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ALPHABETIC WRITING IN THE HANDS OF THE COLONIAL NAHUA NOBILITY

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Abstract

Alphabetic writing in Nahuatl, originally promoted by friars, was quickly adopted and developed by native writers, including notaries and chroniclers, who left the biggest corpus of indigenous writing in the Americas. They used this new tool prolifically and practiced it in their own ways. In doing so, they created new spaces and forms of expression for elements of preconquest pictorial genres and traditional orality. Writing flourished at the hands of particular members of different social classes of the indigenous population, including the nobility, middle-class and sometimes even lower-class individuals who used it efficiently for legal and economic purposes. In addition, we have evidence pointing to the production and translation of devotional religious materials by the Nahuas themselves, paralleling the preparation of official ecclesiastical texts by friars and priests. As argued in this paper, the Nahuas did not perceive alphabetic writing as something imposed and culturally alien, but used it both to preserve their tradition as well as to negotiate successfully with and challenge the Spanish administrative, judicial, political and religious order.

Resumen

La escritura alfabética en lengua náhuatl, originalmente promovida por frailes, fue rápidamente adoptada y desarrollada por escritores nativos, incluyendo notarios y cronistas, que dejaron el corpus más grande de escritura indígena de las Américas. Aprovecharon esta nueva herramienta de una manera prolífica y la emplearon a sus propia manera. De este modo crearon nuevos espacios y formas de expresión para elementos de los géneros pictóricos de origen prehispánico y para la oralidad tradicional. La escritura florecía en las manos de los miembros de diferentes clases sociales de la población indígena, incluyendo la nobleza, la clase media y a veces incluso individuos de la clase baja que la usaban con eficacia para varios fines de índole legal y económica. Además, existen evidencias de la producción y traducción de materiales religiosos de carácter devocional por los propios nahuas, en paralelo a la confección de los textos eclesiásticos oficiales por frailes y sacerdotes. Como se demuestra en el presente artículo, los nahuas no percibían la escritura alfabética como una imposición o algo culturalmente ajeno, sino que la empleaban tanto para conservar su tradición como para negociar con y desafiar el orden administrativo, judicial, político y religioso de los españoles.

INTRODUCTION

Creators of an unparalleled corpus of colonial indigenous writing, the Nahuas occupied vast areas of central Mexico as well as more peripheral regions to the north, south and east; in some of those places they continue to live today. Their language, Nahuatl, enjoyed great importance in the pre-Hispanic world, its history probably extending at least into the Classic period, to the time of the Teotihuacan empire, that is, roughly speaking, the first millennium AD. Central Mexican

Nahuas populated numerous local ethnic states (*altepetl*), many of which before 1519 formed part of the powerful organization of the Triple Alliance, often called the Aztec empire by scholars today. The imperial core corresponded roughly with the Valley of Mexico, while dependent areas covered significant portions of the present states of Hidalgo, Guerrero, Morelos, Puebla, Oaxaca, and Veracruz. Often classified by modern scholars as a hegemonic empire, the Triple Alliance expanded both through military conquests and the mere threat of martial intervention, adjusting its goals to different local historical, geographic, economic and military factors (Hassig 1995; Berdan *et al.* 1996; Berdan 2007: 133-136). Although the empire collapsed, local states survived along with much of their political organization and many other aspects of their culture, in spite of becoming part of New Spain and the object of long-term Hispanization.

Until the end of the colonial era in the eighteenth century native *altepetl* continued as the seats of Indian municipal government based on European models. Native socio-political organization provided important space for the development and sustained use of alphabetic writing in Nahuatl. However, writing also flourished at the hands of particular members of different social classes of the indigenous population, including the nobility, middle-class and sometimes even lower-class individuals who used it for legal and economic purposes within the judicial and administrative framework of the colonial system. In addition, we have evidence pointing to the production and translation of devotional religious materials by the Nahuas themselves, paralleling the more massive preparation of ecclesiastical texts by friars and priests. The latter, in fact, probably entailed much direct participation of collaborating indigenous authors, though the extent and exact nature of their contribution in such projects is very difficult to assess. While certain aspects of the process of creation and development of the colonial Nahua literary tradition remain yet to be understood, it is clear that numerous genres of Nahua writing were widely used for administrative and religious aims by native and non-native members of the colonial society across all Spanish Mesoamerica, including regions where other native tongues prevailed. Many of the Nahuatl genres can be considered a response to the Spanish system requiring the use of different kinds of legal documents; some items were produced to supply “ethnographic” information collected by the Europeans and to help with Christianization. However, many genres alphabetically transmit the content and characteristics of native oral tradition or develop originally pictorial records. Except for religious texts composed by Spanish priests and friars with the help of native collaborators, the bulk of these documents were written solely by indigenous authors.

PRECONQUEST POWER BASE OF COLONIAL NAHUA ELITES

Nahua sociopolitical organization centered on ethnic states called *altepetl* carrying a strong sense of microethnicity. These numerous entities, scattered throughout the Valley of Mexico and surrounding areas and differing in size, rank, and ethnic composition, consisted basically of groups of people holding rights to certain territories. *Altepetl* could be units either of an entirely sovereign nature or subordinated to other *altepetl* to which they owed tribute. They had a cellular structure encompassing symmetrical and self-contained parts of the whole, which operated on a rotational basis (Lockhart 1992: 14-25). The head of each *altepetl* was a dynastic ruler known as a *tlahtoani* (‘the speaker’), who usually represented the highest-ranking sub-entity and received tribute and labor duties from the entire polity. Across central Mexico particular *tlahtohcayotl*, or rulerships, were often small political entities that usually engaged in competition and conflicts with their peers. In more complex *altepetl* the constituent parts ruled by separate *tlahtohqueh* preserved a rotational and symmetrical arrangement. Such entities could accommodate distinct ethnic groups, who tended to form rival factions (Reyes García 1988; Lockhart 1992: 18-21, 24). Although rulers of Nahua *altepetl* sat at the top of the regional

social hierarchy, they could be subordinated to other *tlahtoqueh*, as was the case with the domains controlled by the Triple Alliance. Across central Mexico particular *tlahtohcayotl*, or rulerships, were usually small and their hereditary leaders often engaged in competition and conflicts with their peers. However, the rank of the sovereign of Tenochtitlan was highlighted by his title of *huey tlahtoani* ('great ruler'), claiming superiority vis-a-vis other *tlahtoqueh*. By the time of the Spanish conquest he enjoyed incomparably high status in the Nahuatl world, his position being enveloped in esoteric lore expressed by elaborate ceremonies, sophisticated courtly etiquette, and precious insignia. Although the *huey tlahtoani* was elected by a council of high lords, it was believed that his accession had been predetermined by the sign under which he was born (Sullivan 1986: 11).

Nahuatl nobles, or *pipiltin* (sg. *pilli*), were grouped into noble houses, headed by a lord titled *teuctli*. These entities were called *tecpan* in western regions, especially the Valley of Mexico, and *teccalli* in the east, including the Valley of Puebla (Hicks 1986: 38). The position of *teuctli* was a mixture of social rank and hereditary political office. Every lord was the holder of a specific lordship including lands, subordinate nobles, and commoners; he was also entitled to a special lordly title identifying him as head of a given *tecpan* or *teccalli* (Lockhart 1992: 103, 109). A nobleman was elevated to the *teuctli* rank with the formal acquiescence of the supreme lord, the *tlahtoani*, in an elaborate ceremony of investiture (Carrasco 1966: 134-138; Motolinía 1970: 151-156; Muñoz Camargo 2002: 94-95). Other members of such units included junior kin who were nobles of *pilli* rank. Although it is generally believed that *pipiltin* acquired their rank by descent from a *tlahtoani* or *teuctli* (Carrasco 1971: 354), it seems improbable that only the first generation of their offspring belonged to the nobility; also collateral relatives must have maintained their noble status for some time (Lockhart 1992: 102-103). The *tlahtoani* was thus a *teuctli* at the *altepetl* level, occupying the highest position in the Nahuatl world and receiving services from the entire domain. The *tlahtoani* had a title specific to that particular *altepetl*, such as Chichimecateuctli in Tetzaco, and it always incorporated the word *teuctli*; it was usually also based in a specific subunit of the *altepetl* (Lockhart 1992: 109). Like *teteuctin*, *tlahtoqueh* possessed rights to lands and *macehualtin* (commoners), to receive tribute, perform military, judicial, and religious roles, wear clothing and paraphernalia expressing their rank and live in residences of palatial dimensions.

Aztec nobility and their co-opted local counterparts were fundamental for the process of empire-building launched by the Triple Alliance. Political and military expansion was accompanied by the spread of Nahuatl language, ideology, and culture. Local rulers could profit from their connections to the empire in many ways, especially in political struggles against neighboring enemies or traditional rivals (Berdan 2006: 160-163; Chance and Stark 2007: 219-224). Provincial nobles enjoyed the advantages of a friendly association with the Triple Alliance and often emulated their overlords by adopting prestigious status markers, iconography of rank and courtly art, all of which merged with local traditions. Important vestiges of this process, but also originally carriers of imperial elite culture, are written records, or books based on the use of glyphic writing and pictorial imagery. The multi-faceted relationship with the Triple Alliance is manifest in early colonial pictorial manuscripts from areas previously subordinated to the empire, especially in the current states of Guerrero, Hidalgo, Puebla, and Veracruz (Olko 2006, 2008). Sometimes, as the case of the *Códices Azoyú* from the kingdom of Tlapan in Guerrero clearly shows, interaction with Tenochtitlan not only entailed the use of Nahuatl as the language of external politics and communication, but also resulted in the reinforcement of Nahuatl-speaking factions within local populations (Oudijk 2012). However, the creation of extensive networks connecting elites both at the central and peripheral levels, involving such aspects of high culture as writing and artistic expressions, preceded the formation of the Aztec empire (Berdan and Smith 1996: 211; Boone and Smith 2003: 192). These networks could have been based, at least to a certain degree, on the prior geographical extension of Nahuatl, not only as the actual language of communities located peripherally with respect to the Valley of Mexico, but as an interregional

language. It seems very probable that the expansion of Nahuatl, especially as the second language used by other ethnic groups across Mesoamerica, was spurred by the administrative practices and the cultural policy of the Triple Alliance and additionally strengthened by the spread of Aztec writing conventions and written records.

Further on, Nahuatl continued as a *lingua franca* favored by Spanish colonial administrators and ecclesiastics, also becoming the language of written communication on different levels and in many different contexts, an important tool both in the hands of friars, state officials, native municipalities and countless individual members of indigenous society. Legal steps, such as the decision of Philip II in 1570 to make Nahuatl the language of conversion and training of priests and friars working with the native people in different regions, no doubt contributed to its growing importance in Spanish Mesoamerica. One of the basic postconquest uses of Nahuatl beyond Nahuatl-speaking communities was Christian instruction carried out by friars and priests, who were allowed to be ordained *a título de lengua*, for the purpose of working as a kind of doctrinal interpreter in indigenous languages. Nahuatl was by far the most commonly spoken indigenous tongue among ecclesiastics. They used it as the language of instruction within linguistically-mixed communities whose members knew Nahuatl as an additional language and in regions dominated by other ethnic groups (Schwaller 2012: 678-687). Thus, the ecclesiastics benefited from the pan-regional presence or at least a widespread intelligibility of Nahuatl in many Mesoamerican regions. It is also becoming clear that the use of Nahuatl in the colonial world was not limited to a specially trained group of scribes, notaries and other officials. Members of the nobility belonging to other ethnic groups as well as numerous non-elite figures of different backgrounds, including Spaniards, used spoken and written Nahuatl to facilitate communication in different aspects of colonial life (Yannakis 2012: 669-670; Nesvig 2012: 739-758).

The rapid development of Nahua writing was also possible because many fundamental features of Nahua sociopolitical organization (such as the *altepetl*) as well as the whole system of beliefs, cultural practices and artistic expressions, continued largely unaltered after the Spanish conquest, sometimes only transformed on the surface under the guise of the new municipal order and Christianity. Initiating their rule, Spaniards usually dealt directly with particular *altepetl*, just as the Triple Alliance did before the conquest, and in fact local elites could probably perceive many parallels between the former Aztec overlord and the new Spanish authorities to whom they owed tribute. The reliance of new administration on indigenous organization contributed considerably to the survival of precontact entities (Gibson 1964: 63-74; Lockhart 1992: 28-29; Horn 1997: 19). In most cases Spaniards respected preexisting political-territorial units and divisions when introducing the most important European institutional forms that affected and transformed the native world. Thus, a single *altepetl*, with its borders and constituent parts, could successively become an *encomienda* (a grant of Indian tribute and labor to a Spaniard), a parish, and then, beginning in the 1530s, a Spanish-style municipality, thus acquiring the status among Spaniards of a *cabecera*, or head town (Lockhart 1992: 29). Throughout the sixteenth century and later on, native *altepetl* continued as the seats of Indian municipal government, organized on the European models of the *cabildos* or town councils, as well as centers of tribute collection and labor organization in the traditional manner.

The introduction of Spanish rule did not bring about the eradication of the native nobility and its power base. Thanks to the recognition of local ruling dynasties in the formation of municipal councils, the *tlahtoani* was frequently appointed to the office of the first governor, or *cabildo* chief. This dual role indigenous lords often managed to play was frequently described as “cacique y gobernador,” that is, a native ruler and municipal officer. The domestication of the new system also entailed its adjustment to the traditional structure of the native *altepetl*. Perceived correspondences were often based on cultural misunderstandings between the two sides (Lockhart 1985: 477, 1990, 1991: 21-22), helping the native elite to take advantage of the Spaniards’ limited understanding of indigenous organization. They also benefited from the Spanish crown’s formal recognition of the

local hereditary nobility and its rights, successfully maintaining their privileged position within the new political and economic reality. At the same time, however, the Nahuatl population as a whole was heavily affected by catastrophic epidemics, while taxation became increasingly excessive in view of the deep population decline.

CREATION OF AN ALPHABETIC WRITING TRADITION

The strategies of the colonial Nahuatls are best manifest in the alphabetic writing surviving from this period. Many of its genres were borrowed from European tradition, but these became modified and adapted to native concepts and forms of expression. Some, however, derived from pre-conquest pictorial tradition or, at the very least incorporated some of its elements. The tradition of native books flourished in the communities of pre-conquest central Mexico, serving a variety of needs. These documents used native glyphic writing, which in the case of the Nahuatls was a mixture of logographs and phonetic signs, with local variants differing in the degree of phoneticism (Lacadena 2008). There were several types of indigenous pictorial records, employing different materials, including deerskin, local bark paper (*amate*), cloth and European paper. Pre-conquest and early colonial manuscripts could take the form of the *tira*, a relatively narrow strip composed of sheets of animal hide or paper glued together; the screenfold, which can be seen as a specific variant of the *tira*; the *lienzo* ('cotton cloth, canvas') and the single-panel formats. This tradition of native manuscript painting, along with certain glyphic records, continued to develop under Spanish influence until the end of the sixteenth century, and persisted in altered forms well beyond that.

After the conquest many native manuscripts, especially those commissioned by Spaniards, were also made in a European book format. As a result, in the sixteenth century one document could combine glyphic records with alphabetic glosses, annotations, and texts, these latter components not necessarily being made by the same hands and at the same moment. Judging by thematic content, native pictorial documents fall into several genres, some of them with mixed characteristics. They embrace ritual-calendrical, historical, genealogical, cartographic, and economic manuscripts. Extending this basic classification and following the native tendency of blending different forms of presentations within one space, often based on the map format, some documents can be described as cartographic-genealogical, cartographic-economic, genealogical-economic, and so forth (Glass 1975: 28).

This pre-conquest precedent of books and glyphic records prepared the Nahuatls well for the arrival of alphabetic writing. They adopted this tool with a high level of readiness and capacity and proceeded to use it prolifically. As a result, indigenous authors produced an extremely rich and complex corpus of written texts that attests to the vitality of their culture throughout the colonial period. The rapid development of the Nahuatl writing tradition was made possible by adapting the orthographic conventions of the Roman alphabet in the 1530s in such major centers as Mexico-Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco. Friars were important agents in this process: they not only tried to become familiar with the native tradition, but also, in such important educational centers as the Colegio de Santa Cruz in Tlatelolco, started to teach the local nobility to write in their own language. Beginning in the 1540s various kinds of writing in Nahuatl expanded quickly across the core area of Nahuatl culture and beyond, and served as a kind of "alphabetic bridge" with other ethnic groups whose written records developed later, but were never so widely acknowledged by Spaniards as documents composed in Nahuatl. And once the first generation of indigenous scribes and notaries had begun working, the participation of the Catholic Church in the training process lost importance because qualified indigenous persons in each town took over the process of preparing their successors. By the third quarter of the sixteenth century the number of nobles capable of writing in the new mode was constantly growing. At that time even the small *altepetl* had a notary associated with the municipal government. And in the more populous

towns, several specialists of this kind were busy producing textual records and providing service to local authorities and individuals (Lockhart 1992: 330-331).

The creation and development of Nahuatl orthography was a task undertaken simultaneously by several friars and their indigenous assistants. It was based on the Spanish values of the Roman alphabet representing similar sounds in Nahuatl, a process which was facilitated by the fact that Spanish had close equivalents for the majority of the phonetic elements in the native language. In fact it was Nahuatl that lacked more of the Peninsular sounds. Several phonological features of Nahuatl nevertheless posed a serious challenge. The glottal stop and vowel length were usually left unmarked. The glottal stop and voiceless glottal fricatives posed special problems. Other non-compatible elements were coped with quite well. The native sounds *tl* and *tz* were rendered as digraphs, while the double *l*, lacking in Spanish, was modeled on the Latin *ll*; early orthographers also became aware of the fact that in Nahuatl voiced consonants are voiceless at the end of a syllable, so they changed prevocalic *hu-* [w] to *-uh* in syllable-final positions, doing the same with *-uc* and *-cuh* for the sound [k^w].

This system, first developed by the ecclesiastics, was immediately reshaped by native scribes and authors, whose primary concern, —differing from the European priority given to standardized, conventional forms— was to reproduce not only orality, but also phonetic features that could change as a result of phonetic interaction with the sounds of neighboring words. Unlike for Spaniards, the word as such was neither an important nor easily recognizable entity for the Nahuas, who tended to record sounds in an ongoing string of letters (Lockhart 1992: 336-339). Thus, an innovation introduced by indigenous writers was to use the alphabet to reproduce pronunciation, not established spellings for each word, which was the aim of Spanish writers (even if Spanish orthography at the time was still far from fully standardized). In the indigenous approach, the rendering of a given word or syntactical unit could change because of neighboring words. Thus, although the native authors of the earliest known and surviving body of alphabetic documents in Nahuatl, the Cuernavaca-region census records of the late 1530s and/or early 1540s, reveal instruction in an orthographic canon developed by friars, they use the script in their own ways. The text follows a purely European arrangement, but meaningful linguistic units are not always marked as such. And what we often deal with as readers, are continuous strings of letters. Scribes use some typical Spanish abbreviation conventions, betraying their formal training, but they also developed their own conventions for abbreviations, such as *a^o* for *amo*, or *uīa* for *moquatequia*. Emendations reflect their desire to record information adequately. Interestingly, despite an early date a number of different hands is found in each of the censuses, indicating the presence of more than one trained scribe on site. Although we do not know anything about their training, similarities in orthographic conventions and calligraphy suggest a single instructor, training all the scribes at the same time or capacitating one who then prepared others (Cline 1993: 12-15).

This native adaptation and the relative flexibility governing the use of orthographic conventions do not disappear over time and never give way to full standardization. Rather, indigenous writers give priority to the phonetic characteristics of real speech. Thus, in the devotional text written by native authors toward the end of the sixteenth century (Codex Ind. 7, John Carter Brown Library) the same terms are often written in different ways, including loanwords (*pillato* – *villāto*), *n* is often added in a syllable-final position (*tocanyontilloc* for *tocayotilloc*, *tlatovanni* for *tlahtoani*, *quicanhuāya* for *quicahuaya*), *h* is sometimes added before a word-initial *o*, while the replacement of alveolar consonants *t* for *d* and *d* for *t* is not limited to Spanish loanwords (*presitente* for *presidente*; *hoquimicdi* for *oquimictih*). Although there were further attempts at standardization undertaken by the Europeans, such as Horacio Carocho who published his outstanding *Gramática de la Lengua Mexicana* in 1645,¹ these had little impact on the traditions of literacy and ways of writing in native communities. Toward

¹ Carocho proposed the use of a system of diacritics to represent vocalic length and the glottal stop; nevertheless, and as a rule, indigenous writers never considered the representation of these two language characteristics important.

Stage 3, in the late seventeenth and through the eighteenth centuries orthography in indigenous writing became more regionalized, reflecting local, unstandardized variants of spelling (Lockhart 1991: 122-134; Pizzigoni 2007: 35-39). Local and regional differences thus come to surface in the written language, and, to a certain degree, in the native handling of orthography. Thus, we have for example *tz* for *z*, like *tetazin* instead of *tetatzin* and *hespiritu* instead of *espiritu* in a 1739 will from Ixtenco, Tlaxcala, or *quimotillisquen* for *quimoittilizqueh* in a 1766 will from the same locality. In fact, it has been suggested that the relative homogeneity of “Classical” (colonial) Nahuatl should be associated with the strategy of the noble group to assert their identity with other members of indigenous elite as opposed to the commoners from their own ethnic group (Canger 1988: 52). However, even if in the sixteenth century the majority of authors (notaries and private persons) were members of the nobility, quite often the documents were dictated by persons of varying social status, position, and roles. The further destandardization of Nahuatl orthography toward the end of the colonial period is best explained not as a result of phonological evolution; rather, it should be attributed to the decreasing involvement of the native nobility who spoke a more standardized Nahuatl than the commoners and gradually switched to Spanish. The more localized Nahuatl spoken by the lower-ranking people became more dominant in written texts (Lockhart 1991: 134). Further isolation, through the nineteenth and twentieth century, of Nahuatl-speaking groups, who today have become virtual “islands of native speakers,” strongly contributed both to the increase of regional and local differences, and to the disappearance of the writing tradition.

POSTCONQUEST GENRES OF WRITING AND THEIR POSSIBLE ROOTS

The postconquest body of Nahuatl writing embraces historical annals, speeches, plays, petitions, assertions of local traditions and rights called “titles,” religious texts (among them translations and reinterpretations of European sources) and a mass of everyday documentation including wills, bills of sale, parish records, and censuses. The source base for Nahuatl writing remains largely unparalleled in Mesoamerica and other regions of the Americas, even taking into account the substantial textual records left by other advanced cultures, such as the Maya, Mixtecs, or Zapotecs. This corpus makes it possible to explore the ways native nobility used this tool for numerous purposes, including both practical and religious aims, defending their rights and negotiating their position in the colonial society, both versus their peers and the Spanish administration. This rich body of materials also reveals the role of alphabetic writing as a repository of tradition and native concepts. It has been emphasized that the different “ways of conceptualizing transcription — the European array of writing and figuration on the one hand, and Mexican pictography on the other — were culturally commensurate” (Boone 2011: 197). But even if preconquest continuities are indeed more readily recognized in pictorial records combining elements of indigenous and European origin, numerous elements of the preconquest tradition, forms of expression and concepts thrived in the form of purely alphabetic writing in Nahuatl. This new vein of communication had important implications for elite and political strategies of the members of the native society. Although much of the burden of daily documentation relied on notaries, the skill of literacy was a means of access to this exclusive realm of restricted knowledge and constituted an extremely useful tool for dealing successfully with different aspects of colonial life. Thus, the ability to produce, interpret and use written documentation was an important asset in the hands of native nobility, both at the private and sociopolitical (inside and outside the *altepetl*), as well as at the religious level.

The speed and efficacy with which the preconquest Nahuatl written and visual traditions adopted European elements and traditions attests to their flexibility and capacity of adaptation (Navarrete 2011: 190). It is significant, nevertheless, that after accepting alphabetic writing, they continued to name it using the verbs, *ihcuiloa* (‘to write/paint’) and *pohua* (‘to read/relate’), rather than adopting Spanish

terms, so the convergence was obviously not complete (Lockhart 1992: 326). It has been emphasized that each side, native and European, undertook a huge and difficult project to learn the languages and graphic systems of the other and hybrid expressions quickly emerged, combining elements from each of the formerly separate systems (Boone 2011: 198). Although these “hybridities” are most easily seen within “colonial pictography”, they are also manifest in purely alphabetic writing. As has been accurately pointed out in reference to colonial works of art, some of the results produced by cross-cultural encounters may be apparently invisible. Hence, in addition to syncretic forms immediately recognizable on the surface, we should look for more nuanced, profound, or embedded forms of “hybridity” (Dean and Leibsohn 2003: 24-26). In Nahua writing, these nuanced interplays can be detected both in the profound, but not immediately striking, modification of European genres and in the deep, not quite overtly perceptible continuities and accommodation of the preconquest tradition.

Thus, on the one hand the pictorial and glyphic component remained important throughout the sixteenth century and beyond. On the other hand, the newly developed genres of purely alphabetic writing in Nahuatl showed considerable thematic overlapping in content and function with certain types of indigenous pictorial records. Pictorial year-count stories soon became alphabetized and flourished as written historical annals, tribute lists found close parallels in economic documents and censuses, alphabetic land titles describing terrains and their borders were strongly based on preconquest maps, while ritual-calendrical books were replaced by doctrinal texts (commissioned and elaborated not only by Spaniards, but also by native authors, sometimes apparently without any supervision on the part of friars or priests). Genealogical components, probably already present in preconquest imagery, gained their space in historical texts, court documents and wills. In addition to these correspondences between pictorial and alphabetic forms of expression, the latter became more closely equivalent to the extensive oral component traditionally accompanying the documents with pictorial and glyphic content before and after the conquest. Many textual genres, such as songs, poems, speeches and theatrical plays, created important spaces for extremely rich native oral tradition impossible to record this way in preconquest “texts”. Indigenous orality is also manifest in native annals, letters, petitions, and even wills. Thus, generally speaking, by adjusting alphabetic writing in accordance with their own needs and tradition, the Nahuas developed their specific forms of expression, profoundly transforming originally Spanish genres. In addition to different manifestations of orality, they often resorted to the conventions of elegant, polite speech that crop up in private letters, official petitions, speeches, and admonitions.

NATIVE ANNALS

The oral component is probably most striking in an important hybrid genre of Nahua writing: historical records structured as annals. Called *xiuhpohualli*, or ‘year counts’, they were based partly on preconquest glyphic and pictorial prototypes capable of recording only rudimentary information, including for example royal accessions, deaths, war, and natural events, and partly on the extensive oral recitations that accompanied the pictorials. Continuing to thrive after contact, they quickly became adapted to an alphabetic mode of expression. Annals recorded in Nahuatl were produced in the Valley of Mexico by 1650 and in Tlaxcala and Puebla they continued into the first half of the eighteenth century. Usually told from the point of view of a citizen identifying himself with a specific subdivision of the native state, these records convey the local vision of political life and cultural changes; attest to the survival of earlier concepts, structures and offices; shed light on interactions with competing indigenous entities and with the Spanish world; finally, they reveal current concerns of the community. Nahua annals were particularly productive in regard to postconquest history. Although some preserved a strong pictorial component until the end of the sixteenth century, what we see was

by no means product of a linear development because some texts were composed at a relatively early date as entirely alphabetic accounts. In addition to the chronological presentation of key events from the point of view of a given *altepetl*, they sometimes contain dialogic forms and speech taken from the oral tradition that originally accompanied and complemented abbreviated year-count records.

This strong oral component is manifest in the writings of one of the most outstanding Nahua annalists, don Domingo de San Antón Muñón Chimalpahin Quauhtlehuanitzin, active in the early seventeenth century. He was born in Chalco Amaquemehcan, but resided most of his life in Mexico-Tenochtitlan and had access to some Mexica sources. However, the primary sources for his work were available in his own *altepetl*, where Chimalpahin interviewed notable leaders and made use of their ancient manuscripts, both pictorial and alphabetic, including those collected by his grandfather, don Domingo Hernández Ayopochtzin (Schroeder 1991: 14-24). A good example of the indigenous textual structure of his work is the year entry 13 *acatl* (13 'Reed') or 1479 contained in one of his accounts (Chimalpahin 1998: 107-111). It relates a colorful account about how artists from the conquered Chalco went to Mexico-Tenochtitlan to perform songs for the Mexica ruler, Axayacatl. The music they played was not good enough, though, and Quecholcohuatzin, a noble from Chalco, took the lead in the performance. He played the drum and sang so marvelously that Axayacatl, who had remained inside his palace, heard the music from a distance and "his heart rejoiced". He summoned the singer, and this terrified the Chalcos because they thought he wanted to punish the previous performer who played and sang poorly. Eventually Quecholcohuatzin arrived before the ruler who addressed him in a courtly manner, rewarded him with numerous precious insignia of nobility and made him his personal minstrel. The account relates the episode in minute detail, including dialogues between different protagonists, replete with elements of elegant, metaphorical speech; it rivets the reader's attention with twists in the plot and by building tension in the narrative.

"MUNDANE" DOCUMENTS

A huge part of Nahua texts commissioned, created and used not only by the Nahua nobility, but also by members of lower social groups, belongs to a broad category of "mundane" documents dealing with legal and economic matters, sometimes preserving an additional pictorial content, but at the same time relying on Spanish genres. It is not infrequent to find here numerous elements and conventions transmitted from native oral expression into alphabetic texts, especially letters and petitions, which sometimes deviate considerably from their European models. Following Spanish prototypes and becoming conventionalized, they conveyed some of the speechlike and declamatory features characteristic of the typically indigenous mode of expression. In much the same way, numerous Nahua wills, especially those made for important members of the nobility, can be seen as an important vehicle for conveying traditional terminology referring to power and rank, in addition to elegant, polite speech.

The production of alphabetic documents, such as petitions, complaints, wills and letters, was spurred by the challenges of colonial reality, as well as the will and the strategies of native nobility to become important agents in socio-political, administrative, economical, and religious matters concerning their communities or private enterprises. At a relatively early date, such texts, written in Nahuatl, crop up not only in the central, core area dealing intensely with the Spanish system and colonial rearrangements, but also in more peripheral regions where Nahuatl was used as a second language or *lingua franca*, as is the case in the remote region of Soconusco. The typical conventions of noble speech and orality surface in the following excerpt from early colonial petitions coming from this peripheral area and preserved today in the Archivo General de Indias. They were commissioned by members of the local nobility and directed to the king of Spain himself in order to bring back

Franciscan friars and remove secular clergy who had taken their place; in addition, they struggled to come back under the jurisdiction of Mexico, complaining about being subject to Guatemala. This is one of numerous attempts of indigenous nobility to negotiate with Spanish authorities about local arrangements, administrative solutions, tax duties and other kinds of power relations, often in alliance with specific groups, such as Franciscans, Dominicans or Spanish *encomenderos*. Letters from Soconusco combine explicit accusations and claims with many traditional formula of polite elite speech:

Our precious ruler,

We, your subjects, reverently kiss your hands and feet here in our home named Amacatlan Mamepan. Today we the rulers and nobles in our calpulli have assembled and conferred because the Spaniard Hernando de Santa Iglesia is about to leave. We look on him as our father because he loves us and helps us. Now he seems to be fleeing, leaving, at the command of the president and oidores [judges]. But we make a statement about this, so that our dissatisfaction may appear before you, because the officials of justice sometimes mistreat us. They do not really obey your lordly commands, they do not really help us, they do not really listen to us. It is as if we were not your subjects. We would be as slaves if the priest named fray Luis de Guevara weren't here. He helps us, he advises us, he teaches us. He completely knows our foreign language. All of us are happy; we listen to him; we rejoice. Today we request your revered, rulerly command. For the sake of your precious authority, please issue your command to the local provincial and the officers of justice here, so that it will be put into effect in our land, the land of you our ruler. And we will always be happy. Through your grace, our ruler, we request that your lordly statement just remain and be put into effect here because he [Luis de Guevara] understands our language, advises us and confesses us. And we request that your command come to our father so that he won't leave, so that he will just remain in Mamepan, even if he wants [to leave]. May he not leave, we will weep greatly if he leaves. Oh, our ruler, [grant us this] for the sake of God and for the sake of your throne from which derives your rulership, since we are your children who live at your feet here in the land of the Indies. This is the entirety of the statement that we have written today, the fifteenth day of the month of January, 1562 years since our lord Jesus Christ was born.²

² An unpublished document, Archivo General de Indias (Seville), Guatemala 52, fol.29r: tlatlacohtlatocatin tehuantin y timomacehualhuan . toconmahuizenamiq̄i . ŷ momatzin . ŷ mocxitzin ŷ nican tochantzinco . ytucaycan . Amacatlan . mamepan axca . otitocentlaliq̄ue / titonozoa . t(i)tocalpolcotlatoque pipiltin . ŷ in ipampa . nican . moquixtitiq̄uiza . ce xp̄iãñõ . ytuca . hernando de s̄m̄ ella . ypampa . yuhqui totatzin . tiechihua . techtlaçotla . techpalehuia . axca . yuhqui chuloa . yahui yca . ytlatol . presidente . yhuan . oydores . ahu . ytechpa/ ticahua .totlatol . y(n)ic mixpantzinco . netziz . tonetequipacholiz . ypanpa . quemania . techtolinia . ŷ justicias . ca amo huel quipia . ŷ motecoctlatoltzin . amo huel techpalehuia . amo huel techcaqui . çan yuhqui . amo timopillhuan . yuhqui . titlacotin . ŷ tllacamo . nican . onca . ce totlatzin . ytuca fray luis de guevara . techpalehuia . technonotza . techmachtia . mochipa . huel quimati totlatol popoloquitzli . timochintin . tipaq̄i . ticaqui . paqui toyolo . Axca ticlatlania . ŷ momahuiz ŷ motlatocayotlatoltzin . ma çan ypanpa . ŷ motlacoh . yepaltzin . ma xichualtlali . ŷ tlatoltzin . ynahuac . ŷ nican probiçial . yhuan . ynahuac . quipia . justicias . ynic nican . motlaliz . totlalpan . yhuan . ca motlal . titotlatocahu . paquiz toyolo . mochipa . titotlatocahu . mopaltzinco . ticlatlania . ŷ moteochtlatol [v] ma çan nican . mocahuaz . motlaliz ypanpa . quicaqui totlatol . technonoça techyolcuitia . yhuan . ticlatlania . motlatoltzin . hualaz ynahuac . totatzin ŷnic amo quiçaz ma çan nican motlaliz mamepan manel quinequiz yn iyolo . macamo quiçaz ma cenca choç[sic!]jaz toyolo . ŷtla quiçaz totlatocahu ma ypanpa . dios . yhuan . ypanpa . ŷ mocpaltzin ŷnic motlatocayohu . ahu . ynic timopillhuan . mocxitlitan . tinemi . ŷ nican . yndias . tlalpan . ca çan yxquichi . totlatol otitlaquiloç̄ axca . yc castoli meztli enero . yc yeçontli . ypan . castolpohuali . ypan yepohuali . ypan omixihuitl . omlacacatili . totecuyo.s.xpo . motlaçohpillhuan motlacahuan Don Alonso Don Bardasa Don ju^o.

Similar claims and attempts to influence the choice of local religious officials underlay a complaint about a bad priest submitted by the representatives of the town, Coatlan de Puertos Abajo in Jalisco 1637 (An unpublished document, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA, McAfee Collection, 339). This relatively short petition is an excellent example of the concurrence of almost all typically native elements in one Nahuatl document: it contains elements of polite, noble speech, a colorful narrative enriched with many details, as well as statements belonging to indirect speech that reflect the importance of orality. In addition, the argumentation is skillfully enhanced by the use of metaphorical comparison based on the Old Testament, perhaps intending to show the indigenous familiarity with the Christian tradition. Taken as a whole, the document is a proficient attempt to influence colonial reality and change power relations directly affecting the life of the community. As with numerous other comparable documents written by native people throughout the colonial era, it should be seen as a proactive defense of native rights and community autonomy, launched through the use of alphabetic writing in Nahuatl. Thus, the Nahuas practiced and pursued forms of writing in their own language for their own benefit rather than as a mere response to administrative or legal requirements of the Spanish crown.

Very honorable representative of our Lord Jesus Christ, we, your children, rulers/ notables here in the altepetl of Coatlan, address you, bow humbly before you, we politely kiss your honorable hands and feet. We implore you to help us, the subjects of God, concerning a priest of ours who was ruling the children of God here in our altepetl. But we are not satisfied [with him]. [...] And we gave him a woman, whom they took to the salt works, where she prepared meals for the salt workers. And he does not want to pay two Indians. If they request [their pay], he then gets angry, and wants to beat them. Even if they are women, he really mistreats them, he whips them repeatedly, he pulls them by their hair. And he really mistreated another woman: he kicked her repeatedly all over [her body], he used spurs on her all over [her body]. And we do not know where that woman went, it is as though we have lost her. And he says, "I will not go, I will serve another year here, that is what the lord bishop wrote me; I cannot go." By your orders, let him no longer be in our altepetl, let him leave. Help us. [Let it happen] by order of our Lord God, as with the Egyptians, that the children of Israel were freed from the hands of the king pharaoh by order of God. This concludes the affliction and weeping that we subjects of God have informed you of.³

Indigenous orality and the transformation of Spanish conventions is perhaps best manifested with the inclusion of direct speech into legal documents and accounts presented in litigation. A good example comes from Tlaxcala, where in 1563 María Quetzalcocoztli, acting before the local Audiencia court and employing elegant language replete with numerous traditional formula and ways of address, accused her cousin of false claims regarding a land she inherited from her father (see Figure 1):

³ An unpublished document, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA, McAfee Collection, 339: *y n çenca timahuiztililoni yn tehuatzin yn tixiptlatzin tt^o Js^o Tehuantin timopilhuan titlatoque nican altepetl cohuatl timitztotlatlauhtilia mixpantzinco tontopechteca tictotlaçotenamiqulia yn momahuizmatzin yhuau in moyxitzin timitztotlatlauhtilia ma huel xitechmopalehuili tehuantin timaçehualhuan Dios yn itechcopa çe toteopixcauh nican onca ypan toaltepeuh quipachoticatca ypilhuan Dios auh amo pachihui toyolo [...]. yhuau cihuatl ticmomaquiliqe salinas oquihuicaque ompa quinchuiliaya tlaquali salineros yhuau home maçehuali amo quintlaxtlahuiznequi aço quitlatlanilia ca niman qualani qimictiznequi ymanel cihuame huel quintolinia quinhuihitequi quintilanilia yntzon yhuau oc ce cihuatl huel oquitolini mochican oquitetelicçac oquiyspuliado mochican yhuau amo ticmati capa yca oyac yn cihuatl çan yoquin hoticpoloque. yhuau quitohua hamo nias oc ce xivitl nicchihuaz nican yoquin nechtlacuilhui tlatohuani hobispo amo huel niaz auh ma motencopatzinco macayocmo onca ya ypan toaltepeuh ma quica auh xitechmopalehuili ma ytencopatzinco tt^o Dios in maca çan yoqui egiptotlaca in Rey faraon ynic ymacpa maquixtiloque yn isRael ypilhuan ytencopatzinco Dios ya yxquich otimocaquiti yn tonetoliniliz yn tochoquiliz yn imacehualhuan Dios.*

I am María Quetzalcocoztli, a resident of Chimalpan San Hipólito. We belong to the cabecera of Ocotelolco. I kneel down before you [pl.], I greatly implore you [pl.], who are responsible for justice. May you [pl.] listen to how I bring an accusation against my older cousin named María Tochomitzin, daughter of my late uncle Quauhtlitzactzin, concerning our field located in Apiyatzinco. [...] At harvest time she said that I had harvested it all and that I am trespassing on the land. Oh rulers, it is not that we harvested it all; horses ate her maize. And as for her saying, "You trespass on the land," it is not true. The officer of justice went to see it and it was just the way we had divided it. And my brother-in-law, Pelayo, said that we had joined the fields in regards to planting. [What she says] is not true, the officer of justice went to verify it. And may you, who are rulers, hear, that Pelayo really made us argue, so now we fight with each other. We are telling each other many thoughtless things, we say some shameful words. Did we perhaps want to do it this way? Pelayo just incited us [against each other], he made us argue. He likewise said that he mercifully favored me with a field, he recently took pity on me. Where do I come from? Am I born in the same place? I know this wholeheartedly that our fathers were indeed of one family, we were engendered by the same ancestors. Because of this, it will not be possible now for us to divide the field. All that I demanded was what my father had owned. Do your [pl.] hearts not know that the minors will be heard so as to request justice? If my heart truly desires justice, I will request that Pelayo should leave [because] he caused discord between us. It is necessary that they [officers of justice] mediate between us in order to bring us to a settlement.⁴

We do not know anything about the possible preconquest equivalent of wills, yet the enormous popularity of this genre among indigenous people in the postconquest era brings to mind a possible confluence with an earlier tradition. It could have had an entirely oral form, such as a speech of the dying person containing instructions announced in the presence of witnesses and/or heirs. Despite following closely a Spanish formal model, Nahuatl testaments, in much the same ways as other alphabetic indigenous texts, betray numerous traits of orality/rhetoric, such as admonitions, as well as dramatization. The role of witnesses mentioned in wills also deviated from the Spanish model, acquiring the function of giving assent and legitimacy to the content of the will on behalf of the community (Lockhart 1992: 364-371). Nahuatl testaments were produced from the sixteenth to the end of the eighteenth century; however, this tradition continued in some places, such as the Valley of Toluca, well into the nineteenth century (Melton-Villanueva 2012). They were also commissioned by persons belonging to lower classes, whereas members of the higher nobility, becoming gradually more and more Hispanicized through the colonial period, often tended to write their wills in Spanish.

⁴ An unpublished document dated to 1563, reproduced with the permission of the Archivo Histórico del Estado de Tlaxcala (Tlaxcala, Mexico), Fondo Histórico, caja 2, exp. 17, fol. 1r. This document was transcribed and originally translated by Agnieszka Brylak: María q̄tzalcocoztli nichane chimalpā sāt ypolito ytech tipoui cabeçera / ocotelulco amixpātzico nimopechteca cēca namechnotlatlauhtliya in just.^a āqmopiliya. ma xicmocaq̄ticā nictlatoleuiya no[p̄ih] ytoca maria tochomitzi. yplitzi notla q̄uhtlitzactzi catca / ypāpa tvcuē ompa manj apiyatzico [...] auh yn iqc̄ ya pixco. ȳ q̄tōua. oniccēpixcac. yvā ya q̄tōua nicxocoua / auh tlatoq̄ ye amo ȳ ticēp̄ixcaq̄. cavallome q̄ q̄ que. yn icē. / auh ynic q̄tōua ticxocoua. amo nelli. oq̄'tatu ȳ topile / cā ya yuhtica yn iuh ticmoteq̄q̄. yvā yn q̄'tvua nouehpol. peloyo. tictvc nepanoua. camo nelli. oq̄tato ȳ topile / yvā ma xocōmocaq̄ticā ātlatōq̄. uel yehuatl otechchalani ȳ pelayo. ynic axcā ya timixnamiq̄. miyec yn iliviztlatolly ya tietolhuiya. ceq̄ pinaviztlatolly ya tiq̄'tōua. auh mach yuh ticchivazneq̄.q̄ cā ye otechōnetecheuh ȳ pelayo. otechōchalani. auh ȳ q̄tōua çano nechtlaocoli cuemitl / q̄nī (probably *quin*, *quiniuh* or *quiniz*, recently, a short time ago) onechtlaocoly. cuix canapa nivaleva. cuix ceccā nitlacati. yn iuh q̄'mati noyolo. cā uel cētlaca ȳ totahuā. ce ȳ.nā. ce ȳta. otechihūq̄ / ypampa ȳ axcā avelitiz ȳ ticmoteq̄zque cuētzintli. nochi ȳ niq̄tlani. q̄ notahtzi. oq̄piyaya. cuix amo. q̄'momachitiya amoyolotzi. ȳ menores. caq̄liloqz ynic just.^a q̄ tlani. / auh ȳtla q̄ neqzq̄ noyolo uel Just.^a yc niqtlaniz ȳ pelayo. q̄cā yehuatl otechōchalani. q̄ moneqz. cā nepātla moq̄tzazqz / ynic techyecchivazq̄ q̄.

1563 NAHUATL

Maria quetzalcocoztli mchane dn malpa Sar. opolto. y tech tipu m cabeca
 za/o ateluleo. amio patzi co thmo ped teca ceo namach notlatlau
 tiliya m suste aq mopiliya. mazi mo caqtica mella toleniya. niq
 y teca maria tubomtzin. y pilzi notla quibtzitatzicatza y p p t au
 ompa man apixatzico. notabtzin. q mopiliya. y teca q talpo y tzi. ma
 xoco mo caqtica alatoq. y notatzin caza motitica. utzila pa. y qe
 mo m qli y paupa atle p t e qtl / aub y nebruat ocuel mitzotz o cotz m
 y nebruat. aub m m q de cuemite q mopiliya. m ma y qe xim
 qentcu q notlav a t aub m m qe gone z na doo tpo dolmoy xia atca
 all de tiza m t e p e d e y t e p e d e. q u o v a t i y n o t l a t z i c a t z a t e c p a n e c a t i
 q u b d o d o l o r a t z i n. y m e n e b p i l i z n o c u e. y a p u r n e b e n i l i z. a u b y t e c p a
 n e c a t a t e c a / a g u b. o n a v i l a u b. m a m o e d n e d i c o. n o t a b t z i n y e n e
 y m e q m e c u e m i t e q u e n o t l a v a. a u b y n e b r u a t m i y e c p a o m i
 x l a u l a u b t i y n o p i b. m a r i a t u b o m t z i n. y m e q u i p a n e b m o n a
 q l i z n o t a b t z i n y e n e. c a u e l t e l l a c a m a d n i t e c a m q l i m i t m e c a
 m e o c e g a c o. o t i c m o t l a b a t e q q. n e n e u b q. d e i c i n q y c u e t z i n t i z
 y o m p a m a n i y a p i y a t z i c o / m m a m e t u c a r. n o y d h u a t a n o p i b
 q t o c a t. t e c a n i q s c e c e p u a l m a t l o d n d i q c e. f t h u y t i r t o m a c a q
 c a c a t c a t e a / d i c a c a m o q y m e t i c o c a q / a u b m i c a e n o p i b. y q t u a r
 c a c a t e p a / a u b y m q e y a p i x c o. y q t u a. o m i c e p i c a r. y a y a q
 t u a m e x o c o n a / a u b t l a t o q y a m o y t i c e p i x c a q. c a v e l l o m e
 q q u e y m i c e. a u b y m e q t u a t i c o c o n a. a m o n e l l i. o q t a t o y t o
 p i l e / c a r a y u l t e c a y m i n h t i c m o t e q q. y a y a q t u a n o n e b p o. p e l a
 y o. t e c o v e n e p u n o u a. c a m o n e l l i. o q t a t o y t o p i l e / y a m a z o c o m o y a
 q t e a a t l a t o q u e l y o d n a t o t a d d h a l a m i y p e l a y o. y m e a x e a y a t i m a
 n a m i q. m i y e c y m i l i n i z h a t o l l y y a t i c t o l m i y a. c e q p i n a v i z h a t o l l y.
 y a t i q t o n a. a u b m a h y n u l t i c a n i v a z n e q. q e p y e o t e c h o n e t e d e u b i z
 p e l a y o. o t a d i d h a l a m i. a u b y q t u a c a n o n e b t l a o e l i c u e m i t e q m i.
 o n e b h a o d o y. c u i x e c a n a p a m v a l e v a. m i x c e c a m i l a c a t i. y m i l i
 q m a t i n o y o l o. c a u e l c e l l a c a y t o t a b n a. c e y n a. c e y t a y o
 t e d i u b q y p a u p a y a x e a v e l i t i z y t i m o t a q q u e c u e t z i n t i. n o c h i
 y m i q r e m i. q n o t a b t z i. o q p i y a y a. a u x a m o. q m o m a d n i t i n a a m o y a
 t z i. y m e n o r e s. c a q l i l o r q. y m e s u s t e p l a m i. a u b y t l a q n e y n o z d e
 u e l s u s t e y e m i l l a m i z y p e l a y o. q e p y e h u a t o t a d d h a l a m i. y q t u o
 n e q z. c a n e p a h a m o q t a z q. y m i c t e d y n e c h i v a z q / a u b y q t u a n o
 p i b y c u e m i t e q m o t e q q. y q u a u b t z i t a t z i. y a y a q t a l p o y t z i. y p u p

Figure 1. A 1563 petition of María Quetzalcocoztli, Tlaxcala (AHET, siglo XVI, caja 2 exp. 17; courtesy of the Archivo Histórico del Estado de Tlaxcala)

Thus, late documents of this genre, dating to the eighteenth century, were usually dictated by lower-ranking and less wealthy indigenous members of the society, who nevertheless often adhered to the tradition of writing in their own language, instead of commissioning documents in the more and more dominant Spanish. Although it was customary that native notaries, often associated with local municipal organizations, wrote down and verified such statements, sometimes this role was assumed by a local priest. Thus, Sebastian de la Cruz, an inhabitant of a small town of San Juan Ixtenco in the Tlaxcala region, admits in 1766 that his will was done and signed by a priest from this parish, because he himself “did not know writing”. Although the sick man claims not to own a house, land “and anything at all,” he has a decent number of domestic animals, such as cows, bulls and donkeys, which he distributes carefully among his children. Almost thirty years earlier, in 1739, a female citizen from the same town, María Juana, made her will in front of a fiscal, a church official, and a notary, showing great concern about masses and responses to be performed for her and her parents. Nevertheless, she did not forget about any mundane things, such as money owed to her by different persons and even the fact that she lent scissors to one of them and should be paid for them⁵.

RELIGIOUS GENRES

Other genres of alphabetic writing important for indigenous society included traditional songs and speeches preserving naturally even more elements of preconquest oral tradition than “mundane” and historical texts. However, the traditional content becomes more and more merged with Christian concepts, making it often difficult to filter out “purely” pre-Hispanic ideas, vocabulary or ways of expression. Similar elements, though much profoundly disguised, are to be found in devotional genres representing a separate category of Nahuatl texts, produced under Spanish ecclesiastical auspices, based directly on European prototypes and produced in accordance with the goals and necessities of religious policy and instruction. They embrace catechisms, collections of sermons and confessionaries composed by Spanish priests with the help of native assistants. It was mainly within those genres that the Nahuatl language, constantly adapting to new conceptual spaces, transferred pre-Hispanic religious and ritual concepts into Christianity. This is particularly true of the vocabulary serving Christian needs but embedded in the indigenous tradition, and thus often characterized as “Nahua Christian”. Indigenous concepts are especially detectable in the terms for God, a supreme creator deity, the devil, demons, the soul, sin, confession, hell, sacrifice, offerings, as well as the very gestures and postures associated with religious devotion. Thus, although many ecclesiastics favored the publication of doctrinal materials in Nahuatl, they were not convinced that doctrinal truth could be adequately rendered in a native language, considered by many as clearly inferior to Latin, but also because they suspected that preconquest, nuanced meanings are preserved in the new terminology. This concern was expressed by the First Mexican Provincial Council in 1555 and by later pronouncements, which strengthened ecclesiastical control over the process of translating religious materials (Christensen 2012: 693). It is hardly surprising, then, that Spanish authors or editors of devotional texts in indigenous languages avoided mentioning their native aides, who surely must have played an important, if not joint role in their production (Burkhart 1989: 25; Sell 1993: 81). Such texts, in addition to serving practical needs of friars working in local communities, also contain features of preconquest orality and the elegant language of the upper class.

It is also becoming more and more patent that some devotional texts preserved today were produced by Nahua authors themselves, with little or no supervision by friars or priests. Whenever we are able to substantiate that preconquest equivalents of Christian terms existed, this implies much

⁵ Unpublished documents, Archivo Parroquial, San Juan Ixtenco, Tlaxcala.

greater communication between the two sides and greater comprehension on the part of the indigenous people than generally assumed, challenging the old, but still powerful view of “spiritual conquest” (Ricard 1933). A good example of a Nahua devotional manuscript, composed of heterogeneous parts and based on different European prototypes, apparently written by native authors independently of Spanish friars or priests, is the Codex Indianorum 7 preserved in the John Carter Brown Library. Probably made in late sixteenth century, this manuscript is a compilation of devotional materials of various kinds, assembled and written by literate indigenous authors (Burkhart 2001: 32-33). Among its contents is a story of Judas that reveals the very essence of the translation process that brought an old legend from the medieval bestseller, the *Golden Legend* by Jacopo de Voragine, to the Nahua audience (Figure 2). This legendary account of Judas the Betrayer, based on the Greek myth of Oedipus, is found in almost every language and country of mediaeval Europe. The Bible provides no biography for Judas before the point at which he became a disciple of Christ, and this is where the myth of Oedipus came into play. The account of Judas shares a significant number of features with the Oedipus story: his destiny is supernaturally revealed before his birth, his parents attempt to avoid the prophecy by ridding themselves of the baby, he is taken in by a royal family, he unwittingly murders his father and takes his mother as wife, and the end of the legend leaves him inconsolable (Hahn 1980: 227).

Castillian manuscripts from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that transmit the golden legend represent two distinct traditions, Compilation A (*Gran flos sanctorum*) and Compilation B (Thompson and Walsh 1986; Aragüés Aldaz 2005: 2). From these derive two printing lines, that of Renaissance *Flos Sanctorum*, related to Compilation A and the *Leyenda de los santos*, from Compilation B. These editions maintain close links with the *Legenda aurea* in contrast to post-Tridentine *Flos sanctorum* that bear no influence of Voragine (Aragüés Aldaz 2005: 5). The comparison of the Nahuatl text with editions based on both compilations leaves no doubt that its source was a printed version of the *Leyenda de los santos* derived from Compilation B. That tradition reveals many lexical dependencies with respect to the Latin original and these are also reflected in the Nahuatl manuscript. The *Leyenda* was being rewritten and remodeled during subsequent editions beginning with the first one by Juan de Burgos around 1499 and ending with the last one, published in Sevilla by Alberto de la Barrera in 1579. Unfortunately there are only six extant copies of the *Leyenda de los santos* corresponding to numerous editions of this work.⁶ The Nahua story is closest, though not identical, to the Toledo edition from 1554, currently known through a unique copy presented in the library in Munich.

In general, Spanish impact on the language of the Nahua story is relatively light, especially considering that the indigenous text was produced as a faithful translation of the Castilian prototype. The general characteristics of the text, as well as its orthography fit well into the end of the sixteenth century. As could be expected, the translation of the Judas legend left not much space for its native reinterpretation. However, in spite of faithfully following the Spanish original, some elements of the story betray specifically Nahua flavors. For example, the word *isla* was apparently not recognized for Isla de Escarioth, and was rendered “Is cante escalrioth”. Another interesting case is that of *ventanas*, a reference to a window in Pilate’s palace. The Nahuatl text says: *Auh yn iquac Cenmilhuil Coyonticatca. yn itocan Ventanas. honpa tlachiaya In pillato Auh ychätzinco hotlachix yn simon. Inic oquitac ynquilla* (‘One day when what is called a window [lit. windows] was open, Pilate was looking out from there; he looked at the house of Simon so that he saw his garden’). In the Toledo edition we read “en vn dia estando Pilato en vna finiestra d sus palacios vio una huerta en que estaban las mãçanas

⁶ 1499-1500, Burgos edition (a copy at the British Library); 1520-21, Sevilla edition (a copy at Archivo Histórico de Loyola); 1554 Toledo edition (a copy in Munich); 1567, Alcalá de Henares edition (a copy in Praga); 1568, Sevilla edition (a copy in Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional); 1579, Sevilla edition (a copy at Balliol College Library, Oxford).



Figure 2. A Judas story, John Carter Brown Library Codex Indianorum 7, fol. 51r (Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University).

y aquella huerta era d Simon.” Thus, if this expression was indeed the prototype of the Nahuatl text, a rarely used older word for a window borrowed from Latin, *finiestra*, was explained by a Nahuatl author with a more familiar Spanish term *ventanas*, used in the plural but probably with the intention to name a single object. The use of explanatory expression *yn itocan Ventanas*, ‘what is called a window’ [lit. windows] seems to confirm this hypothesis. However, another possible explanation is that they used a later edition, attested only by Sevilla 1568, where *finiestra* is replaced by *ventana* (but in Nahuatl: *ventanas*).

The most puzzling element of this story, retold by the Nahuatl translator, is the final episode of the death of Judas:

He went to hang himself on a tree called an elder tree and his middle ripped and his intestines came out because his spirit did not want to leave through his mouth. It was because with it he kissed the mouth of our lord Jesus Christ. And because his sin was so great that he made angels and people of the earth sad; because of that he descended to the home of devils, there in hell/Mictlan.⁷

This is a significant departure from the Spanish prototype despite its apparent textual proximity. According to the Toledo version the body broke in half and the intestines came out. The reason was that the soul, *anima*, did not want to leave through the mouth of Judas because he kissed the mouth of Christ. He caused sorrow among angels and humans, so he had to be isolated from them and to stay in the company of devils in the air. In the Spanish versions of the legend, the soul did not want to leave the body through the mouth, so it had to leave through his broken stomach, which reflects the medieval Christian tradition in which soul, good or bad, usually left the body through the mouth. This belief corresponds closely with Mesoamerican concepts, making it understandable for the Nahuatl audience. However, the Nahuatl text reveals what seems to be a reinterpretation of the circumstances of the death of Judas. First of all, its native author did not preserve the Spanish term *anima* but replaced it entirely with the word *-yolia*. *Anima* was often combined with *-yolia* to refer to a Christian soul (*in -anima in -yolia*). It was exceedingly rare to find *-yolia* used alone without the accompanying loanword *anima*; I have been able to find it so far only in one Nahuatl devotional text in direct relationship to departure for Mictlan.⁸

According to pre-Hispanic beliefs *-yolia* was a spiritual entity located in the heart; after death it left the body and travelled to Mictlan, the place of the dead, the place of purification of spiritual essences of the deceased (López Austin 1980: I: 252-254, 1994). As such, it was commonly identified as an equivalent of Spanish *anima* (e.g. *inic yehica in ixpolihuia in izquitzonxiquipilli in teyolia in teanimazhuan in quinhuicaya ompa Mictlan*; “and for this reason numerous souls [teyolia, animas] were lost, they took them to Mictlan”; Tezozomoc 1975: 12). Thus, it is natural that the *-yolia* of Judas goes to Mictlan and the author does not follow the prototype in saying that Judas was left in the air in the company of devils. Or perhaps he followed a later edition of the legend (Sevilla 1568: XLVII) saying simply that he was to stay in the company of devils. This detail, apparently, must have been incomprehensible for the Nahuas. Furthermore, in native beliefs breath contained fragments of spiritual entities, whereas the mouth was identified as the way of passage of spiritual essences and of *-yolia* in particular. Greenstone beads were placed in the mouth of the deceased to replace the *-yolia* and apparently attract those of its fragments, which did not set off to Mictlan (and other Otherworld

⁷ John Carter Brown Library Codex Indianorum 7, fol. 51r: Omopilloto. quahuil ytech. yn itocan Saucō. yhuān In inepantla. hotzantzayan Oquiz In icuetlaxcol. Ieica. hamo honpa quiçaznequi yn iyollia yn icamac. yheican Ca yc oquimotennamiquilliCa. In icamā In to°. Jex°. Auh yheica Cenca huei yn itlatlacol ynic oquintlaocolti yn agellotin yhuān yn tlatlicpactlaca. huell ic otemoc yn ichan Diablome yn opa mictlan. etc

⁸ e.g. Biblioteca Nacional de México, Ms. 1487, fols. 87-88.

locations). Thus, breath soul, related to the heart, was encapsulated in a precious green stone placed in the mouth, preserving the spiritual entity after bodily incineration (López Austin 1980: I: 374; Furst 1997: 42-47, 54-55). Similar concepts identifying breath, soul and jade jewels are attested among the Classic Maya. Both them and the Nahuas perceived speech as an emanation of breath soul (Houston *et al.* 2006: 142-154). Thus, the final part of the Judas legend, in spite of its apparent proximity to the Spanish original, became, at the hands of a native author, a profound reinterpretation of the European prototype in accordance with indigenous concepts. The results of his attempt to understand, render and make comprehensible in native terms a story belonging to European lore—that posed a continuous challenge for indigenous elites!—, reveal the complexity of the translation process as well as both the richness and ambiguity of its results.

CONCLUSIONS

It is often claimed today that colonial alphabetic writing was imposed on the indigenous population, including the Nahuas, under Spanish imperial domination. Likewise, it has been emphasized that this form of recording constituted a drastic reduction, if not a violation, of indigenous orality and thus was not an adequate medium for perpetuating native tradition and concepts. As I have shown, alphabetic writing did become a powerful tool at the hands of indigenous people, both noble groups and members of other social classes across the colonial period. They did not see it as something imposed and culturally alien, but used it both to preserve their tradition and to negotiate successfully or even challenge the Spanish administrative, judicial, political and religious arrangement, its institutions and functionaries. This dimension of indigenous discourse and rhetoric employed in alphabetic writing early on in the colonial period has already been convincingly demonstrated in the context of Tlaxcalan documents dealing with congregations (Sullivan 1999), but is manifest in almost the entirety of their writing tradition, with all its heterogeneity. Indigenous people were not only able to shape alphabetic writing as a space for their traditional orality, but also adapt it to and merge with the genres of preconquest records. In effect, it was within the space of alphabetic genres that the Nahuas dialogued both with their own past and concepts, as well as with numerous and no doubt alluring facets of European tradition they tried to absorb, translate and understand. The functions of writing and the contexts of its use reveal considerable continuity with certain pre-Hispanic behaviors and functions; also, new uses developed in response to the Spanish colonial system making the alphabetic mode of expression an efficient tool for defending indigenous autonomy and privileges, as well as for expanding existing rights.

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