Native Communities in Colonial Mexico Under Spanish Colonial Rule

Vannessa Smith

Prior to World War II and the subsequent social rights movements, historical scholarship on colonial Mexico typically focused on primary sources left behind by Iberians, thus revealing primarily Iberian perspectives. By the 1950s, however, the approach to covering colonial Mexican history changed with the scholarship of Charles Gibson, who integrated Nahuatl cabildo records into his research on Tlaxcala.[1] Nevertheless, in his subsequent book *The Aztecs under Spanish Rule* Gibson went back to predominantly Spanish sources and thus an Iberian lens to his research.[2] It was not until the 1970s and 80s that U.S. scholars, under the leadership of James Lockhart, developed a methodology called the New Philology, which focuses on native-language driven research on colonial Mexican history.[3] The New Philology has become an important research method in the examination of native communities and the ways in which they changed and adapted to Spanish rule while also holding on to some of their own social and cultural practices and traditions. This historiography focuses on continuities and changes in indigenous communities, particularly the evolution of indigenous socio-political structures and socio-economic relationships under Spanish rule, in three regions of Mexico: Central Mexico, Yucatan, and Oaxaca.

Pre-Conquest Community Structure

As previously mentioned, Lockhart provided the first scholarship following the New Philology methodology in the United States and applied it to Central Mexico. In his book, *The Nahuas After the Conquest*, Lockhart lays out the basic structure of Nahua communities in great detail.[4] The Nahua, the prominent indigenous group in Central Mexico, organized into communities called *altepetl*. Directly translating into "water" and "hill," the *altepetl* could describe a

community of any size. These communities divided further into sub-units within this community called *calpolli*, and depending on the *altepetl*, ranged from four to eight *calpolli* per *altepetl*. Each *calpolli* within the *altepetl* would determine the number of *tlatoque*, or leaders, within each community.[5] Lockhart notes that there were more complex *altepetl* structures as well, as such was the case with the *altepeme* (altepetl plural) of Tenochtitlan and Tlaxcala, which both consisted of multiple *altepeme*.

The structure of the altepetl determined which of the *tlatoque* would be *teutlatoani*, or the leader of the complex *altepetl*. Based on anthropological evidence, the *altepetl* followed a cellular-modular rotation cycle of rulers, as shown in Figure 1. According to Lockhart, this style elected successors to the main *altepetl* structure based on turns of rule of the constituent parts, which were well-rounded and capable of functioning independently of the *altepetl* by principle.[6] Each constituent part would then contribute to the main *altepetl* by providing tribute and labor. Lockhart's research will be crucial to later parts of this historiography because most of the post-conquest ruling structure was based on the Nahua form of *altepetl* government. The *altepetl* of Tenochtitlan will be looked at in more detail using recent scholarship to expand on Lockhart's New Philology approach.
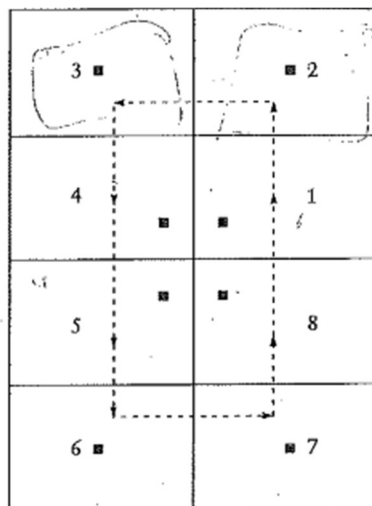
Figure 1: Example of *altepetl* with eight *calpolli* detailing the pattern of Cellular-Modular organization. From Lockhart's book: *The Nahuas after the Conquest*, page 19.

Moving forward in the scholarship, other scholars, wishing to expand understanding of indigenous agency, applied Lockhart's methodology in other regions of Mexico. One of the next scholars, Matthew Restall, applied Lockhart's method to Maya communities in Yucatan in his book *The Maya World: Yucatec Culture and Society, 1550-1850*.[7] Whereas in Central Mexico, the Nahua identified themselves with their *altepetl*, the Maya identified themselves by a mixture of their *cah* (the Mayan sociopolitical unit) and their *chibal* (patronym groups).[8] Restall argues that the arrangement of *cah* is far less clear in Yucatan compared to other areas of Mexico due to "paucity of pre-conquest indigenous sources and… subsequent dependence by historians on comments by Spaniards."[9]

As such, most Mayan notarial documents seem to provide evidence that the *chibal* may have acted in place of the sociopolitical structure for *cah*. In many ways, *chibalob* (plural) could be seen as a substitute for the Nahua calpolli due to basis for identity, economic organization, and sociopolitical factions within the *cah*, however, they did not constitute geopolitical or sociopolitical subunits.[10] Restall notes that the notarial documents from multiple *cah* point that the basis of using the *chibal* in the same context as *calpolli* in *altepeme* would be inaccurate because while the *calpolli* structure consistently appeared in the Nahua sociopolitical structure, the *chibal* did not. Restall argues, that due to a lack of evidence in documentation pointing to cross-*cahob* (plural) *chibal* rule, or even centralized rule to begin with, the *chibal* and *calpolli*

cannot be analyzed in the same way. Instead, the *chibal* acted more as a factional unit similar to what will later be seen further into the colonial period.

The New Philology methodology continued to be implemented into other scholarship in Mexico. Kevin Terraciano examined Oaxaca, specifically the *Ñudzahui* people (also known as the Mixtec), thoroughly through native-language research in the book *The Mixtecs of Colonial Oaxaca: Ñudzahui History, Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries*.[11] Unlike the Nahua and the Maya, the *Ñudzahui* political structure represented gender parallelism, a joint rule of a male and female lord called the *yuhuitayu*, as demonstrated in Figure 2. The *yuhuitayu* also represented the most populated political centers in *Ñudzahui* territory, as evident in indigenous documentation from the Oaxaca archives.[12]

Figure 2: Image of the *yuhuitayu* from the *Codex Becker II* reproduced from Kevin Terraciano. page 166. From Museum für Völkerkunde, Wien.

In other documents, another name used for a *Ñudzahui* community is the *ñuu*, and much like in Central Mexico and Yucatan, served as an identification marker when names of *Ñudzahui*

individuals are mentioned. The *ñuu* consisted of sociopolitical subunits similar to the *altepetl*, however, Terraciano argues that the subunits are more complex and less fixed than in Central Mexico.[13] Each subunit has relations to a particular geographic region rather than the consistent organizational basis seen in Central Mexico and even Yucatan. The first subunit, the *siña*, typically had a religious and political affiliation, and belonged to regions with highly settled populations. Terraciano provides Yanhuitlan as an example, where census documents detailed at least forty different *siña* within the *ñuu*.[14] *Ñuu* such as Yucundaa, used another subunit called the *siqui*. The *siqui* may represent an ethnic *barrio* (Spanish word for neighborhood/subunit) as individuals in court testaments introduced themselves from their *siqui* first, then their *ñuu* or *yuhuitayu*.[15] The final discussed subunit, the *dzini*, is seen in documents originating from the Mixteca Baja of Oaxaca. The *dzini* has the most in common with the Maya *cah*, being that its association is with social relation, that being a connection with royal patrimony. However, Terraciano does note that there are a handful of documents, his example being from 1674, that identify the *dzini* as a political entity.[16] Terraciano's analysis of the multiple different subunits in Oaxaca is significant because of the demonstration it provides that even within regions ways of self-identity across multiple *ñuu* were widely varied.

Reorganization of the Political Structure

Moving into the colonial period, indigenous communities changed, some more than others, and adapted to the Spanish colonial system to retain a level of indigenous autonomy. Some regions, like Central Mexico, had an easier time than Yucatan and Oaxaca because the Spanish had developed local government and tribute systems based on the Nahua *altepetl* model

because the system already functioned pre-conquest. The significance of this change is that it created a situation where some communities had to change to continue a level of indigenous agency. This section will examine how particular indigenous regions of Mexico transformed or shifted to meet the Spanish demands while also remaining in control of their communities.

In Central Mexico, William Connell examines Tenochtitlan in his book *After Moctezuma: Indigenous Politics and Self-Government in Mexico City, 1524-1730* using the New Philology and the organizational structure of the previously listed scholars in an effort to expand on Lockhart's original analysis of the Nahua.[17] Connell accomplishes this with the introduction of indigenous factionalism against Spanish officials and focuses on the lawsuits Nahua officials used to retain their autonomy. Using the basic *altepetl* model, the Spanish established the cabildo, or town government, system, which allowed the indigenous rulers to continue to "exercise influence and authority and to draw labor from the surrounding indigenous communities."[18] Also remaining unchanged, the positions of office rotated, allowing for a continued presence of indigenous leadership and autonomy. The significant difference was that the process shifted to an election-based system, rather than one by birthright. The cabildo system based on the Nahua sociopolitical structure, was applied to other communities as well.

However, the continuation of this form of government was not free of its own issues. With the establishment of an election-based system instead of a royal lineage, Spaniards attempted to gain more authority by taking political leadership roles to diminish the control the indigenous cabildo officers had over labor and tribute. The attempts at robbing native autonomy were resisted by using the politicization of the cabildo against the Spanish, or in other words,

using the Spanish system in favor of themselves. Such is the case in a court lawsuit in 1564, where the involved Mexica filed a case for the Real Audiencia, the highest court in New Spain, "to resolve a political conflict" by involving "Spanish courts in the internal disputes of indigenous government," which was ultimately effective for warranting an investigation. [19] Another adaptation came further into the colonial period, as the constituency of Mexico City changed with the growing mestizo population. As mestizos became voters, mestizos could be seen making a presence in politics and cabildo as officers. This change started first with the intervention of elected officials by the Real Audiencia. Connell argues that it was during this intervention by the Audiencia that in the Nahua perspective, "the royal lineage lost its hold on the governorship and could never be restored."[20] Around this time, the highest office of the cabildo, tlatoani-gobernador, changed to just gobernador in part due to the loss of the royal lineage in control. This perspective is crucial to understanding the relationships between class and ethnicity in Central Mexico that will later be discussed.

In Yucatan, the Spanish implemented the cabildo system, and despite its basis in Nahua government structure, the Maya were able to carry out many of the same activities, such as tribute collection and administrative duties, in the *cah* as they had done pre-conquest. Similarly to the Nahua, the Maya attempted to maintain indigenous autonomy by adapting the Spanish system to pre-conquest structure. One example was the naming of the cabildo's highest office position to batab-gobernador, based on the highest leadership position pre-conquest known as *batabil*. Restall argues that despite the overall change to the governing structure of the *cah*, the Maya still retained much of their previous duties.

Some issues did result as a change of the system, however, resulting in political factionalism that developed from the previous *chibal*. This factionalism developed from questions of the legitimacy of election to the position of batab-gobernador. Restall notes that "…eligibility to rule was determined by a complex but not totally rigid system of interrelationships of class, patronym, wealth, and political experience."[21] Despite this system, documentation from this period indicates that whoever was in the position of batab-gobernador was generally accepted as a "rightful" ruler. As a result, this meant that most accusations of illegitimacy were based on factions wanting the position in to obtain control of the tribute and labor flow in Yucatan. The significance of these accusations is that it indicates a perspective on office occupation that reflected a change in social mobility that arose due to the Spanish colonial system.

Arguably, the region that had the most change relative to the new Spanish system was Oaxaca, where the *yuhuitayu* targeted. The cabildo system was implemented across the multiple *ñuu*, however, the *yuhuitayu* still had a level of recognition to Spanish authorities. This recognition came in the form of the *conjunta persona*, a colonial system based on joint rule. However, the overall political power of women was reduced, and while the hereditary rights of women were still recognized, Spaniards gave preference to men. Court cases throughout Oaxaca demonstrated this change. In most cases, court documentation often referred to the male cacique counterpart as the main defendant in cases relating to land disputes, and in losing cases, results in the male cacique receiving the case punishment such as imprisonment and paying fines. In these cases, Spanish documents often refer to the rulers with the plural term of cacique, which

acknowledges the hereditary rights of women, but not the individual legal rights.[22] This bias also carried into government proceedings. Based on multiple government documents, Terraciano argues that though native female noblewomen's rights were recognized officially, "they seldom spoke in the record, hardly ever wrote, and were barred from the formal political arena within their communities."[23]

As stated earlier, court cases and legal proceedings demonstrated how the *yuhuitayu* was targeted under the Spanish colonial system. One such way involved the application of Spanish principles on cases around native inheritance. For instance, in the inheritance case of doña Catalina de Peralta and don Diego de Mendoza in 1566, a Spanish lawyer argued that don Diego should be the sole *cacique* (Arawak word for "ruler") despite doña Catalina's patrimony due to the European concept of dowry and the "man as master in marriage" mentality.[24] Court officiators would continue to apply Spanish ideas at the expense of local customs. This example, demonstrates the changes to the past political system of the *yuhuitayu* due to the application of European ideas of rule.

Class and Ethnic Relationships

Due to the changes implemented by the introduction of the cabildo system, class and ethnic relationships shifted both socially and politically. This change often arose through factionalism, with groups fighting for power based on legitimate rule's discrediting leaders. However, with the progression into the colonial period, perspective on leadership and social mobility changed. Unlike in the pre-conquest period, indigenous commoners did not necessarily

have to rely on their respective leaders, but rather, they could supplant themselves in society through the economy.

According to Connell, with the Spanish requesting more monetary tribute, the economy of regions changed and diversified the populace of indigenous communities. By the seventeenth century in Central Mexico, foreign Nahuas and non-Nahuas became matriculated into one tribute system with Mexico City. As a result, the cabildo positions became open to other *altepetl* due to the need for representatives for tribute collections, and as such, diversified the voting pool and candidates. The new positions also opened up new ways of gaining political favor, as class did not necessarily mean an automatic right to vote, as most notarial documents show the voting pool coming from previously elected officials.[25] As a result, government positions became more contested than earlier on in the colonial period as noblemen competed with others to retain the rights they had prior to the conquest.

As non-Tenocha gained more favor in political spheres, "questions of origin, race, and ethnicity all emerged as political disputes."[26] These disputes opened up the question of other ethnicities serving in high office positions of the indigenous cabildo in 1659. The mixture of different ethnicities, and the popularity of the candidates originating from communities outside of the Mexica-Tenocha, led to the viceroy's inolvment to determine if a non-native could serve on the cabildo. One candidate, don Lorenzo de Santiago, attempted to use the Spanish law system and ideas about race around indigenous cabildo proceedings to discredit his opponents to his advantage by claiming they were a mestizo. While Santiago did gain the viceroy's attention, the official decision was that his competitor, don Benitez de Inga, who was from Peru, would

serve the governor position because of his acquisition of more votes and the investigation to determine his ethnicity was cut short. Connell argues this shows a change in the perspective and an opening of the governorship (within limits) due to the ethnic status of Benitez as the *altepetl* of origin no longer provided the determining factor of electoral proceedings.[27] However, questions of ethnicity remained a prevalent tool to discredit competing candidates in governor elections.

As was the case in Central Mexico, the Spanish colonial system provided a new outlet for social mobility in Yucatan. However, this mobility was much more prevalent across class relations rather than ethnic ones. Prior to the conquest, class relations depended on "predetermined expectations of behavior in every aspect of life, …, in which both individual and private action has certain communal and public implications."[28] During the pre-Columbian era, *almehen*, or Maya noblemen, held the authority in society both politically and economically. To describe Mayan commoners, Restall uses the Nahuatl term "*macehuales*" due the lack of a Mayan word equivalent and its presence in notarial documents from that region. With the turn of the colonial system, *macehuales* were able to obtain social advantages through economic means. As a result of economic mobility, class distinctions between the *almehen* and *macehuales* became porous with the rise of a new class structure in a similar way to other regions of Mexico.

Additionally, as mentioned in the previous section, most Yucatan political factions questioned the legitimacy of the person in the role of the batab-gobernador to gain political advantage for themselves. Restall argues that because of this factionalism, the adoption of the Spanish title "don" was used to indicate hereditary rule rather than just office status, as was

commonly the case in Central Mexico.[29] Factions would use these Spanish titles in their favor in order to discredit the rising middle class as illegitimate and unfit for governorship positions. In Maya communities, the focus shifted from maintaining *chibal* authority to also discrediting commoner economic mobility.

In terms of class and ethnic relations, Oaxaca provides an interesting juxtaposition to Central Mexico and Yucatan due to its location on the periphery of colonial Spanish affairs. Unlike with Yucatan and Central Mexico, the class system of *Ñudzahui* society was much more complex with multiple terminologies to describe noblemen. Some notable examples Terraciano mentions are the *yya* and *yya dzehe*, which described the highest-ranking lords and ladies respectively both politically and religiously, and the *toho*, who were equated with the Spanish *hidalgo* in Spanish translations.[30] Based on the precedent established during the pre-conquest era, these classes were expected to fulfill certain roles. In particular, the *toho* had a strong presence in the organization and collection of tribute for the *yya* in a process called *tniño*, which was added as an office on the cabildo. As nobles began to lose a level of autonomy going into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the *toho* were gradually replaced as the tribute gatherers by former *yya*. They mostly became a term in reference to the *Ñudzahui* merchant class.[31]

As with Central Mexico, Oaxaca came to have court dealing relating to ethnicity and relationships. Terraciano notes multiple cases of marital affairs between mestizos and indigenous individuals, often resulting in the disapproval from local native authorities. However, one case from Yanhuitlan demonstrates the growth of multiethnic class relations. During that particular case, the defendant had written a letter in *Ñudzahui* saying he killed his wife because she

committed adultery. Terraciano argues that this case demonstrates the growth of a complex, multiethnic society due to the diversity of the witnesses that both did and did not speak Spanish.[32] Despite the few non-native people who lived in the Mixteca region of Oaxaca, these two worlds could not be separated, which prompted and reinforced conscious expressions of native identity.[33]

Conclusion

The work of these scholars was crucial towards providing a general examination at multiple sociopolitical entities throughout Mexico during the colonial period. Prior to the development of the New Philology methodology by Lockhart, there was minimal amounts of scholarship that focused on indigenous agency and perspective as the Spanish colonial system redefined political and social ideas prevalent during the preconquest era. However, based on the use of native-language sources, scholarship has determined that most communities in the Mexican center south kept a level of indigenous agency through adaptive changes that would provide these communities a sense of autonomy, as demonstrated in Central Mexico, Yucatan, and Oaxaca. Despite the growing Spanish presence in colonial Mexico, native peoples used the new colonial system in order to preserve indigenous autonomy, albeit in a different way than before the conquest, as evident in colonial indigenous primary sources.

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[1] Charles Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954).
[2] Charles Gibson, *The Aztecs under Spanish Rule: A History of the Indians of the Valley of Mexico, 1519-1810* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1964).
[3] James Lockhart, *The Nahuas after the Conquest: a Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992).
[4] Lockhart, *The Nahuas after the Conquest.*
[5] Ibid, 15.

[6] Ibid, 27.

[7] Matthew Restall, *The Maya World: Yucatec Culture and Society, 1550-1850* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997).

[8] Restall, *The Maya World*, 17.

[9] Ibid, 24.

[10] Ibid, 28-29.

[11] Kevin Terraciano, *The Mixtecs of Colonial Oaxaca: Ñudzahui History, Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001).

[12] Terraciano, *The Mixtecs of Colonial Oaxaca*, 104.

[13] Ibid, 110.

[14] Ibid, 110.

[15] Ibid, 113.

[16] Ibid, 115.

[17] William Connell, *After Moctezuma: Indigenous Politics and Self-government in Mexico City, 1524-1730* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011).

[18] Connell, *After Moctezuma*, 7.

[19] Ibid, 25.

[20] Ibid, 61.

[21] Restall, *The Maya World*, 65.

[22] Ibid, 181.

[23] Ibid, 182.

[24] Ibid, 180.

[25] Connell, *After Moctezuma*, 120.

[26] Ibid, 121.

[27] Ibid, 125.

[28] Restall, *The Maya World*, 88.

[29] Ibid, 91.

[30] Terraciano, *The Mixtecs of Colonial Oaxaca*, 135.

[31] Ibid, 137.

[32] Ibid, 343.

[33] Ibid, 344.

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