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Trauma and Transition in Sixteenth Century Central Mexico

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Summary. The sixteenth century in central Mexico was a time of both trauma and transition for the native peoples of that region. In the early part of that century, the Mexica of Tenochtitlan and their immediate neighbours dominated much of central and southern Mexico. The arrival of the Spaniards initiated a new order for all these peoples. Selected aspects of life (political organization, social stratification, economic production and exchange, religion, and language and writing) are examined here as they appeared before and after the Spanish conquest. Adaptations to the newly introduced conditions are emphasized, as are the resilience and persistence of aspects of the indigenous culture and society.

I HAVE TITLED this article "Trauma and Transition" to highlight the dual, and sometimes contradictory, nature of culture contact and its often-dramatic aftermath. The native peoples of early sixteenth century Mexico were no strangers to contact and conflict with other peoples, for this had been a fact of life for centuries in the geographically and culturally diverse region. Strong political centres periodically rose to unprecedented heights, only to disappear or be replaced by others, themselves replaced in turn.

Under the stimulation of the Mexica (often called "Aztecs"), the apex of this dynamic process was reached. The armies and diplomats of the Mexica of Tenochititlan (with their allies the Acolhua of Texcoco and the Tepanecas of Tlacopan), surged beyond the Valley of Mexico to conquer divergent peoples from Gulf coast to Pacific, north to the borders of the "chichimec" desert, and south to the border of present-day

Guatemala. Though loosely-knit, this conquest empire brought peoples of diverse languages, cultural backgrounds and ethnic identities under one administrative umbrella. It was at this juncture that the Spaniards arrived.

Some groups, such as the Mexica and their allies, were sufficiently powerful and motivated to dominate others. Yet each centre, no matter how small, held on tenaciously to its traditional identity and to a defined territory it could claim as its own. When the Spaniards arrived, then, the people of central Mexico had logged a long and dramatic "history of contrasts": fluctuating political fragmentation and unity, alliances formed and broken, imperial conquest and defeat, and ethnic diversity and interethnic contact ranging from casual exchanges in a marketplace to marriages among elites. Under the aegis of the "Triple Alliance empire", war was an expected and anticipated affair of life, and whole communities might experience temporary demographic decline due to warfare and the capture of warriors for sacrifice (in very large numbers, if the documents are to be believed). Once conquered, a community's resources were selectively siphoned off to the coffers of the victors, to be used in enhancing their standard of living and in financing future wars. With imperial armies on the march in distant regions, and merchants penetrating new lands, the Mexica and their neighbours were repeatedly exposed to new and unusual products, and to novel peoples, customs, beliefs, materials and techniques.

The Spanish arrival also entailed warfare, depopulation, the introduction of new ideas and materials, and the imposition of a new imperial order. It was, on the one hand, astoundingly different from anything the central Mexicans had so far experienced; it was indeed traumatic. Yet, on the other hand, aspects of this contact contained enough resemblance to earlier experiences, and sufficient opportunities for collective and individual action, to summon up coping strategies long embedded in native history; it resulted in considerable continuity of custom and persistence of tradition. In short, while there was trauma when these very different worlds collided, there was also a transition from the known way of life to the new Spanish order. The event of conquest (in 1521) was not simply an abrupt end of the old and the advent of the new, for much of native life continued relatively unaltered for some time following the arrival of Europeans, and thereafter adjustments and adaptations were continually made to meld the introduced with the traditional.

This article focuses on the ethnically and linguistically diverse peoples of central Mexico in the sixteenth century. In space it encompasses the densely-populated Valley of Mexico and the surrounding valleys of the *mesa central*, with occasional glances to the south and toward the coasts where good documentary information is hard to resist. In time it spans the

height of the Triple Alliance empire, the arrival of the Spaniards and Spanish imperial administration, and the first century or so of Spanish rule. The themes of trauma and transition are pursued throughout, applied to selected key arenas of both indigenous and colonial-period life: political and territorial organization, social stratification, economic production and exchange, religion, language and writing. In these spheres of life the dynamics of culture contact and change can be seen in especially sharp focus. And while there is some danger in featuring one side of the story, the emphasis in this treatment is nonetheless on the lives of the *nican tlacah* the "here people".

These *nican tlacah* have become generally known as "Aztecs", a term which tends to convey the impression that central Mexico contained a singular, monolithic culture at the time of Spanish contact. Nothing could be farther from the truth. While many general elements of culture were shared by all the peoples of this region, they considered themselves quite distinct from one another, and indeed displayed variation in language, historical background, dynastic heritages, costume, rituals, and specializations. Ethnic pride was of considerable importance. Thus the Mexica of Tenochtitlan distinguished themselves from their neighbours the Acolhua of Texcoco, the Tepaneca of Tlacopan and Azcapotzalco, the Chalca of Chalco, the Xochimilca of Xochimilco, and so on.

Central Mexico before 1519

The year was 1325, or Two House in the Mexica calendar (Boone 1992). The periodically nomadic Mexica, following a long and arduous journey, had finally established a homeland in the populous Valley of Mexico (Figure 1). Looking about them from their island retreat in Lake Texcoco, they would have gazed upon larger and more ancient *altepetl* ("city-states") dotting the most favourable sites along the lakeshore and the surrounding piedmont. Some centres, such as Culhuacan, flaunted ancient and revered lineages, traceable back to the earlier, idealized Toltecs. Others such as the Chalca and Xochimilca were more recent arrivals; like the Mexica, they were Chichimecs from the northern desert regions. In the year Two House, then, the Valley of Mexico was home to persons and groups of diverse origins and backgrounds. In a general sense, the ancient sedentary agricultural traditions contrasted with the nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle of the Chichimec arrivals. The newcomers came to blend with their "hosts", learning sophisticated agricultural techniques, acquiring large retinues of deities to add to their own ample supply, intermarrying into local lineages, and profiting from their own considerable martial skills as

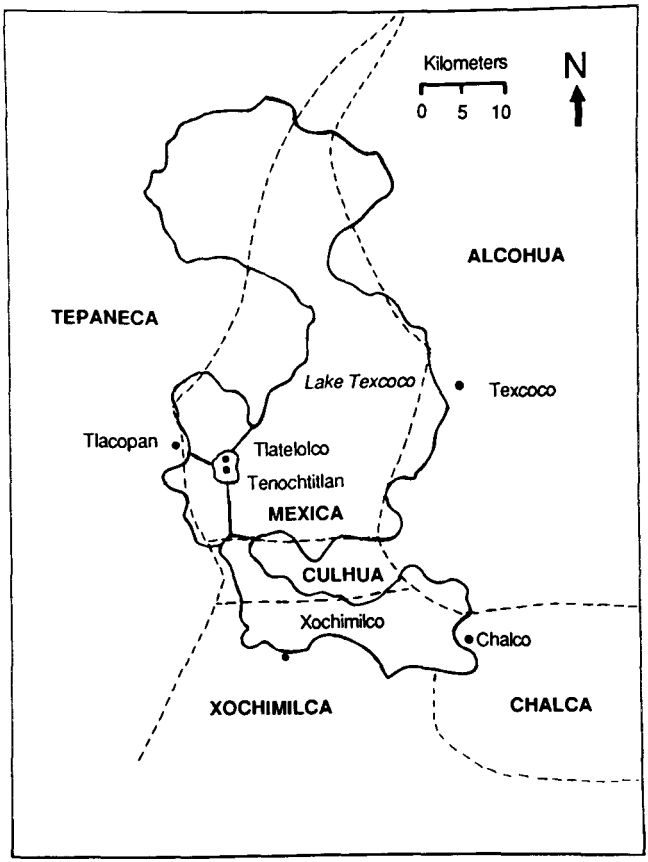

Figure 1 The Valley of Mexico in 1519.

mercenaries. They laid out their centres after local models, adopted "socially acceptable" titles, and entered enthusiastically into the political intrigues of the time. The Mexica were the last of the northern newcomers to settle in the Valley, and over the next 200 years they were to emerge as the most powerful.

For the first hundred years or so the Mexica fell into established patterns: making a living (from the lake, in this case), building temples, constructing a respectable city, arranging elite marriages with local Toltec-descended dynasties, and serving as mercenaries to more powerful states. Their population grew rapidly. Their social arrangements became more and more hierarchical, with titled positions mirroring those in more complex neighbouring centres. And as their military prowess became increasingly feared and respected, the Mexica gained in political stature.

By 1428 the stage was set for a major political and military upset in the Valley, an upset in which the Mexica played a major role.

The dominant Valley of Mexico *altepetl* or "city-state" in 1428 was Azcapotzalco, a Tepanec centre on the western shore of Lake Texcoco. It was at that time embroiled in a severe conflict over dynastic succession, and the Mexica and their Acolhua neighbours to the east took ready advantage of Azcapotzalco's weakness. The two allies conquered and razed the Tepanec centre, solicited a separate Tepanec *altepetl* as a third ally, and the three then embarked on an energetic enterprise of further military conquests. For the next ninety years this Triple Alliance consolidated conquests within the Valley of Mexico, then marched to the north, west, east and south in major military campaigns. They were not always victorious. The Triple Alliance never managed to defeat the Tarascans of western Mexico, nor conquer the Tlaxcallans closer to home. With the Tlaxcallans, however, the Triple Alliance conducted fairly frequent "flowery wars" ostensibly with the purpose of acquiring sacrificial victims and training warriors. "Official state scripts" notwithstanding, it appears that these wars were conducted in earnest, with neither side capable of conclusively dominating the other (Berdan n.d.). In addition to these wars, rebellions racked the land, especially in the later years of the empire.

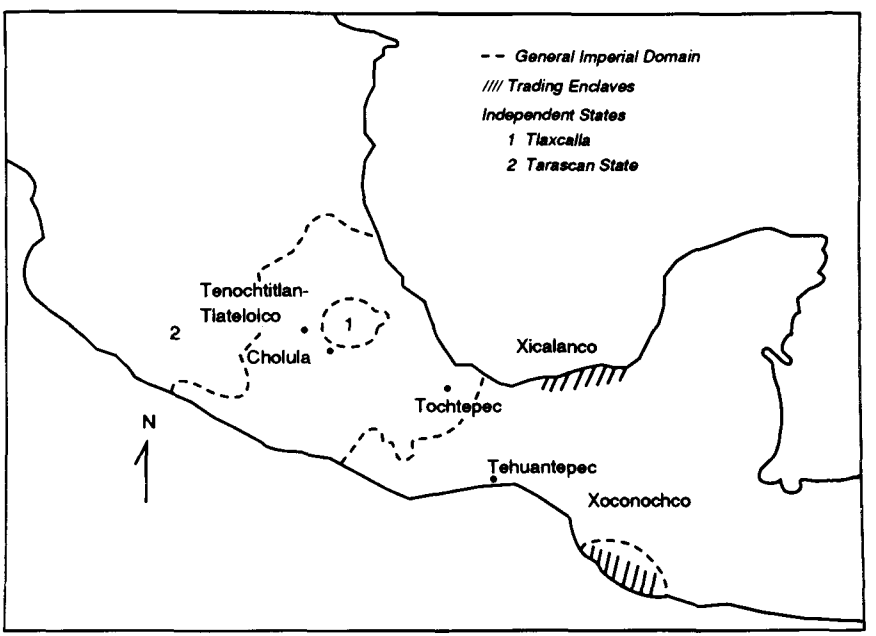

Figure 2 The Aztec Empire in 1519.

Nonetheless, the Mexica and their allies did succeed in amassing an extensive tribute empire and confederation of client states by the year 1519 (Berdan et al. n.d.). This was the empire encountered by Hernando Cortés in that fateful year (Figure 2).

In the following sections a brief overview of the Mexica and their empire is presented to provide a baseline against which to unravel the intertwined processes of trauma and transition that followed the jolting confrontation between the native central Mexicans and the Spaniards who became the next lords of the land.

Political and territorial organization

Over the short ninety-year period prior to 1519 the Mexica and their allies aggressively subdued and effectively managed an empire extending throughout much of present-day central and southern Mexico. This empire may best be viewed as an administrative overlay, designed to siphon desirable and often distant resources to imperial capitals, to protect trading routes, and to secure hostile borderlands against enemies. The Mexica, as Valley newcomers and possessing little land to sustain their rapidly growing urban domain, sought resources beyond their own restricted local boundaries to support their citizens and to enhance the standard of living of the ruling elite (Blanton n.d.).

To facilitate political control over needed or desired products, the Mexica divided their conquered city-states into provincial units; 371 subject city-states were arranged in 38 provinces, according to the tribute tally of the Codex Mendoza (Berdan and Anawalt 1992). Traditional rulers of subdued city-states were normally retained in power, on condition that they paid tribute on schedule and did not rise up in rebellion against their imperial overlords. Tribute collectors (*calpixque*) were reportedly assigned to each province, and their jurisdictions apparently could extend to maintaining general provincial order. Political and/or military governors were occasionally stationed in selected provinces of this loosely-knit tribute empire, though they seem to have interfered little in local affairs. More rarely, fortresses or garrisons were established to serve the interests of the imperial overlords (Berdan and Anawalt 1992, vol. 2:29–31; van Zantwijk 1967). Massive amounts of tribute in goods ranging from clothing to warrior costumes, and from tropical feathers to wooden beams, arrived in Tenochtitlan from these subject regions on a regular and predictable basis.

The expansion of the Triple Alliance empire was a dynamic and incomplete affair—in the early sixteenth century conquests were still being made, defeats were suffered, enemies simmered along extensive imperial borders, and rebellions were rife in the hinterlands. To help

maintain this rather tenuous hold on subjugated peoples, especially those in distant regions, the Mexica negotiated somewhat more reciprocal relations with city-states along frontiers and astride major commercial and transport routes. While viewed as subservient to the Mexica, these "client states" (Luttwak 1976) delivered "gifts" rather than tribute to the Mexica (at times receiving gifts in return) and were often linked to the Mexica through marriage and through shared customs. These "strategic provinces" served to hold hostile borderlands by engaging in sustained but low-level warfare with their unfriendly neighbours or, if situated along critical commercial routes, by ensuring safety and supplies of Mexica armies on the march, or to Valley of Mexico merchants laden with valuable merchandise (Smith n.d.).

Whether conquered outright and required to pay tribute, or incorporated into the empire along more negotiated lines, city-states in the imperial web nonetheless retained their *altepetl* status and ethnic consciousness. These units constituted the fundamental territorial organization of central Mexico, and each tended to focus around a particular ethnic group. While they varied considerably in scale and complexity (Lockhart 1992), they may be best described as city-states, whose well-populated urban capitals served as the centres for political, religious, and economic (especially market) activities. A hinterland consisting of lesser settlements rounded out the *altepetl*, people in the outlying areas considering themselves just as much a part of the city-state as those residing in the major centre. The centre itself, as well as its more rural components, was divided up among smaller residential units, the *calpulli* or *tlaxilacalli*. These were often even more clearly associated with specific ethnic identities and occupational specializations (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 9).

Whether imperial capital or subject centre, *altepetl* and their respective components served as the basic political and territorial building blocks of Mexico. Empires, native or Spanish, were built upon this fundamental unit of organization. When the empires successively collapsed and fragmented, these basic and essential political units re-asserted themselves; they were tenacious and adaptive (Lockhart 1992).

Social stratification

A city-state was ruled by one or more legitimized rulers, or *tlatoque* (sing. *tlatoani*), who sat at the apex of the social, political and economic hierarchy. *Tlatoque* rose to their exalted positions by virtue of a combination of heredity and achievement. Each *altepetl* was headed by a ruler (or more than one) who represented a well-defined dynastic line. For instance, Tenochtitlan was governed by one *tlatoani*, but Xochimilco was ruled by

three *tlatoque*, Cuitlahuac by three, greater Chalco by ten, and Tulancinco by two (Gibson 1964:41–44; Lockhart 1991:26). It appears that succession to the rulership was not a simple clear-cut matter of sons before brothers and elder sons before younger sons. Indeed, there was some variation in succession among even near neighbours: the Mexica favoured succession by brothers before descending to the next generation, while the Acolhua of Texcoco followed a father-to-son principle. And brothers sometimes competed for a rulership, as in the dynastic conflict that weakened Azcapotzalco in 1428 (see above). Ambition to attain a *tlatoani* title led, as one might imagine, to more than a small amount of political tension and court intrigue. While genealogical reckoning served as a basic criterion for rulership, there was also an important element of achievement involved, and, for the Mexica at least, an election also took place (Berdan 1982: 100). It was essential that a ruler exemplify the ideals and goals of the culture; thus the very term *tlatoani* means speaker, and eloquence in speech was among the characteristics of a successful ruler. In a society where warfare was a prominent activity, a ruler was required to be courageous and clever in battle. And in a society where religion and politics were tightly interwoven and the ruler actively participated in religious ceremonies, he must also be well-versed in rites and dedicated to priestly endeavours (such as fasting and sacrifices). A *tlatoani*'s responsibilities lay first and foremost with his city-state. He was responsible for the sustenance and defence of its citizens, and therefore was a manager on economic, political, and military fronts. Under imperial conditions *tlatoque* became hierarchically ranked, with the imperial rulers dominating so many other *tlatoque* they were called "señores universales" in a sixteenth century Spanish record (Zorita 1963:190–191).

The rulers were just the most prominent of a whole cadre of elite personages, those who might be generally dubbed "nobles". A member of the nobility, without particular title or special achievement, was called *pilli* (pl. *pipiltin*), and from these hereditary ranks were drawn the higher ranking officials of the land, including the *tlatoque*. Titled military officers, secular officials (including governors and judges), ambassadors, tribute collectors, priests, scribes, teachers, and a host of other positions were occupied by *pipiltin*. In addition to access to prestigious occupations, these nobles also enjoyed special privileges such as fancy attire, elaborate housing, rights to practise polygamy, and access to the labour and production of others lower on the social ladder. Polygamy, the prerogative of nobility, would probably have led to an increasing proportion of nobles in the overall population, and the likelihood that social mobility would become increasingly restricted (Berdan 1982:65).

Those persons on the lower rungs of the social scale were predominately

farmers, fishermen and artisans, and constituted the bulk of the population throughout central Mexico in the early sixteenth century. Dubbed in modern scholarship as "commoners", these *macehualtin* (sing. *macehualli*) were the backbone of the economy, producing enormous quantities of foodstuffs, clothing, and the innumerable objects of everyday life (from pots to stone tools). They also provided services in the marketplace as barbers, porters, preparers of "fast food", and the like (Cortés 1977, vol. 1:257–258).

The *macehualtin* residing in the various urban and rural *calpulli* owed their tribute to the city-state (and, if conquered, to the imperial lords of the land). They also provided the labour so often mobilized for local and imperial projects: they repaired roads, bridges and temples; provisioned and cared for the palaces of nobles; and fought in distant wars (for all men were trained in the martial arts). The labour of other commoners (often called *mayeque* or *tlalmaitl*) was applied to the needs of landed nobility, working in their fields or lordly houses (Berdan 1982:55–61).

In its fundamental outline the Aztec social scheme resembles a two-caste system. Yet there were many people in intermediate positions, luxury artisans and professional merchants who were economically wealthy but not of noble social status. They enjoyed the favour of the Valley of Mexico *tlatoque*, and seem to have operated much like guilds, residing in separate *calpulli*, controlling their membership and standards, developing their own internal social ladder, and revering particular patron deities. The long-distance merchants (*pochteca* or *oztomeca*, see below) trafficked in manufactured goods and also in precious raw materials which the artisans transformed into headdresses, shields, necklaces, masks and other valuable objects and ornamentations. These were consumed by both nobles and deities, for idols were likewise lavishly adorned.

Merchants could climb the social ladder pertaining to commercial life, and social mobility was also apparently possible through the priesthood (whose highest positions were usually restricted to nobles). But the more usual avenue for mobility lay in the military arena: the capture of enemy warriors on the battlefield led the way to enhanced social position and potentially to a quasi-noble status (Berdan and Anawalt 1992, vol. 3: folios 64r, 65r).

Economic production and exchange

Life in early sixteenth century central Mexico was fundamentally based on agriculture. Maize, prepared in a multitude of ways, was the staff of life. Combined with beans, chilis, squashes, fish, fowl, a vast variety of fruits and vegetables, and a host of other dietary supplements (including maize

fungus and insect eggs) the population, and especially the elite, enjoyed a varied and adequate diet. But by 1519, the people of the central Valley of Mexico were under some stresses to support themselves. The city of Tenochtitlan had grown to an astounding 150,000–200,000 persons, and neighbouring cities such as Texcoco numbered up to ca. 30,000 inhabitants. These were remarkable population concentrations for a system of labour-intensive agriculture performed largely at fairly high (and thus risky) elevations (over 2,200 m. in the Valley). A severe four-year famine beginning in 1450 was still remembered in the sixteenth century, and a damaging flood in 1502 was likewise disruptive to the economic wellbeing of Valley inhabitants.

But the Mexica and their neighbours devised innovative ways to insure against famine and other potential catastrophes, and to provide sustenance for their burgeoning citizenry. The creation of *chinampas*, a highly productive agricultural technique based on land built up in the shallow lake bed, produced high yields and, for Tenochtitlan especially, an avenue for urban expansion beyond its small island core. Yet it appears that yields from these urban plots were not sufficient to feed the concentrated populations, many of whom were non-agricultural producers specializing in crafts, bureaucratic offices, religious positions, and a variety of voluntary and involuntary services (Calnek 1972).

As the cities grew, building materials were in considerable demand; Tenochtitlan's island position meant that materials such as stone, lime and wood were difficult to obtain locally. A population must also be clothed, and while all women were taught to spin and weave cloth (cotton and/or maguey), it is likely that even their diligent efforts were insufficient to satisfy expanding urban needs and desires. Furthermore, as the population expanded in size and complexity, symbols of social status came into increasing demand: tropical feathers, jadeite, turquoise, gold, silver, and copper were all fashioned into status-linked sumptuary ornaments. None of these raw materials was found natively in (or even near) the Valley of Mexico. Other means than local production, therefore, were pursued by the Mexica and their neighbours in an effort to provide reliable supplies of subsistence and luxury goods.

Successful imperial expansion involved the delivery of tribute on a regular basis from conquered city-states to imperial capitals (Figure 3). Tribute ranged from the relatively everyday (food staples, gourd bowls, salt, carrying frames, or plain clothing) to items more closely connected with important social status (such as feathered warrior costumes, jewellery, or cacao beans). It is intriguing that, on balance, more tribute was paid in manufactured goods than in raw materials (Berdan 1992b). Feathers, along with foodstuffs, were the most notable raw materials paid in tribute.

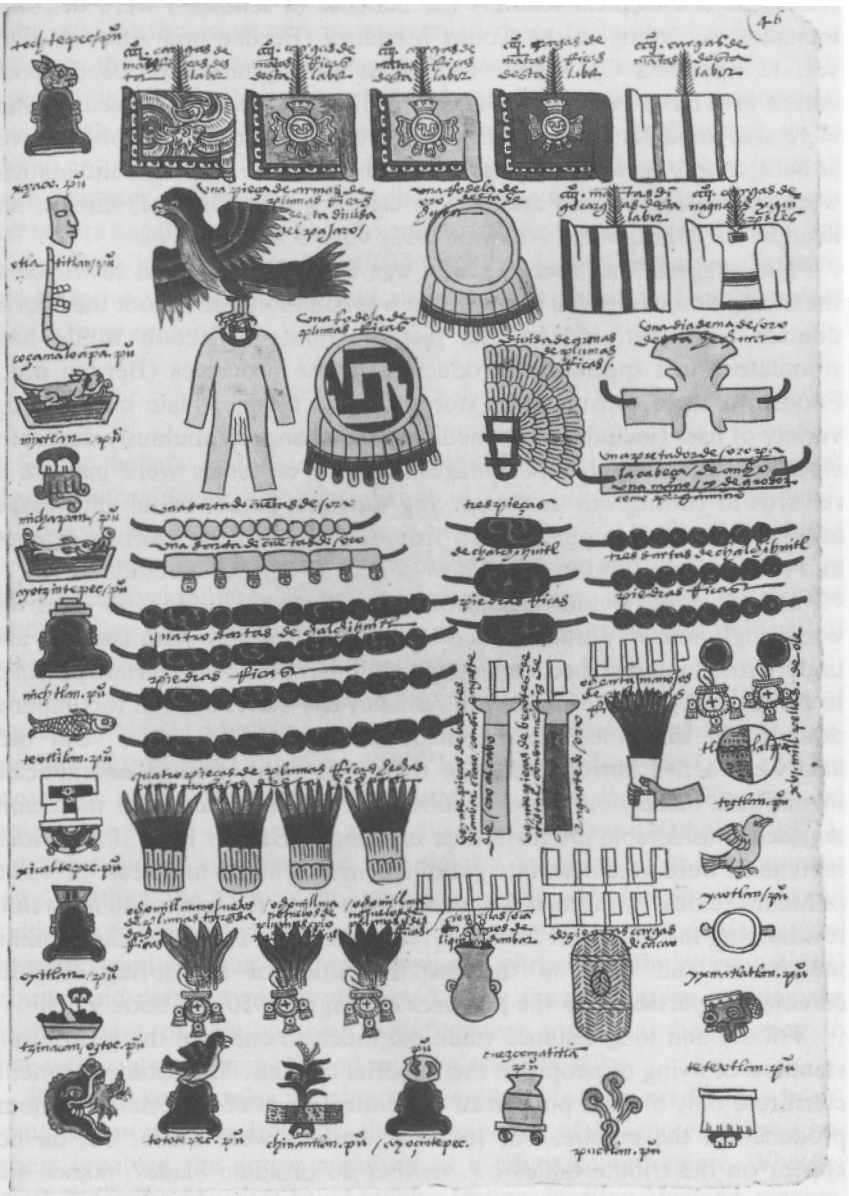

Figure 3 The Aztec Tributary Province of Tochtepec. Codex Mendoza folio 46r.

Nearly 30,000 tropical feathers (or bunches of feathers) were delivered annually, according to the Codex Mendoza (Berdan and Anawalt 1992, vol. 1: Appendix C). Jadeite arrived as already-fashioned beads; some cotton arrived in raw form, but nearly 150,000 pieces of woven clothing were sent annually; reeds were woven into mats and seats; rubber arrived as balls; amber, gold and crystal were fashioned into lip plugs; and feathers were meticulously glued and tied to create warrior devices, shields, and headpieces (Berdan and Anawalt 1992, vols. 3 and 4).

This suggests that specialization was not a phenomenon restricted to the monumental imperial capitals, but was common throughout the Mexica domain, and that, indeed, the fact of tribute collection would have stimulated such specialized production in the provinces (Berdan n.d.). Foodstuffs were consumed or stored against famine; plain cloaks had a variety of uses (including as a medium of exchange); fabulously decorated clothing adorned noble personages; warrior costumes were granted as rewards to courageous and deserving warriors; stone, metal and feather adornments set the nobility apart from the commoners; incense, feathers and rubber were used in the almost-constant religious ceremonies.

Tribute was obviously controlled by the state, and was an overwhelmingly one-way transference of goods. Some city-state *tlatoque* also underwrote long-distance trading expeditions, sponsoring certain *pochteca* to carry royal goods to trade with rulers of city-states beyond the imperial domain. In this role, the merchants acted as state agents. But they also were active entrepreneurs in their own right, trading energetically in markets throughout (and beyond) the empire; successful merchants amassed considerable profits in their exchanges (Berdan 1986). Professional merchants were organized into guild-like arrangements in at least 12 Valley of Mexico cities. A successful merchant was expected to expend his wealth on climbing the merchant hierarchy: he would give feasts for high-ranking merchants, and take on the responsibilities of sponsoring religious ceremonies particular to the *pochteca* (Sahagún 1950–82, book 9).

Tribute and long-distance trade did much to enhance the growth and standard of living of people in the imperial capitals. Yet tribute payments constitute only a small portion of the entire range of materials and items produced in the empire. For instance, baskets were made, but do not appear on the tribute tallies . . . neither do obsidian blades, manos and metates (maize grinding stones), glue, or pulque (a drink made from fermented sap of the agave plant). Similarly, the long-distance merchants, as state agents, specialized in trading royal luxuries. A whole host of items, produced by specialized persons or in specific regions, reached the hands of consumers through the extensive market network. Virtually every city-state held a major market, usually once a "week" (every five days). The

largest market in the land, at Tenochtitlan's sister-city Tlatelolco, met daily; several thousand persons converged there to buy and sell, and to exchange the latest news and rumours (Anonymous Conqueror 1971: 392). Even though, in the largest market at least, judges oversaw procedures, and prices may have been somewhat controlled, the marketplace scene had an entrepreneurial cast to it: traders ranged from the *pochteca* to small scale producer-sellers, goods from the mundane to the ornate, and buyers and sellers haggled over prices. Together, tribute, long-distance trade, and marketplace exchange served to stimulate production and specialization, and to move vast quantities (and an impressive variety) of goods across very diverse regions.

Religion

Religious beliefs and ceremonies permeated the lives of the central Mexican *nican tlacah*. The central zone of Tenochtitlan was a ceremonial, not a business district. The passage of time was marked by flamboyant and frequent ceremonies, some involving human sacrifice and all entailing large and impressive retinues of priests and priestesses. Temples dotted the urban setting and countryside, dedicated to the multitudinous deities that populated the central Mexican pantheon.

The polytheistic religion encountered by the Spanish in 1519 was of ancient vintage in Mesoamerica. The Mexica themselves, while introducing their patron god Huitzilopochtli ("Hummingbird-on-the-Left") to the pantheon, at the same time incorporated a wide array of ancient and regionally specific deities into their divine assemblage (Nicholson 1971). Acts of imperial conquest did not require adoption of the "dominant deity"; rather, the Mexica conquerors normally added regional gods and goddesses to their religious repertoire. The domains of their deities ranged from universal creation to the patronage of particular ethnic/occupational groups, and deities typically displayed more than one guise, making the decipherment of this complex belief system somewhat bewildering to sixteenth century Spaniards and modern scholars alike.

Religious ceremonies punctuated everyday life on a predictable basis. Some ceremonies required only the participation of designated priests, but others involved the entire populace of a city-state or region. Whether priest or farmer, the rites could involve fasting, feasting, dancing, singing, processions, and/or the enactment of human sacrifice. Much human sacrifice took the form of self-sacrifice, blood-letting typically by piercing fleshy parts of the body with sharp spikes of the maguey cactus. The most publicized sacrifices, however, were those involving removal of the heart of very large numbers of individuals, particularly defeated enemy warriors

(see Davies 1987:217–242 and Berdan 1982:111–118 for summaries of this topic). A belief in the efficacy of fate and in successive world destructions was strongly related to the thrust of many ceremonies: gods and goddesses had to be appeased and nourished to ensure the continuation of a rather precarious universe.

Language and writing

The predominant language in the Valley of Mexico in the early sixteenth century was Nahuatl. Of the many native languages in Mexico, Nahuatl was one of the latest to appear, arriving in central Mexico with the successive waves of nomadic and semi-nomadic Chichimecs travelling from the north. Then with the Mexica and their Nahuatl-speaking neighbours, it gained prominence beyond the realm of its own native speakers, and became the language of empire. Nahuatl gained importance even in distant areas, suggesting considerable Triple Alliance presence. This was the case in the eastern sierra tributary city-state of Quauhtochco, which also housed a Triple Alliance garrison (Gerhard 1972:83). Another example is Tetela, just north of enemy Tlaxcalla, where Nahuatl was spoken and even Huitzilopochtli was worshipped (Berdan et al. n.d.: Appendix 4). And in some conquered city-states (e.g. Tulancinco, Acatlan), Nahuatl was spoken by a minority of the population who were also concentrated in the major centres; this suggests that it was spoken by imposed officials or local administrators who found it expedient to learn the language of their overlords. The latter were probably bilingual (Berdan et al. n.d.).

During the course of imperial expansion the Triple Alliance powers encountered speakers of numerous languages. Language, like clothing and religious ritual, was closely tied to ethnic identity, and conquered peoples held on tenaciously to their native languages, incorporating aspects of Nahuatl when deemed expedient. This is confirmed by the historic and present-day geographic distribution of native languages in Mexico.

Nahuatl was visually expressed through a complex system of hieroglyphic writing. Pictorial books, usually in screen-fold form and drawn on paper pounded from the inner bark of the fig tree, were common in early sixteenth century Mexico. They depicted histories, kept track of tribute payments, recorded census data, provided maps and calendric guides, and described the rich ritual life of the central Mexicans. The writing system employed in these books was glyphic and non-alphabetic, with glyphs largely devised as pictographs and ideographs, along with some phonetic elements (Berdan 1992a). The glyphs (and all pictorial elements), served largely as mnemonic devices, memory-joggers for an extensive store of information which could be related from memory. When the Spaniards

arrived, then, the Mexica and their neighbours were no strangers to books and writing, although the specific language and writing system introduced by the newcomers were indeed quite novel to the *nican tlacah*.

This sketch of pre-Spanish political and territorial organization, social stratification, economic production and exchange, religion, and language and writing sets the stage for the arrival of Spaniards from across the *Mar Oceano*. These spheres of life provide five little windows through which the impact of the Spanish arrival can be viewed, and the resilience and persistence of native culture can be perceived. Before proceeding to the next section, however, it should be emphasized that these social and cultural features did not exist in isolation from one another, but rather were intricately intertwined. For instance, the nobility, and especially the rulers of city-states, frequently intermarried with one another: *altepetl* were linked at the highest levels of the social stratification system. In addition, traders (from professional merchants to small scale peddlers) journeyed from market to market, most of those sites being located in city-states different from their own. Deities were borrowed, and common rituals performed across city-states and social strata. Lavish offerings presented to deities moved large quantities of goods, especially exotic ones, from city-state to city-state, and from region to region. Furthermore, languages served to differentiate as well as to unify. These were interwoven strands, yielding much of the social and cultural complexity encountered by the Spaniards in 1519.

The Spanish Conquest and its Aftermath

The misunderstandings began early. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, accompanying Cortés as a soldier in his small expeditionary force, graphically describes the momentous meeting between the Spanish captain and the exalted *tlatoani* Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin. When they met,

> . . . each bowed deeply to the other . . . Cortés, I think, offered Montezuma his right hand, but Montezuma refused it and extended his own. Then Cortés brought out a necklace which he had been holding . . . This he hung round the great Montezuma's neck, and as he did so attempted to embrace him. But the great princes who stood round Montezuma grasped Cortés' arm to prevent him, for they considered this an indignity (Díaz del Castillo 1963: 217–218).

The two worlds collided in all arenas, from such seemingly small faux pas of etiquette to crucial impasses in cultural content and understandings.

Contrasts between the *nican tlacah* and the Spaniards are highlighted by the very events and strategies of conquest and defeat. The practice (and

glorification) of warfare was shared by people in both hemispheres, though it differed considerably in critical specifics. The Spaniards arrived armed with technologies novel to the indigenous inhabitants; they carried steel weaponry and armour, startling (but relatively ineffective) firearms, and they brought large horses and dogs. Steel swords and firearms were matched against spears, spear throwers (*atlatl*), arrows, and obsidian-edged clubs (*macquahuitl*); steel armour against its quilted cotton counterpart, mobility on horseback against mobility on foot. While it appears that, in the area of technology, the advantage was held by the Spaniards, the efficacy of the indigenous technology should not be underestimated. A *macquahuitl* could deliver a damaging blow and, along with spears and arrows, inflicted large numbers of wounds on the Spanish soldiers. Quilted cotton armour and well-constructed shields likewise offered sufficient military protection (at least against native weaponry), while the Spanish metal armour was often inappropriate and uncomfortable in this non-European setting and climate. And for their part, the Mexica and their allies had the advantage of numbers, vastly outnumbering the small Spanish forces. They also were fighting on their own terrain: they knew the "lay of the land", and were motivated to defend it. Yet the Spaniards had strong motives as well: eager for "gold and souls" they pushed tenaciously ahead in conquering the most powerful state in central Mexico.

Other significant differences contributed to the final outcome. One of these involved the rules and goals of warfare. The armies from both "worlds" were well-trained and the fighters courageous, but they fought by conspicuously different rules. Native battle tactics were slanted toward the capture of enemies, which yielded both social renown for the captor and a sacrifice for the captor's gods. While battlefield casualties did occur, reportedly in considerable numbers, native Mexican strategies were more oriented toward a surround-and-attack operation (Hassig 1988:95–109, 116–118). The warriors from enemy city-states, although they warred with one another, did so according to the same rules and goals. The Spaniards, for their part, had little interest in capturing large numbers of enemy warriors; hand-to-hand combat between native warrior and Spaniard would have a rather different flavour from that between native warrior and native warrior.

But, in the course of the Conquest, the Spaniards enlisted an even more effective weapon, taking advantage of the loosely-knit structure of the Triple Alliance empire. At the earliest opportunity Cortés perceived this structural weakness and convinced the Cempoallans, then the Tlaxcallans, and later numerous other city-states, to join him in overthrowing the imperial Mexica. These previously-conquered or habitually enemy city-states saw an opportunity to throw off the yoke of onerous tribute or rid

themselves of unrelenting military pressures. In the end, in the late summer of 1521, the Mexica had few allies with which to face the relentless Spanish seige. The advantage of numbers was gone, as thousands of native warriors were by then fighting side by side with Spanish soldiers.

By then, too, an even more insidious weapon had asserted itself. The siege of Tenochtitlan was not yet even begun when not only famine, but also smallpox ravaged the inhabitants of the beleagered city. At about the time of the Spanish *noche triste*,

> . . . there came a great sickness, a pestilence, the smallpox. It started in the month of Tepeilhuitl and spread over the people with great destruction of men . . . It caused great misery . . . Indeed many people died . . . But many just died of hunger. There were so many deaths that there was often no one to care for the sick; they could not be attended . . . The pestilence lasted through sixty day signs before it diminished. When it was realized that it was beginning to end, it was going toward Chalco (Anderson and Dibble 1978: 64).

This, the first of several epidemics, claimed the life of the Mexica *tlatoani* Cuitlahuac, who had succeeded Motecuhzoma as the tenth ruler of Tenochtitlan. During the next 100 years the contact-period central Mexican population, estimated at 13,839,000 (Denevan 1992:xxviii) plummeted as successive epidemics in 1545–47, 1576–81, and 1629–31 decimated the native population. In the higher valleys of central Mexico the decline was dramatic, but not quite as total as in the coastal lowlands. Actual population numbers are elusive and extremely difficult to estimate. Borah and Cook, pioneers in the study of colonial Mexican demographics, estimate the population of central Mexico in 1519 as 25,200,000. They calculate that this had diminished to 6,300,000 by the end of the 1545–47 epidemic, to 1,900,000 by 1580, and to just over one million inhabitants by 1605 (Borah and Cook 1963:4, 88). There have been many evaluations and reassessments of their methodologies and calculations, most notably by Denevan (1992), Dobyns (1976), Sanders (1992), and Newson in this volume. In addition, the creation of an increasingly large mestizo population "artificially" removed many people from the "Indian" category in population figures.

Estimates by sixteenth century observers of population loss in the Valley of Mexico range from one-half to five-sixths by only 34–49 years after the conquest (Gibson 1964:138). Effects on individual city-states must have varied considerably; Gibson reports a decline from 30,000 to 6,000 or 7,000 inhabitants by 1563 for Xochimilco, and similar losses for other city-states are calculated by Sanders. His figures show roughly a two-thirds loss of population in the Valley of Mexico by 1568. He shows similar declines in the Puebla-Cholula area, but a 75–80% loss in the Morelos

region (Sanders 1992:130–131). While these figures are staggering, and the impact on daily life must have been traumatic and devastating, especially during the major epidemics, the basic structures of native life maintained themselves to a good degree, or became adjusted to the presences of the new lords of the land.

Political and territorial organization

The trauma of extraordinary population loss stood in sharp contrast to the persistence of indigenous institutions and culture. The new political order, a Spanish order, required adjustments on the part of subjugated populations; nonetheless, the native peoples were already accustomed to making political and economic adaptations in pre-Spanish times as the tide of empires rose and fell. Much as the Triple Alliance was an administrative overlay, so, to a good extent, was the Spanish empire. While each regime was largely designed to deflect surpluses to the conqueror's coffers, each imposed somewhat different arrangements on its subjugated populations.

In the political and territorial arena, the Spanish crown early on granted *encomiendas* to certain privileged Spanish settlers. These awards provided the Spanish *encomendero* with rights to the labour and tribute of native peoples inhabiting city-states of varying sizes. In exchange for these rights, the grantee was obliged to offer protection to the people and to oversee their religious conversion. The Spanish administration largely based these *encomienda* grants, as well as focal political institutions, on the already-existing and notably tenacious *altepetl* (Gerhard 1972).

Altepetl politico-territorial units remained essentially intact following Spanish conquest. The perhaps ideal, neatly-constructed city-state with a single *tlatoani*, a singular sense of ethnic identity, a defined number of subunits, a well-established system of rotation of responsibilities, and a traditionally-delineated territory, provided the model for Spanish administration. Yet, as Lockhart (1991) has pointed out, there was considerable variation in this *altepetl* form, which led to some mismatch between Spanish expectations and indigenous understandings. In Tlaxcalla and Tulancinco, for instance, the Spaniards had some initial difficulty acknowledging the presence of more than one *tlatoani*, and tended to recognize only one, and to develop unitary governing institutions even in these complex settings (Lockhart 1991:27, 29). Coincident with this was the generally urban focus of the Spanish arrivals. They made distinct conceptual divisions between "cabecera" (head town) and "sujeto" (subject town), thus introducing a slightly different tilt to the preconquest city-state arrangement. In the pre-Spanish *altepetl*, segments of major centres (*calpulli* or *tlaxilacalli*) and rural towns or hamlets were all component

parts of the same political structure, essentially muting the marked dominant-subordinate arrangement implied in the Spanish terminology (Lockhart 1992).

The existing city-states provided the rough basis for *encomienda* awards, parish territories, and finally (beginning in the 1530s) for the establishment of Spanish-style municipal governing bodies. These town councils, or "cabildos", were devised on the general Spanish model, with a governor, *alcaldes*, *regidores*, a notary, and a host of other functionaries. They did, however, differ somewhat from the Spanish institution, being built upon the *altepetl* structure. For instance, in the earliest years the *gobernador* was synonymous with the *tlatoani*, who held that position for life. As the sixteenth century wore on, however, more and more dynastic rulers became separated from the elected governorship; the *tlatoani*'s powers, along with his legitimacy in Spanish eyes, thus became eroded (Lockhart 1992:32). The presence of a cabildo also contributed to some restructuring of indigenous divisions: thus, the fundamental four-part composition of Tlaxcalla came to be governed by one cabildo, not four. The four *tlatoque* then served as permanent *regidores* on the council, and "were powerful and respected figures who may have been the cabildo's backbone" (Lockhart, Berdan and Anderson 1986:19).

The traditional functions and powers of dynastic rulers, including assessing and collecting taxes, forming labour drafts, overseeing public construction projects, and in general maintaining order (both mortal and spiritual) in the realm were transferred to the cabildo (Lockhart, Berdan and Anderson 1986:1). Under Spanish rule the cabildo additionally took on somewhat different functions. It represented the community to the Spanish administration, petitioning for special rights or perquisites, allocating labour for the local encomendero, arguing against overly-onerous tribute demands, or defending the community's interests against "alleged encroachments whether by Spanish officials, lay Spaniards, or neighbouring Indian corporations" (Lockhart, Berdan and Anderson 1986:1). The cabildo could also set itself up as a corporation with disposable wealth, and it involved itself in supporting Christian religious activities (see below). During the course of the sixteenth century, then, the cabildo came to assume the powers and functions of the dynastic rulership while at the same time maintaining and reinforcing the integrity of the individual *altepetl*.

Social stratification

The members of the sixteenth century municipal councils, in keeping with pre-Spanish principles, were consistently members of the native nobility;

this was also true of lesser officials (such as constables) and even of electors connected with the council. The nobility held on jealously to their power and wealth, and they were being squeezed by the Spaniards above them and the *macehualtin* below them. In Tlaxcalla, in 1553, the nobles of the municipal council complained bitterly about the deleterious effects of cochineal production and trade on the commoners:

> And he who belonged to someone no longer respects whoever was his lord and master, because he is seen to have gold and cacao. That makes them proud and swells them up, whereby it is fully evident that they esteem themselves only through wealth (Lockhart, Berdan and Anderson 1986:81).

In this same tirade, the nobles were clearly worried about commoners encroaching on their traditional perquisites, even when the commoners

> find the chocolate just a little watery, then it is not to their liking and they do not want to drink it. Some pour it on the ground, whereby whoever has given this very good cacao to someone is affronted, but they imagine themselves very grand because of it (Lockhart, Berdan and Anderson 1986: 82)

These tensions between native nobles and commoners are also manifested in the same *cabildo*'s decree in 1553 forbidding nobles to sell their lands to commoners, which they apparently had been doing (Lockhart, Berdan and Anderson 1986:85–86). The commoners, for their part, appear to have devised strategies to gain wealth and to translate it into social position and some degree of political clout.

Early on, many high-ranking members of the aristocracy maintained their titles, lands and sumptuary symbols to some extent, but these later became transformed into Spanish-style titles (e.g., governor), control over labour (as *encomiendas*), and special material perquisites (e.g., rights to "carry swords or firearms, to wear Spanish clothing, to ride horses or mules with saddles and bridles"; Gibson 1964:155). The effect was the same, the content was new. Nonetheless, over the course of the sixteenth century the native elite progressively lost many of their symbols of status, their lands and labour, and their exalted positions. The indigenous hierarchy, which had been complex and deep in pre-Spanish times, became more and more compressed under Spanish rule. The minutes of the Tlaxcallan *cabildo* express a clear perception of this process of social compression: ". . . perhaps those who are in the lordly houses will become ordinary commoners, and the commoners who are buying the fields will be noblemen" (Lockhart, Berdan and Anderson 1986:85).

The status of the commoners themselves underwent some transformation. The general distinction between *calpulli* commoners and those who worked the lands of hereditary nobles became less and less clear, although

at an early date many nobles successfully asserted their traditional rights over the labour of dependent commoners (Lockhart 1992:111–113). Yet, in some cases commoners employed strategies to dodge tribute duties, whether to noble, *altepetl*, or imperial overlord. The Tlaxcallan council, in 1550, worriedly dealt with the problem of how "all over Tlaxcala everyone is falsely claiming nobility," avoiding tribute duties, and generally living in idleness (Lockhart, Berdan and Anderson 1986:72–73). The tendency was for these commoners to move into the city of Tlaxcalla, abandoning their tribute and labour obligations in the smaller communities throughout the city-state. There was also a certain amount of movement of people from city-state to city-state; twice in 1547 that same municipal council took up the matter of non-Tlaxcallans living in Tlaxcalla, and did so once again in 1550 (Lockart, Berdan and Anderson 1986:35, 36, 49). As the sixteenth century progressed, increasingly conflicting demands were made on the labour and tribute of commoners: the *altepetl*, indigenous lords, Spanish *encomenderos*, friars and other church officials, and the Spanish government all tugged at the commoners' available labour and produce (Lockhart, Berdan and Anderson 1986; Gibson 1964:154). Overall, the Spaniards gained at the expense of the native nobility:

> With each generation, the new group of Indians-among-Spaniards grew in size and importance, and soon Spanish employ far outweighed the estates of indigenous lords as a safety valve for Nahua society (Lockhart 1992:113).

The Spaniards also gained in terms of land acquisition; between 1580 and 1620 most indigenous lands in the Valleys of Mexico and Puebla had been transferred as land grants to Spaniards. Beyond these central areas, however, such changes in land ownership were more spotty (Prem 1992). Whether the land was controlled by Spaniard or noble lord, throughout the sixteenth century the *macehualtin* continued as the fundamental labour force of society; however, the recipients of their productive efforts were often re-directed, and the finer distinctions in their social positions all but disappeared.

Social distinctions became even more blurred as the occupational and material repertoire altered. The famed luxury artisans of pre-Spanish days lost their market: nobles no longer wore feathered headdresses and jadeite beads; deities were no longer draped in jewels, gold and feathers; warriors no longer wore feathered warrior costumes on the battlefield. However, some, perhaps many, such objects were still in existence in the colonial setting. In his 1566 will, don Julian de la Rosa of Tlaxcalla mentioned a feathered cloak, a shield with 200 quetzal plumes, a coyote headdress with crest device, and a monkey (of feathers) with a pheasant's head device (Anderson, Berdan and Lockhart 1976:44–45, 50–51). Precious feathers

adorned church paraphernalia in that same city in 1550 (Lockhart, Berdan and Anderson 1986:71). The sixteenth century testament of a Culhuacan resident Juan Tellez includes a "striped cloth of various colours with rabbit fur", harking back to a pre-Spanish luxury (Cline and León-Portilla 1984: 40–41).

But while some skills and crafts fell aside, others (such as carpentry, masonry, canoe making and pottery making) continued to bring business and recognition to the communities that specialized in them (Gibson 1964: 350–351). Still other specializations, like tailoring, were introduced by the Spaniards, and the native artisans gained considerable proficiency in these activities (Motolinía 1950:242). Commerce in the hands of professional merchants continued with energy, but now the luxury entrepreneurs (*pochteca*) no longer moved state goods and traditional prestige items. Instead, they focused on one traditional luxury commodity that continued to bear considerable value under colonial conditions: cacao (Berdan 1986: 294–298). They also lost their political trappings and "guild" support, and therefore emphasized their activities as private entrepreneurs. However, merchants labelled *oztomeca* do appear on the mid-sixteenth century tax records of Coyoacan (Anderson, Berdan and Lockhart 1976:138–149). For the merchants it was not a complete change in endeavour or procedure, but rather a change in priorities.

Other aspects of indigenous social life showed considerable persistence. For instance, in the late sixteenth century, Nahuas in colonial Mexico City were still continuing traditional inheritance practices, which were notably different from their Spanish counterpart (Kellogg 1986a). While resilience of native institutions is perhaps easiest to perceive in areas more peripheral to Spanish interest, and there was considerable regional variation,

> . . . even in highly urbanized Tenochtitlan/Mexico City, the Indian community in the sixteenth century was as much a product of the indigenous sociocultural system as it was a product of conquest and colonial administration (Kellogg 1986b:118).

Under these conditions, hereditary position, occupation and wealth became rearranged as criteria for social station. Commoners, previously distinguished by their attachment to a *calpulli* or a noble house (*teccalli*), all came to be regarded as essentially the same, with roughly equivalent tribute and labour obligations to Spanish *encomenderos*, indigenous landed nobles, or corporate communities (Lockhart 1992:111–115). But some commoners were apparently quite successful at working within the new system to gain a certain amount of wealth and its associated status; they might capitalize on a high European demand for cochineal dye, take up a new and valued craft, move to a different town or city-state, or pursue

a commercial pattern only slightly different from that of their forebears. By the same token, the political influence, landed wealth and status symbols of hereditary nobles became progressively eroded.

Economic production and exchange

At the time of Spanish conquest, central Mexico was essentially an agrarian economy: land/labour was the basis and source of wealth, and access to land was clearly delineated according to social position and political power. This pattern continued after the conquest, although the allocation of land and labour shifted towards more and more Spanish control (Lockhart 1992:141–176). The Spaniards also introduced a considerable array of novel foodstuffs, technologies, techniques, and institutional arrangements to the already sophisticated and specialized production system of central Mexico. Many of these introductions, however, applied to the Spanish residents but had relatively little impact on the native way of life during the first century of Spanish rule. Wheat did not displace maize as a preferred food staple, and the use of cattle, horses, donkeys and mules was restricted to merchants or those in the higher rungs of society. Sheep herding became popular among some native elite, and in some entire communities; in the late sixteenth century a legal limit of 300 sheep and 250 goats was set for herds managed by native entrepreneurs, though some apparently did number in the thousands (Gibson 1964:345). The town council of Tlaxcalla owned a herd of sheep in the mid-1500s, and in fact hired a Spaniard to manage the animals and show the Tlaxcallans how to increase production (Lockhart, Berdan and Anderson 1986:42, 56). But by far the most popular acquisition by the *nican tlacah* was the chicken, whose similarity to the native domesticated turkey made its adoption relatively smooth and successful. But livestock raising generally remained a Spanish enterprise during the sixteenth century. This created some difficulties, as certain lands now had to be designated as pasturage, animals had to be contained so as not to destroy crops, and decisions had to be made when animals and humans competed for the same food supply. In some regions livestock raising was enthusiastically pursued; for example, in the Valley of Toluca (to the west of the Valley of Mexico), over 150,000 head of cattle were reportedly grazing in the early 1550s (Prem 1992:454).

Different technologies also arrived with the Spaniards, most notably metal tools (such as machetes and ploughs) and the practical use of the wheel. Accompanying these introductions, the Spaniards brought major items such as wagons, carts, and the potter's wheel.

With the exception of some members of the indigenous elite, most

Figure 4 Nahua farmers planting and harvesting maguey. Traditional techniques and technologies are used, though the planter wears Spanish-introduced garb. (Illustration by Francisco del Paso y Troncoso as reproduced in *The Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, by Bernardino de Sahagún, translated by A. J. O. Anderson and C. E. Dibble, 1950–82, book 11: ill. 750. University of Utah Press.)

native farmers for at least the first few generations after contact continued to cultivate in the traditional manner, with hoe and digging stick (Figure 4). There was also considerable persistence in other traditional production activities: among these, fishing and fowling continued (albeit at a reduced rate) in the Valley of Mexico lakes (Linné 1948), many textiles continued to be produced on backstrap looms, and native-style ceramics and other craft products persisted well into the colonial period. For instance, archaeological investigations around Otumba, in the northern Valley of Mexico, have yielded "Aztec"-style pottery into the early 1600s before it eventually disappeared (Charlton 1972:111).

The material repertoire of most *nican tlacah* during the colonial sixteenth century certainly contained a mix of the familiar and the novel.

Clothing is an obvious example. The Spanish friars, scandalized by the rather scanty dress of native men, insisted on the adoption of Spanish-style attire. The loin cloth was therefore replaced by Spanish trousers, and shirts and tunics also appeared. However, this apparently did not happen all at once with each and every individual (Figure 4; Linné 1948). Women's clothing was transformed less, though sleeved blouses and shawls gained early popularity. Thus a woman would continue to wear a native-style skirt along with an introduced blouse; a man might combine trousers and a shirt with a native-style cloak (see the illustrations in Sahagún 1950–82). An individual's collection of material culture in general could be similarly eclectic; the last will and testament of don Juan Tellez of Culhuacan included traditional gourd bowls and baskets alongside scissors, a lock, an axe, white boots and leather shoes (Cline and León-Portilla 1984:42–43 and throughout, for further examples).

Similarly, the marketplace or *tianquiztli* contained a wide array of native and Spanish wares. These arenas for exchange continued into the colonial period as the most effective mechanism for moving goods from hand to hand. These weekly rotating markets experienced some transformation as they were realigned from a week of five days to one of seven, and as Spanish goods such as shirts, candles, guitars and chicken eggs appeared for sale (Lockhart 1992:187–188). Money in coin also appeared and was quickly adopted, although long-standing indigenous media of exchange (cacao beans, white cotton cloth) continued in use, often side-by-side with Spanish *pesos* and *tomines*.

In addition to material arrivals and adoptions, some adjustments were needed to Spanish-style economic techniques and arrangements. For instance, ox-drawn plough agriculture became applied to fertile flatlands, pushing traditional agriculture from those settings. More graphically, an emphasis on mining required the transfer of labourers (and their support) to mining sites, and the establishment of textile workshops (*obrajes*) transferred a good deal of weaving activity (notably of wool garments) from the backstrap looms of women to the treadle looms operated by men. It also concentrated this activity as a workshop industry as opposed to a household operation. Nonetheless, like so many aspects of colonial economic life, neither enterprise precluded or supplanted the other; rather, the combination contributed to the potpourri of material goods and necessary services available in the sixteenth century.

Religion

Central Mexican religious beliefs and rituals were a complex matter: there were numerous gods, each with varied guises, domains and supplicants;

there were ceremonies on a public (and usually state) scale, and rituals of a more specialized and/or private nature; there were intertwined calendars that afforded a meaningful scheduling of public religious events and an individual's management of fate. Native religion was polytheistic and assimilative (rather than proselytizing); it entailed spectacular ceremonials (often with human sacrifice), and required an extensive retinue of priests. Aside from these overt manifestations of the religion, there was also a complex of beliefs focusing on repeated world-creations and destructions, on the importance of fate, and the need for mortal intervention in supernatural affairs (Nicholson 1971). Although religious conversion did proceed apace, these beliefs and rituals did not easily succumb to the arrival of a new religion.

The very act of military conquest carried religious symbolism. In prehispanic Mexico, conquest was achieved by gaining the enemy's main temple; this act was symbolized in the pictorial manuscripts by a burning, toppling temple (Berdan and Anawalt 1992, vol. 3: part 1). Essentially, one god defeated another. The arrival of the Christian god was, then, readily understood in this context. The monotheistic and proselytizing nature of the new religion, however, was less easily assimilated.

In an environment of inquisition, the Mexica state religion, with its flamboyant ceremonies and human sacrifices, was quickly suppressed (Madsen 1967:372). While there were some similarities (e.g., variants of baptism and confession, and a belief in virgin birth), there were also marked differences and contradictions between native and Spanish beliefs. In the course of conversion, the native calendar of religious events was replaced with a Christian one, and new concepts (such as punishment after death, the idea of a single world creation, free will vs. fate, monotheism, and a deity independent of human support) were introduced (Madsen 1967: 374). These conceptual matters were less easy to assimilate, and

> Even where a relatively high degree of exposure to Christian teaching existed, it would have been fairly easy for the Nahuas to accept what appeared to be compatible with their own conceptions, and to ignore or reinterpret the rest. Despite the incorporation of many Christian elements, the belief system of the majority of Nahuas remained essentially untouched (Burkhart 1989:192).

Thus, even visible, overt rituals still carried some pre-conquest flavour. In Tlaxcalla in 1550 the *cabildo* found it necessary to prohibit the populace from dancing with feathers adorning a religious litter and cross (Lockhart, Berdan and Anderson 1986:70–71). This is reminiscent of an astonishing theatrical performance enacted in the same city on Corpus Christi, 1538, involving a cast of thousands and props of gold, featherwork, artificial animals, and 1068 arches (Motolinía 1950:101–120). Aside from the

general flavour (if not the content) of rituals, various beliefs persisted in the face of enthusiastic Christian religious instruction. For instance, the ritual 260-day calendar apparently continued in use after the conquest, if personal names are any indication (Lockhart 1992:117–130). Individuals were frequently named after the day of their birth, that day also carrying a heavy load of fate, from favourable to disastrous, for the name-bearer. This manner of meshing religious forms was also manifest in the ready adoption of the multitude of saints by the indigenous peoples. Saints came to be closely associated with socio-political units (such as *calpulli* or *altepetl*), in this sense replacing (and in many ways merging with) the ancient patron gods of those same units (Madsen 1967; Lockhart 1992: 235–251). Much in the way of native religious form and flavour thus persisted in the early years of Spanish rule, although the specific content (particularly in the public arena) had undergone considerable alteration.

Language and writing

The responsibility for religious conversion lay with the regular orders of Franciscans, Dominicans and Augustinians. These friars oversaw religious and related instruction including reading, writing, singing and the playing of musical instruments, as well as household skills (for girls) and such skills as masonry, carpentry, and silk culture for boys (Madsen 1967:374; Ricard 1966:209–210). The friars often learned Nahuatl for this purpose, applying their familiar Roman alphabet to the language. Thus a considerable body of written Nahuatl was generated, from wills to land disputes, market records to personal letters, council minutes to historical and cultural accounts (e.g., Sahagún 1950–82). From these documents (beginning around 1545) it is possible to reconstruct, to a good extent, the sorts of transformations in Nahuatl language during the sixteenth (and indeed later) century. It is curious to speculate whether some of these same patterns might have applied in pre-conquest times when Nahuatl was the language of empire and a lingua franca over broad areas. For instance, Williams García (1963) describes linguistic borrowing of Nahuatl terms into Tepehua, in northeastern Mexico.

In the earliest contact between Spanish and Nahuatl, the Nahuas did little in the way of adopting Spanish linguistic forms to describe new introductions. Instead, they applied the creative mechanisms of their own language to denote novel objects or to deal with new expressions or concepts through extended meanings. So, for instance, a "wheel" was called *temalacatl*, or "stone spindle, revolving thing of stone", a "hat" became *nequacehualhuiloni*, or "thing for shading one's head", and a "sheep" was called *ichcatl*, or "cotton" (Lockhart 1992:226, 269, 280).

Horses became associated with deer (*mazatl*), so that a stable logically became *mazacalli* ("deer house") and a "horseshoer" became a *mazacacti* ("one who puts footwear on deer") (Lockhart 1992:271).

From 1545, for approximately 100 years, the impact of Spanish on Nahuatl was almost exclusively in the realm of noun-borrowing (Lockhart 1992:284). It is no surprise that noun-borrowing coincided with object-borrowing; such words as *caballo*, *hospital*, *gobernador*, and *tomín* gained early popularity, and, along with a host of other borrowings, attest to their importance in the daily lives of the Nahuatl-speakers. It was not until well into the seventeenth century that radical grammatical changes in the native language occurred as a result of contact with Spanish (see Lockhart 1992 for a thorough discussion of these language changes).

Change in writing was a somewhat different matter. The pictographic/glyphic writing of pre-Spanish Mexico was composed of pictographs, ideographs, and phonetic elements, but did not provide an alphabetic presentation. The pictorial elements, therefore, served to a good extent as mnemonic devices, memory-joggers to generate from the reader's recollection a full rendering of the story, ceremony, calendar count, tribute assessment, map, or whatever was depicted (Berdan 1992a). This form of writing transcended the Spanish arrival, and continued in some form well after the first 100 years of colonial rule. Out of necessity it expanded to take into account novel occurrences, for example the need to depict pictorially the names Clara or Francisco (Lockhart 1992:332). European artistic style also intruded on native conventions, as in the somewhat fragile attempt at perspective on folio 69r of the Codex Mendoza (Figure 5).

Documents produced in the sixteenth century frequently contained a combination of native pictorial elements, Spanish alphabetic writing and/or Nahuatl rendered into Roman script (e.g., Codex Osuna, Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca, Codex Mendoza, and a host of others). Communication in these manuscripts was therefore conveyed by more than one means and, despite the greater "completeness" of the alphabetic format, the native peoples seemed loath to give up their well-established glyphic writing traditions. As in so many other arenas of life, however, they did develop combinations and mergings of borrowed forms. The continuity and resilience of the indigenous elements, however, stand out.

This article has focused, briefly, on five selected realms of prehispanic and colonial life to elucidate the nature of culture change at a particularly dramatic moment in history. The "collision of continents" unquestionably produced some severely traumatic consequences (especially in the area of population loss). Yet the native cultures and institutions demonstrated an

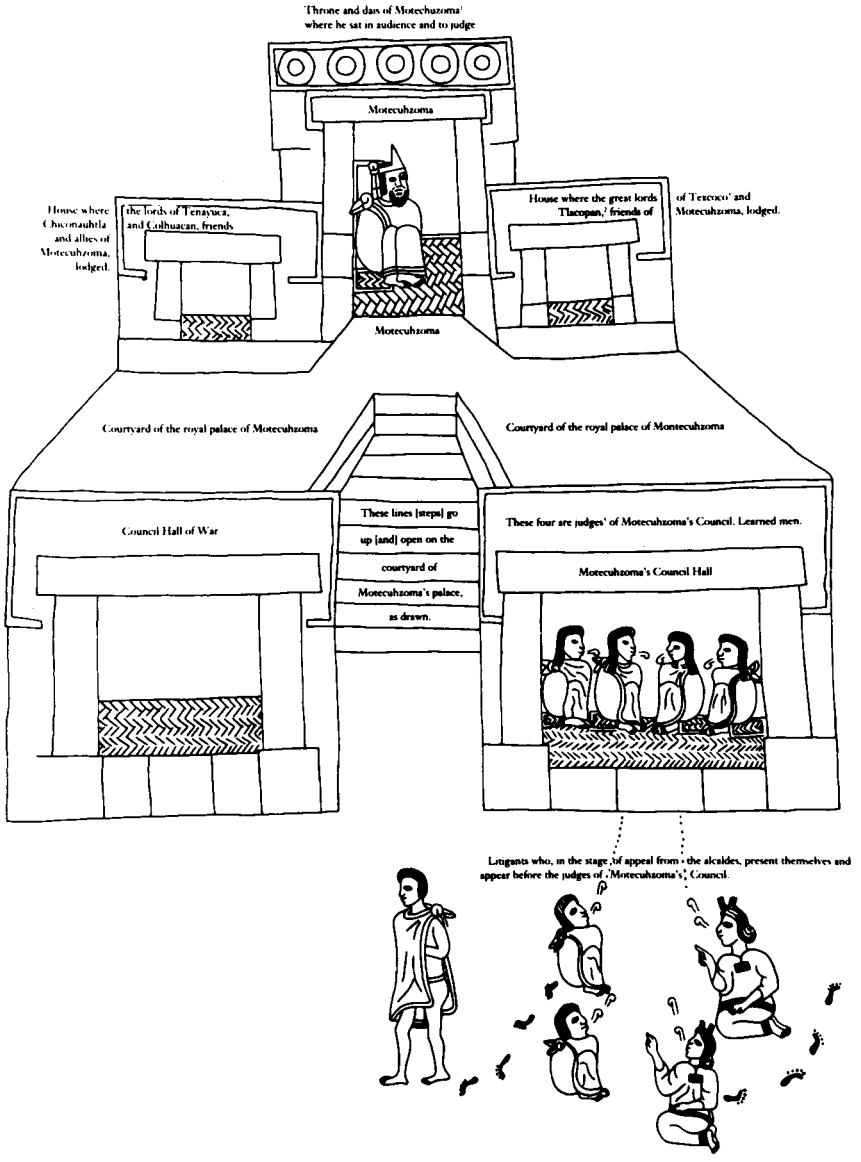

Figure 5 Motecuhzoma's palace, drawn with an attempt at European-derived perspective. Codex Mendoza folio 69r (Berdan and Anawalt 1992, vol. 4).

impressive persistence in the face of the new and unusual Spanish order. In a very general sense, this was a continuation of the pattern of prehistory in central Mexico: empires rose and fell, overlords came and went, yet the basic institutions had remained intact for centuries before the arrival of

the Spaniards. *Altepetl* had served then as the basic political building blocks, and they continued to do so under the colonial regime. Indigenous social differentiation likewise continued, though transformed, for the first hundred years or so of Spanish rule. It was, however, on an irreversible course of ultimate collapse. Members of the native societies were adept at incorporating selected economic elements of Spanish culture, while at the same time retaining traditional material artifacts, specializations, and exchange systems. Likewise many aspects of native religion, language and writing persisted through this period—none of it unaltered, but nonetheless recognizable as indigenous in principle or design, concept or content.

Ultimately, in spite of the traumas, a sense of transition and continuum emerges whereby native cultures and institutions rather slid across that bumpy event of conquest and headed off on an unexpected tangent. That tangent necessitated adjustments and adaptations, employing well-known strategies and well-established institutions. It resulted in considerable continuity of native forms, though virtually all merged and blended to varying extents with those of the new lords of the land.

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