burkhart 1989: 166. Brackets hers. I have changed her translation in one respect: everywhere she had "Castilian" I have placed "Spanish."
29. Sahagún 1579: I recto. I have edited his translation; brackets mine. This unpublished translation is by Arthur J. O. Anderson, co-translator of the Florentine Codex and a lifelong student of the work of Sahagún. I here acknowledge myself grateful for his permission to use it.
30. Karttunen 1987: 155-7. See also pages 2-13 and 19-21 for the history of the manuscript and a description of its contents.
32. Molina 1578: 35 verso.
34. The regular clergy would be those that lived "by the rule" and would encompass orders like the Franciscans, Dominicans and Agustinians. Secular clerics would be those that "lived in the world" and generally did not have the same number or kinds of rules that governed the members of the regular clergy. Looked at from the organizational point of view, regular clergy, like the Franciscans, functioned as part of disciplined groups with an international scope, which could conduct big campaigns on behalf of the church and support members who engaged in intellectual pursuits like writing books; secular clerics usually were on their own and often engaged in secular business activities since they had no automatic means of support like regular clerics did.
35. Smith 1978: 112-13. This sentiment was not exclusively shared by friars. Smith comments that the passage "belongs to the [Spanish] Golden Age topic of present-day degeneracy contrasted with a more innocent and admirable past" (113).
37. In the late sixteenth century, the time up to the mid-1560s was referred to as a golden age (Mendieta 1980: 559; see also 415).
38. The point of view I have just outlined is clearly and eloquently stated at great length in fray Gerónimo de Mendieta's Historia eclesiástica Indiana (1980: 491-563). The manuscript was finished sometime during the winter of 1595-6.
40. Bautista 1600: "Prologo" (unnumbered).

References


