



Fray Bernardino de Sahagun and the Nahua : conflicting interests intertwined  
by SilverMoon

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History  
Montana State University

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Abstract:

Some men, a few men, in the early period of colonization, while helping birth New World mythology, and with their own Eurocentric purposes and curiosity at hand, recorded the world of the conquered people. One such man was the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagun, who wrote, with the collaboration of indigenous participants, an extensive, encyclopedic compendium. The twelve book work, *Historia Universal de las Cosas de Nueva Espana*, was composed of information gathered from certain groups of Nahua people, during the mid to late Sixteenth Century. A careful study of this work serves to prove that the conquest, and its aftermath, were equivocal, contradictory, ambivalent, and complex processes that involved many peoples, most of whom were not members of the European Imperial cast. The indigenous people were not the flat surfaces upon which Europe wrote history, but they were people with sophisticated and distinctive cultural constructs of their own, complex languages and historical recording processes that were not limited always to oral histories. They were people with serious attachments to their gods and to their traditions.

Only recently, in the last thirty years or so, the indigenous people's voices and versions of history have begun to receive their due credit among scholars and activists.

The information that Sahagun recorded has the power to adjust the indigenous stereotypes, and the historic assumptions, that still today function to subjugate those people imagined as the vanquished, the voiceless, those erroneously imagined as parts of cultures that somehow vanished. This work is part of the effort to show that the Conquest, and subsequent colonization were plurivocal processes. They were not the mere actions of a homogenized 'subject' empire over an equally homogenized Pan-Indian indigenous 'object'. Indeed, it was a 'come-and-go' of individual and group-specific interests seeking to represent themselves.

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MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY-BOZEMAN  
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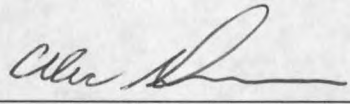
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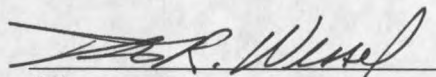
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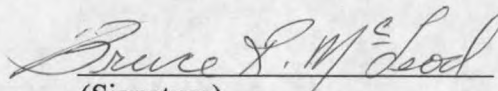
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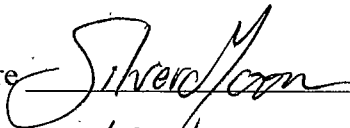
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## ABSTRACT

Some men, a few men, in the early period of colonization, while helping birth New World mythology, and with their own Eurocentric purposes and curiosity at hand, recorded the world of the conquered people. One such man was the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún, who wrote, with the collaboration of indigenous participants, an extensive, encyclopedic compendium. The twelve book work, *Historia Universal de las Cosas de Nueva España*, was composed of information gathered from certain groups of Nahuatl people, during the mid to late Sixteenth Century. A careful study of this work serves to prove that the conquest, and its aftermath, were equivocal, contradictory, ambivalent, and complex processes that involved many peoples, most of whom were not members of the European Imperial cast. The indigenous people were not the flat surfaces upon which Europe wrote history, but they were people with sophisticated and distinctive cultural constructs of their own, complex languages and historical recording processes that were not limited always to oral histories. They were people with serious attachments to their gods and to their traditions.

Only recently, in the last thirty years or so, the indigenous people's voices and versions of history have begun to receive their due credit among scholars and activists. The information that Sahagún recorded has the power to adjust the indigenous stereotypes, and the historic assumptions, that still today function to subjugate those people imagined as the vanquished, the voiceless, those erroneously imagined as parts of cultures that somehow vanished. This work is part of the effort to show that the Conquest, and subsequent colonization were plurivocal processes. They were not the mere actions of a homogenized 'subject' empire over an equally homogenized Pan-Indian indigenous 'object'. Indeed, it was a 'come-and-go' of individual and group-specific interests seeking to represent themselves.



## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

In 1524<sup>1</sup> a group of Franciscans generally referred to as ‘the Twelve’ arrived in New Spain under the leadership of their superior, Martin de Valencia. Many, including their leader, belonged to strict groups of the Order of St. Francis that followed the Observant tradition.<sup>2</sup> These were men willing to suffer for their beliefs, men filled with missionary fervor. They landed in a world imagined as the soil for the new church. This was the land that God had chosen because it was pure from the corruption of the church in Europe. It was their mission, indeed their divine calling, to prepare the indigenous population in “the eleventh hour of the world”<sup>3</sup> for the second coming of Christ and the establishment of his Kingdom. They carried with them a copy of the mandate that Francisco de Los Angeles, their Minister General, had given them soon before boarding

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<sup>1</sup> This date taken from several secondary sources presents a discrepancy with Sahagún’s *Arte Adivinatoria*. He stated: “[Y] así el año de 1525 llegaron a esta tierra doce frailes menores de San Francisco, enviados por el Sumo Pontífice Adriano VI con toda la autoridad necesaria y con el favor del invictísimo Emperador Don Carlos V, para convertir a la fe católica a esta gente indiana de esta Nueva España, la cual ya había pacificado y conquistado el valerosísimo D. Hernando Cortés, y a petición suya fueron enviados estos predicadores evangélicos.” Quoted from Joaquín García Icazbalceta’s publication of parts of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún’s *Arte Adivinatoria*, in Bibliografía Mexicana del Siglo XVI: Catálogo Razonado de Libros Impresos en México de 1539 a 1600 Con biografías de autores y otras ilustraciones. Agustín Millares Carlo, Ed. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1954. P. 382.

<sup>2</sup> “Virtually from the order’s beginnings in the early thirteenth century, there had existed an internal tension over whether to adhere strictly to an original rule of austerity, simplicity, and renunciation of property...[Observants] or to lead more material lives as a way to exert greater influence in the world...[Conventuals].” Kenneth Mills and William B. Taylor, Edts. Colonial Spanish America: A Documentary History. Wilmington, Delaware: A Scholarly Resources Inc. Imprint, 1998. P. 47.

<sup>3</sup> Statement made by the Dominican Father Bartolomé Las Casas in his “Octavio Remedio.” Quoted from Luis N. Rivera. A Violent Evangelism: The Political and Religious Conquest of the Americas. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992. P. 59.

ship in Spain. It was a record of his words, and testament to the Franciscans' missionary zeal:

Among the continuous cares and affairs which daily present themselves to me and occupy my mind, this one presses, worries, and afflicts me first of all, as to how [...] I might labor with the apostolic man and father of ours, Saint Francis, toward liberating and snatching away from the maw of the dragon the souls redeemed with the most precious Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ, deceived by satanic wiles, dwelling in the shadow of death, held in the vain cult of idols.

[...] But now that the dawn is far spent and passing away, which is the eleventh hour of which the Gospel speaks, you are called [...] not hired for a price like the others, [...] not seeking your own interests, but those of Jesus Christ without promise of pay or reward [...] To you, therefore, O sons, with the last end of the world at hand, I your father cry out and bestir your minds that you defend the King's army already falling and presently fleeing from the foe, and, taking up the victorious contest of the heavenly Victor, you preach by word and work unto the enemy. [...] Run therefore thus with such speed as to gain the victory.

[...] I send you to convert with words and example the people who do not know Jesus Christ Our Lord, who are held fast in the blindness of idolatry under the yoke of the satanic thrall, who live and dwell in the Indies which are commonly called Yucatan or New Spain or Tierra Firme. [...] I charge and command you the twelve through the merit of holy obedience, and the rest who in the future should join your company [...].<sup>4</sup>

Only five years later, Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún followed in their footsteps as one of "the rest who in the future should join."<sup>5</sup> He arrived in New Spain in 1529. In his own words: "The first to come after them [the Twelve] were the Dominican fathers, and the

<sup>4</sup> Partial quote from the "Orders Given to the Twelve" by Fray Francisco Angelorum, Minister General on October 30th. of the year 1523 (Originally given in Latin). Published in Kenneth Mills and William B. Taylor, Edts. Colonial Spanish America: A Documentary History. Wilmington, Delaware: A Scholarly Resources Inc. Imprint, 1998. P. 48-51.

<sup>5</sup> Fray Francisco de Los Angeles (Angelorum). See note 4.

second were twenty observant friars of St. Francis (amongst whom I came).<sup>6</sup> Sahagún was part of the same mendicant order as the Twelve, and bearer of the same dream. He had volunteered, as was the custom, to make the journey under Fr. Antonio de Ciudad Rodrigo.<sup>7</sup> Sahagún and the other new Franciscans were, as the Twelve, obligated under the Minister General's mandate to preach to, and convert those indigenous people of New Spain living under the "yoke of the satanic thrall."<sup>8</sup>

After his arrival, Sahagún began a project that would encompass the remainder of his days, over half a century. He dedicated himself to the study of the Nāhua world, including multiple aspects of their culture, language, religion, social and governmental traditions, and the alleged Nāhua version of the Conquest. The result of his efforts translated into the most complete, if scattered at present, piece of "contact zones"<sup>9</sup> writings on indigenous matters, in Mesoamerica, compiled during the colonial period. It has captured the minds, curiosity, and imagination of countless scholars. It even earned

<sup>6</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. In Icazbalceta, 1954. Prologue to the *Arte Adivinatoria*. P. 382, column 1. Original wording: "Los primeros que después de ellos [the Twelve] vinieron fueron los padres dominicos, y los segundos fueron veinte frailes de San Francisco de la Observancia (entre los cuales yo vine)."

<sup>7</sup> Icazbalceta explains in his biography of Sahagún that Fray Antonio was supposed to recruit forty friars but was able to find only twenty. He explains the difference by noting that: "Por el voto de obediencia no tenían obligación de pasar a estas nuevas regiones, y así las reclutas eran de voluntarios, por la cual no siempre se obtenía el número deseado." Icazbalceta, 1954, p. 327n6.

<sup>8</sup> Fray Francisco de Los Angeles (Angelorum). See note 4.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Louise Pratt. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London and New York: Routledge, 1992. P. 4 and 6. Although Pratt's study is specifically directed towards post-Enlightenment travel writings, when there existed a sort of religious skepticism unlike the religious fervor of Sahagún's epoch, a few of her guiding premises are valuable for this study. She defines 'contact zones' writings as those produced in "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict." P. 6.

Sahagún the title of “Father of Anthropology in the New World.”<sup>10</sup> This man is, without a doubt, one of the most intriguing figures of the sixteenth century.

The known corpus of his work is held by different hands around the world, an aspect that adds to the difficulty for scholars of Sahagún to form a complete picture.<sup>11</sup> And Although still much of Fray Bernardino’s work is unaccounted for or incomplete, Enough of his materials exist in order to attempt to answer two interrelated questions: What possessed this man to invest so much time and energy into the compilation of indigenous information, and what drove some of the indigenous people to participate in the project? The answers to these questions are a reflection of the complex and equivocal nature of the bi-cultural encounter. Both sides of the exchange, the Franciscan and the Nahua elite, used the compendium to pursue their own interests, and both sides maintained portions of control over the creative process. Sahagún was, at once, a scholar, a Spanish male of his times, and a devoted Franciscan. Each one of these roles interplayed with, and became affected by the utterly new cultural dialogue between the New World

<sup>10</sup> Miguel León-Portilla. *Sahagún Early Years in Tlatelolco*. Chipping Away on Earth: Studies in Prehispanic and Colonial México in Honor of Arthur J.O. Anderson and Charles Dibble. Eloise Quiñones Keber, Ed. with the assistance of Susan Schroeder and Frederic Hicks. Lancaster, California: Labyrinthos, 1994. P. 19n10. Here, León-Portilla quotes an acknowledgment of Sahagún included in *Cross-Cultural Understanding: Epistemology in Anthropology*. New York: Harper and Row, 1964. P. v. which reads: “To Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, Franciscan Missionary, Father of Anthropology in the New World. He devoted sixty years of his life to understanding from the inside, in the light of their philosophy, the culture of the ancient Mexicans.”

<sup>11</sup> “There is no edition of the *General History of the Things of New Spain* in which the variants contained in the oldest extant manuscripts of the History or parts of it are considered [...] There exist, furthermore other texts by Fray Bernardino of which there is not even a precise description, let alone a critical edition. [...] We know for a fact that in the Ayer Collection, the National Library of México, and the Vatican Library there exist several other documents belonging to the body of Sahagún’s works which up to now either have not been taken into consideration or have not merited more than summary descriptions.” Miguel León-Portilla. *The Problematics of Sahagún: Certain Topics Needing Investigation*. Sixteenth Century México: The Work of Sahagún. Munro S. Edmonson, Ed. Albuquerque: University of New México Press, 1974. P. 240-241.

and the Old. The reasons for Fray Bernardino's obstinate dedication to his compendium were multiple and at times conflicting, and they were born out of Sahagún's historical, social, and religious context: As a scholar, the Franciscan felt drawn towards the learning, understanding, and preserving of a language, and culture (both homogenized in his mind)<sup>12</sup> unlike anything the Friar had ever known. As a teacher, Sahagún was moved by the culture and its people. He was impressed by his pupils' intellectual capacities, and the speed of their accomplishments. Fr. Bernardino sincerely loved his students and the Nahuatl teaching tradition. He was so impressed by it that it became one of his goals to save it. As a Spanish man, he had to find a way to make graspable, and translate a fully foreign experience, and then position the indigenous versions of 'Self' and the universe, to which he was constantly exposed, in relationship to Spain and the Catholic Church. Also, as a Spanish male in the sixteenth century, Sahagún had to reconstruct the indigenous reality into something that would fit his pre-existing categorical assumptions; such as redefining the position of indigenous females to match that of Spanish ones. As a Franciscan, Fr. Bernardino had come to New Spain after taking vows of obedience: He had to fulfill his superiors' mandates to gather the information that he set out to collect. Also as a Franciscan, Sahagún was part of a millenarian movement: The Messianic dream

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<sup>12</sup> In the cauldron that concocted the dichotomical sophism between the 'Old World' and the 'New World', a few people faced with indigenous cultural, traditional, religious, and linguistic plurality (multiculturalism), through their American experience, could not escape meeting a challenge to their mode of oppositional thinking. These men fell in in-between crises that illuminates the conflicted nature of their human experience, and the struggles produced when contextualized categories are challenged. Tension cracks opened between these men's own cultural contexts, and their corollary ideologies, and the indigenous world all around them. One such man was the Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagún. One of his responses to the indigenous multi-cultural reality was to homogenize it, to lump all of the Native Americans into one 'Other'. This was one of the early exercises of Pan-Indianism.

set up the Americas as the depository, willing or not, of the Catholic God's grace. This land would be the seat of the New Church, and Christ would come back and set up his millenarian reign there. It was after Sahagún realized that the numerous conversions claimed, by the Twelve, to have taken place, were not complete, nor truthful, that he set out to save the dream by sounding the alarm on the indigenous deceit. His solution was to record every detail of idolatrous practices. This would make them known, and hence, it would make them easier to eradicate.

All in all, Fray Bernardino's agendas were many. Saving the culture and language conflicted with the eradication of indigenous religious practices, yet the Franciscan, somehow managed to allow all his agendas to co-exist. Perhaps the greatest buffer, that which allowed the convergence of opposing goals, was the Friar's perspective of himself, his culture, and religion, as superior to those of the indigenous people, to whom he referred at times in paternalistic, and infantilizing terms: "This people [the Nahuatl] so childlike and so easily deceived."<sup>13</sup>

The Modern Theorist Pierre Bourdieu defined this superior perspective as "strategies of condescension [...meaning] those symbolic transgressions of limits which provide, at one and the same time, the benefits that result from conformity to a social definition [Sahagún's contexts and categories] and the benefits that result from transgression [Sahagún's experience-near participation with the indigenous world]."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume II. Book VII. Prologue. P. 255. Original wording: "[E]sta gente tan p rvara y tan facil para hacer engafiada [the Nahuatl]."

<sup>14</sup> Pierre Bourdieu. *Language and Symbolic Power*. John B. Thompson, Ed. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson, Trans. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991. P. 124. And supported as well on *Social*

For Sahagún, superiority and condescension, allowed him to infiltrate the Nahua world, and write about it in the era of the *Santo Oficio de la Inquisición*, while maintaining an omniscient voice.

Sahagún's compendium unintentionally opened the doors for Nahuas' agendas to represent themselves. The Nahua elite narrated their side of the story, and participated in the making of the new historiography. Their narrative represented their interests; interests that were grounded on their pre-existing categories and their own point-of-perspective<sup>15</sup> as the vestige of the indigenous elite. These participants aimed to retain access to power, and as people subjugated under a completely foreign system, they faced fundamental issues: They needed to keep cultural cohesion and to retain a coherent sense of themselves and their experiences. They had to find ways to integrate, through their pre-existing concepts, the new faces of the supernatural. Through their participation in the creation of the *Historia General*, they made a bid for personal and cultural survival through sophisticated subversive, and traditional-based strategies, such as: The retrospective writing of history and the historiographical redemption of an empire lost, the assimilation of aspects of the outsider's world, the re-education of their young, and even the willful giving of misinformation to the outsider.

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*Space and Symbolic Power. In Other Words: Essays Toward a Reflexive Sociology.* Matthew Adamson, Trans. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990. 123-137. P. 127.

<sup>15</sup> 'Point-of-perspective' is a term that seeks to express the specific nature of the initial categories, in both sides of the exchange: It refers to those categories which met at the time of contact. I do not mean to imply, however, that those were static, primordial categories. In fact they had weaved themselves through time and experience into what they were at the time when 'the-many-Europes' (the many sub-groups and sub-contexts usually bunched together) met 'the-many-Americas', and continued to do so during and after the initial encounter.

The *Historia General* provided a very specific group of indigenous people with a chance to preserve their own point-of-perspective on their culture, their reality, what was or was not worth preserving, and even more significantly, it created conditions that would allow them to hold on and pass down that which was important to them, albeit in limited form. However, it was the version of particular groups of Nahua elite that was recorded, and not the *Universal* or *General Historia* of all of the indigenous people of New Spain.

The questions addressing the reasons behind the creation of Sahagún's compendium have remained unanswered on their own, and most significantly as they relate to each other. In the last three decades of the Twentieth Century, the scholarship on Sahagún has been defined by a poetic backlash to the centuries of near-obscurity suffered by the Franciscan's work, and subsequent traditionally Eurocentric interpretations. The new historiographical reaction has tended to eulogize the man and his efforts, and to celebrate the alleged early-ethnographic value of his work. As necessary as this equalizing tendency has been, the study of Sahagún as a pro-Indian ethnographer is incomplete. It misses the complexity of the Franciscan's, and the Nahuas' relationships with their New Spanish experiences. Sahagún can not be fully understood if he is limited to a representation of the colonial-encounter-birthing-indigenism. The *Historia General*, as its participants, must be analyzed through its complexity.



As early as 1970, scholar John Leddy Phelan referred to Fray Bernardino as “One of the pro-Indian leaders,”<sup>16</sup> and “the scholar of the pro-Indian party, who found his investigation of Indian antiquities hindered and obstructed by the anti-Indian faction.”<sup>17</sup> In 1974, Arthur J.O. Anderson, (together with León-Portilla the best and most respected of scholars in the field) wrote: “In becoming an indigenist and an ethnologist he [Sahagún] worked not only against the prevailing trends of his time but against what was a part of his own training, ambition, and personality.”<sup>18</sup> In the 1980’s, Tzevetan Todorov eulogized Sahagún and admired his learning of the indigenous language. Todorov based his adulation of the Franciscan on the claim that “usually it is the conquered who learns the conqueror’s language.”<sup>19</sup>

In fact, Sahagún’s linguistic studies, although particularly magnificent in their quality were not uncommon. They were indeed the norm for the Franciscans in New Spain. Furthermore, linguistic agility did not constitute pro-Indianism, nor did it reduce the friar to an exceptional sort of conqueror. Also, in the 1980’s and 1990’s, distinguished scholars of Sahagún such as Miguel León-Portilla, Inga Clendinnen, Barry D. Sell, and Luis N. Rivera, have tended to look at Fray Bernardino in a compensatory manner that seeks to see beyond traditional Eurocentrism. Sell, for example, named the

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<sup>16</sup> John Leddy Phelan. The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World. Second Revised Ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970. P. 74.

<sup>17</sup> John Leddy Phelan, 1970. P. 57.

<sup>18</sup> Arthur J. O. Anderson. “Sahagún in His Times.” Sixteenth Century Mexico: The Work of Sahagún. Munro S. Edmonson, Ed. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974. 17-25. P. 24.

<sup>19</sup> Tzevetan Todorov. The Conquest of America. New York: Harper Perennial, 1982. P. 219.

friar as the “initiator of a ‘golden age’ of Nahuatl related scholarship as well as participant in it,”<sup>20</sup> while Clendinnen, who consistently tends to eulogize Sahagún, described the *Historia General* as “the record of the recollections of native nobles of the world they once knew, compiled and transcribed thirty and more years after the conquest, under the direction of the remarkable Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagún.”<sup>21</sup> This description creates the impression that Sahagún’s own interests were not imposed in the project. Nothing could be further from the truth.

León-Portilla wrote, in 1994, that “he [Sahagún] thought it was of prime importance to record what we now call ‘the Vision of the Vanquished,’” and he adds that the recording of the indigenous perspective came “at the sole initiative of Sahagún.”<sup>22</sup> Neither of these statements hits the mark. Sahagún began the compilation of indigenous information upon orders from his superiors, and the Franciscan himself explains his intention in the prologue to Book XII: “It was not done so much to obtain some truths of the versions given by the same Indians who took part in the conquest, as it was to record the language that the natives used on things of war and the arms they used.”<sup>23</sup> Finally, Rivera presented the Franciscan as an example of “the humanizing effect of Christian

<sup>20</sup> Barry D. Sell. “All the Way to Guatemala: Sahagún’s Sermonario of 1548.” *Chipping Away on Earth: Studies in Prehispanic and Colonial México in Honor of Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles Dibble*. Eloise Quiñones Keber, Edt. Lancaster: Labyrinthos, 1994. 37-44. P. 39.

<sup>21</sup> Inga Clendinnen. *Aztecs: An Interpretation*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991. P. 8.

<sup>22</sup> Miguel León-Portilla, 1994. P. 17.

<sup>23</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún’s *Historia General*. Garibay, 1956. Volume IV. Book XII. *Al Lector*. Pg. 21. Original wording: “[It was] *no tanto para sacar algunas verdades de la relación de los mismos indios que se hallaron en la conquista, cuanto por poner el lenguaje de las cosas de la guerra y de las armas que en ella usaban los naturales.*”

doctrine,<sup>24</sup> based on the statement made by Sahagún that the indigenous people were “from the same trunk of Adam like us.”<sup>25</sup> Rivera’s praise forgets that Sahagún also wrote that the indigenous people were part of Satan: “This natives are a good part of him.”<sup>26</sup> The acknowledgment of Sahagún’s equivocal, and often contradictory statements, is the exclusive way to reach an understanding of the Franciscan’s contribution. Picking only those statements which support an apparently much desired indigenist perspective is an oversimplification. It only dilutes Sahagún’s expression. The best course of action is to follow James Lockhart’s example, who in his impressive 1992 study on the Nahuas wrote: “[E]verything in a given society, or simply in a given group of people in contact with each other, affects everything else, and some phenomena are pervasive, so that to achieve the greatest insight one should proceed on a broad front, seeing many elements in relation to each other.”<sup>27</sup>

The intent of this work is to dialogue with recent historiography by continuing to step away from Eurocentrism, while avoiding a partisan, and exclusively positive exploration of Sahagún’s work. This study constitutes a move away from the dramatization of the Franciscan as the effigy of the conqueror. It stands in disagreement with scholars like Jesús Bustamante García who, in 1991, reduced Fray Bernardino’s

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<sup>24</sup> Luis N. Rivera, 1990. P. 151.

<sup>25</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. Prologue. P. 31. Also quoted by Rivera, 1990. P. 151.

<sup>26</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume II. Book V. Prologue. P. 13. Original wording: “[E]stos naturales son buena parte de él.”

<sup>27</sup> James Lockhart. *The Nahuas After the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1992.. P. 9.

perceptive to that of a “nefarious” inquisitor.<sup>28</sup> It also aims to avoid eulogizing the friar as a pro-Indian activist. The complexity of Sahagún’s interests and agendas can only be fully explored by seeking the plurality of his experiences.

This analysis focuses primarily on the late Spanish version of Sahagún’s compendium put together in 1956 by Angel María Garibay titled *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España: Escrita por Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún Franciscano y fundada en la documentación en lengua mexicana recogida por los mismos naturales*,<sup>29</sup> and Joaquín García Icazbalceta’s publication of the prologue, the dedication to the reader, and the first chapter of the “*Arte Adivinatoria*” in 1954, together with a host of secondary texts, to find answers to the two questions posed above.

The basis of this study rests on a few fundamental guiding theoretical principles and assertions. Initially, it rests on the awareness that the study of the past from a new, contemporary perspective is always a presentist exercise that revises history as it seeks to understand it. Traditionally, Western culture has dictated the keys through which the rest of the world would be interpreted. Starting with Sahagún’s and those of his

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<sup>28</sup> Bustamante García. *Fray Bernardino de Sahagún: Una Revisión Crítica de los Manuscritos y de su Proceso de Composición*. México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Bibliográficas, Biblioteca Nacional y Hemeroteca Nacional, 1991. P. 376. As quoted by Browne, 1996. P. 111. Original wording included: “Sahagún es, sin duda, un finísimo observador y un excelente conocedor de la cultura indígena tradicional, pero aquí, con más claridad que en otras partes, se destaca su punto de vista fundamental: no es un etnólogo, es un inquisidor.”

<sup>29</sup> Angel María Garibay K., Edt. *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España: Escrita por Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún Franciscano y fundada en la documentación en lengua mexicana recogida por los mismos naturales*. Translation: General History of the Things of New Spain Written by Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún, Franciscan, and based on the documentation in the Mexican language Gathered by the Same Natives. Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, S. A., 1956.

contemporaries, and extending towards the present, texts have tended towards Euro-diffusionism. These tendencies served to maintain the status quo. As J. M. Blaut, modern author, argued: "All scholarship is diffusionist insofar as it axiomatically accepts the Inside-Outside model, the notion that the world as a whole has one permanent center from which culture-changing ideas tend to originate, and a vast periphery that changes as a result (mainly) of diffusion from that single center."<sup>30</sup> Consequently, Native Voices have suffered. Traditional historiography treated the indigenous perspective as non-existent or derived from undependable sources. Tzevetan Todorov, in his 1982 thoughtful, although slanted work *The Conquest of America*, wrote: "[T]exts expressing Indians' point of views [are] especially problematic: as it happens, given the absence of Native writings, they are all subsequent to the conquest and therefore influenced by the conquerors."<sup>31</sup> Historians can not afford to give credence to the colonialist illusion that there exists some, or any kind of Euro-cultural-superior-perspective, which produced the only applicable and usable historical sources. That belief, so imbedded that it functions often at systematically unconscious levels, is colonialism's self-serving delusional myth.<sup>32</sup> In Sahagún's approach, although he interpreted the indigenous world from within the confines of his own categorical assumptions, the native people were never imagined as voiceless.

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<sup>30</sup> J.M. Blaut. The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History. New York: The Guilford Press, 1993. Pg. 13.

<sup>31</sup> Tzevetan Todorov, 1982. P. 54.

<sup>32</sup> As Father Bartolomé de Las Casas noted: "It is a wonder to see how, when a man greatly desires something and strongly attaches himself to it in his imagination, he has the impression at every moment that whatever he hears and sees argues in favor of that thing." Father Bartolomé de Las Casas. Historia de las Indias. V. I, 44, as quoted by Tzevetan Todorov in The Conquest of America. New York: Harper Perennial, 1982. P. 21.

Without his collaboration with Nahua informants, Sahagún could have never produced his compendium. The Nahua elite used the *Historia General* to create what Mary Louise Pratt called an “autoethnography.” In it, they “represent[ed] themselves in ways that engage[d] with the colonizer’s own terms [...which] involve[d] partial collaboration with and appropriation of the idioms of the conqueror.”<sup>33</sup>

“The mechanism of acculturation is basic to any culture; all cultures live in a state of permanent acculturation.”<sup>34</sup> This implies a need to steer away from over-simplification of events by treating the colonial experience at large, and the encounter between Sahagún and the Nahua people in particular, as a dichotomic event. This type of simplification is capable of creating a historiography that supports the dichotomy between colonizer and colonized, powerful and powerless, victor and vanquished, Christian and heathen, agent and subject, Europe and the New World.<sup>35</sup> The study of indigenous America under the visage of the dichotomy between two opposing poles is an illusory deception that serves to reiterate the position of the colonial force as winner, and the colonized as loser. As José Rabasa expressed it: “The dichotomy ...is too simplistic.”<sup>36</sup> These studies necessitate what modern scholar Walter Mignolo calls *diatopical*, and José Rabasa extends to

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<sup>33</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, 1992. P. 7.

<sup>34</sup> Rigoberta Menchú. *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, Ed. Ann Wright, Trans. New York: Verso, 1983. Quote from the editor’s introduction, pg. xvii.

<sup>35</sup> New World terminology is itself obvious proof of Euro-diffusionist mentality. The continent that the Europeans ‘bumped’ into was only new to them, yet it has become an established term, with all its conceptual meanings, in historiography.

<sup>36</sup> José Rabasa. *Inventing America: Spanish Historiography and the Formation of Eurocentrism*. Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993. P. 13.

*pluritopical understandings*.<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, a simplistic approach based on totalizing representations objectifies the indigenous people. It turns them into a sort of literary form, whose purpose is to illuminate the greatness, or more precisely the power, eulogized or criticized, of the imperialist ruler. Defining-by-opposition ignores the fact that people, as they invent themselves, and the systems they create, are equivocal, contradictory, and fluid. It neglects the “contradictory impulses that motivate all human beings and groups.”<sup>38</sup> It attempts to create an ultimate, authoritative, solid, and final statement of power and powerlessness that consequently alienates the indigenous people that it seeks to understand. Indeed, it is no less a cultural construction than passing fashions, though sadly less ephemeral. The exchange of cultural, linguistic, organizational, political, and even religious traits moved in a bi-directional manner, at different levels of intensity, between the many different groups sustaining the exchange. Sahagún, and the indigenous people who participated in the compilation of the *Historia General*, as informants, scribes, or translators, co-created the compendium and affected each others’ experiences. The result was a magnificent four volume work that recorded the over-valorized perceptions of privileged voices: Sahagún and his Catholic-colonial narrative, and particular groups of Nahuatl elite and their versions of events, and of matters worth recording.

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<sup>37</sup> José Rabasa, 1993. P. 14.

<sup>38</sup> Octavio Paz. *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in México*. Lysander Kemp, trans. New York: Grove Press, INC., 1961. P. 96.

Similarly, although Eurocentric<sup>39</sup> historiography has traditionally taken for granted that the arrival of ‘the-many-Europes’, and their representatives to the ‘New World’ was the momentous, and rupturing event that rewrote the whole world under European models, in reality, as “any new phenomenon is likely to be interpreted in the first instance in terms of existing images and categories.”<sup>40</sup> All the participants interpreted and constructed reality based upon their own pre-existing categories. Sahagún categorized the indigenous people, with whom he had contact, as homogenous representations of the indigenous world. This was a world automatically integrated, in Fray Bernardino’s mind, into the Christian landscape. However, those same indigenous people also integrated Christianity, and Sahagún himself, as an acceptable piece of their cosmology at large. In his study of the conquest of Mexico, modern scholar Serge Gruzinski explained the conflicted dynamics produced during the colonial encounter:

[T]he most disconcerting aspect of the Spanish conquest [and subsequent colonization] was probably the irruption of other apprehensions of the real, unlike those of the Indians, and not altogether like ours today. [...W]ithout visible reference, without local links, [...] the evangelizers wanted the Indians to bring their adherence, namely, to the Christian supernatural. The undertaking was at the same time easy and practically impossible. Easy, because [...] the two worlds agreed in valuing the supernatural to the point of making it the ultimate, primordial and indisputable reality of things. Impossible, since the way they conceived it

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<sup>39</sup> I choose to use Rabasa’s definition of Eurocentrism: “By Eurocentrism I do not simply mean a tradition that places Europe as a universal cultural ideal embodied in what is called the West, but rather a pervasive condition of thought.” José Rabasa. *Inventing America: Spanish Historiography and the Formation of Eurocentrism*. Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993. P. 18.

<sup>40</sup> Olivia Harris. “The Coming of the White People: Reflections on the Mythologization of History in Latin America.” *Colonial Spanish America: A Documentary History*. Kenneth Mills and William B. Taylor, Edts. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1998. P. 34-45.



differed in every aspect. Misunderstandings proliferated. [...] Each hastened to project his own grids on to the adversary.<sup>41</sup>

Consequently, all sides of the exchange operated under what James Lockhart calls “double mistaken identity.” This is a process by which “each side of the cultural exchange presumes that a given form or concept is operating in the way familiar within its own tradition and is unaware or unimpressed by the other’s side interpretation.”<sup>42</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún categorized the Indigenous people of New Spain by molding that which appeared familiar so that it could fit his understanding of the world. That which appeared non-familiar was also forced into the pre-existing patterns of Sahagún’s cultural conceptions, becoming often marginalized as idolatry or indigenous ignorance, condemnable or curable. He homogenized the many indigenous groups in Mexico following “an old textual practice that readily complement[ed] the processes of deculturation and deterritorialization”<sup>43</sup> which the colonizing forces had already set in motion. The Nahua people responded in kind. They integrated, particularly in the initial stages of colonization, the Spanish/Catholic incoming information into their own pre-existing categories. They responded to the Christian God by accepting him as one more deity in their pantheon, following pre-Hispanic traditions that had historically build the ranks of Nahua Deities through the adoption of the Gods of people with whom they came

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<sup>41</sup> Serge Gruzinski. The Conquest of Mexico: The Incorporation of Indian Societies into the Western World, 16th-18th Centuries. Eileen Corrigan, Trans. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993. P. 184.

<sup>42</sup> James Lockhart. “Some Nahua Concepts in Postconquest Guise.” *History of European Ideas*. Vol. 6, No. 4, p. 465-482, 1985. I have decided to go with Lockhart’s definition to support my argument without making changes. His expertise hardly needs adjustment here.

<sup>43</sup> Maru Louise Pratt, 1992. P. 64.

in contact. They appropriated the imposed forms and used them to express their own narrative. They interpreted the foreign experience in familiar terms. In an “unspoken presumption of sameness,”<sup>44</sup> they, as the Spaniards also had done, related to “Spanish introductions pragmatically as things they might make their own, according to criteria of familiarity, usability, and availability.”<sup>45</sup> Sahagún’s compendium fitted the criteria in all three accounts: It was a chance for the elite to continue their historiographical traditional control, it was a usable tool to express their interests, and it was most available; after all Sahagún asked the Nahua elite for help. Both the Nahua elite and Sahagún functioned under a system of dependent reciprocity which allowed for the creation of the *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España*.

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<sup>44</sup> James Lockhart, 1992. P. 445.

<sup>45</sup> James Lockhart, 1992. P. 443.

## CHAPTER 2

## SAHAGÚN AND HIS WORK

Sahagún's New Spain Experience

Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún was born in 1499 or 1500, under the last name Ribeira,<sup>46</sup> in Leon, province of Spain, soon after the so called 'Discovery' of what became known as the New World. Later, upon taking the habit,<sup>47</sup> he adopted the name of his natal village as his own, just as Franciscans were accustomed to do. The good father lived until the fifth of February, 1590, when he departed this world after a period of illness. He died at the infirmary of the convent of San Francisco, México. He was about ninety years old and had spent sixty-one of those years in New Spain. Most of that time he dedicated to building the *Historia General*. The compendium was the physical manifestation of Sahagún's sense of guilt at his initial belief that the conversions had already taken place, which had lulled him into wasting time and allowing the upper hand to the Devil and his doings, and his intense dedication to the eschatological war he waged against the "enemy of God and of men."<sup>48</sup> The *Historia* was, in its simplest form, the collection of all the intelligence necessary to eradicate idolatry and save the indigenous people of New Spain.

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<sup>46</sup> Joaquín G. Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 327. As this author summarizes, Fray Bernardino's last name appears to point to descent from Portugal or Galicia.

<sup>47</sup> Joaquín G. Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 327n5. Original wording: "Sahagún había tomado el hábito antes de 1529 en el convento de Salamanca, perteneciente a la compostelana."

<sup>48</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 385 column 1.

Sahagún “arrived in New Spain in 1529 at the age of twenty-nine, or thirty, five years after the first group of Franciscan ‘apostles’ made their way across the ocean.”<sup>49</sup> Convinced as he was upon arrival of the veracity of the claims made by Motolinia,<sup>50</sup> and the other members of the Twelve, that the indigenous people had been successfully converted, the Franciscan concentrated on the indoctrination of the native population. Sahagún wrote that his main focus was the teaching of “the articles of faith and the seven sacraments of the Church.”<sup>51</sup> To achieve proper indoctrinations, based on mutual, and thorough understanding, Sahagún’s early “missionary work [became...] primarily linguistic.”<sup>52</sup> He composed devotional works such as *El Santoral* (1540, corrected and expanded in 1563), and a Náhuatl collection of sermons, now lost (1540), and the *Sermonario* (1548). Writings of this type served the Franciscans’ needs for building of the New Church amongst the Nahuatl. These materials were fundamental, for Sahagún and other Franciscans, to the missionary effort because they provided the vehicle to reach the largest possible indigenous audience. The composition of doctrinal work continued throughout Fr. Bernardino’s life, well into his later years: The *Psalmody Christiana*, “the

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<sup>49</sup> Walden Browne. “When Worlds Collide: Crisis in Sahagún’s *Historia Universal de las Cosas de Nueva España*.” *Colonial Latin American Historical Review*. Spring 1996. 101-149. P. 101.

<sup>50</sup> This was Fray Toribio de Benavente’s Indian name. In his *Historia de los Indios de Nueva España*, Fray Toribio explained that he took the name after his arrival. He noticed that the indigenous people kept looking at the friars and repeated the word *Motolinia*. “Upon being told that it meant poor, and that the Indians were commenting on the Franciscans’ bare feet and patched and threadbare habits, he at once declared that because it was the first Náhuatl word that he had learned (and undoubtedly also because of its meaning) it should thereafter be his name.” *Life and Works of Fray Toribio Motolinia*. Elizabeth Andros Foster, Trans. and Ed. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1977. P. 2.

<sup>51</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 382 column 2. Original wording: “[L]os artículos de fe y de los siete sacramentos de la Iglesia.”

<sup>52</sup> Munro S. Edmonson, 1974. P. 3.

only work to be printed in his lifetime,<sup>53</sup> was dated 1583, when Sahagún was in his early eighties.<sup>54</sup>

Sahagún's other major preoccupation was his work as a faculty member at the *Colegio Imperial de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco*.<sup>55</sup> As a man educated at the University of Salamanca (1512-1514), he was able to use his preparation to aid in the foundation, and subsequent work of the *Colegio*. He became one of the few select teachers of that college. Sahagún wrote with apparent pride about the beginnings of the school:

After we came to this land to implant the Faith, we assembled the boys in our houses, as is said. And we began to teach them to read, write, and sing. And, as they did well in this, we then endeavored to put them to the study of grammar. For this training a college was formed in the city of México, in the Santiago Tlatilulco section, in which [college] were selected from all the neighboring villages and from all the provinces the most

<sup>53</sup> John W. Keber. *Sahagún's Psalmody: Christian Love and Domination in Sixteenth Century México*. In Eloisa Qíñones Keber, 1994. 45-64. P. 47.

<sup>54</sup> In 1983, highly respected scholar of Sahagún Arthur J. O. Anderson wrote: "These Náhuatl writings of Sahagún were a part of the body of devotional works that such missionaries as Sahagún, Olmos, Motolinia, Mendieta, and probably most of the regular clergy then in New Spain considered essential for the effective conversion of recently [Christianized] or still pagan populations then and for a long time to come speaking their native languages. During the two decades between 1560 and 1580 Sahagún succeeded in writing or compiling a great deal of such material before the ecclesiastical and crown policies that had at first encouraged such activities in the end stifled them." "Sahagún's Doctrinal Encyclopaedia." *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl*. Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Vol. 16, 1983. 109-122. P. 110.

<sup>55</sup> As faculty, he spent three periods of his life in the school: First from the foundation in 1536 to 1540, after which time he took a leave of absence to do missionary work. Second, from 1545 to 1558, after which period he left to do field research in Tepepulco until 1561, and finally, from 1571 to his final illness in 1589. He made his final journey to the infirmary of San Francisco where he died on February 5th., 1590, at the late age of ninety (plus) years. This information comes from a combination of data found in both: Walden Browne. "When Worlds Collide: Crisis in Sahagún's *Historia Universal de las Cosas de Nueva España*." *Colonial Latin American Historical Review*. Spring 1996. 101-149. And Miguel León-Portilla. "Sahagún's Early Years in Tlatelolco." Chipping Away on Earth: Studies in Prehispanic and Colonial México in Honor of Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble. Eloise Qíñones Keber, Ed. Lancaster: Labyrinthos, 1994. 13-20. For more biographical information consult Luis Nicolau d'Oliver's Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, 1499-1590. Mauricio J. Mixco, Trans. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987, and Joaquín García Icazbalceta's Bibliografía Mexicana del Siglo XVI: Catálogo Razonado de Libros Impresos en México de 1539 a 1600. Agustín Millares Carlo, Ed. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1954. P. 327-387.

capable boys, best able to read and write. They slept and ate in the same college without leaving it, except few times.<sup>56</sup>

The *Colegio* served to educate mostly the children of the indigenous elite, much like the pre-Hispanic *Calmécac*, creating an illusion, in both sides of the exchange, of something in common, while in reality the *Calmécac* and the *Colegio* were fully different institutions: The first served to educate the young Nahua elite, and provide a continuation of the Nahua ways from within the context of their cosmology, and the second served the Spanish and more specifically the Franciscan's acculturation and indoctrination purposes. It was a case of double-mistaken-identity. Here, taking the place of the *tlamacazque*,<sup>57</sup> Fr. Bernardino instructed "a select group of Aztec nobility, whose skill—some could compose hexameters—astounded and stirred jealousy among many who aspire such feats."<sup>58</sup> Sahagún was also doing his ruler's work. In fact, in 1573, King Philip II made the role of schools for the indigenous people in the Americas all too clear: "Even though they seem to be pacified and ask for a teacher, be careful, asking first that they send their

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<sup>56</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume II. Book X. *Relacion del Autor Digna de Ser Notada*. P. 165. Original wording: "Luego que venimos a esta tierra a plantar la fe juntamos (a) los muchachos en nuestras casas, como está dicho, y les comenzamos (a enseñar) a leer y escribir y cantar, y como salieron bien con esto, procuramos luego de ponerlos en el estudio de la Gramática, para el cual ejercicio se hizo un Colegio en la ciudad de México en la parte de Santiago del Tlatilulco, en el cual de todos los pueblos comarcanos y de todas las provincias se escogieron los muchachos más hábiles, y que mejor sabían leer y escribir, los cuales dormían y comían en el mismo Colegio sin salir fuera sino pocas veces."

<sup>57</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Garibay, 1956. Volume I. Book III. Chapter VIII. P. 305. *Tlamacazque* or Indigenous Ministers.

<sup>58</sup> John W. Keber. In Eloise Quiñones Keber, 1994. P. 47. Fray Bernardino de Sahagún expressed his sentiments of pride in his students in the *Relación del Autor, digna de ser notada*. Volume III. Book X. P. 165-166.

children to be taught—these will serve as hostages—and urging them to build churches first where ministers may go and teach and preach.”<sup>59</sup>

Sahagún was a well-loved professor. His students would eventually become his assistants in the process of gathering and translating the ethnographic information that served as the basis for the Florentine Codex and the *Historia General*:

And in all this scrutiny, [making reference to the field research] there were grammarians from the College. The principal and wisest was Antonio Valeriano, from the neighborhood of Azcapotzalco; another one, not much lesser than he was Alonso Vegerano from the neighborhood of Cuauhtitlan; another was Martín Jacovita, whom I mentioned above. Another was Pedro de San Buenaventura, from Cuauhtitlan; All were experts in three languages, Latin, Spanish, and Indian. The scribes that produced all the work in good print are Diego de Grado neighbor of Tlatelolco, from the quarter of Concepción; Bonifacio Maximiliano, from Tlatelolco, from the quarter of San Martín; Mateo Severino, from Xochimilco, of the part of Utlac.<sup>60</sup>

Fray Bernardino’s biographer, late nineteenth century Joaquín García Icazbalceta, illustrated the close nature of the teacher-students relationship when he quoted Father Mendieta, Sahagún’s contemporary. Mendieta recorded that at the end of Fray Bernardino’s life, before the Friar left the convent in Tlatelolco to go to the infirmary at the convent of San Francisco de México, Fray Bernardino. “He had his children, the

<sup>59</sup> King Philip II. July 13, 1573. From the “*Recopilación de Leyes de los Reinos de las Indias, Libro I, título I, ley 4.*” Quoted in Charles S. Branden. *Religious Aspects of the Conquest of Mexico*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1930. P. 198.

<sup>60</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Garibay, 1956. Volume I. Book II. Prologue. P. 107. Sahagún has mentioned Martín Jacovita one page earlier and credited him with being “*el que más trabajó de todos los colegiales.*” (He who worked more than all the other students). Original wording: “[Y] en todos estos escrutinios [making reference to the field research] hubo gramáticos colegiales. El principal y más sabio fué Antonio Valeriano, vecino de Azcapotzalco; otro, poco menos que este, fue Alonso Vegerano vecino de Cuauhtitlan; otro fue Martín Jacovita, de que arriba hice mención. Otro Pedro de San Buenaventura, vecino de Cuauhtitlan; todos expertos en tres lenguas, latina, española, e indiana. Los escribanos que sacaron de buena letras todas las obras son Diego de Grado vecino de Tlatelolco, del barrio de la Concepción; Bonifacio Maximiliano, vecino de Tlatelolco, del barrio de San Martín; Mateo Severino, vecino de Xochimilco, de la parte de Utlac.”

Indians raised at the school, brought to him, and after saying good-bye, he was taken to Mexico, where after devoutly receiving all the sacraments, [...] he died and there he is buried.”<sup>61</sup>

The early period of Sahagún’s life in New Spain was a formative period where the Friar defined his role in the foundation of the New Church. In 1994, Miguel León-Portilla wrote that during Fray Bernardino’s stays at the *Colegio*, “besides acting as a teacher and missionary, he developed the most cherished concern of his life—that of learning about the culture and history of the Nahuatl people of México.”<sup>62</sup> This statement by itself, although part of the truth, is deceptively incomplete. During this time Sahagún had a painful realization. Those first Franciscans, including Motolinia, had euphorically boasted that “the religious conversion of the indigenous population had been both profound and complete.”<sup>63</sup> Motolinia said: “Because where the doctrine and the word of Christ has arrived, nothing [of idolatry] remains that is known nor that needs to be taken into account.”<sup>64</sup> He went on to categorically defend what seemed as indigenous idolatrous practices, such as the making of idols, as necessary responses of the Indians to placate the

<sup>61</sup> Mendieta quoted by Joaquín Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 333 column 1-2. From Mendieta’s *Historia*, Lib. V, pte. I, cap. 41. Original wording: “[M]ando traer ante si a sus hijos los indios que criaba en el colegio, y despidiendose de ellos, fue llevado a México, donde acabando de recibir devotamente todos los sacramentos [...] murio y está allí enterrado.”

<sup>62</sup> Miguel León-Portilla. Eloise Quiñones Keber, 1994. P. 14. In reference to Sahagún’s “two well defined stays [at the *Colegio*]: 1536-1540 and 1545-1558.”

<sup>63</sup> Walden Browne, 1996. P. 103.

<sup>64</sup> Fray Toribio de Benavente or Motolinia. *Historia de los Indios de la Nueva España*. Georges Baudot, Ed. Madrid: Clásicos Castalia, 1985. P. 254. Quoted in Walden Browne. “When Worlds Collide: Crisis in Sahagún’s *Historia Universal de las Cosas de Nueva España*.” *Colonial Latin American Historical Review*. Spring 1996. 101-149. P. 103. Original wording was included: “Porque adonde ha llegado la palabra y doctrina de Cristo no ha quedado cosa [de la idolatría] que se sepa ni de que se deba hacer cuenta.”



Spaniards' greed.<sup>65</sup> It seemed, by the confident statements made by those first Franciscans that they were convinced of their success, and that the millenarian dream was well in its way to becoming a reality at the time of Sahagún's arrival. Sahagún's experience told him a very different story. Those first 'gleamy-eyed' claims were more than a little political and self-congratulatory. Fr. Bernardino's feelings on the matter are so intense he even questioned his God vehemently:

What is this, Lord? You have permitted for so long that the enemy of human kind rule, at his pleasure, without resistance, over this sad and forsaken nation, where with such liberty he poured all his grime and darkness! Lord, this injury is not only yours, but of all human kind. For that share which is mine, I beg you that after taking the power from the enemy, you grant abundance of grace where once was so much wrongdoing, and as there was such an abundance of darkness, that there will be an abundance of light over these peoples, which you have, for so long, permitted to be subjugated and oppressed under such tyranny!<sup>66</sup>

From this moment of realization grew an intense pessimism and belief that the Nahua people were playing out an exercise in deceit: "Having set forth these two great inconveniences in the founding of this new Church, it is a clear thing that all is false, [...] in their hearts they don't stop having their gods as gods, nor rendering them occult service, offerings, and celebrations, in which account this affair suffers by being secret."<sup>67</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Walden Browne, 1996. P. 103.

<sup>66</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Garibay, 1956. Volume I. Book I. *Exclamaciones Del Autor*. P. 95. Original wording: "*¡Que es esto, señor Dios, que habeis permitido, tantos tiempos, que aquel enemigo del género humano tan a su gusto se enseñorease de esta triste y desamparada nación, sin que nadie le resistiese, donde con tanta libertad derramó toda su pozoña y todas sus tinieblas! ¡Señor Dios, esta injuria no solamente es vuestra, pero también de todo el género humano, y por la parte que me toca suplico a V.D. Majestad que despúes de haber quitado todo el poder al tirano enemigo, hagáis que donde abundó el delito abunde la gracia, y conforme a la abundancia de las tinieblas venga la abundancia de la luz, sobre esta gente, que tantos tiempos habeis permitido estar supeditada y opresa de tan grande tiranía!*"

<sup>67</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. "Arte Adivinatoria." In Joaquín García Icazbalceta. *Bibliografía mexicana del siglo XVI*. Agustín Millares Carlo, Edt. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1981. 376-387. P. 383. Original wording: "*Habiendo precedido estos dos inconvenientes tan grandes en el fundamento de esta nueva Iglesia, es*

Sahagún felt, at one time, conflicting feelings for the Nahuas.<sup>68</sup> The Friar did not understand that the indigenous reactions to the initial conversions were the result of their pre-existing modes of understanding of the universe.<sup>69</sup> Still, his sense of deception co-existed with a deep level of love and admiration for aspects of the indigenous culture.

Sahagún became ill during an outbreak of plague in 1542: “Where in all this New Spain died the greater part of the people who lived there, and I found myself in the time of this plague (pestilence) in this city of México, in the part of Tlatilulco, and I buried more than ten thousand bodies, and at the end of the plague I became ill and almost died (was near the end).”<sup>70</sup> While Sahagún recovered, he heard some Native elders pray. When he heard those “words which truly issued from their hearts when they spoke,”<sup>71</sup> the Friar could not but “admire [...] the force and wisdom of that Ancient word.”<sup>72</sup> Upon that basic contradiction, between admiration and distrust, Sahagún built the great purpose of

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*cosa clara que todo esta falso,..., en lo interior no dejan de tener a sus dioses por dioses, ni de hacerles servicio, ofrendas y fiestas en lo oculto, en cuanto sufre el ser secreto este negocio.”*

<sup>68</sup> “[His] work was driven by a sense of crisis...determined by his inability to reconcile a pre-existing, and ostensibly complete, medieval world view with his increasing awareness of the complexity of the world of the Nahuas.” Walden Browne, 1996. P. 102.

<sup>69</sup> “Sahagún was haunted by his discovery of an internal Nahua psyche that did not coalesce with outward demonstrations of Christianity and from this he assumed that everything about their conversion must have been false.” Walden Browne, 1996. P. 104.

<sup>70</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Códice florentino*. Book XI:238r. As quoted in Browne, p. 115. Original wording: “[D]onde en toda esta Nueva España murió la mayor parte de esta gente que en ella via: y yo me allé en el tiempo desta pestilencia en esta ciudad de México en la parte de tlatilulco y enterré más de diez mill cuerpos: y al cabo dela pestilencia diome ami la enfermedad, y estube muy al cabo.”

<sup>71</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Códice florentino*. Book VI: 1969:1; 1979:2. Fol.1r. As quoted in León-Portilla. “Sahagún Early Years in Tlatelolco.” P. 15. Original wording: “Palabras que verdaderamente salían de sus corazones cuando hablablan.”

<sup>72</sup> Miguel León-Portilla. In Eloise Quiñones Keber, 1994. P. 15. “Admirar la fuerza y sabiduría de ese mundo antiguo.”

his life, to gather, translate and compose a twelve book encyclopedia on the Nahua and their world.<sup>73</sup>

It was sometime in the early 1540's that Fray Toribio de Benavente, commonly known by his adopted Indian name, Motolinia, gave the initial charge to Sahagún to collect the information that eventually grew into Fr. Bernardino's compendium: The Florentine Codex, and its Spanish version, the "*Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España*." Later, in 1557, Father Francisco de Toral formally reiterated his charge. "As Mexican Provincial he [Toral] had taken the hard decision to aid Fray Bernardino de Sahagún in the compilation of his great work on the religion and society of the Aztecs of México."<sup>74</sup> Sahagún wrote of this charge, which in fact constituted the formal reason for his work, his Franciscan vow of obedience: "Under mandate of the Reverend Father Fray Francisco Toral, Provincial of the Holy Gospel, and later Bishop of Campeche and Yucatán, I wrote twelve books of the divine things, better called idolatrous, and human and natural things of the natives of this New Spain,"<sup>75</sup> and later: "I was ordered through

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<sup>73</sup> "The Florentine Codex, the work of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún and of learned Nahuas, is made up of twelve books gathered in three volumes. The whole consists of about 2,466 pages. The general structure of the work is quite regular. Each page is divided into two columns. The Náhuatl text, written first, is on the right half, while the Spanish text and the illustrations, which were drawn last, are on the left. The only exceptions to this pattern are the title page, the prologues, the admonitions, and the summaries, which generally all occur at the beginning of each book." Quoted from Marc Thouvenot. "Sahagún and the Florentine Codex: An Example of the Non-Discovery of Aztec Writing." *Chipping Away on Earth: Studies in Prehispanic and Colonial México in Honor of Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble*. Eloise Qiñones Keber, Edt. Lancaster: Labyrinthos, 1994. 21-28. P. 21.

<sup>74</sup> Inga Clendinnen. *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517-1570*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. P. 85.

<sup>75</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Garibay, 1956. Volume I. Book I. Prologue. Pg. 28. Original wording: "[P]or mandato del muy Reverendo Padre el P. Fray Francisco Toral, provincial de esta Provincia del Santo Evangelio, y después Obispo de Campeche y Yucatán, escribí doce libros de las cosas divinas, o por mejor decir idolátricas, y humanas y naturales de esta Nueva España."

holy obedience to my prelate superior, to write in the Mexican language what I considered useful for the indoctrination, acculturation, and maintenance of the natives of New Spain, and to help the workers and ministers that teach them.”<sup>76</sup>

Building the compendium proved to be a formidable task. Besides the usual difficulties that most scholars must endure during field research, such as traveling long distances, and finding reliable informants, there was the huge scope of the work. Sahagún demonstrated tireless tenacity in a variety of ways which reflect the fact that the significance of the compendium was unquestionable for the Friar. During the epidemic of 1545, not only tens of thousands of indigenous people died, but Fray Bernardino himself became gravely ill (1546).<sup>77</sup> A second epidemic hit in 1576 devastating the indigenous population once more: “Due to which there is no one left at the school. Almost all have left dead and sick.”<sup>78</sup>

The Franciscan also faced hostilities from his own religious superiors. In 1570, Father Escalona ordered the dispersion of Sahagún’s work throughout New Spain and stopped its funding. Escalona’s intention was to punish Sahagún. The reasons are complex, and the source of arguments amongst scholars.<sup>79</sup> Fr. Bernardino complained in

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<sup>76</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Garibay, 1956. Volume I. Book II. Prologue. P. 105. Original wording: “[A] mi me fue mandada por santa obediencia de mi prelado mayor, que escribiese en lengua mexicana lo que me pareciese ser util para la doctrina, cultura y manutención de la cristianidad de estos naturales de esta Nueva España, y para ayuda de los obreros y ministros que los doctrinan.”

<sup>77</sup> Joaquín Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 330.

<sup>78</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book X. *Relación del Auto, r digna de ser notada*. P. 167. Original wording: “[Q]ue así no está ya nadie en el Colegio, muertos y enfermos casi todos son salidos.”

<sup>79</sup> Icazbalceta, in the late nineteenth century, postulated that Escalona’s attitude towards the Franciscan vow of poverty was such that it led him to view Sahagún’s work as a wasteful exercise. Joaquín García Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 372-373.

his *Historia* that after the cutting of funding he was put in the position to write everything by his own hand. Sahagún was then in his early seventies and his writing had become tremulous due to his age, and age related illness. The lack of funds meant that he could not hire scribes to aid him in the task of transcribing the information he had compiled. Sahagún complained that because “some of the Definitors thought it was against the vow of poverty to spend money on writing”<sup>80</sup> his works, and since his hands trembled (he was then over seventy years old) there was no progress in his work for five years. Also, in the prologue to Book I he commented, somewhat bitterly:

These twelve books, with the art and vocabulary Appendix, were put on paper in this year of 1569. They have not been written in prose yet, nor have the notes been added, as it was the original goal of this work; I do not know what it will be accomplished in the coming year of the seventieth decade, sine from the year mentioned [1569] to almost the end of 1575, nothing more could be accomplished in this work because of the great disfavor received from those that should have supported it.<sup>81</sup>

Escalona's decision to disperse Fray Bernardino's work might have also been a response to Sahagún's insubordination. Sahagún sent his *Breve Compendio*, a brief summary of his work, directly to the Pope, and his *Sumario* or summary of that same work to Spain:

<sup>80</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book II. Prologue. P. 107. Original wording: “Algunos de los definidores les pareció que era contra la pobreza gastar dineros en escribirse aquellas escrituras, y así mandaron al autor que despidiese a los escribanos y que el solo escribiese de su mano lo que quisiere en ellas. El cual, como era mayor de setenta años y por temblor de la mano no pudo escribir nada ni se pudo alcanzar dispensación de este mandamiento, estuvieron las escrituras sin hacer nada en ellas más de cinco años.”

<sup>81</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. Prologue. Pg 28. Original wording: “Estos doce libros, con el arte y vocabulario Apéndice, se acabaron de sacar en blanco este año de mil quinientos y sesenta y nueve. Aún no se ha podido romanizar, ni poner los escolios según la traza de la obra; no se lo que se podría hacer en el año de setenta que se sigue, pues desde el dicho año, hasta casi el fin de este año de mil quinientos y setenta y cinco no se pudo mas entender en esta obra, por el gran desfavor que hubo de parte de los que la debieron de favorecer.”

In that time the author made a summary of all the books and of all the chapters in all the books, and the prologues, where briefly the content of each book was introduced. The summary was taken to Spain by the father Fray Miguel Navarro and his companion father Fray Geronimo de Mendieta. In this way all that was written about the things of this land got to Spain.<sup>82</sup>

Fray Bernardino's actions called for Escalona's punitive response. Fray Bernardino had plenty of opportunity to demonstrate his persistent, and rather stubborn nature. His loss of support might have also been due to the sharp statements that he aimed particularly at Motolinia. Motolinia had died only a year earlier. His death was recent in the minds of many who loved, respected, and admired this member of the first apostles to the Americas. Fr. Bernardino's timing was most "*inoportuno*" (untimely).<sup>83</sup>

The 1577 royal ruling of confiscation left Fr. Bernardino "stripped of the most complete texts of his General History."<sup>84</sup> Soon after, Fr. Bernardino became tangled in the middle of the Seraphic conflicts (1584-1587). On the twenty-ninth of June of 1585, the Franciscan chapter chose Fray Bernardino as first defensor. The Friar renounced the position soon after Fray Ponce ordered him to follow the Franciscan constitution and govern the province as Commissary General, and after the Viceroy asked him for his credentials.<sup>85</sup> The difficulty for Sahagún was not a weakness of spirit, as the late

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<sup>82</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book II. Prologue. P. 107. Original wording: "En este tiempo el autor hizo un sumario de todos los libros y de todos los capitulos de cada libro, y los prólogos, donde en brevedad se decia todo lo que se contenia en los libros; (y) este sumario llevaron a España el padre fray Miguel Navarro y su compañero el padre fray Gerónimo de Mendieta. Y así se puso en España lo que estaba escrito acerca de las cosas de esta tierra."

<sup>83</sup> Joaquín Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 373 column 2.

<sup>84</sup> George Baudot. In Edmonson, 1974. P. 165.

<sup>85</sup> George Baudot, 1974. P. 166-167.

nineteenth century biographer Joaquín García Icazbalceta suggested,<sup>86</sup> but the simple fact that his support rested with Fray Pedro de San Sebastián. Sahagún not only rejected Fray Ponce openly, but also signed his name with other Franciscans to a series of complaint letters to the *Audiencia*.<sup>87</sup> It was also in 1585 that Fray Bernardino felt compelled to rescue his work, mostly from memory, and to write his "*Calendario mexicano, latino, y castellano*," the "*Arte Adivinatoria*," the "*Libro de la Conquista*," and his "*Vocabulario Trilingüe*." It was indeed a busy year for the good father. His persistent, even desperate attempts to expose idolatry tell of Sahagún's growing fears. In the face of peninsular oblivious attitude towards what he perceived as the deeply rooted nature of idolatrous practices among the indigenous population, the Messianic dream was dying, or was at least in grave danger. Sahagún spent his later years in a untiring attempt to rescue his dream. Also in 1585, "voices [including Sahagún's] were raised at the Third Mexican Council to demand the prohibition of depicting devils and animals alongside the saints, for the Indians adored them as before"<sup>88</sup>

The New Spain Tribunal of the Inquisition, on December 19, 1587, excommunicated all the Definitors, of which Sahagún was one ...[for refusing to recognize Fray Alonso Ponce as Commissary General (May 16, 1587) and ...] introduc[ing] suit

<sup>86</sup> Joaquín G. Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 332 column 2 and 333 column 1. "*A la verdad no nos hallamos con ánimo para condenar severamente en el anciano religioso una flaqueza muy disculpable y redimida de antemano con tantas virtudes y tan largos años de eminente servicio.*"

<sup>87</sup> In these letters, brought to light by scholar Georges Baudot in 1974, Sahagún and the others requested that the Crown intervene, and protect the friars from Father Ponce. George Baudot. In Munro S. Edmonson, Ed., 1974. P. 165-187. The four letters can be found in pages 172-176.

<sup>88</sup> Serge Gruzinski. *The Conquest of Mexico: The Incorporation of Indian Societies into the Western World, 16th-18th Centuries*. Eileen Corrigan, Trans. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993. P. 187.

before the *Audiencia* against Father Ponce's legitimacy as commissary general."<sup>89</sup>

Sahagún was then in his late eighties, still working, and still fighting for what he, so vehemently believed: The providential nature of the conquest justified the Franciscans' dream to established the New Church in the Americas. The success of this mission depended on a true eradication of idolatry. Such eradication could only be accomplished if the Nahuatl culture was fully understood. Sahagún aimed to illuminate and eradicate every minute detail that could harbor idolatrous practices. Then, and only then, with Nahuatl as its language, the New Church would be ready for the second coming of Christ. At least this was Sahagún's solution to the grave lack of *prudencia* (prudence),<sup>90</sup> and "culpable ignorancia" (culpable ignorance)<sup>91</sup> of the Twelve.

### *Historia Universal de las Cosas de Nueva España*

Sahagún's *Historia* is a work of encyclopedic magnitude. It consists of twelve books that form, from within the limitations of the Franciscan's understanding, interests, and pre-existing categorical assumptions, a compendium on indigenous matters. Fray Bernardino's compendium is commonly known in historiography as the *Historia General*

<sup>89</sup> George Baudot. *The Last Years of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún (1585-90): The Rescue of the Confiscated Work and the Seraphic Conflicts. New Unpublished Documents. Sixteenth Century México: The Work of Sahagún.* Munro S. Edmonson, Ed. Albuquerque: University of New México Press, 1974. 165-187. P. 167. Baudot goes on to explain that the excommunication was somewhat academic since, in his words, "Fray Bernardino did not leave his office as Definitore until the new Chapter was celebrated on January 29, 1589." P. 167.

<sup>90</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún blames the Twelve's failure in the veracity of their conversions of the indigenous people on their lack of prudence. *Arte Adivinatoria.* In Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 382. column 2. See also this work's section titled *Sahagún and the Messianic Dream.* SilverMoon. Master Thesis, 1999. Chapter 4.

<sup>91</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General.* Volume I. Book IV. *Apendice Del Cuarto Libro, En Romance, Y Es Una Apologia En Defension De La Verdad Que En El Se Contiene.* P. 371.



*de las Cosas de Nueva España*.<sup>92</sup> That was not the Friar's intended title. In 1829-1830, Carlos Bustamante García published an edition of the *Historia* based on the *Manuscrito de Tolosa*. The title page was damaged and so the work received its title from a "careless appendage to Sahagún's work"<sup>93</sup> made by the manuscript's scribe: "End of the General History written by the Very Reverend Father, fray Bernardino de Sahagún."<sup>94</sup> Sahagún's chosen title was: *Historia Universal de las Cosas de la Nueva España*.<sup>95</sup> The difference is of consequence in that it gives the reader a clue to the Friar's framework. Whereas the word *General* creates an impression of a survey study, the word *Universal* is defined in Spanish as "valid in a total and imperative manner."<sup>96</sup> This definition gives the compendium a totalizing quality. However, the *Historia* is neither general nor universal. It is a collection of the indigenous information that Sahagún, and the Nahuatl participants, following their own interests, saw fit to record. Sahagún claimed to focus on the indigenous people of New Spain. However, the work was composed in three very specific areas: Tepepulco, México-Tlatelolco, and México-Tenochtitlan. The information was also gathered from very specific indigenous social strata. It was compiled from those left in the areas mentioned above holding elite positions.

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<sup>92</sup> Following the title of the source used, Angel María Garibay's 1956 edition, this study has used the title *Historia General* for the sake of maintaining consistency with that source.

<sup>93</sup> Walden Browne, 1996. P. 121.

<sup>94</sup> Walden Browne, 1996. P. 121 and 121n50.

<sup>95</sup> Walden Browne, 1996. P. 121n52.

<sup>96</sup> Ramón García Pelayo y Gross. *Pequeño Larousse Ilustrado*. Marsella and Mexico: Ediciones Larousse, 1988. P. 1042. Original wording: "Válido de una manera total e imperativa."

The twelve books treated issues that ranged from the Gods and religious practices,<sup>97</sup> to various aspects of the natural world (Refer to Table 1). Sahagún explained the order of subjects in the prologue to Book IX:

The first order followed in the history is that initially, and in the firsts books, the gods and their celebrations, their sacrifices, and their temples, and all that concerned their service, were addressed, and of these things were composed the firsts five books; and of them, the last and fifth book addressed the divining arts and supernatural things; [...] Book six discusses the rhetoric and moral philosophy that these natives reached. In it there are many kinds of prayers, very elegant and moral, and even those about their gods and their ceremonies, which can be said are very theological. In this same book is discussed the esteem in which the speakers and those who used rhetoric were held. Next, the work discusses natural things, in the seventh book; and then the lords, kings and governors, and principal people; and then the merchants, and after, the lords captains, and strong men, who were held in the greatest esteem of any in the republic, and who are discussed in book eight. And after them, book nine discusses the feather and gold craftsmen, and those of precious stones. And the qualities, conditions, and forms of all the crafts and people are discussed in book ten, and there also are discussed the parts of the body, illnesses and medicines against them, and also the differences and diversities of all the generations of people that inhabit this land, and their conditions. In the eleventh book are treated the animals, birds, plants, and trees. In the twelfth, the wars fought when this land was conquered, as a horrible thing, contrary to human nature, are discussed.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>97</sup> Note that the categories used throughout Sahagún's work are the author's. The assumed divisions between religious and secular, God(s) and humans, for the Nahuatl world, and for that of Sahagún's, were completely different and irreconcilable. Sahagún could only examine the indigenous experience by making it his own, hence forever altering it, and its meanings through his translation.

<sup>98</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book IX. Prologue. P. 13. See table 1. Original wording: "La primera orden que se ha tenido en esta historia es que primeramente y en los primeros libros se trató de los dioses y de sus fiestas, y de sus sacrificios, y de sus templos, y de todo lo concerniente a su servicio, y de esto se escribieron los primeros cinco libros; y de ellos el postrero fue el quinto, que trata de la arte adivinatoria y que también habla de las cosas sobrenaturales; [...] El sexto libro trata de la Retórica y Filosofía Moral que estos naturales alcanzaron, donde se ponen muchas maneras de oraciones, muy elegantes y morales, y aún las que tocan a sus dioses y a sus ceremonias se pueden decir muy teologales. En este mismo libro se trata de la estimación en que se tenía los retóricos y oradores; después de esto se trata de las cosas Naturales, y esto en el séptimo libro. Y luego de los señores, reyes y gobernadores, y principales personas; y luego de los mercaderes, y después de los señores capitanes y hombres fuertes, que son los mas tenidos en la república, de los cuales se trata en el octavo libro. Y tras ellos los oficiales de pluma y de oro, y de piedras preciosas; de estos se trata en el noveno libro. Y las calidades, condiciones y maneras de todos los oficiales y personas, se trata en el libro décimo, donde también se trata de los miembros corporales y de las enfermedades, y medicinas contrarias, y

	<i>Full Title</i>	<i>Composition</i>	<i>Subject Matter</i>
<b>Book 1</b>	<i>En que se trata de los dioses que adoraban los naturales de esta tierra que es la Nueva España</i>	<i>Carta Dedicatoria; Prólogo; Al Sincero Lector; Chapters I-XXII; Apéndice; Confutación; Al Lector</i>	Gods and Goddesses
<b>Book 2</b>	<i>Que trata del Calendario, fiestas y ceremonias, sacrificios y solemnidades que estos naturales de esta Nueva España hacían a honra de sus dioses</i>	<i>Prólogo; Chapters I-XIX; De las fiesta movibles; Chapters XX-XXXVIII; Six appendices to Book One; Sacerdotisas</i>	Rituals: Calendar, Celebrations and Ceremonies
<b>Book 3</b>	<i>Del principio que tuvieron los Dioses</i>	<i>Prólogo; Chapter I-XIV; Nine Chapter Appendices</i>	Origins of the Gods
<b>Book 4</b>	<i>De la Astrología judiciaria o arte de adivinar que estos mexicanos usaban para saber cuales días eran bien afortunados y cuales mal afortunados y que condiciones tendrían los que nacían en los días atribuidos a los caracteres o signos que aquí se ponen, y parece más nigromancia que no de Astrología</i>	<i>Prólogo; Chapters I-XL; Appendix: Apología en defensión de la verdad que en él se contiene</i>	Astrology: The Soothsayers
<b>Book 5</b>	<i>Que trata de los Augüeros y Pronósticos, que estos naturales tomaban de algunas aves, animales y sabandijas para adivinar las cosas futuras</i>	<i>Prólogo; Chapters I-XIII; Appendix: De las abusiones que usaban estos naturales</i>	Omens
<b>Book 6</b>	<i>De la Retórica y la Filosofia moral y Teología de la gente mexicana, donde hay cosas muy curiosas, tocante a los primores de su lengua, y cosas muy delicadas tocante a las virtudes morales</i>	<i>Prólogo; Chapters I-XLIII; Adiciones al libro sexto: Refranes, Adivinanzas, Metáforas o modismos.</i>	Moral Philosophy, Theology, Rhetoric and Prayers
<b>Book 7</b>	<i>Que trata de la Astrología Natural, que alcanzaron estos naturales de esta Nueva España</i>	<i>Prólogo; Chapters I-XIII</i>	Astronomy: Natural Astrology

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*también de las diferencias y diversidades de generaciones de gentes que en esta tierra habitan, y de sus condiciones. En el undécimo libro se trata de los animales, aves, yerbas, y árboles. En el libro duodécimo se trata de las guerras cuando esta tierra fue conquistada, como cosa horrible y enemiga de la naturaleza humana."*

<b>Book 8</b>	<i>De los Reyes y Señores, y de la manera que tenían en sus elecciones, y en el gobierno de sus reinos</i>	<i>Prólogo; Chapters I-XXI</i>	History, Government, Kings
<b>Book 9</b>	<i>De los Mercaderes y Oficiales de oro, piedras preciosas y plumas ricas</i>	<i>Prólogo; Chapters I-XXI; Adiciones al libro nono: Oficiales de oro, De la manera de labrar de los plateros, Gematística, Arte Plumaria</i>	Merchants and Artisans
<b>Book 10</b>	<i>De los vicios y virtudes de esta gente mexicana; y de los miembros de todo el cuerpo interiores y exteriores; y de las enfermedades y medicinas contrarias; y de las naciones que han venido a esta tierra</i>	<i>Prólogo; Chapters I-XXVII Relación del Autor digna de ser notada; Chapters XXVIII-XXIX</i>	Virtues, Vices, Diseases
<b>Book 11</b>	<i>De las propiedades de los animales, aves, peces, árboles, hierbas, flores, metales y piedras, y de los colores</i>	<i>Chapters I-XII; Appendix: Adición sobre supersticiones and De las Calidades de los caminos; Chapter XIII</i>	The Natural World: Animals, Trees, Plants, Flowers, Metals
<b>Book 12</b>	<i>Que trata de la Conquista de México</i>	<i>Prólogo; Chapters I-XLI (Doubled ); Relato de la conquista por un anónimo de Tlatelolco, versión del Náhuatl; Relación de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl sobre la venida de los Españoles; Appendixes: Atavios e insignias de los Dioses, Los Himnos de los Dioses, Magos y Saltimbanquis; Vocabulario</i>	The Conquest of México

TABLE 1:

*La Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España: A Break Down.* Using Angel María Garibay's Edition, 1956. In four volumes.

The original order of the encyclopedia followed a typically Medieval hierarchical model: It began with a study of the divine and heavenly things, including the relationship between humans and God(s), then moved to human subjects such as history, government,

economics, and social issues, and ended on a final, and lowest level that addressed the natural world: Animals, plants, and minerals. Medieval hermeneutics did not match, neatly or otherwise, with the indigenous form of interpreting the universe. Faced with such different experiences, and lacking traditional authorities to guide him, Fr. Bernardino had to make adjustments, as the work progressed, in his attempt to force the indigenous reality into his model. For example, Sahagún felt compelled to add Book VI, the first composed (1547), which treated the subject of Mexican rhetoric, moral philosophy, and theology. He decided to place it after his presentation of signs (Book V), and before his introduction of Natural Astrology (Book VII). "The reason is unclear; perhaps he considered that it was necessary to situate the Nahuas' knowledge of philosophy and theology, expressed in rhetoric, before the treatment of their knowledge of heaven as a physical entity."<sup>99</sup>

Although technically the encyclopedia should have ended with Book XI, Sahagún added a twelfth book in which he addressed the Conquest, from a stated indigenous perspective:

It must be added to this that they who were conquered knew and gave their versions of many things which happened among them during the war, things that those who conquered them did not know. For this reason I do not believe that the writing of this history, written while they were still alive those who were in that same conquest, has been superfluous. They gave their version, and they were principal people of sound judgment, and it is certain that they told the whole truth.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>99</sup> Alfredo López Austin. *The Research Method of Sahagún: The Questionnaires*. In Edmonson, 1974. 115-120. P. 121.

<sup>100</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume IV. Book XII. *Al Lector*. P. 21. Original wording: "Alléguese también a esto que los que fueron conquistados supieron y dieron relación de muchas cosas que pasarón entre ellos durante la guerra, las cuales ignoraron los que los conquistaron, por las cuales razones me parece que no ha sido trabajo superfluo el haber escrito esta historia, la cual se escribió en tiempo que eran vivos los que se hallaron en la misma conquista, y ellos dieron esta relación, y personas principales y de buen juicio, y que tiene por cierto que dijeron toda la verdad."

Sahagún and the weight of his interests and assumptions filtered and adapted the alleged indigenous point-of-perspective. The Friar's adaptations watered down the indigenous narrative, and served as basis for the birth of New World mythology as an extension of that of the Old World:

It seems certain that the earthly paradise was located between the torrid-zone and the Arctic. There our father Adam and our mother Eve lived, I do not know for how many days, and from them the earth swelled with people, and in this parts there were giants as those from before the deluge, and there have been found bones and their great skeletons, not only in New Spain, but also in the surrounding provinces and kingdoms.<sup>101</sup>

The Conquest and *conquistadores*, particularly Cortés, became Nahua Gods on the one hand (Cortés becomes *Quetzalcoatl*), and the instruments of the Christian God on the other: "For this great and important endeavor, God decided that it would be good that the most valorous captain Don Hernando Cortés would open the way, and that he would overthrow the wall that fenced and protected idolatry. In his presence, and through him, God our Lord made many miracles in the conquest of these lands."<sup>102</sup>

As Fr. Bernardino set out to order the Nahua world through the use of Medieval hermeneutics, and as he made adjustments, the indigenous reality was forever changed.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>101</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume IV. Book XII. *Prólogo del Autor*. P. 17-18. Original wording: "Parece también cosa cierta, que el paraiso terrenal está entre la tórrida-zona y el norte-ártico, en el cual nuestro padre Adán y nuestra madre Eva moraron no se cuantos días, y de aquellos dos se hinchó de gente todo el mundo, y en esta partes hubo gigantes de los de antes del diluvio, y han parecido aca huesos y toda la armazon de su grandeza, no solo en esta Nueva España, pero también en las provincias y reinos circunstantes."

<sup>102</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume IV. Book XII. *Prólogo del Autor*. P. 18. Original wording: "A este negocio muy grande y muy importante, tuvo nuestro señor Dios por bien de que hiciese camino y derrocasse el muro porque esta infidelidad estaba cercada y murada, el valentísimo capitán D. Hernando Cortés, en cuya presencia y por cuyos medios, hizo Dios nuestro señor muchos milagros en la conquista de esta tierra."

<sup>103</sup> Modern scholar of Sahagún, Alfredo López Austin, identified four stages in the creation of the *Historia*. First, a brief plan composed of the information gathered, early on, in Tepepulco, and generally known as *Los Primeros Memoriales*. Second, a large manuscript that became eventually divided into two parts. These are known today as

What Sahagún narrated in his *Historia* was his version of a few Nahuas' versions. He did not and could not have written an actual 'Universal' record of the experiences of the people who populated the area that the Spaniards had baptized as New Spain. Author Walden Browne, in his 1996 analysis of Sahagún's work, explained it in the following manner: "Sahagún struggle[d] to fit the square peg of Nahua culture into the round hole of a medieval Christian world[view]."<sup>104</sup> The result was a work that was not-fully-here, nor-fully-there. The *huehuetlatolli*, or orations of the elders, of which there are eighty-nine "scattered throughout the Madrid and Florentine codices,"<sup>105</sup> pulled the work towards a pre-Hispanic world-view, and Sahagún's numerous prologues, and addresses to the reader pulled the work firmly towards his own perspective.

The Spanish version of the *Historia* was somewhat of a late development. Late in the life of the Franciscan author, "[a] Spanish version of the work was suddenly necessary in order to defend not only Sahagún but the whole thrust of the Franciscan missionary effort from the Inquisition. Fray Bernardino produced the Spanish version in relative haste in 1575-1577 and he sent it to Spain with Father Rodrigo de Sequera as its advocate."<sup>106</sup>

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the Madrid Codex of the Royal Academy of History, and the Madrid Codex of the Royal Palace. Third, a "beautiful and extensive bilingual manuscript now known as the Florentine Codex, subsequent to the Madrid codices, the Náhuatl column of which Sahagún must have considered definite."<sup>103</sup> The Spanish translation of this text is not a literal translation, but a version, or interpretation of the Náhuatl. Fourth, the *Memoriales con Escolios* (passages found in the Madrid Codex), where Sahagún wrote a literal translation of some Náhuatl texts, with explanations added. Also, according to Austin, the first three stages correspond to "work done in Tepepulco, México-Tlatelolco, and México-Tenochtitlan, respectively." Alfredo López Austin. In Edmonson, 1974. P. 118. The information on the four stages of Sahagún's work is from López Austin. *The Research Method of Sahagún: The Questionnaires*. In Edmonson, 1974. P. 115-120.

<sup>104</sup> Walden Browne, 1996. P. 149.

<sup>105</sup> Thelma D. Sullivan. *The Rhetorical Orations, or Huehuetlatolli, Collected by Sahagún.* In Edmonson, 1974. P. 79.

<sup>106</sup> Munro S. Edmonson, 1974. P. 9. Fray Bernardino spoke of Sequera with gratitude and affection, crediting the Commissary General with the rescue of the Friar's life work: "*En este tiempo ninguna cosa se hizo en ellos, ni*



<i>From</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Manuscript</i>	<i>Whereabouts</i>	<i>Published Version</i>
Tlaltelolco (1542-1558)	1547	Book 6 (Náhuatl)	Florentine Codex	1950-69:6
Tepepulco (1558-1561)	1560?	" <i>Primeros Memoriales</i> " (Náhuatl)	Madrid Codices	1905-8:6
Tlaltelolco (1561-1565)	1561?	" <i>Memoriales Complementarios</i> " (Náhuatl)	(Madrid Codices)	1905-8:6
	1563?	" <i>Memoriales con Escolios</i> " (Náhuatl and Spanish)	(Madrid Codices)	1905-8:6,7
	1564?	" <i>Memoriales en Tres Columnas</i> " (Náhuatl and Spanish)	(Madrid Codices)	1905-8:7,8
	1565?	Madrid Codices (Spanish)	Academy, Madrid	1905-8
Tenochtitlan (1565-1590)	1566?	Book 4 (Spanish)	National Library, México (Florentine Codex)	None 1938
	1567?	Prologues and Appendices (Spanish)		
	1568?	" <i>Memoriales en Español</i> " (Spanish)	Academy, Madrid	1905-8:7
	1570?	" <i>Breve Compendio</i> "	Vatican Library, Rome	1942
	1577?	Florentine Codex (Náhuatl, Spanish, Illustrations)	Laurentian Library, Florence	Without Sp.: 1950-69
	1580?	<i>Manuscrito de Tolosa</i> (Spanish)	Academy, Madrid	None
		a) Panes Copy (1793)	National Library, México	1938
		b) Bauza Copy (1820)	Public Library, NY	1831-48
	1585	" <i>Arte Adivinatoria</i> " (Spanish)	National Library, México	None Complete. Partial 1954
	1585	" <i>Calendario</i> " (Náhuatl, Spanish, Latin)	National Library, México	1918
	1585	" <i>Libro de la Conquista</i> " (Náhuatl, Spanish)	Laietana Library, Barcelona ?	Without Sp.: 1950- 69:12
	1585	" <i>Vocabulario Trilingüe</i> " (Náhuatl, Spanish, Latin)	Newberry Library, Chicago?	None

TABLE 2:

Principal Manuscripts Of Sahagún's *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España*. (After Jiménez Moreno 1938; Nicolau D'Olwer 1952, 1973, From Munro S. Edmonson. Sixteenth Century México: The Work of Sahagún. Albuquerque, N.M.: University of New México Press, 1974. P. 11. With minor adaptations.)

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*hubo quien (los) favoreciece, para acabar de traducir en romance, hasta que el padre Comisario general fray Rodrigo de Sequera vino a estas partes y los vio, y se contentó mucho de ellos, y mandó al autor que los tradujese en romance y proveyó de todo lo necesario para que se escribiesen de nuevo."* Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. Volume I. Book II. Prologue. P. 108.



The compendium constituted an attempt to create a master narrative where both sides, the Nahua elite and Sahagún, made a bid for symbolic potency: The Nahua sought some level of restoration and perpetuation, and the Franciscan helped construct colonial discourse. Both sides actively participated in the process of defining power relations. However, the *Historia* also served to create a pseudo-Nahua, a more homogenous “collective they.”<sup>107</sup> As impressive as the compendium was, Sahagún’s inspiring agendas reached for one version that imagined itself as the true interpretation of indigenous experience, and ignored the multiple sub-units of the New Spain Indians: It neglected their religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity, gender issues, age variants, social status, individual and communal experiences, ancestral relations, and various environmental conditions. Sahagún was incapable of perceiving the many categorical incompatibilities between his representations and the indigenous perceptions. In Sahagún’s version, mainly represented through the numerous interpolations he made, there was really only one interpretation: His own.

#### Sahagún And The *Arte Adivinatoria*

In 1585, when Father Bernardino was already in his mid-eighties, he wrote his *Calendario mexicano, latino y castellano* in Spanish, Náhuatl, and Latin, and then his *Arte Adivinatoria* in Spanish. Both texts shared a purpose in a sense. They expressed Sahagún’s growing frustration with the persistence of idolatry, and even more so, with the fact that his compatriots did not understand the seriousness of the matter. In these texts

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<sup>107</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, 1992. P. 64.

Sahagún, insistently and persistently, continued his persecution of idolatry with ever increasing exasperation. The Friar held on desperately to the Messianic dream that fueled the initial stages of the ‘conquest of souls.’ He feared that the dream was fatally wounded. The *Calendario* and the *Arte Adivinatoria* reflected a few Sahagúnian concerns:

[H]e wanted to achieve and make public a native calendar perfectly adjusted to the Christian model, [with] the direct objective of the rapid location of the pre-Hispanic Mexican holidays in the course of the year, ...[to then] displace and disperse [the *nemontemi* or unlucky days] in order to erase their memory and their religious content.<sup>108</sup>

Sahagún believed only those who had the knowledge to locate those pre-Hispanic celebrations from within the Christian holidays, which he deemed idolatrous, could work to de-emphasize the Nahuatl calendar, and its attached worldview:

It is very necessary that all the Ministers of this Indian work and conversion should have this Calendar, for even though at the beginning when those who first came to it declared and affirmed that idolatry was totally destroyed, and assuming that such were the case, yet the devils and especially the things of idolatry sprout again and spread through secret caves; and having this Calendar they will be able to know whether there are any idolatries still alive and for this reason not only the Calendar is necessary for the Ministers and preachers of this new Church, but also it is indispensable to have the *Arte* of the divining sciences used by these natives; and I have the intention of putting it into Spanish together with this Calendar for the same reason as mentioned above, if Our Lord provides the opportunity for it.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>108</sup> Georges Baudot. *The Last Years of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún (1585-1590): The Rescue of the Confiscated Work and the Seraphic Conflicts. New Unpublished Documents. Sixteenth Century México: The Work of Sahagún.* Munro S. Edmonson, Ed. Albuquerque: University of New México Press, 1974. 165-187. P. 183.

<sup>109</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Calendario mexicano, latino y castellano.* MS 1628 bis: folios 96-112. Folio 105. Biblioteca Nacional, México. Original wording: “Este Calendario es muy necesario que le tengan todos los ministros de esta obra y conversión indiana, porque aunque a los principios, como dijeron y afirmaron los primeros que vinieron a ella, que del todo fué destruida la idolatría, y caso que así fuera, siempre los males y en especial las cosas de la idolatría tornan a reverdecer y pulular por cuevas secretas, y teniendo este Calendario podrán caer si hay algunas cosas idolátricas que estén aún vivas, y para este efecto no solamente es necesario este Calendario a los ministros y predicadores de esta nueva Iglesia, pero también es menester tener el Arte de la ciencia adivinatoria que usaban estos naturales; y tengo propósito de ponerlo en romance junto con este Calendario, por el mismo propósito dicho arriba, si Nuestro Señor diere oportunidad para ello.”

The *Arte Adivinatoria* went further still. The tone of the *Arte* was condemnatory, even exasperated. The prologue contains a sharp critique, and accusations of the Twelve's lack of *prudencia*. Because of that lack, Sahagún told the reader, the Indians "were baptized, not like true believers as they [the Twelve] claimed but as liars who received the faith without abandoning the false believe they had in many gods."<sup>110</sup> Still in 1585, Sahagún complained that the misrepresentations of those first twelve friars, their self-congratulatory reports misled the second group of Franciscans:

"We were all told (as it had been told to the Dominican fathers) that these peoples had converted truthfully, and that they were almost all baptized and so firm in the Catholic faith of the Roman Church, that there was no need to preach against idolatry, since they had certainly abandoned it."<sup>111</sup>

Fr. Bernardino accused the Twelve of creating such an impression that he, and his companions, believed a miracle had taken place in New Spain. Feeling misled in this manner, Sahagún wrote: "We abandoned the arms that we had brought well sharpened to battle idolatry, and following their council, and persuaded by those fathers, we began to preach moral things about the articles of faith and the seven sacraments of the church."<sup>112</sup>

Sahagún had invested, or rather miss-invested his early years in New Spain teaching the

<sup>110</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 382 column 2. Original wording: "[F]ueron bautizados no como perfectos creyentes como ellos [the Twelve] mostraban, sino como fictos que recibían aquella fe sin dejar la falsa que tenían de muchos dioses."

<sup>111</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 382 column 2. Original wording: "A todos nos fue dicho (como ya se había dicho a los padres dominicos) que esta gente había venido a la fe tan de veras, y estaban casi todos bautizados y tan enteros en la fe católica de la Iglesia Romana, que no había necesidad ninguna de predicar contra la idolatría, porque la tenían dejada ellos muy de veras."

<sup>112</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 382 column 2. Original wording: "[D]ejamos las armas que traíamos muy afiladas para contra la idolatría, y del consejo y persuasión de estos padres comenzamos a predicar cosas morales acerca de los artículos de fe y de los siete sacramentos de la Iglesia."

Catholic precepts to subjects of false conversions. Guilt fueled Fr. Bernardino's alarm and his deep sense of responsibility to reclaim the time wasted. His unguarded position was partially responsible for the success in idolatrous matters of the enemy of the messianic dream and his troops: "Devils enemies of God and enemies of all his creatures, and enemies of men [...] All are lies and fallacy from the devil Satan, enemy of God and of men."<sup>113</sup> By 1585, the force of Sahagún's writings against idolatry had grown in strength and persisted even through Sahagún's illnesses. The Friar desperately tried to postpone the end of the messianic dream "decades after most of the missionaries, including Motolinia had abandoned their utopian dreams for New Spain."<sup>114</sup>

Ever since the writing *Los Primeros Memoriales*, in the early 1560's,<sup>115</sup> Sahagún displayed a persistent preoccupation with the investigation of the indigenous divining arts. The information he gathered was, not only completely foreign to him and his categorical assumptions, but was also particularly threatening to the Friar. Fray Bernardino dealt with the unfamiliarity of the matter in three ways: From a position of assumed superiority, he took upon the role of inquisitor, while ignoring (perhaps not even being aware) of that which was beyond his grasp. In fact, Book VII (Natural Astrology),

<sup>113</sup> Both quotes are from Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 385 column 1. Original wording: "[D]iablos enemigos de Dios y enemigos de todas sus criaturas, y enemigos de los hombres," and again "todo eso es mentira y falsedad, que no es sino diablo Satanás, enemigo de Dios y de los hombres."

<sup>114</sup> Walden Browne. "When Worlds Collide: Crisis in Sahagún's *Historia Universal de las Cosas de Nueva España*." *Colonial Latin American Historical Review*. Spring 1996. 101-149. P. 106. Motolinia, one of the original Twelve became the center of Sahagún's sharp criticisms. This in spite that it was Motolinia who initially gave Fray Bernardino the charge to compile the ethnographic material that would later become the Florentine Codex.

<sup>115</sup> Of these materials, Anthropologist Thelma D. Sullivan tells us in her 1974 essay, "only a minimal part was later incorporated in the Florentine Codex." Quoted from Thelma D. Sullivan. *The Rhetorical Orations, or Huehuetlatolli, Collected by Sahagún*. In Edmonson, 1974. P. 109n1. *Los Primeros Memoriales* was composed of the data compiled in Tepepulco between 1558-1561.

is, in the words of modern scholar of Sahagún Alfredo López Austin, a “personal failure.”<sup>116</sup>

If Sahagún could have avoided treating this subject without damaging the general plan of the work, he would probably have eliminated it [...Fr. Bernardino’s failure covering this matter...] may be due in part to his inexperience as a text collector, but undoubtedly he was strongly motivated by his aversion to material he judged diabolical.<sup>117</sup>

The Franciscan translated the information that made sense to him, in terms of the known past. He made innumerable comparisons between the New World and the Old, using Christian, Greco-Roman, Moorish, Jewish, and Spanish historical, and mythological imagery. Sahagún compared the idolatries of his culture’s gentile ancestors, including Greeks and Romans. He called their beliefs in the sun, moon, stars, and other natural elements and creatures, ridiculous. He blamed them in the Devil and stated: “So if this happened, as we know, among people of such keenness and presumption, there is no reason why any one should marvel that such things are found amongst such child like people and so easily deceived, as the indigenous people of New Spain.”<sup>118</sup>

Sahagún conceptualized the Greek and Latin cultures, to which his own related, as superior “people of such keenness and presumption,” while condescending, even making

<sup>116</sup> Alfredo López Austin. *The Research Method of Sahagún*. In Edmonson, 1974. P. 135.

<sup>117</sup> Alfredo López Austin. *The Research Method of Sahagún*. In Edmonson, 1974. P. 134-135.

<sup>118</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume II. Book VII. Prologue. P. 255. Original wording: “Cuan desatinados habían sido en el conocimiento de las criaturas los gentiles nuestros antepasados, así griegos como latinos, está muy claro por sus mismas escrituras, de las cuales nos consta cuan ridículas fábulas inventaron del sol y de la luna, y de algunas de las estrellas, y del agua, fuego, tierra y aire y de las otras criaturas; y lo peor es (que) les atribuyeron la divinidad, y adoraron y ofrecieron, sacrificaron, y acataron como dioses. Esto provino en parte por la ceguedad en que caímos por el pecado original, y en parte por la malicia, y envejecido odio de nuestro adversario Satanás que siempre procura abatirnos a cosas viles, y ridículas, y muy culpables. Pues así esto paso —como sabemos— entre gente de tanta discreción y presunción, no hay por que nadie se maraville por que se hallen semejantes cosas entre esta gente tan pàrvula y tan facil para ser engañada.”

infantilizing references to the Nahuatl: "This people so childlike and so easily deceived." Fray Bernardino also interpolated Christian idioms throughout the corpus of his work, converting what were fully different and unrelated experiences into common ones. His transformation of the indigenous ceremony for newborns into a baptism,<sup>119</sup> or the indigenous renewal of a proper relationship with *Tezcatlipoca* into a confession are two examples. The basis for these types of transformations were some coincidences, such as gestures or perceived imagery, that gave the two different ceremonies an appearance of sameness:

Once this was said, [the midwife] putting her wet fingers to his mouth [the baby's] said: Take, receive this with which you'll need to survive in this earth. [...] Then she touched his chest with water on her fingers and said: Take here the celestial water, take this pure water that washes and cleanses our heart, that takes impurities away, receive it; may she purify and clean your heart. Then she poured water over his head [...] it is to wash, to clean [...] I pray that she destroy all in you that is bad and contrary which was given to you before the beginning of the world.<sup>120</sup>

References to the Catholic myth, from the Bible's Genesis, about the original sin and the cleansing baptismal waters are clear.

Tzvetan Todorov wrote, somewhat naively, in his 1982 study of the conquest:

"Sahagún, for his part [as compared with other translator-compilers] chooses the path of

<sup>119</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume II. Book VI. Chapter XXXVII. P. 206-209.

<sup>120</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume II. Book VI, Chapter XXXVII. Pg. 207. Original wording: "Dicho esto luego le daba a gustar del agua [la partera a la criatura], llegándoles los dedos mojados a la boca, y decía de esta manera: "toma, recibe, ve aquí con que has de vivir sobre la tierra, [...] Después de esto tocábale los pechos con los dedos mojados en el agua, y decíale: "Cata aquí el agua celestial, cata aquí el agua muy pura que lava y limpia vuestro corazón, que quita toda suciedad, recíbela; tenga ella por bien de purificar y limpiar tu corazón. Después de esto echábale el agua sobre la cabeza [...] es para lavar, para limpiar. [...] Ruego que ella destruya y aparte de ti todo lo malo y contrario que te fue dado antes del principio del mundo."

total fidelity,”<sup>121</sup> and again “Sahagún’s style is very different [from Duran’s or Motolinia] [...] no value judgment, but no interpretation either.”<sup>122</sup> This is not only improbable, but impossible. “Total fidelity” could not have been achieved by Sahagún, particularly in a project so fueled by such a grand dream as his. Total fidelity would also require perfect translation: This was an impossible task, due to the vast difference between the Christian-European, and Native perspectives and interpretations of their universe. It was yet more improbable because Sahagún was no stranger to the practice of close, but loose translation. Sahagún used a free interpretative style in his Spanish version. In Book I, for example, a short Latin sentence grows into a large paragraph:

*O quam suavis est, Domine, spiritus tuus in omnibus*, which means: Oh God our Lord! How kind and gentle is your spirit to all; and it is as if it said: Oh God our Lord! your omnipotent love, that is your divine spirit, pours goodness and gentleness over all the things that you created, giving to all your creatures qualities that Man can use, and even you, yourself, communicate with Man in diverse forms, showing your servants your kindness. You give them enlightenment so that they might know you, and commandments so that they serve you; so that knowing you and serving you they might reach immortality; and those of your servants who offend you, you do not condemn them, but you warn them through your holy preachers, and you favor them with your holy sacraments so that they may abandon their sins, and remain in your most sacred friendship.<sup>123</sup>

<sup>121</sup> Tzevetan Todorov, 1982. P. 226.

<sup>122</sup> Tzevetan Todorov, 1982. P. 230. The author goes on to admit that “[d]iscourse, as has been said, is fatally determined by the identity of his interlocutor.” P. 231. Still it is unclear if Todorov fully realizes that Fray Bernardino was really not that different from other translator-compilers of the period, such as Durán or Olmos, in that the Franciscan could not shut down his own voice or his own agendas.

<sup>123</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. Prologue to Book I of *Historia General*, as published by Icazbalceta with the *Arte Adivinatoria*, 1954, P. 377 column 2, paragraph C. Original wording: “*O quam suavis est, Domine, spiritus tuus in omnibus, que quiere decir: ¡Oh Señor Dios nuestro! cuan bueno y suave es el vuestro espíritu para con todos; y es como si dijese: ¡Oh Señor Dios Nuestro! el vuestro omnipotente amor, que es el vuestro divino espíritu, derrama su bondad y suavidad sobre todas las cosas que criastes, dando a todas vuestras criaturas virtud de que el hombre se pueda aprovechar, y a Vos mismo os comunicáis al hombre en diversas maneras, mostrando a vuestros siervos la vuestra benignidad; los dáis lumbre para que os conozcan, y mandamientos para que os sirvan, para que conociendoos y sirviendoos alcancen la inmortalidad; y a los que vuestros siervos os ofenden no*”

The 'translation' went on, using the same tone, for a few more long sentences, completing the paragraph. Sahagún used this free translation style and with it, he affected that which he translated, Latin or Náhuatl.

Book IV of the *Historia* (c. 1566), was titled: "About the judicial astrology or divining art that these Mexicans used to know which days were of good fortune and which days were off bad fortune, and which conditions would have those who were born in the days attributed to the types or signs there placed, which is all more necromancy than astrology [note the value judgment incorporated here]."<sup>124</sup> In this book, which shares much of its information with the later *Arte Adivinatoria*,<sup>125</sup> Sahagún expressed his negative attitude towards the indigenous divining arts. He wrote in sharp and severely critical terms, both of the divining arts, and of those Franciscans who defended any part of said arts. His position towards the divining arts is to be expected, but his sharp rebuke of other Franciscans demonstrated the severity of Sahagún's position:

It is not a calendar but a divining art, in which are contained many idolatrous things, and many superstitions and invocations to demons, implied and expressed, like it is stated in the preceding book four, in such manner that it is clear that there is no truth in the treatise recorded above, written by that friar [in reference to Motolinia's defense of the Nahua calendar], moreover it contains fallacies and harmful lies.<sup>126</sup>

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*los condenais luego, más antes los amonestais por vuestros santos predicadores, y los favoreceis con vuestros santos sacramentos para que se aparten de los pecados, y permanezcan en vuestra santísima amistad."*

<sup>124</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book IV. Original wording: "De la astrología judiciaria o arte de adivinar que estos mexicanos usaban para saber cuales días eran bien afortunados y cuales mal afortunados y que condiciones tendrían los que nacían en los días atribuidos a los caracteres o signos que aquí se ponen, y parece cosa de nigromancia que no de astrología."

<sup>125</sup> Chapter II of the *Arte*, coincides with Chapter I of Book IV, Chapter 32 of the *Arte* coincides with Chapter 31 of Book IV of the *Historia*, and so on. George Baudot. In Edmonson, 1974. P. 181.

<sup>126</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book IV. Appendix. P. 373. Original wording: "[N]o es calendario sino arte adivinatoria, donde se contienen muchas cosas de idolatría, y muchas supersticiones y muchas invocaciones de los demonios, tácita y expresamente, como parece en todo este cuarto libro precedente,



In the later *Arte* the tone, and by extension, Sahagún's dedication to his cause, did not lose any force. Actually, the Friar's tone is increasingly condemnatory and even exasperated: "All are lies and fallacies. It is not anything else but from the devil Satan, enemy of God and of Men."<sup>127</sup> The constancy of Sahagún's work, throughout the years, illuminates his attachment to the millenarian and apostolic dream, his desperate fight to preserve it, his frustration, and his stubborn nature. The force of his drive does not show Sahagún to have been limited to the saintly, and weak man described by late nineteenth century biographer, Icazbalceta: "[O]ld man, almost in his nineties, peaceful by character."<sup>128</sup> Perhaps a closer, and more balanced description of the Friar was that one written by Sahagunian scholar Angel Ma. Garibay, who in his introduction to the 1956 edition of the *Historia*, noted:

That famous man was intellectually acute, and keen, of lively talent, tenacious about the pursuit of data. He was understanding, of fine feelings, not without vehemence, perhaps more passionate than fair, partisan and suspicious. He was physically robust, full of energy for his work, untiringly active, always alert.<sup>129</sup>

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*de manera que ninguna verdad contiene aquel tratado arriba puesto, que aquel religioso escribió [in reference to Motólinia's defense of the Nahuatl calendar], mas antes contiene falsedad y mentira muy perniciosa."*

<sup>127</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. In Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 385 column 1. Original wording: "[T]odo esto es mentira y falsedad, que no es sino el diablo Satanás, enemigo de Dios y de los hombres."

<sup>128</sup> Joaquín García Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 332 column 1. Original wording: "[A]nciano casi nonagenario, pacífico por carácter."

<sup>129</sup> Angel María Garibay, 1956. Introduction to Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. 7-23. P. 22-23. Original wording: "Fue aquel insigne varón, en lo intelectual, agudo, penetrante, vivo de ingenio, tenaz en la persecución del dato. Comprensivo, fino de sentimientos, no sin vehemencia, acaso más ardiente de lo que era justo, partidista y suspicaz. Robusto en su físico, de grandes energías para el trabajo, de una incansable actividad siempre en vela."

### Sahagún's Authority to Write About the Nahua

In Medieval hermeneutics, knowledge was an act of God, and understanding could be achieved through the guidance of traditional authorities. These authorities, the likes of Erasmus and St. Thomas Aquinas, had “ma[de] manifest (*manifestare*) [...] knowledge and [had] preserve[d] it against the eroding forces of time,”<sup>130</sup> by composing *summas*. These *summas* provided those who followed with a map to understanding the Christian God's universe, his plans, and people's role within them. In other words, the traditional authorities created the categories upon which the whole universe could be ordered. They conceptualized the Western experience. That is, until traditional knowledge was challenged forever by the discovery of the New World, and the encounter with cultures that were incomprehensible, and impossible to organize by the use of Medieval hermeneutics. When Fray Bernardino's superiors gave him the mandate to start his study on indigenous matters, the Friar faced a project for which traditional authorities, from within his historical and cultural context, did not exist.

As a scholar trained in the tradition of *La Compostelana*, Sahagún had to find a way to authorize his work. He had to negotiate the legitimacy of his work between what he assumed to be real, his own pre-existing categories, and his new experience in New Spain. Initially, Fray Bernardino felt he had only one recourse: He had to depend on his capacity as a witness of, and participant in the cultural encounter. Sahagún addressed his

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<sup>130</sup> Walden Browne, 1996. P. 139.

preoccupation with the authority of his work, and noted this solution in the prologue to

Book II:

All authors attempt to authorize their works as best as they can, some with reliable witnesses, others with previous writers whose testimonies have been proven as true, others with testimony from the Holy Scriptures. I have lacked all those foundations to authorize these twelve books, and I can not find another basis to authorize it that to add here all the work I did to know the truth of all which is written here.<sup>131</sup>

This solution took Sahagún closer to a modern hermeneutics, where his own voice would represent a valuable asset. However, he limited the integrity of his claims to authority by considering that only his efforts to find the truth lent value to his words. He stated that he lacked “reliable witnesses,” therefore ignoring the indigenous people’s ability, and authority to speak for their own cultures, and devaluing their contribution. By claiming that he lacked worthwhile witnesses, he refuted and invalidated at some levels his repeated claims of the veracity of the information provided by the indigenous participants: “It is certain that they told the whole truth,”<sup>132</sup> and again, “all the knowledgeable Indians would affirm that this language is appropriate to their ancestors, and the things they did,”<sup>133</sup> and, “according to the assertions of the elders, in whose power were the

<sup>131</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book II. Prologue. P. 105. Original wording: “*Todos los escritores trabajan de autorizar sus escrituras lo mejor que pueden, unos con testigos fidedignos, otros con otros escritores que antes de ellos han escrito, los testimonios de los cuales son habidos por ciertos; otros con testimonios de la Sagrada Escritura. A mi me ha faltado todos estos fundamentos para autorizar lo que en estos doce libros tengo escritos, y no hallo otro fundamento para autorizarlo sino poner aquí la relación de la diligencia que hice para saber la verdad de todo lo que en estos libros se escribe.*”

<sup>132</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume IV. Book XII. *Al Lector*. P. 21. Original wording: “[Q]ue tiene por cierto que dijeron toda verdad.”

<sup>133</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume II. Book VI. Prologue. P. 53. Original wording: “[Y] todos los indios entendidos [...] afirmarían que este lenguaje es propio de sus antepasados, y obras que ellos hacían.”

paintings and memories of the old things,”<sup>134</sup> and once more, “as it is gathered from believable conjectures.”<sup>135</sup> These Sahagunian contradictions reflect a tension between his level of admiration, or respect for the Nahuatl voices, and at the same time, an intense sense of distrust. These contradictions might have been fueled by the fact that Fray Bernardino needed to believe the indigenous informants to prove that they were lying about their conversions. The task itself was equivocal. The Franciscan, ultimately could only depend on himself to authorize those versions that would serve his many interests. Even though the presence of Sahagun’s voice gave the work a particular value and meaning, the Friar viewed the need to “rely on [his American] experience [...] more as a concession than an innovation.”<sup>136</sup>

Fray Bernardino’s insecurity about the authorization of his *Historia* was reflected in the “veritable avalanche of prologues”<sup>137</sup> and addresses to the reader, both from within his culture, and from the Mexican one. These interpolations appear in numerous places, with the prologues, found in the beginning of almost all the books, setting the tone for the reader. The prologues and addresses permitted Sahagun to hold to the strings of his work. They reminded the reader, continuously, of why the compilation of the *Historia* was of fundamental importance, of how the Friar’s experience amongst the Nahuatl, and his struggles in the production of the encyclopedia validated and legitimized the compendium.

<sup>134</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagun. *Historia General*. Volume II. Book VIII. Prologue. P. 280. Original wording: “Segun que afirman los viejos, en cuyo poder estaban las pinturas y memorias de las cosas antiguas.”

<sup>135</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagun. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. Prologue. P. 30. Original wording: “[S]egun se colige por conjeturas verosimiles.”

<sup>136</sup> Walden Browne, 1996. P. 139.

<sup>137</sup> Walden Browne, 1996. P. 147.

Finally, they gave his audience the keys through which to interpret the Nahuatl version of the world. Those keys told the reader to admire a few things, to condescend several others, and to condemn a great many, anything that Sahagún deemed idolatrous.

Sahagún presented the significance of the *Historia*, and later of the *Arte*, immediately and then he reiterated it throughout the works. The prologue to Book I contains a fairly formal proclamation of Sahagún's intent, together with a presentation of his credentials, and those of Toral, from whom he wrote that he received the mandate:<sup>138</sup>

So that the ministers of the Gospel who will follow those who first came, in the cultivation of this vine of the Lord, will have no reason to complaint about the first for having left the things, of the natives of New Spain, in the dark, I, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, professed friar of the Order of Our Seraphic Father Saint Francis, observant, original from the village of Sahagún, in Campos, under mandate of the very Reverend Father Fray Francisco Toral, Provincial of this Holy Gospel Province, and later Bishop of Campeche and Yucatan, wrote twelve books about the divine things, or better yet the idolatrous human and natural things of the natives of this New Spain.<sup>139</sup>

Sahagún's intention to eradicate idolatry from New Spain, his own personal war against the devil, enemy of God's plan, served to establish the legitimacy of the Franciscan's work: "The zeal for the truth and for the Catholic faith compels me."<sup>140</sup> Fray Bernardino

<sup>138</sup> Although it is well known that the initial charge came from Motolinia, Sahagún, perhaps due to his frustration with the first Twelve, and the failure of their conversions, focused on the later mandate received from Fr. Toral.

<sup>139</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. P. 27-28. Original wording: "Pues por que los ministros del Evangelio que sucederán a los que primero vinieron, en la cultura de esta nueva viña del Señor no tengan ocasión de quejarse de los primeros, por haber dejado a oscuras las cosas de estos naturales de esta Nueva España, yo, fray Bernardino de Sahagún, fraile profeso de la Orden de Nuestro Seráfico P. San Francisco, de la observancia, natural de la Villa de Sahagún, en Campos, por mandato del muy Reverendo Padre el P. Fray Francisco Toral, provincial de esta Provincia del Santo Evangelio, y después Obispo de Campeche y Yucatán, escribi doce libros de las cosas divinas, o por mejor decir idolátricas, y humanas y naturales de esta Nueva España".

<sup>140</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. *Apendice del Cuarto Libro, en Romance, y es una Apología en Defensa de la Verdad que en él se Contiene*. 369-374. P. 371. Original wording: "El celo de la verdad y de la fe católica me compele."

insisted upon the vital nature of his purpose throughout his life. In the 1585 treatise on the indigenous divining arts, *Arte Adivinatoria*, Sahagún reiterated his argument: “This church was founded over false ground, and even having put some supports, it remains hurt and ruined. So that this mistake may be repaired with patience and care, the Calendar was written, and now the treatise on the Divining Arts is written.”<sup>141</sup>

Fray Bernardino cemented his authority through his knowledge of, and experience-near participation with the Nahua, and Náhuatl. He made character remarks on the indigenous people, based on his experience as their teacher, to illustrate his own capacity as a loving, and one might say paternal witness: “They are very capable of learning all the liberal arts, and holy theology, as it has been seen by experience of all those who were taught these sciences. [...] They are not less capable for our Christianity if they were properly educated in it.”<sup>142</sup> Sahagún also gave the reader updates on the progress and struggles involved in the compilation and composition of his work: “To redeem a thousand gray hairs, because with much less work than I, those who wish will be able to know, in little time, many of the antiquities and all the language of this Mexican people.”<sup>143</sup> This served to create a sense of familiarity that gained the reader to the Friar’s

<sup>141</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. In Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 383 column 1. Original wording: “*Esta Iglesia nueva quedó fundada sobre falso, y aún con haberle puesto algunos estribos, esta todavía bien lastimada y arruinada. A propósito de que este avieso se vaya enmendando con mucha prudencia y tiento, se ha escrito el Calendario, y ahora se escribe esta tratado de la Arte Adivinatoria.*”

<sup>142</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. P. 31. Original wording: “[S]on también hábiles para aprender todas las artes liberales, y la santa Teología, como por experiencia se ha visto en aquellos que han sido enseñados en estas ciencias.[...] Pues no son menos hábiles para nuestro cristianismo sino en el debidamente fueron cultivados.”

<sup>143</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. Prólogo. P. 29. Original wording: “*Es para redimir mil canas, porque con harto menos trabajo de lo que aquí me cuesta, podrán los que quisieren, saber en poco tiempo muchas de sus antiguallas y todo el lenguaje de esta gente mexicana.*”

cause. Sahagún's authorization claims, based upon his role as witness, helped him achieve what Historian Roland Barthes (1970) calls the "effect of the real," by repeating incessantly: "[I]t happened [or better yet, I saw it happen]."<sup>144</sup> In Sahagún's words: "Which I, as first hand witness, compiled in this Mexican language."<sup>145</sup>

Sahagún's authoritative knowledge of Náhuatl and the Nahuatl culture lent his work valuable legitimacy. His knowledge was established, beyond question, through a life dedicated to the production of innumerable original Náhuatl works and translations. Sahagún's contemporaries noted the great value of Fr. Bernardino's skill. This was clearly stated by Mendieta, Sahagún's fellow Franciscan missionary in New Spain: "I realize that none will understand the secrets and qualities of the aforesaid language as well as these two, [Friars Bernardino de Sahagún and Alonso de Molina] who have achieved it from the natural speech of the old Natives."<sup>146</sup> More recent Sahagunian scholars accept this claim to authority. Arthur J. O. Anderson referred to the Franciscan as the "best Náhuatl"<sup>147</sup> (1983), Barry D. Sell wrote that Sahagún was "among the most outstanding persons

<sup>144</sup> Roland Barthes. "The Discourse of History." Peter Wexler, Trans. *Structuralism: A Reader*. Michael Lanek, Edt. London: 1970. As quoted in Rabasa, p. 9.

<sup>145</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book X. Prologue. P. 97. Original wording: "[Lo] cual yo como testigo de vista compilé en esta lengua mexicana."

<sup>146</sup> Joaquín García Icazbalceta believed that it was an statement made by Mendieta. It appears in the "Informe de la Provincia del Santo Evangelio al Visitador Lic. Juan de Ovando" and it was published under the title *Códice franciscano*. Joaquín García Icazbalceta, Edt. México: Editorial Salvador Chávez Hayhoe, 1941. P. x-xi, 61. As quoted in Arthur J.O. Anderson. "Sahagún's Doctrinal Encyclopedia." *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl*. México City, D.F., México. V.16, 1983. 109-122. P. 110-11.

<sup>147</sup> Arthur J.O. Anderson. "Sahagún's Doctrinal Encyclopedia." *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl*. México City, D.F., México. V.16, 1983. 109-122. P. 110.

engaged in early Náhuatl studies”<sup>148</sup> (1994), or as Inga Clendinnen put it in 1987, Fr. Bernardino was: “A superb linguist, with a fine and observing eye.”<sup>149</sup> Sahagún himself also legitimized his work on the basis of its language, as something so different that it could not have been invented. Sahagún does not seem to have considered that those within the Nahua culture had a perfect domain of Náhuatl, and the sophistication to use it to their advantage. Sahagún, either somewhat naïvely, or most astutely, wrote that it was impossible for any human to invent the information that he recorded, hence it had to be all true: “That which is written in this book is beyond the understanding of human men to be able to make it up, nor could any living man make up the language which is in it.”<sup>150</sup>

Perhaps due to Sahagún’s insecurities, and undoubtedly due to his training at the University of Salamanca, he interpolated in his work the known past to aid in his translation of Nahua culture. He could not distance himself from the historical, academic, religious, and cultural foundations upon which he supported his interpretation of the universe. For this reason he viewed the Nahua through the myths and experiences of the familiar: He applied to the indigenous people of New Spain the myths of Christianity, Spain, Greeks, Romans, Moors, and Jews. He even made comparative references to the Arthurian legend: “The deal with the king of these natives is like that of King Arthur’s

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<sup>148</sup> Barry D. Sell. “All the Way to Guatemala: Sahagún’s Sermonario of 1548.” Chipping Away on Earth: Studies in Prehispanic and Colonial México in Honor of Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble. Eloise Qifiones Keber, Edt. Lancaster: Labyrinthos, 1994. 37-44. P. 38.

<sup>149</sup> Inga Clendinnen. Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517-1570. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. P. 85.

<sup>150</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume II. Book VI. Prologue. P. 53. Original wording: “[L]o que en este libro esta escrito no cabe en entendimiento de hombre humano el fingirlo, ni hombre viviente pudiera fingir el lenguaje que en él está.”



among the English.”<sup>151</sup> He defined the indigenous people, and their accomplishments in graspable terms, comparing the Nahuas’ experiences to his own known experiences: “There are so many examples among the Greeks and Romans, Spaniards, French and Italians, that there are books filled with them. The Indian nation used these same things, and especially among the Mexicans.”<sup>152</sup> Sahagún applied to the Nahua scriptural mythology, explaining that they suffered the curse of Jeremías, who prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem and Judea on the hands of a stronger invading force: “This work will be of great value to gain knowledge about the value of this Mexican people, which is still unknown, because that curse of Jeremiah, spoken in behalf of God and sent upon Judea and Jerusalem, also came upon them. This, word by word, happened to the Indians.”<sup>153</sup> With the same tone, he equated the Nahua to the Moors, who he believed had lost both their souls and bodies. Sahagún hoped to bring the Nahua to his faith before they shared the Moorish fate: “It would be very advisable now to remedy this among the Indians, in such a way that their disguised and false faith, now seen [...] could be remedied, so that they would not end up like those misfortunate Moors, who lost their souls and their bodies, the temporal and the spiritual, and all of them perished.”<sup>154</sup>

<sup>151</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume II. Book VIII. Prologue. P. 281. Original wording: “*Está el negocio de este rey entre estos naturales, como el del rey Arthus entre los ingleses.*”

<sup>152</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume II. Book VI. Prologue. P. 53. Original wording: “*Hay de estos tantos ejemplos entre los griegos y latinos, españoles, franceses e italianos, que están los libros llenos de esta materia. Esto mismo se usaba en esta nación indiana, y más principalmente entre los mexicanos.*”

<sup>153</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. Prologue. P. 29. “*Aprovechará mucho toda esta obra para conocer el quilate de esta gente mexicana, el cual aún no se ha conocido, porque vino sobre ellos aquella maldición que Jeremías de parte de Dios fulminó contra Judea y Jerusalem [...] Esto a la letra ha acontecido a estos indios.*”

<sup>154</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. Icazbalceta, 1954. Prologue. P. 384 column 1. Original wording: “*Convendría ahora grandemente remediar este negocio entre los indios, de tal manera que esta paliación*

Fray Bernardino's comparisons of the two completely different worlds continued throughout the texts. He referred to Roman builders and Venice to explain the Mexican capital city. Comparing the Nahuatl building and governing skills to those of the Romans or Venetians was no small compliment: "They had the succession of the Romans, and as the Romans they built their *Capitolio* as its defense [...] Many years later the Mexicans built the city of Mexico, which is another Venice, and in their knowledge about governance they were as the Venetians."<sup>155</sup> He also translated the indigenous gods into understandable Greco-Roman models. Hence, *Huitzilopochtli* was another Hercules, *Tezcatlipoca* was another Jupiter, *Chicomecoatl* another Ceres, *Chalchiuhtlicue* another Juno, *Tlazolteotl* another Venus, and *Xiuhtecutli* another Vulcan.<sup>156</sup>

Fray Bernardino reached out in an attempt to grasp at traditionally authorized sources: He made references to past works such as those of Saint Augustine, Virgil, Cicero, and Saint Gregory. These references, although unable to give the Friar direct guidance, did help him justify his endeavor, and served to demonstrate the author's scholarly authoritative knowledge. Sahagún noted the value of St. Augustine's study of gentile theology in *The City of God*, to help those same gentiles understand the fallacy of their gods, and used it as justification for his own endeavor:

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*y ficción de su fe, que ahora se ve [...] se remediase, y no viniesen al fin que vinieron aquellos malaventurados moros, que perdieron las ánimas y los cuerpos, lo temporal y lo espiritual, y todos ellos perecieron."*

<sup>155</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. Prologue. P. 29-30. Original wording: "[H]an tenido la sucesión de los romanos, y como los romanos edificaron el Capitolio para su fortaleza [...] Muchos años después los mexicanos edificaron la ciudad de México, que es otra Venecia, y ellos en saber y en policia son otros venecianos."

<sup>156</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. P. 43-94.

It was not superfluous or vain for the divine Saint Augustine to discuss the false theology of the gentiles in book six of *The City of God*, because, as he well said, once those false and vain fictions beliefs that the gentiles had about their false gods are known, it could easily be shown to them that they were not gods, and that they had nothing of benefit to offer to a rational creature.<sup>157</sup>

He also validated his work by saying that it was “as well authorized and true as those written by *Virgilio*, and *Cicero*, and the other authors of the Latin language.”<sup>158</sup> Again, in the *Carta Dedicatoria*, he gave his work traditional foundations: “And thinking to myself how I could enhance this great benefit, the words of the glorious doctor Saint Gregory came to memory: Mejor no haber nacido que nacer para ir a pena eterna.”<sup>159</sup>

Finally, Sahagún authorized his work by granting himself the approval of the indigenous people themselves, and further qualifying those who would support his work as those with knowledge: “[A]ll the knowledgeable Indians, if asked, would affirm that this language is appropriate to their ancestors, and the things they did.”<sup>160</sup> This qualification might have been necessary for two reasons. On the one hand, it served to distinguish his informants from all the other Nahua, who the Friar constantly described in negative tones.

<sup>157</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book III. Prologue. P. 269. Original wording: “No tuvo por casa superflua, ni vana el divino Agustino tratar de la Teología fabulosa de los gentiles, en el libro sexto de LA CIUDAD DE DIOS, porque, como él dice, conocidas las fábulas y ficciones vanas que los gentiles tenían acerca de sus dioses fingidos, pudiesen facilmente darles a entender que aquellos no eran dioses, ni podían dar cosa ninguna que fuese provechosa a la criatura racional.”

<sup>158</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. *Al Sincero Lector*. P. 32. Original wording: “[T]odas maneras de hablar, y todos los vocablos que esta lengua usa, tan bien autorizados y ciertos como lo que escribió Virgilio, y Cicerón, y los demás autores de la lengua latina.”

<sup>159</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. *Carta Dedicatoria Del Autor*. P. 25. Original wording: “Y pensando en mi cómo podría encarecer este tan gran beneficio, me vinieron a la memoria las palabras del gloriosísimo Doctor San Gregorio [...] nihil nobis nasci profuit, nisi redimi profuisset.”

<sup>160</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume II. Book VI. Prologue. P. 53. Original wording: “[Y] todos los indios entendidos, si fueran preguntados, afirmarían que este lenguaje es propio de sus antepasados, y obras que ellos hacían.”

He did so with particular vehemence in his *Arte*: “The fraud that was made, and the fictitious manner with which they deceived the first preachers,”<sup>161</sup> and “they run away from hearing the preaching, and use such frivolous excuses that their wickedness is clearly understood,”<sup>162</sup> and again, in reference to their religious leaders: “Divining and lying prophets.”<sup>163</sup> On the other, it defended the veracity of his work from anyone who might have doubt it. In fact, Fr. Bernardino directed himself to his audience in the address *Al Lector*, in Book XII, and stated: “Those who were conquered knew and gave an account of many things which transpired among them during the war of which those who conquered were unaware [...] And those who gave this account [were] principal persons of good judgment, and it is believed they told the truth.”<sup>164</sup> The judgment of those *principales* was not in question for Sahagún. His perception that their judgment was ‘good’ (or in our terms ‘agenda-free’) was based on the fact that their information served to aid his own interests. Fray Bernardino, in other words, heard what he wanted to hear, when he wanted to hear it, and he struggled to guide the reader to reach the conclusions for which the Friar aimed. For this reason, the secure establishment of authority was fundamental. The Nahua were not the real enemy, Satan was. Sahagún reserved for

<sup>161</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. Icazbalceta, 1954. Prologue. P. 383 column 2. Original wording: “[E]l embuste que se hizo y ficción con que engañaron a los dichos primeros predicadores.”

<sup>162</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. Icazbalceta, 1954. Prologue. P. 384 column 1. Original wording: “[H]uyen de oír las predicaciones, y ponen para su excusa unas causas tan frívolas, que se entiende de muy claro su maldad.”

<sup>163</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. Icazbalceta, 1954. Capítulo 1°. P. 387 column 2. Original wording: “[P]rophetas adivinos y mentirosos.”

<sup>164</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume IV. Book XII. *Al LECTOR*. P. 21. Original wording: “[L]os que fueron conquistados supieron y dieron relación de muchas cosas que pasaron entre ellos durante la guerra, las cuales ignoraron los que los conquistaron [...] [Y] ellos dieron esta relación, y personas principales y de buen juicio, y que tiene por cierto que dijeron toda la verdad.”

himself the power to decide when the Nahua informants were telling the truth, and when the Devil had them in his grasp, which was usually when they did not follow the Franciscan's designs.

## CHAPTER 3

## SAHAGÚN'S RAISON D'ÊTRE

Towards a Pluritopical Understanding<sup>165</sup> of Sahagún's Work

Sahagún's work reflected a complex set of agendas that inter-played with each other even when seemingly conflicting. Fr. Bernardino played a number of different roles, each one expressing sometimes slight, and other times fully divergent, interests: He was a Spanish male of his times, a Franciscan friar and seraphic soldier of Christ, and an scholar and teacher. Modern Mexican scholar Jesús Bustamante García criticized Sahagún's perspective by labeling it as "nefarious." Bustamante went on to say: "Sahagún is an extremely fine observer, an excellent authority on traditional indigenous culture, but here, with more clarity than in other parts [of his corpus], his fundamental point of view is apparent: He is not an ethnologist, he is an inquisitor."<sup>166</sup> Bustamante's statement is somewhat limited. Actually, Sahagún was both and more: ethnologist, inquisitor, paternalist, admirer, denouncer, and the carrier of the banner of a dying dream. His perspective was not fully nefarious, nor fully innocent, and it shifted beyond those limited

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<sup>165</sup> José Rabasa. Inventing America: Spanish Historiography and the Formation of Eurocentrism. Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993. P. 14.

<sup>166</sup> Bustamante García. Fray Bernardino de Sahagún: Una Revisión Crítica de los Manuscritos y de su Proceso de Composición. México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Bibliográficas, Biblioteca Nacional y Hemeroteca Nacional, 1991. P. 376. As quoted by Browne, 1996. P. 111. Original wording included: "*Sahagún es, sin duda, un finísimo observador y un excelente conocedor de la cultura indígena tradicional, pero aquí, con mas claridad que en otras partes, se destaca su punto de vista fundamental: no es un etnólogo, es un inquisidor.*"

oppositions. Fray Bernardino's experience was made up of concurrent incongruities that leave the modern scholar with the image of a complex man, in a complex time period.

### Sahagún's Scholastic and Educational Interests

As a scholar, Fray Bernardino set out to learn the language, according to his late nineteenth century biographer Joaquín García Icazbalceta, as soon as he boarded ship to cross the Atlantic. Icazbalceta wrote that given Sahagún's investigative character, he would not have passed the chance to pick up as much of the language as possible.<sup>167</sup> In fact, after only a few years in New Spain, the Friar's skill had little competition. His linguistic interests became a focal point of his *Historia*. In the prologue to Book I, Fray Bernardino wrote: "This work is like a sweeping net used to bring to light all the idioms of this language [Náhuatl], with its proper metaphors, and all its manners of speech."<sup>168</sup>

Sahagún the scholar was also concerned with the preservation of a culture that he could not help but admire: "The boys and girls were brought up with great rigor [...]. They raised them in the community under very solicitous and rigorous teachers."<sup>169</sup> Miguel León-Portilla called it: "The most cherished concern of his life."<sup>170</sup> One can extrapolate that after developing indigenous relationships, with his students, elders

<sup>167</sup> Joaquín G. Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 328 column 1. The Emperor charged Fr. Antonio de Ciudad Rodrigo, who was also bringing Sahagún and other nineteen friars to New Spain, with the guardianship and protection of those returning Indians.

<sup>168</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. Prologue. P. 28. Original wording: "Es esta obra como una red barrendera para sacar a luz todos los vocablos, de esta lengua con sus propias y metafóricas significaciones, y todas sus maneras de hablar."

<sup>169</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book X. *Relación del Autor, digna de ser notada*. P. 158. Original wording: "[L]os muchachos y muchachas criábanlos con gran rigor [...] los criaban de comunidad debajo de maestros muy solícitos y rigurosos."

<sup>170</sup> Miguel León-Portilla, 1994. P. 14.

working, even teaching at the college,<sup>171</sup> and burying so many during the great plague (1545),<sup>172</sup> Sahagún must have felt a need to save as much as possible of Náhuatl and the Nahua culture in which he had, and would continue to invest so much of his life. Sahagún's admiration, particularly about certain aspects of the Nahua world, as he understood them, was genuine:

They were perfect philosophers and astrologers, and very capable in all the mechanical arts of defense, which was held in greater esteem than any other virtue. [...] Concerning religion and the care of their gods, I do not believe that there have been, in the whole world, idolaters of such devotion and dedication to their gods like these of New Spain; not even the Jews, nor any other nation had such heavy burden filled with so many celebrations.<sup>173</sup>

They were, certainly, in these things extremely devout to their gods, jealous about their republics, among themselves very courteous; to their enemies very cruel; to their own humane and strict; and I think that due to these virtues they achieved their empire, although it lasted them only a short while, and now all is lost.<sup>174</sup>

Still, “despite Sahagún's professed admiration”<sup>175</sup> for the indigenous world in which he was an implant, his scholastic interests buckled repeatedly under the weight of his own impositions. His condescending superiority damaged his academic observation by

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<sup>171</sup> Such as Martín de la Cruz: Nahua medicine man that put together the magnificent herbal Codex Badiano or Libellus de Medicinalibus Indioium Herbis. Miguel León-Portilla, 1994. P. 16.

<sup>172</sup> Walden Browne, 1996. P. 115.

<sup>173</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. Prologue. P. 30. Original wording: “[F]ueron perfectos filósofos y astrólogos y muy diestros en todas las artes mecánicas de la fortaleza, la cual entre ellos era más estimada que ninguna otra virtud [...] En lo que toca a la religión y cultura de sus dioses no creo ha habido en el mundo idólatras tan reverenciadores de sus dioses, ni tan a su costa, como estos de esta Nueva España; ni los judíos, ni ninguna otra nación tuvo yugo tan pesado y de tantas ceremonias.”

<sup>174</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume II. Book VI. Prologue. P. 53. Original wording: “Fueron, cierto, en estas cosas extremados, devotísimos para con sus dioses, celosísimos de sus repúblicas, entre sí muy urbanos; para con sus enemigos muy crueles; para con los suyos humanos y severos; y pienso que por estas virtudes alcanzaron el imperio, aunque poco les duro, y ahora todo lo han perdido.”

<sup>175</sup> Walden Browne, 1996. P. 111.



encouraging the standardization of his object of study as lesser than, rather than distinct from the Friar, and by the overvalorization of his categorical assumptions. Sahagún the scholar was unable to write a true ethnography. His work fits best under Mary Louise Pratt's terminology of 'contact zones' writings created "in the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict."<sup>176</sup> At the starting point of the era of modern thinking, Sahagún still did not view the Nahuatl as they represented themselves, but as they fitted into his cultural pre-conceived stereotypes: He referred to them as child like people<sup>177</sup> and wrote that in their ancestral beliefs they acted "more [...] like children without sense than [...] like reasoning men,"<sup>178</sup> while noting the ease with which he believed they could be deceived and misguided.<sup>179</sup>

Both condescension and admiration towards the indigenous people of New Spain coexisted in the Franciscan, and both colored the compilation of his ethnographic *summa*, the *Historia General* and other works such as the later *Arte Adivinatoria*. In the *Arte*, Sahagún explained that the prophesy given to Jeremiah: "Here, I have put my words in your mouth and I have made you superior to all the people, and placed you above all

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<sup>176</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, 1992. P. 6.

<sup>177</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume II. Book VII. Prologue. P. 255.

<sup>178</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. Confutación. P. 94. Here Sahagún directs himself to the indigenous people and lectures them, vehemently, about the mistakes and lies handed down to them by their ancestors. Original wording: "[M]ás [...] niños sin seso, que [...] hombres de razón."

<sup>179</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume II. Book VII. Prologue. P. 255, and *Arte Adivinatoria*. Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 387 column 2.

kingdoms,<sup>180</sup> was given to the prophet to write, but its execution, and the Christian god's grant of superiority over other peoples and over kingdoms was, in Sahagún's interpretation, "granted to the Roman Pontiffs who in these times, after the centenary of 1600, govern the Catholic Church."<sup>181</sup> In his later years, the Franciscan still believed, in spite of his experience-near participation with the indigenous people, in the Christians' superior status, and that this was his God's will.

Academic concerns became secondary when for Sahagún the war against the "enemy of god and of men,"<sup>182</sup> was so close to being lost in New Spain. Sahagún lived his American experience with anguish and anxiety on this matter, as illustrated in this question to his god: "What is this Lord? You have permitted that for so long that enemy of human kind, at his pleasure, establish lordship over this sad and forsaken nation."<sup>183</sup> His anguish was also evident in his exclamation about the sacrifices of children. Here Sahagún again cried out to his god: "Oh Lord, do justice upon this cruel enemy who does

<sup>180</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún quotes Prophet Jeremiah. In *Arte Adivinatoria*. Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 382 column 1. Original wording: "*Ecce dedi verba mea in ore tuo, ecce constitui te hodie super gentes et super regna.*"

<sup>181</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 382 column 1. Original wording: "[C]oncedida a los Pontífices Romanos que en estos tiempos de este centenario postrero de mil y seiscientos gobiernan la Iglesia Católica."

<sup>182</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 385 column 1. Original wording: "[E]nemigo de Dios y de los hombres."

<sup>183</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia general*. Volume I. Book I. *Exclamaciones del Autor*. P. 95. And in Joaquín G. Icazbalceta, 1954. *Exclamaciones del Autor*. P. 380 column 2. Original wording: "*¿Qué es esto, Señor Dios? que habéis permitido tantos tiempos que aquel enemigo del género humano tan a su gusto se enseñorease de esta triste y desamparada nación.*"

us so much evil, and wishes to do us even more! Take from him, Lord, all the power to do harm!”<sup>184</sup>

As Important as the Franciscan’s scholarly pursuits were to him, they still were only a part of the reasons that drove him to study and record the Nahua experience. His endeavor was not “the result of a merely academic restlessness. The epoch did not permit it, and the active life dedicated to evangelization gave Sahagún no time for it.”<sup>185</sup>

Ultimately, the culture and the language had to be recorded because it was “the vehicle to penetrate the native mind,”<sup>186</sup> to completely and unquestionably gain all the knowledge necessary to eradicate idolatry. Once idolatry was eradicated, Náhuatl, and much of Nahua culture, hybridized with Spanish information, would be re-introduced in the service of Christ, to fit the “politico-religious utopia of the Franciscans.”<sup>187</sup> The old indigenous world, once “cleansed of all the idolatry that it contained, and making it fully Christian, it would be re-introduced to this Indian and Spanish republic.”<sup>188</sup>

<sup>184</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book II. *Exclamación del Autor*. P. 142. Original wording: “¡Oh señor Dios, haced justicia de este cruel enemigo, que tanto mal nos hace y nos desea hacer! ¡Quitadle, señor, todo el poder de empecer.”

<sup>185</sup> Alfredo Lopez Austin. In Edmonson, 1974. P. 115.

<sup>186</sup> Alfredo Lopez Austin paraphrases Miguel León-Portilla. In Edmonson, 1974. P. 115. The original idea is from Miguel León-Portilla. “Significado de la Obra de fray Bernardino de Sahagún.” *Estudios de Cultura Novohispana*. 1:13-28. 1966.

<sup>187</sup> Alfredo López Austin. In Edmonson, 1974. P. 114. Austin quotes José Antonio Maravall. “La utopia politico-religiosa de los franciscanos en Nueva España.” *Estudios Americanos*. 2: 199-228. 1949. Austin also bases his statements on Sahagunian millenarism on the work of Lluís Nicolau D’Olwer. “Fray Bernardino de Sahagún (1499-1590).” *Historiadores de America* 9. (Mexico City) Instituto Panamericano de Geografía e Historia, 1952: 155-170.

<sup>188</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book X. *Relación del Autor Digna de Ser Notada*. P. 161. Original wording: “[L]impiada de todo lo idólatrico que tenía y haciéndola del todo cristiana, se introdujese en esta república indiana y española.”

A secondary purpose for this re-introduction was to remedy the damage made to the Indians by those who, in removing their ordered systems, and introducing Spanish ways, had promoted the fall into viciousness of the indigenous population. In fact, Sahagún blamed the land, and its climate, and added that it had affected the Spaniards in the same measure:

I do not marvel as much about the faults and madness of the natives of this land, because the Spaniards that live in it, and more so those who are born here, acquire those same bad inclinations. [...] But it is a great disgrace for us that the native Indians, old sane and wise men, knew how to remedy the damage that this land impresses in those who live in it; [...] and we drown under our bad inclinations; and certainly people are raised here, as much the Spanish as the Indians, that are intolerable to rule and a heavy burden to save. [...] If that old form of rule [...] once cleaned of all idolatry, and once made fully Christian, was reintroduced in this Indian and Spanish republics, it would certainly be a great good, and it would be the cause that could free one republic as much as the other of great evils, and free those who rule them from much effort.<sup>189</sup>

Still, Sahagún the teacher, through his experience at the *Colegio*, saw the parts of the Nahua world that did not conflict with his missionary calling with respect and admiration. He vehemently defended the qualities of his students and wrote with pride about their accomplishments, demonstrating his appreciation for the Nahua educational heritage: “Grammar, logic, rhetoric, and theology, we know from experience that they

<sup>189</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book X. *Relacion del Autor Digna de Ser Notada*. 157-168. P. 160-161. Original wording: “Y no me maravillo tanto de las tachas y dislates de los naturales de esta tierra, porque los españoles que en ella habitan, y mucho más de los que en ella nacen, cobran estas malas inclinaciones. [...] Pero es gran vergüenza nuestra que los indios naturales, cuerdos y sabios antiguos, supieron dar remedio a los daños que esta tierra imprime en los que en ella viven [...] y nosotros nos vamos al agua abajo de nuestras malas inclinaciones; y cierto, se cria aquí una gente, así española como india, que es intolerable de regir y pesadísima de salvar. [...] Si aquella manera de regir [...] limpiada de todo lo idólatrico que tenía y haciéndola del todo cristiana, se introdujese en esta república indiana y española, cierto sería gran bien y sería causa de librar así a la una república como a la otra de grandes males, y de grandes trabajos a los que las rigen.”

have ability for all of it, and they learn it, and know it, and teach it, and there isn't an art that they are not capable of learning and using."<sup>190</sup> Sahagún wanted to continue that educational heritage through the work of the Franciscans and the Native teachers and aids at the *Colegio de Tlatelolco*. Sahagún wrote that the school had functioned for over forty years, and the students had never erred "against God, nor against the Church, nor against the King, nor against his republic." Instead they had helped the apostolic work, and even composed sermons freed from any idolatry. Sahagún ended his statement by expressing fear that this all might be lost: "I have great fear that this will be completely lost."<sup>191</sup>

Sahagún wrote with sorrow about the damage done to the indigenous population, and particularly to the students at the college, during the plagues (1545 and 1576). He was concerned that not only many were lost, but that it was due to the lack of Spanish support towards the education of the Nahua. That lack of education left them with no means to heal themselves:

The plague we had about thirty one years ago hit the school greatly, and this new plague in this year of 1576 is doing the same. So much so that there is almost no one left at the school. Almost all leave dead or ill. [...] And if there would have been attention and care that these Indians

<sup>190</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book X. *Relacion del Autor Digna de Ser Notada*. P. 158. Original wording: "Gramática, Lógica, Retórica, Astrología, y Teología, todo esto tenemos por experiencia que tienen habilidad para ello y lo aprenden y lo saben, y lo enseñan, y no hay arte ninguna que no tengan habilidad para aprenderla y usarla."

<sup>191</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book X. *Relacion del Autor Digna de Ser Notada*. P. 166-167. Original wording: "Ha ya más de cuarenta años que este Colegio persevera, y los colegiales de él en ninguna cosa han delinquido, ni contra Dios, ni contra la Iglesia, ni contra el rey, ni contra su república, más antes han ayudado y ayudan en muchas cosas a la plantación y sustentación de nuestra santa fe católica, porque si sermones y postillas y doctrinas se han hecho en la lengua indiana, que pueden parecer y sean limpios de toda herejía, son precisamente los que con ellos se han compuesto. [...] Recelo tengo muy grande que esto se ha de perder del todo."

were instructed in grammar, logic, natural philosophy, and medicine, they could have saved many who died [...] and so they die without help.<sup>192</sup>

Fray Bernardino believed that there was a point in common between the American aborigines and the Spaniards. They shared a common descent, a shared lineage from Adam, he who the Christians accepted as the first man created by their God, and as the father of all subsequent generations. This shared lineage justified, in the eyes of Sahagún, a Christian obligation to care for the indigenous people, and to guide them to what he perceived was the right path: "It is certain that these peoples are our brethren, proceeding of the trunk of Adam. They are our fellow beings. We are obliged to love them as we love ourselves. We are the same."<sup>193</sup>

#### Sixteenth Century Spanish Male

Sahagún the Spanish man was a subject of the Crown, and a member of the Catholic flock. He was, in the words of Mary Louise Pratt, part of the "historical-colonial-ideological explanatory apparatus."<sup>194</sup> In spite of his love for his indigenous students, and his admiration for certain aspects of Nahua culture, the Friar never did cast doubt over the Crown's or the Church's authority, and he did not put the indigenous people's well being ahead of the Spanish-Catholic Imperial designs. His apparently pro-

<sup>192</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book X. *Relacion del Autor Digna de Ser Notada*. P. 167-168. Original wording: "La pestilencia que hubo ahora a treinta y un años dio gran banque al Colegio, y no le ha dado a menor esta pestilencia de este año de 1576, que casi no está ya nadie en el Colegio, muertos y enfermos, casi todos son salidos. [...] Y si se hubiera tenido atención y advertencia a que estos indios hubieran sido instruidos en la Gramática, Lógica y Filosofía Natural, y Medicina, pudieran haber socorrido (a) muchos de los que han muerto [...] y así se mueren por no tener remedio ni socorro."

<sup>193</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. Prologue. P. 31. Original wording: "[P]ues es certísimo que estas gentes todas son nuestros hermanos, procedentes del tronco de Adán como nosotros, son nuestros prójimos, a quien somos obligados a amar como a nosotros mismos, quid quid sit."

<sup>194</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, 1992. P. 137.

Indian perspective, was not truly pro-Indianism, but an apparently benevolent part of the colonialist rhetoric at large. He never approximated the Dominican Father Bartolomé de Las Casas, who in his later years had come to believe that it was better for the indigenous population to remain free heathens than to exist as enslaved Christians, who supported indigenous autonomy, and who pushed “those who had robbed the Indians to make restitution.”<sup>195</sup>

Although Sahagún criticized Spanish abuses perpetrated on the Indians: “This has occurred to the Indians with the Spanish: They, and their things, were run down and destroyed to such degree that nothing was left of who they once were,”<sup>196</sup> and although he wrote against the Spanish destruction of the pre-Hispanic indigenous order, which left them without “all the regiment that they had,”<sup>197</sup> Sahagún believed that it remained the obligation of the Crown, and the Church, to maintain control over the Indies and the native population. In turn, it was the obligation of the indigenous population to labor to

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<sup>195</sup> Juan Friede. *Las Casas and Indigenism in the Sixteenth Century*. Bartolomé de Las Casas in History: Towards an Understanding of the Man and His Work. Juan Friede and Benjamin Keen, Eds. De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971. 127-234. P. 203. Las Casas wrote: “None may lawfully deprive any group of men, be they Christian or gentile, of dominion over their lands and of the right to have kings or princes in order that they may freely govern themselves. The rulers of the Indians are independent and sovereign. In Venancio Carro. *The Spanish Theological-Juridical Renaissance and the Ideology of Bartolomé de Las Casas*. In Juan Friede and Benjamin Keen, 1971. 235-277. P. 268.

<sup>196</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. Prologue. P. 29. Original wording: “*Esto [...] ha acontecido a estos indios con los españoles: fueron tan atropellados y destruidos ellos y todas sus cosas, que ninguna apariencia les quedó de lo que eran antes.*”

<sup>197</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book X. *Relaciones del Autor Digna de Ser Notada*. P. 159. Original wording: “[T]odo el regimiento que tenían.”

learn “better the things of the faith and [...] subject themselves to the most Christian Prince.”<sup>198</sup> Idolatry, and hence the Nahua belief system, had to be stamped out:

It was necessary to destroy all the idolatrous things, and all the idolatrous building, and even the customs of the republic that were mixed with idolatrous practices, which were nearly all the customs that the republic, with which they governed themselves, had. Because of that it was necessary to take it all apart, and to give them another form of rule that had nothing of idolatry in it.<sup>199</sup>

Sahagún believed that both the Church, and the Spanish secular powers, had the right and authority to follow resistance, or perceived resistance, with punishment: “They are obliged to believe, through the preaching they usually receive; and if they rebel, they are to be punished as heretics, because we have the ecclesiastic and secular authority to do so.”<sup>200</sup> Thus, Fray Bernardino was a willing participant, and a supporter of the Spanish colonial enterprise, and of the Catholic colonial-apostolic desire. He rationalized his participation and support by imagining the two fully different cosmologies, the Nahua and the European, as asymmetrical components of the one he judged superior, his.

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<sup>198</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book X. *Relaciones del Autor Digna de Ser Notada*. P. 166. Original wording: To learn “*mejor las cosas de la fe, y [...] estar sujetos a[el] Principe Cristianísimo.*”

<sup>199</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book X. *Relaciones del Autor Digna de Ser Notada*. P. 159. Original wording: “*Necesario fué destruir todas las cosas idolátricas, y todos los edificios idolátricos, y aún las costumbres de la república que estaban mezcladas con ritos de idolatría y acompañadas con ceremonias idolátricas, lo cual había casi en todas las costumbres que tenía la república con que se regia, y por esta causa fué necesario desbaratarlo todo y ponerles en otra manera de policia, que no tuviese ningún resabio de cosas de idolatría.*”

<sup>200</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book X. *Relaciones del Autor Digna de Ser Notada*. P. 166. Original wording: “[S]on obligados a creerlo, predicándoselo como ordinariamente se les predica; y siendo en esto rebeldes castigarlos como a herejes, pues hay autoridad de poder Eclesiástico y Seglar para hacerlo.”



The Franciscan molded the Nahua to fit into his God's plan, and consequently he participated in the subjugation of the Nahua under the yoke of Spanish-Catholic paternalist imperialism. Sahagunian subjugation expressed itself in the Friar's expressions of coercive, and punitive love throughout his work: "Miraculously, our Lord sent a great plague over all the Indians of New Spain, as punishment for the war they waged against his Christians, who he had sent in this journey,"<sup>201</sup> and again, "until they had repented of what they had done, and had the intention to not do it again; in this way they left instructed and punished."<sup>202</sup>

This was not an original action created in response to Sahagún's, and his world's encounter with New World experiences. Actually, Sahagún was following Christian tradition where "the two most central and richest symbols, [...] God and Jesus Christ [...] have their ambivalence of love and domination, the protective and the punitive."<sup>203</sup>

Sahagún's love for the Nahua, as his God's love for the Christians, was coercive. Sahagún joined in the creation of New Spain as a landscape for Catholic and Spanish action, and for a Counter-Reformation reaction:

Certainly, it appears that in this our times, and in these lands, and with this people, our Lord wished to restore to the Church that which the Devil had stolen from it in England, Germany, and France, in Asia and

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<sup>201</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume IV. Book XII. Prologue. P. 19. Original wording: "Milagrosamente nuestro Señor Dios envió gran pestilencia sobre todos los indios de esta Nueva España, en castigo de la guerra que habían hecho a sus cristianos, por él enviados a hacer esta jornada."

<sup>202</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book X. *Relaciones del Autor Digna de Ser Notada*. P. 163. Original wording: "[H]asta que ellos [Indians] estaban ya arrepentidos de lo que habían echo y con propósito de no lo hacer más, y así salían de allí catequizados y castigados."

<sup>203</sup> John W. Keber. *Sahagún's Psalmody: Christian Love and Domination in Sixteenth-Century México*. In Eloisa Qinoes Keber, 1994. P. 51.

Palestine, from which we are left with the obligation to thank our Lord and to work diligently in this his New Spain.<sup>204</sup>

The transformation of the many upper Mesoamerican worlds,<sup>205</sup> into New Spain, with all the implied connotations, required a revision of the Spanish, and by extension of the Catholic classification of the universe. This was not a radical transformation. Instead, it was the mere addition of the Nahua somewhere beneath the upper echelons already occupied by the Europeans. In Sahagún's paternalistic eyes, the indigenous people "were not capable of such perfection."<sup>206</sup> The Spaniards were still fueled by the furor and the fervor of the *Reconquista*. They had no reason to question their superior placement in their categorization of reality. They saw themselves as the representatives of God, and thus their hegemony was unquestionable. "The discovery of the unknown lands and the conversion of pagan peoples appeared to the Spaniards as a clear sign of the providential mission that [their] God had indicated for the chosen people."<sup>207</sup>

Sahagún enumerated a series of "truths" discovered with the New World where he placed the Americas inside the somewhat expanded boundaries of Euro-Christian mythology, imposing a "Christian conceptualization of history."<sup>208</sup> He wrote that the

<sup>204</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. Prologue. P. 31. Original wording: "[C]ierto, parece que en estos nuestros tiempos, y en estas tierras y con esta gente, ha querido Nuestro Señor Dios restituir a la Iglesia lo que el demonio la ha robado (en) Inglaterra, Alemania y Francia, en Asia y Palestina, de lo cual quedamos muy obligados de dar gracias a Nuestro Señor y trabajar fielmente en esta su Nueva España."

<sup>205</sup> Meaning the many pre-Hispanic independent groups, and those interconnected, that had different traditions, languages, self-identifications, and loyalties.

<sup>206</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book X. *Relaciones del Autor Digna de Ser Notada*. P. 162. Original wording: "[N]o eran capaces de tanta perfección."

<sup>207</sup> Enrique Florescano, 1994. P. 77.

<sup>208</sup> John W. Keber, 1994. P. 56.

lands under the “torrid-zone to the Antarctic” were inhabitable, that the ocean was not without end, that the population of the world began in Babylon and it had expanded into the New World, that the earthly paradise was in the New World, were the bones of pre-deluge giants were also found, and that although it was believed that no one had reached the Americas before, “now it is said with certainty that the boat of King Solomon came to Peru, and to the Island of Santo Domingo to take gold for the building of the temple,” in Jerusalem.<sup>209</sup>

Sahagún’s journey to New Spain had taken him through the proverbial looking glass. Once there, he had to make sense of what he witnessed and what he experienced. He provided for continuity by interpreting apparently coincidental phenomena, between the familiar and the non-familiar, as equivalent phenomena, in spite of their categorical incompatibility. For example, the indigenous informants explained a pre-Hispanic custom defined, in the words of modern historian, Inga Clendinnen, as “a condition of misfortune [that] had been contracted [where said...] condition could be ameliorated only by a cautious, correct, and respectful renewal of the correct relationship [with the sacred], so

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<sup>209</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume IV. Book XII. *Prólogo del Autor*. P. 17-18. “Cuando estas tierras [...] se descubrieron, muchas verdades se descubrieron que antes estaban ocultas. La una de ellas fue que antes todos pensaban que era inhabitable toda esta tierra que esta debajo de la tórrida-zona hasta el polo antártico [...]. Asimismo se afirmaba antes de agora, que el mar oceano (que se estiende desde el poniente adelante en respecto a España) no tenía cabo sin fin [...]. Hase también sabido de cierto, que la población del mundo comenzó de ácia aquellas partes donde esta la gran Babilonia la vieja, y de allí se ha venido poblando el mundo hasta estas partes que se llama el nuevo órbe [...]. Parece también cosa cierta, que el paraíso terrenal está entre la tórrida-zona y el norte-ártico, en el cual nuestro padre Adán y nuestra madre Eva moraron no se cuantos días, y de aquellos dos se hinchó de gente todo el mundo, y en esta partes hubo gigantes de los de antes del diluvio, y han parecido aca huesos y toda la armazón de su grandeza, no solo en esta Nueva España, pero también en las provincias y reinos circunstantes. Teniase asimismo por cierto, que ninguna navegación o flota había llegado a las partes de esta Nueva-España ni del Peru antes de este centenario que cumple mil y seiscientos años de la encarnación de Cristo Ntro. Redentor; y agora se dice por muy cierto que la flota del rey Salomón llevo al Peru y también a la isla de Santo Domingo a tomar oro para el edificio del templo.”

that the essential boundary would be back in place.”<sup>210</sup> Sahagún in turn redefined the custom as the confession of a sin, *pecado*. Neither confession, nor sin, are words that equate, or explain the actual native tradition, which was preoccupied with reestablishing the ‘proper way,’ and not seeking redemption. Sahagún’s presentation of what he transformed into confessions was fully imbued with Christian idioms and interpretations. Sahagún fitted the very deity with whom the proper relationship needed to be reestablished, *Tezcatlipoca* (Smoking Mirror), into the Christian God’s model. This was in itself an unconscious heresy by Sahagún: “Oh our Lord, most humane, protector and aid to all! Already you have heard the confession of this poor sinner.”<sup>211</sup>

In Nahuatl terms, *Tezcatlipoca* was an unknowable God with deep sinister aspects. “He was also named *Moyocoyatzin*, ‘Capricious Creator’, *Titlacuhuan*, ‘He Whose Slaves We Are’, [and] *Moquequelo*, ‘The Mocker’.”<sup>212</sup> In fact, when Sahagún was compiling the information for Book III, about the origins of the Gods, the informants were able to answer his questions about the other three major Gods, *Huitzipochtli*, *Tlaloc*, and *Quetzalcoatl*, and spoke of them by telling epic stories. But when asked about *Tezcatlipoca*,

the informants were unable to answer in a similar fashion about the supreme divinity, invisible and untouchable, creator of history but without a history. They answered with small prayers directed to him, and with the

<sup>210</sup> Inga Clendinnen. *Aztecs: An Interpretation*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991. P. 52.

<sup>211</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume II. Book VI. Chapter VII. P. 76. Original wording: “Oh Señor nuestro humanísimo, amparador y favorecedor de todos! ya habéis oído la confesión de este pobre pecador.”

<sup>212</sup> Inga Clendinnen, 1991. P. 79.

many names given him, [...] explanations of these names, and with information about the places where he was worshipped.<sup>213</sup>

Sahagún transformed this God into his image of an omnipotent God, and translated the indigenous experience into a Catholic confession. He used the Christian symbolism of the cleansing of sins: “You, Lord, who clean the faults of those who truly confess; Forgive him and cleanse him, give him, Lord, the pardon and indulgence, and the remission of all his sins, which descends from heaven, like clear and pure water to wash all sins.”<sup>214</sup> He did this in spite that the festival of *Tezcatlipoca* was characterized by submitting to the sacred through “the deliberate yielding of one’s person to ‘dirt’, as with the prohibitions of bathing, and most particularly the [prohibition of] washing of the head.”<sup>215</sup>

The image of a *Tezcatlipoca* as perceived by the Nahuatl informants show little in common with the Catholic God’s qualities, imposed on the indigenous God by the Friar’s Judeo-Christian categories: “The god *Tezcatlipoca* was believed to be a true god, invisible, who was every where, in heaven, on the earth, and in hell, and when he was on earth he caused wars, enmities, and disputes, from which there arose much suffering and instability.”<sup>216</sup> And again: “He gave to those alive poverty and misery, and incurable and

<sup>213</sup> Alfredo Lopez Austin. In Edmonson, 1974. P. 129.

<sup>214</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume II. Book VI. Chapter VII. P. 76-77. Original wording: “[V]os, señor, lavais las culpas de los que derechamente confiesan; [...] tened por bien de perdonarle y limpiarle, otorgale, señor, el perdón y la indulgencia y remisión de todos sus pecados, cosa que descende del cielo, como agua clarísima y purísima para lavar los pecados.”

<sup>215</sup> Inga Clendinnen, 1991. P. 52.

<sup>216</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. Chapter III. P. 44. Original wording: “El dios llamado *Tezcatlipoca* era tenido por verdadero dios, e invisible, el cual andaba en todo lugar, en el cielo, en la tierra y en el infierno y tenía que cuando andaba en la tierra movía guerras, enemistades y discordias, de donde resultaban muchas fatigas y desasosiegos.”

contagious sicknesses [...] He did as he pleased, and no one dared or could contradict him, [...] and he gave riches to whom he pleased and poverty and misery to whom he wished.”<sup>217</sup>

Sahagún made other compromising and equivocal transformations. He stated that the indigenous God *Quetzalcoatl*, was only a man that the Indians had taken for a God: “Although he was a man, they had him for a god, and they said that he opened the way to the gods.”<sup>218</sup> The Friar went into a condemnatory diatribe against the indigenous God:

They called *Quetzalcoatl*, who was a man, corruptible and mortal, and who although had some semblance of virtue, according to them, was a great necromancer, friend of demons, and very familiar with them, worthy of confusion and eternal torment, and not of being celebrated as a god, or adored as such.<sup>219</sup>

Fray Bernardino’s antagonistic disposition towards the Plumed Serpent,<sup>220</sup> and by no means limited to this one God, but applied to all Nahuatl deities, did not stop the Friar from capitalizing in the ‘Returning-God-Cortés’ myth. In Book XII, the Franciscan promoted the myth without any signs of disgust: “And as they arrived next to the vessels,

<sup>217</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book III. Chapter II. P. 277-278. Original wording: “[D]aba a los vivos pobreza y miseria, y enfermedades incurables y contagiosas [...] hacia todo cuanto quería y pensaba, y que ninguno le podía impedir y contradecir a lo que hacía, [...] y enriquecía a quien quería y también daba pobreza y miseria a quien quería.”

<sup>218</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I: *Confutación*. P. 90. Original wording: “[A]unque fué hombre, teníanle por dios y decían que barría el camino a los dioses.”

<sup>219</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. *Confutación*. P. 90. Original wording: “Llamaron a *Quetzalcoatl*, el que fué hombre mortal y corruptible, que aunque tuvo alguna apariencia de virtud, según ellos dijeron, pero fué gran nigromántico, amigo de los diablos y por tanto amigo y muy familiar de ellos, digno de gran confusión y de eterno tormento y no de que le festejasen como a dios, y le adorasen como a tal.”

<sup>220</sup> Reference to the God *Quetzalcoatl*.

and saw the Spaniards, they kissed the ships in signs of adoration. They thought that he was the god *Quetzalcoatl* that returned, as they expected from the story of this god.”<sup>221</sup>

Sahagún’s authorization of the ‘Spanish-as-Gods’ stories is suspect. Modern scholar David Carrasco wrote: “A comment is needed concerning the references in book 12 which show *Moctezuma* thought Cortés was *Quetzalcoatl*. This extremely important account was written decades after the events described.”<sup>222</sup> Also, the Franciscan gathered the information from one particular locality, Tlatelolco, from one specific social group, with very group-specific agendas: “These elders, while clearly within the Aztec hegemony, represented a position somewhat critical of the Aztec elite who conquered them nearly a century before.”<sup>223</sup> The resulting version of the conquest constituted a revisionist story, a post-factum elaboration,<sup>224</sup> at both the Sahagunian and the indigenous levels. Sahagún started the process, through the questions he chose to ask the native informants with his questionnaires. The indigenous elite of Tlatelolco then followed, and it ended with the imposition of Sahagún’s interest and categorical assumptions during the long translation and organizing process. The Franciscan’s role on the revision served to “produce a version in which the role of Cortés was elevated, Spanish actions justified, and the whole

<sup>221</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume IV. Book XII. Chapter II. P. 25. Original wording: “[Y] como llegaron junto a los navíos, y vieron los españoles, besaron todas las proas de los naos en señal de adoración, pensaron que era el dios *Quetzalcoatl* que volvía, al cual estaban esperando en la Historia de este dios.”

<sup>222</sup> David Carrasco, 1982. P. 48.

<sup>223</sup> David Carrasco. *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. P. 48.

<sup>224</sup> David Carrasco, 1982. This author makes a differentiation between post-factum fabrication and post-factum elaboration, the latter being based on some truths. Pg. 48.

conquest presented as providential.<sup>225</sup> His subsequent elaboration, and capitalization helped him defined the superiority of the Spanish, and hence of his narrative by using the Tlatelolcans' own narrative. For these elders of Tlatelolco, the fabrication would serve to "expose [or rather to construct the image of] a hysterical *Moctezuma's* failure of nerve."<sup>226</sup> This would not be the betrayal it seems to be at first glance. These Tlatelolcans had been conquered by the Aztec only one hundred years earlier. Separating themselves from *Moctezuma's* failure might have been perceived as a way to reach for some level of hegemony.

As a Spanish male, Sahagún also sought to impose the conditions of his interpretation of society, and its proper relationships, upon the New World. One such condition was the transference of the Spanish female 'proper-social-spheres' to the indigenous females. In chapters thirteen to fifteen of Book X, in very few pages, he defined the proper place of the indigenous female in familiar terms and categories. The qualities, positive and negative, that Sahagún applied to these women, were those that the Spanish society attached to its females. Fray Bernardino described them all following the 'if they are good' versus the 'if they are bad' format. A woman of noble cast was worthy of honor, esteemed, honorable, generous, kind, humane, meek, long-suffering, and a good governess for her family. If she crossed those boundaries, she was negligent, conceited

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<sup>225</sup> Inga Clendinnen. "*Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty*": *Cortes and the Conquest of México*. In *New World Encounters*. Greenblatt, Stephen, Ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. P. 12.

<sup>226</sup> David Carrasco, 1982. P. 48.



and self-absorbed, and did not respect anyone.<sup>227</sup> The working women, *las mujeres bajas* (the lower women), were good if they were hard working, strong, firm, and knowledgeable of her trade. They were bad if they were weak, lazy, clumsy, and not good at her proper trade. If a woman was a medicine woman, Sahagún's categorization could be most dangerous: If good, she shared the positive qualities of the other working women, but if bad, Sahagún's conclusion could have had dangerous consequences. He claimed that she "uses witchcraft [...] and has a pact with the Devil."<sup>228</sup>

Sahagún defined *Malas Mujeres* (bad women), prostitutes, adulterers, hermaphrodites, and *alcahuetas*, in sensual, if highly condemnatory terms. They were women that did not fit Sahagún's image of propriety. They were interested in sexuality, and were independent in their actions. The *alcahueta*, a typical Spanish character, was a trouble maker, a woman that facilitated illicit relationships, a woman who was capable of deceit, the Spanish version of the Trickster. Sahagún's description of this social type is very reminiscent of the popular Spanish character *La Celestina*, the *alcahueta* of the

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<sup>227</sup> Adjectives used by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún to describe noble women. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book X. Chapter XIII. P. 124-126. A good woman was "*digna de ser honrada*," "*estimada*," "*honrada*," "*generosa*," "*bondadosa*," "*humana*," "*mansa*," "*sufrida*," A bad woman was "*soberbia y presuntuosa*, [...] y no respeta a nadie."

<sup>228</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book X. Chapter XIV. P. 128-129. Original wording: "[U]sa hechicería [...] y tiene pacto con el demonio."

*Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea* (1499).<sup>229</sup> Sahagún wrote of the *alcahueta*: “She is a demon and has its appearance.”<sup>230</sup>

Sahagún described the good women as saintly Christians that could manage what the Franciscan saw as their proper spheres of domain. Bad women were ignorant of their proper occupations, they were sensual, and judged close to the Devil. Those were all Sahagunian impositions. For the Nahuatl there was “no value placed on male or female chastity, but rather the impulse, as in fasting and vigil, to free oneself for sacred engagement from the distractions of fleshy desires.”<sup>231</sup> Sahagún’s transformations depended upon his perception of his own cultural categories as the only valid measures of reality. In his Christian interpretation of the universe, Fray Bernardino was oblivious to the Nahuatl understanding “which [...] c[a]me closer to the notion of the dangers of breaching proper boundaries by improper, ignorant, or excessive human action,”<sup>232</sup> than to concepts of sin and final judgments.

Fray Bernardino dedicated little time, and few pages to the indigenous women and their issues. This fact alone helps define his categorization of what he considered worth, or not worth recording. In spite that he recorded, in the “*Primeros Memoriales*,” an

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<sup>229</sup> This Tragic-comedy is one of the fundamental works of the Spanish literature. It was published in Burgos in 1499. Authorship is not fully determined. It has been attributed to Fernando de Rojas, except for the beginning that it is believed belongs to Juan de Mena or Rodrigo de Cota. It is a story of love between a handsome young man, and a sweet girl, that are helped in their romance by the intervention of old Celestina. This work had enormous success during the Spanish Golden Age. Information from Ramón García-Pelayo y Gross, 1988. P. 1199.

<sup>230</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book X. Chapter XV. P. 131. Original wording: “[E]s un diablo y trae forma de él.”

<sup>231</sup> Inga Clendinnen, 1991. P. 164.

<sup>232</sup> Inga Clendinnen, 1991. P. 164.

“extensive statement [...] about the activities of boys and girls in their respective schools and the function of the teachers, [he] paid little attention to such matters [in the *Historia*] for he does not discuss the theme of girl’s schools.”<sup>233</sup> His single-minded approach, where he had to force the Nahua world into familiar parameters, left much of the indigenous experiences untouched or malformed, contaminated by the Franciscan’s stereotypes, assumptions, and his Christian-Spanish sensibilities.

The Franciscan’s treatment of women in his writings was marginal, but when referring to the indigenous people’s notions about their Goddesses, he simply wrote with superiority and disdain. His attitude perhaps reflected the Catholic ambivalence between the deification of Mary, and the insistence on defining her worship as the Mother of God, as inter-mediator between humans and the Christians’ God, and on her value as a catholic example of proper womanhood. This ambivalence, mixed with a fear that the indigenous people would adopt Mary’s image as the image of their own pre-existing Mother of the Gods, brought Sahagún, and other Franciscans, to participate in the “Franciscan conspiracy of silence as to the apparition and miracles”<sup>234</sup> of the Lady of Guadalupe. Their initial, violent rejection of the “Mariophany of Tepeyac,”<sup>235</sup> was firmly based on the “fear of seeing the Indians continuing to adore under the name *Tonantzin* the old Mother of Gods rather than the Virgin Mary.”<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Alfredo Lopez Austin. In Edmonson, 1974. P. 129.

<sup>234</sup> Arthur J.O. Anderson. In Edmonson, 1974. P. 20.

<sup>235</sup> Serge Gruzinski, 1993. P. 192.

<sup>236</sup> Serge Gruzinski, 1993. P. 191.

Fray Bernardino expressed his opinion, on the deification of females, with particular force in the confutation at the end of the first book:

In many things the devils deceived your ancestors and mocked them, making them believe that women were goddesses and so they adored them and venerated them. [...] They also believed that women who died during their first child-birth became goddesses and they called them *Cihuateteo* or *Cihuapiltin*, and they adored them as a goddess. This adoration of women is worth so much mockery and laughter, that it is not necessary to debate it using the sacred scriptures.<sup>237</sup>

In Sahagún's mind there was only one acceptable way to order society. That which he could not understand through the familiar he reduced to demoniacal, inferior, or just simply marginalized it. Only by turning the incompatible categories into familiar-negatives, Sahagún could reach out and attempt to make graspable the fully foreign New Spanish experience.

Sahagún's Double Standards: "*Las Señales y Los Pronósticos*."

Father Bernardino, in no uncertain terms condemned and demonized what he labeled the *Arte Adivinatoria* of the indigenous Nahua. Both the *Historia* and the *Arte* are filled with bereavement. His position in the subject of divination was firm: "Great evil came down upon the human race in the form of the Devil; and this natives are in good measure part of him, fill of this disease [divining arts]."<sup>238</sup> The Devil was the enemy, and

<sup>237</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. *Confutación*. P. 90-91. Original wording: "En muchas cosas los diablos engañaros a vuestros antepasados y burlaros de ellos, haciendoles creer que algunas mujeres eran diosas y por tales las adoraban y reverenciaban. [...] También creían vuestros antepasados que las mujeres que morían del primer parto se hacían diosas y las llamaban Cihuateteo o Cihuapiltin, y las adoraban como a diosas. [...] Es esta adoración de mujeres caso tan de burla y reír, que no hay para que hablar de la confutar por autoridades de la Sagrada Escritura."

<sup>238</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume II. Book V. Prologue. P. 49. Original wording: "Mal es este que cundió en todo el humanal linaje [the devil]; y como estos naturales son buena parte de él, cúpulos harta parte desta enfermedad [in reference to the divining arts]."

the indigenous people were under his power: "Such idolatrous people, whose fertile fruits were only gathered by the Devil, and in his infernal fire he has them as his treasure."<sup>239</sup>

In spite of his attitude towards the indigenous arts of divination, Sahagún did not seem to have a problem in pointing out repeatedly those "signs and omens that appeared before the coming of the Spaniards, even before there were any news of them."<sup>240</sup> Fray Bernardino's tone when he spoke of these signs was completely different. Sahagún used them to solidify the Spanish, and Catholic right to the Americas. Through this willing adoption, the prophecies became an integral part of the New World's Mythology. The Franciscan wrote that "[t]en years before the arrival of the Spaniards to this land, twelve years according to others, there appeared a great comet in the sky, in the orient, that seemed like a great and resplendent flame that sent out flashes of fire."<sup>241</sup> He went on to enumerate the eight *agueros* (predictions) that foretold the coming of the Spaniards, and then he neatly introduced the conquest.

The *señales y pronósticos* (signs and omens), as they could be used to support the Catholic and Spanish claims to the Americas, did not bother the Friar. They were signs, not of the indigenous, idolatrous, demonic Gods, but of his own God's presence, the one

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<sup>239</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. Prologue. P. 30. Original wording: "[T]antas gentes idólatras, cuyos frutos ubérrimos sólo el demonio los ha cogido, y en el fuego infernal los tiene atesorados."

<sup>240</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's *Historia General*. Garibay, 1956. Volume II. Book VIII. Chapter VI. Pg. 291. Original wording: "[S]eñales y pronósticos que aparecieron antes que los Españoles vinieran a esta tierra, ni hubieses noticias de ellos."

<sup>241</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's *Historia General*. Garibay, 1956. Volume II. Book VIII. Chapter VI. Pg. 291. Original wording: "Diez años antes que llegasen los españoles a esta tierra, y según otros once o doce años, apareció un gran cometa en el cielo, en la parte de oriente que parecía como una gran llama de fuego muy resplandeciente y que echaba de si centellas de fuego."

and only *Dios*. These signs legitimized Sahagunian, and Franciscan messianism.

Supporting the dream upon indigenous prophetic words gave it a new kind of authority, of value. The power of the Christian god appeared greater, and Spanish legitimacy became hard to question when the conquered people themselves appeared to become part of the Catholic Deity's Greater Plan. These 'allowed' signs provided the Spanish Christian Empire with a godly justification for conquest and colonization:

Our Lord God has (purposefully) hidden this half of the world until our times, when through his divine nature he decided to make it manifest to the Roman Catholic Church, not so that the natives are destroyed and tyrannized, but to enlighten them from the darkness of idolatry where they have lived, and so that they are introduced to the Catholic church, and informed in the Christian religion so that they may reach the kingdom of heaven, dying in the faith like true Christians.<sup>242</sup>

Fray Bernardino wrote about the conquest with Christian fervor, abandonment, and a strong sense of superiority. He relished on the telling of those first days when: "Our Lord made many miracles in the conquest of this land, where the door was opened for the preachers of the Holy Gospel so that they would enter to preach the Catholic faith to this most miserable people."<sup>243</sup> He depicted Cortés as the hero chosen, and guided by God.

<sup>242</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume IV. Book XII. *Prólogo Del Autor*. P. 18. Original wording: "Ntro. Señor Dios (a propósito) ha tenido ocultada esta media parte del mundo hasta nuestros tiempos, que por su divina ordenación ha tenido por bien de manifestarla a la iglesia romana católica, no con propósito de que fuesen destruidos y tiranizados sus naturales, sino con propósito que sean alumbrados de las tinieblas de la idolatría en que han vivido, y sean introducidos en la iglesia católica, e informados en la religión cristiana, y para que alcancen el reino de los cielos, muriendo en la fe de verdaderos cristianos."

<sup>243</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's *Historia General*. Garibay, 1956. Volume IV. Book XII. *Prólogo del Autor*. P. 18. Original wording: "[H]izo Dios nuestro señor muchos milagros en la conquista de esta tierra, donde se abrió la puerta para que los predicadores del Santo Evangelio entrasen a predicar la fe católica a esta gente miserabilísima."

In a long eulogizing speech, Sahagún compared the *conquistador* to the greatest Spanish hero of the *Reconquista*, El Cid:

“It is considered certain (given the beginning, middle, and the end of the conquest) that our Lord ruled over this great man and great Christian [...] so that he inspired him to do more than humanly possible [...] In everything that happened, it seems that God inspired him in what he had to do, as he had done on past times with the noble and holy Spanish captain, the Cid Ruiz Diaz, in the times of king Alonso of the honorable hand. Finally, as Cortés came out victorious, he did as most Christian man and loyal gentleman to his king should do. He offered the rewards of his labors to his emperor king, Charles V, and wrote to the Sovereign Pontiff asking that he send preachers of the Holy Gospel for the conversions of the Indians, which was our Lords intention when he began this project.”<sup>244</sup>

The indigenous signs deserved condemnation, unless they spoke in benefit of the Spaniards and their God’s plan. It is surprising that the Friar so easily made this leap given his adamant attitude about anything related to the divining arts. For the Friar, the indigenous people’s voice was important as it served his purposes. When it did not, it was to be eradicated. Fr. Bernardino turned the indigenous population into subjects of Spanish-Catholic-Franciscan action.

### Sahagún The Franciscan

As a member of the Order of Saint Francis, Sahagún’s reasons for the creation of the compendium centered around several issues: Formally, he had to fulfill his superiors’

<sup>244</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún’s *Historia General*. Garibay, 1956. Volume IV. Book XII. *Prólogo del Autor*. P. 19-20. Original wording: “*Tienese por cosa muy cierta (considerando los principios, medios, y fines de esta conquista) que nuestro Señor Dios regia a este gran varón y gran christiano [...] que le inspiró que hiciese una cosa de más que animosidad humana [...] En todo lo que adelante pasó, parece claramente que Dios le inspiraba en lo que había de obrar, así como hacía en los tiempos pasados el Cid Ruiz Díaz, nobilísimo y muy santo capitán español en tiempo del rey Alonso de la mano honrada. [...] Finalmente, habiendo salido con la victoria [Cortés], hizo como christianísimo varón y fidelísimo caballero a su rey, en que luego ofreció el precio de sus trabajos a su rey emperador D. Carlos V, y escribió al Sumo Pontífice que enviase predicadores del santo Evangelio para la conversión de esta gente indiana; lo cual sumamente pretendía nuestro Señor Dios en haber comenzado este negocio.*”

mandates. He wanted to find redemption for his share in the success of the Devil in reclaiming the Nahua, and he had to solve the damage done by gathering all the intelligence necessary to fight idolatry, warning the Nahua of their precarious situation, and calling to action any good Christian that might help in the endeavor.

The first mandate came from the Minister General, Francisco Angelorum, who on October 30th, 1523, ordered the first Twelve, and those “who in the future should join [...] through the merit of holy obedience,” to “convert with words and example the people who do not know Jesus Christ Our Lord, who are held fast in the blindness of idolatry under the yoke of the satanic thrall, who live and dwell in the Indies which are commonly called Yucatan or New Spain or Tierra Firme.”<sup>245</sup> No price was too much to pay “with the last end of the world at hand [...] to gain victory [against idolatry and Satan’s forces].”<sup>246</sup> The Franciscans had followed their founding father’s example by coming to the New World “burning with the fire of Christ’s love, and thirsting for the palm of martyrdom.”<sup>247</sup> Sahagún also had to obey the orders given to him directly, first by Motolinia<sup>248</sup> in the early 1540’s, and later in 1557 by Father Francisco de Toral, to gather information on indigenous matters.

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<sup>245</sup> Partial quote from the “Orders Given to the Twelve” by Fray Francisco Angelorum, Minister General on October 30th. of the year 1523 (Originally given in Latin). Published in Kenneth Mills and William B. Taylor, Edts. Colonial Spanish America: A Documentary History. Wilmington, Delaware: A Scholarly Resources Inc. Imprint, 1998. 48-51. P. 50.

<sup>246</sup> “Orders Given to the Twelve” by Fray Francisco Angelorum. Kenneth Mills and William B. Taylor, 1998. P. 49.

<sup>247</sup> “Orders Given to the Twelve” by Fray Francisco Angelorum. Kenneth Mills and William B. Taylor, 1998. P. 49.

<sup>248</sup> It seems that Sahagún’s disillusionment with the veracity of the first conversions did not allow him to give Motolinia the same credit he gave Toral. In fact, in 1572, his feelings against Motolinia would go beyond the written word. Reflecting what scholar Ascension León-Portilla called, in 1993, “the dramatic end of a friendship.” In Ascension H. de León-Portilla. “*Las Primeras Biografías de Bernardino de Sahagún.*” *Estudios de Cultura*



Angelorum's and Toral's mandates authorized and fueled Sahagún's work. "[I]n the eleventh hour of which the gospel speaks,"<sup>249</sup> Sahagún had come to the New World as a seraphic soldier of Christ. And while the end of the world mentality was, at large, a direct response to the Catholic church's crisis in Europe due to its own corruption, and the struggles against the Reformation, for Fray Bernardino it was part of his individual experience. The Americas, and the indigenous population were perceived as the raw resources for the formation of "this New Church."<sup>250</sup>

The Franciscans, filled with missionary zeal, believed themselves to be the chosen soldiers of God: "The Eternal Father chose [...the Order of St. Francis] to exalt the glory of his Name and procure the salvation of souls, and to forestall the ruin which threatened the Church (and should she fall, save her and raise her to her primitive state)."<sup>251</sup> Their job was to prepare the way and aid in the creation of the seat of Christ's reign.<sup>252</sup>

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*Náhuatl*. V. 22, 1993. México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. 235-252. P. 250. Original wording: "[E]l final dramático de una enemistad." Fray Bernardino denounced Motolinía to the Inquisition. This act shows, in the words of Georges Baudot, "the harshness that surrounded the elaboration of the *Historia General* In George Baudot. "Fray Toribio de Motolinía denunciado ante la Inquisición por fray Bernardino de Sahagún en 1572." Caravelle. Cahiers du Monde Hispanique et Luso Bresilien. Université de Toulouse —Le Mirail, 1990, n°55, p. 13-17. As quoted by Ascención H. de León-Portilla, 1993. P. 250. Original wording: "[L]as asperidades que rodeaban] la elaboración de la *Historia General*."

<sup>249</sup> "Orders Given to the Twelve" by Fray Francisco Angelorum. Kenneth Mills and William B. Taylor, 1998. P. 49. Many other's believed the time predicted by the apostle John, in the Bible's Apocalypse, was near. Father Bartolomé de Las Casas himself referred to those times as "the eleventh hour of the world." Statement made by the Dominican Father Bartolomé Las Casas in his "Octavio Remedio." Quoted from Luis N. Rivera. *A Violent Evangelism: The Political and Religious Conquest of the Americas*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992. P. 59.

<sup>250</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 383 column 1. Original wording: "[E]sta Iglesia nueva."

<sup>251</sup> "Orders Given to the Twelve" by Francisco Angelorum. Kenneth Mills and William B. Taylor, 1998. P. 48.

<sup>252</sup> "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, to repay every one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood." The Apostle John allegedly quotes Jesus Christ in the Apocalypse. The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New

Sahagún's own Franciscan zealotry appears to have been compounded with a sense of personal failure. Because Fray Bernardino put down his guard against the devil and his works, the success of the Messianic dream, and the post-apocalyptic establishment of Christ's millenarian kingdom in the Americas, were seriously compromised:

We held this information as true and as a miracle [...] and so, we abandoned the weapons that we brought well sharpened to fight against idolatry, and following the counsel of those fathers we began to preach moral things. After a few years, the lack of prudence that occurred in the foundation of this New Church became evident. [And] so the New Church was founded on false ground.<sup>253</sup>

While on the one hand he wrote with hope: "I can not believe that the Church of God will not prosper where the synagogue of Satan has prospered so well, according to the words of Saint Paul: There will be an abundance of grace where there was once an abundance of sin,"<sup>254</sup> on the other he also noted: "I know for a fact that the Devil does not sleep, nor has he forgotten the honor given to him by these natives, and that he is waiting for the proper time to, if he can, get back to his rule."<sup>255</sup> In the words of modern Sahagun scholar John W. Keber, "a good part of [Sahagún's] motivation [...] was the growing

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Testaments. Revised Standard Edition. New York and Cleveland: Collins Publishers, 1971. Revelations 22: 12-15.

<sup>253</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 382 column 2 - 383 column 1. Original wording: "*Tuvimos esta información por muy verdadera y milagrosa [...] y así dejamos las armas que traíamos muy afiladas para contra la idolatría, y del consejo y persuasión de estos padres comenzamos a predicar cosas morales. [...] Hallóse después de pocos años muy evidente la falta que de la prudencia serpentina hubo en la fundación de esta nueva Iglesia. [...] así esta Iglesia Nueva quedó fundada sobre falso.*"

<sup>254</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. Prologue. P. 30. Original wording: "[No] puedo creer que la Iglesia de Dios no sea próspera donde la sinagoga de satanás tanta prosperidad ha tenido, conforme aquello de San Pablo: abundará la gracia donde abundó el delito."

<sup>255</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book III. Prologue. P. 269. Original wording: "[S]é de cierto que el diablo ni duerme ni está olvidado de la honra que le hacían estos naturales, y que está esperando coyuntura para si pudiese volver al señorío que ha tenido."

conviction that the missionary effort had failed, that early conversions had been superficial, that idolatrous practices had continued—and that something had to be done.”<sup>256</sup>

Sahagún embarked in a war against the work of the Devil in New Spain. This seraphic soldier fought the war in several fronts. Initially, he addressed directly the Nahuatl people. He warned them, vehemently, of the errors of their ancestral ways, and aimed to “illuminate the knowledge of the eternal truth, that is God, and the knowledge of false gods which is all a lie and invention of the author and father of all lies, the Devil.”<sup>257</sup> The Friar’s acceptance of only one version of experience and belief as truth was unwavering: “You have all lived in the darkness of infidelity and idolatry in which your ancestors left you, as it is demonstrated in your writings and paintings, and in the idolatrous rites in which you have lived till now.”<sup>258</sup>

The Friar wrote with superior frustration: “It is more a thing of children without sense than that of men of reason. [...] Your ancestors invented other crazy notions without limits, so much so that there is not enough paper to write them.”<sup>259</sup> He allowed himself the right to put words in the mouth of the native idolaters, who he represented in no

<sup>256</sup> John W. Keber. *Sahagún's Psalmody: Christian Love and Domination in Sixteenth Century Mexico*. In Eloisa Quiñones Keber, 1994. 45-64. P. 47.

<sup>257</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. *Confutación*. P. 85. Original wording: *alumbrar el conocimiento de la eterna verdad, que es Dios, y en el conocimiento de los falsos dioses que son pura mentira e invención del autor y padre de toda mentira que es el diablo.*”

<sup>258</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Appendix to Book I. Prologue to Appendix. P. 77. Original wording: “[T]odos habéis vivido en grandes tinieblas de infidelidad e idolatría en que os dejaron vuestros antepasados, como está claro por vuestras escrituras y pinturas, y ritos idólatricos en que habéis vivido hasta ahora.”

<sup>259</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Appendix to Book I. Prologue to Appendix. P. 94. Original wording: “*Esto más parece cosa de niños sin seso, que de hombres de razón. [...] Otras locuras sin cuento y otros dioses sin número inventaron vuestros antepasados, que ni papel ni tiempo bastaría para escribirlas.*”

uncertain terms: "The misfortunated idolaters said: We erred in the way to the truth, we were not enlightened by justice, nor was it born on us the sun of intelligence."<sup>260</sup> Then, the Franciscan set his god in asymmetrical contrast to the native gods:

In all written above it is clear how good and worthy of love, obedience, and reverence is our Lord God, protector, lord and governor of all things; in the same manner it is clear how evil, treacherous and liars, abominable and cruel are the gods that your ancestors honored and adored for such a long time.<sup>261</sup>

It appears that these emphatic speeches had the effect, if any, of alienating Sahagún's intended audience. The Friar himself noted, in 1585, in the *Arte Adivinatoria*, that the Nahuatl still had "the old faith mixed with the Catholic faith, in this time that has been clearly seen [...] They run away from hearing the preachings, and use such frivolous excuses that it is easy to see their wickedness."<sup>262</sup>

Sahagún also reverted to the sharpening of "the weapons that we brought."<sup>263</sup> He aimed to prepare, not only himself, but all the other *predicadores*<sup>264</sup> to do battle against the Devil and his idolatry: "It will be good for us to have weapons with which to come to

<sup>260</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. *Confutación*. P. 87. Original wording: "Dicen los malaventurados idólatras: Erravimus in via veritatis, etc. Sapiente [...] —errado habemos en el camino de la verdad, no nos alumbró la luz de la justicia, no nos nació el sol de la inteligencia."

<sup>261</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. *Confutación*. P. 88. Original wording: "En lo arriba dicho está claro que bueno y cuán digno de ser amado, loado, obedecido y reverenciado es nuestro señor Dios criador, señor y gobernador de todas las cosas; y de lo mismo parece asimismo clarísimamente cuán malvados, traidores y mentirosos, aborrecibles y crueles son los dioses que vuestros antepasados adoraron y honraron tan largos tiempos."

<sup>262</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 384 column 1. Original wording: "[L]a fe antigua revuelta con la fe católica; y ahora en estos tiempos se ha visto claro [...] que huyen de oír las predicaciones y ponen para su excusa unas causas tan frívolas, que se entiende de muy claro su maldad."

<sup>263</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 382 column 2. Original wording: "[L]as armas que traíamos muy afiladas para contra la idolatría."

<sup>264</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book III. Prologue. P. 269.

his encounter.<sup>265</sup> As an arsenal for God, his work served to “to give more opportunity and help to the preachers of this New Church.”<sup>266</sup> He firmly believed that the extirpation of idolatry depended upon his collecting of detailed intelligence on indigenous practices:

In order to preach against these things and even to know whether they exist, it is indispensable to know how they were used in the time of their idolatry. For in the absence of this knowledge they do many idolatrous things in our presence without our understanding; and some say, excusing them, that these are stupidities or childish things, not knowing the source from which they spring—which is mere idolatry, and the confessors do not ask, or believe that such things exist, nor do they know the language for asking them, nor would they even understand if they were told.<sup>267</sup>

In his numerous interjections, be it prologues, confutations, addresses to the reader, or appendixes, Sahagún directly ensured that the significance of his work, the importance of his goals, and of the eschatological battle he waged, could not be missed.<sup>268</sup>

Sahagún also articulated a call to action that was eloquent and coercive. It was so directly aimed that it denounced any Christian who ignored it as a bad Christian deserving of grave punishments. Sahagún appealed “in the name of God,” to any one who might read his work, to disclose any knowledge of idolatry so that it could be remedied. He

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<sup>265</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book III. Prologue. P. 269. Original wording: “[B]ien es que tengamos armas para salirle [the devil] al encuentro.”

<sup>266</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book X. Prologue. P. 97. Original wording: “[D]ar mayor oportunidad y ayuda a los predicadores de esta nueva Iglesia.”

<sup>267</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. Prologue. P. 27. Original wording: “Para predicar contra estas cosas, y aun para saber si las hay, menester es de saber como las usaban en tiempo de su idolatria, que por falta de no saber esto en nuestra presencia hacen muchas cosas idolátricas sin que lo entendamos; y dicen algunos, excusándolos, que son boberias o niñerías, por ignorar la raíz de donde salen—que es mera idolatria, y los confesores ni se las preguntan, ni piensan que hay tal cosa, ni saben lenguaje para se los preguntar, ni aún lo entenderán aunque se lo digan.”

<sup>268</sup> “Blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written therein [in Revelations]; for the time is near.” The Apostle John allegedly quotes Jesus Christ in the Apocalypse. *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments*. Revised Standard Edition. New York and Cleveland: Collins Publishers, 1971. Revelations 1:3.

warned that if the reader did not, he would carry a great burden because it was “the greatest of all sins” to cover or protect idolatry. The punishment would be severe, “in this world and the next.” Sahagún wrote: “He who does not persecute this sin and its doers, through licit and merited ways, can not be considered a good Christian.”<sup>269</sup>

In 1585, the Friar still held fast to the dream, although he was also sobered by the initial failure. He insisted faithfully on his points of war:

The investigation and inquiry to know all idolatrous things [...] the preaching by preachers, [...] and] the third thing that is necessary to remedy this project is that the confessors be informed of the idolatrous rites that they had since old. [...] The preachers must preach directly against the gods they had and adored, who they called *teteo*, that they are not gods, that they are not *teteo*, and it is necessary to name them by their names, striking them and abhor them as devils enemies of God, and enemies of all his creatures, and enemies of men.<sup>270</sup>

Not fully different from the Friar's hero Cortés, who had enlisted the aid of Mesoamerican Indians to defeat the Aztec, Sahagún sought to recruit the Nahua and Spaniards to fight the devil in the New World. The Nahua would join by means of conversion, and would be brought to the fold through the paternalistic *amor caritativo*

<sup>269</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. *Al Lector*. P. 94. Original wording: “Ruégote por Dios vivo, a quien quiera que esto leyeres, que si sabes que hay alguna cosa entre estos naturales tocante a esta materia de la idolatría, des luego noticia a los que tienen cargo del regimiento espiritual o temporal, para que con brevedad se remedie; y haciendo esto harás lo que eres obligado, y si no lo hicieres encargarás tu conciencia con cargas de grandísimas culpas; porque así como este es el mayor de todos los pecados, y más ofensivo a la divina majestad, así también nuestro señor Dios castiga a los que en él ofenden, con mayor rigor que a ninguno de los otros pecadores. Y a los que encumbren este pecado asimismo los castiga con gravísimos tormentos, en este mundo y en el otro. No se debe de tener por buen cristiano el que no es perseguidor de este p[er]cado, y de sus autores, por medios lícitos y meritorios.”

<sup>270</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 384-385. Original wording: “[L]a investigación e inquirición de saber las cosas idolátricas [...], la predicación de predicadores [...y] lo tercero que es necesario para que este negocio se remedie es que los confesores sepan los ritos idolátricos que antiguamente tenían estos. [...] Deben los predicadores expresamente predicar que los dioses que adoraban y tenían por dioses, que ellos llamaban *teteo*, que no son dioses, que no son *teteo*, y es menester nombrarlos a todos por sus nombres, fulminándolos y abominándolos por diablos enemigos de Dios y enemigos de todas sus criaturas, y enemigos de los hombres.”

(charitable love) that the Franciscans would offer, after their baptism, "so that they do not commit idolatry later."<sup>271</sup> The Spaniards would join to fulfill their Christian obligation. Perhaps, as another tool of God, such as Sahagún believed Cortés to be, the Friar held on to the Messianic dream, waiting for one more miracle. The Christian God had already proven himself to the Franciscan in "in this greatest and most important of endeavors,"<sup>272</sup> during the conquest. Then, "God freed him [Cortés] and many of his men, miraculously, from the hands of their enemies."<sup>273</sup> Perhaps the Christian God would also aid the seraphic soldier in his service.

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<sup>271</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 384. Original wording: "[P]ara que no idolatren después."

<sup>272</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume IV. Book XII. Prologue. P. 18. Original wording: "[E]ste negocio muy grande y muy importante."

<sup>273</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume IV. Book XII. Prologue. P. 19. Original wording: "Milagrosamente le libró Dios a él [Cortés] y a muchos de los suyos de las manos de sus enemigos."

## CHAPTER 4

## NATIVE PARTICIPATION

Some Very Specific Nahua Voices

Sahagún's compendium opened the doors for the Nahua participants to narrate their side of the story, and to partake in the making of the new historiography as they had once participated in the construction of the old. It provided Nahua participants with an opportunity to mold the narrative around their interests; interests that were grounded in their pre-existing categories and their own point-of-perspective as the vestige of the indigenous elite. It was fitting within the Nahua tradition for the elite to decide "what to recover of the past and why."<sup>274</sup> The Nahua pre-Hispanic historian-priest was a specialist who "gather[ed] and explain[ed] the past to serve the interests of the *hueytlatoni*, or highest ruler."<sup>275</sup> Sahagún's role as the priest-recorder of Nahua traditions became the logical substitute for the historian-priest. His compendium depended completely on the information that the Nahua elite saw fit to record. The Nahua participants retained some level of access to power by responding to Sahagun's request to aid in the production of the *Historia*, and as subjugated people they faced several issues. The need to retain cultural cohesion and to make a coherent sense of themselves and their experiences could only be accessed during these early stages through the pre-existing indigenous

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<sup>274</sup> Enrique Florescano, 1994. P. 39.

<sup>275</sup> Enrique Florescano, 1994. P. 30.



understanding of the universe, including their cyclical concept of time. It is more than plausible that given the Nahuatl cyclical interpretation of events, they interpreted their subjugation as temporary. Things would eventually be as they once were. In fact, a proverb from Sahagún's compilation states: "Another time it will be like this, another time things will be the same, some time, some place. What happened a long time ago, and which no longer happens, will be again, it will be done again, as it was in far-off times."<sup>276</sup> They also attempted the integration, through their pre-existing concepts, of the new faces of the supernatural. In other words, following pre-Hispanic tradition, they adopted the Christian God as they perceived him. Finally, they made a bid for personal and cultural survival through sophisticated subversive strategies, such as the retrospective writing of history and the historiographical redemption of an empire lost, the assimilation of aspects of the outsider's world, such as the assimilation of Sahagún himself, and even the willful giving of misinformation to the outsider. Perhaps the most significant aim of the participating Nahuatl elite was to establish the legitimacy of their pre-Hispanic status and its continuity in the new system. As James Lockhart clearly explained, in a pre-Hispanic model where there existed a "general lack of clearly drawn polarities,"<sup>277</sup> one clear division did exist; there was a "sharp distinction between *pilli* or noble and *macehualli* or commoner."<sup>278</sup> This distinction was important enough to be "one of the [...] foundations

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<sup>276</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Florentine Codex*. As quoted by Enrique Florescano, 1994. P. 28. Also in Alfredo López Austin. *Cuerpo humano e ideología*. 2 vols. Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1980. Vol. I. P. 65.

<sup>277</sup> James Lockhart, 1992. P. 440.

<sup>278</sup> James Lockhart, 1992. P. 441.

of Nahua society and consciousness.<sup>279</sup> This fundamental rank definition formed the basis for the sort of information that the Nahua elite gave about themselves and about others, where they placed emphasis, and how much information they dedicated to particular subjects: The Nahua elite vindicated their social status, and made the compendium function in registers that made sense from within pre-Hispanic frameworks. The historical record served to validate, and perhaps clarify for the outsider, the upper class' definition of self, community, and history, with religion being an intricate part, inseparable from the whole.

Young Nahua students, such as Antonio Valeriano of Azcapotzalco, Pedro de San Buenaventura, Martín Jacobita, and Andrés Leonardo,<sup>280</sup> often nameless in historiographical works, mediated between Sahagún's questionnaires and the Native *principales*. Sahagún did not choose those *principales*. They were selected by specific groups of the Native elite upon Sahagún's request:

He [Sahagún] assembled the lord and principal people of the town, communicated to them what he wished to do, and asked them to bring to him capable and experienced people with whom they [Sahagún and the Native aids] could meet [...] After taking some time to decide, they brought him ten or twelve principal elders that could give him explanations to what he asked.<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> James Lockhart, 1992. P. 441.

<sup>280</sup> Miguel León-Portilla, 1994. P. 14 and 19.

<sup>281</sup> Joaquín G. Icazbalceta, p. 345. Original wording: "*Juntos el señor y los principales del pueblo, les comunicó lo que deseaba hacer, y les pidió que le trajesen personas hábiles y experimentadas con quienes pudiesen conferenciar [...] Después de tomarse algún tiempo para resolver, le trajeron diez o doce ancianos principales que podían darle razón de lo que preguntaba.*"

The role of the Nahuatl elite groups in the choosing of the people to whom Sahagún, the *gramáticos colegiales* (grammarians), and the *escribientes* (scribes) would have access, allowed them to have a measure of control in the process that created the encyclopedia. It also allowed the Central Mexico indigenous elite to re-negotiate power relations. It was their selected elders, and no others, that Sahagún could interview. The elite, invited by Fray Bernardino, secured a powerful position for themselves. Consistent with pre-existing traditional forms, the Nahuatl elite kept for themselves the positions of first editors, and censors of information. In pre-Hispanic times "the Mexica society was severely controlled by censorship."<sup>282</sup>

The conservator was in charge  
of the songs of the gods,  
of all divine songs.  
So that nobody erred,  
he watched with care  
to teach the people  
the divine songs in the neighborhoods.<sup>283</sup>

Given the fact that the Nahuatl elite took time to *conferenciar* (confer) in the decision process of providing aid to Fray Bernardino, it would be simplistic to assume that their traditional ways would be forgotten, and they would not use their opportunity for joint elite participation in the selection of the information to be shared and recorded.

It was not all the Nahuatl who participated, nor all the elite. The information was gathered from three specific areas: Tepepulco, Mexico-Tlatelolco, and Mexico-

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<sup>282</sup> Enrique Florescano, 1994. P. 39.

<sup>283</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Ritos, sacerdotes, y atavíos de los dioses*. Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1958. Commonly known as authored by *Los Informantes de Sahagún*. P. 93.

Tenochtitlan. It was these specific groups of Nahuatl male leaders that worked with the Franciscan, and whose agency expressed itself through their choice of informants, and selection of material to be shared with the Friar. Fray Bernardino, who initiated the process, wrote about the steps taken in Tepepulco and Tlatelolco:

In that town I had gathered all the principal people with their lord, who was called Diego de Mendoza. I asked them to grant me access to knowledgeable people of experience with whom I could talk, and who could explain the things I asked of them. [...] Another day, the lord and his principal people came and having made a very solemn speech...they assigned me as many as ten or twelve leading elders. They told me I could communicate with them, and they would give me answers to all that I would ask them [...] They gave me all the matters we discussed in pictures, for that was the writing they employed in ancient times. And the grammarians explain them in their language, writing the explanation at the bottom of the page.<sup>284</sup>

[In Tlatelolco] They pointed to eight or ten principal people, chosen from the whole, very capable in their language and their old things, with whom, together with four or five students of the College, [...] all that I brought written from Tepepulco was edited, verified, and to which additions were made.<sup>285</sup>

Sahagún's account does not imply a level of passivity on the part of the Nahuatl participants. To the contrary, the Nahuatl elite, when faced with Sahagún's request for

<sup>284</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book II. Prologue. P. 105-106. Original wording: "En el dicho pueblo [Tepepulco] hize juntar todos los principales con el señor del pueblo, que se llamaba don Diego de Mendoza. [...] les pedí que me dieran personas hábiles y experimentadas, con quien pudiese platicar y me supiesen dar razón de lo que les preguntase. Ellos me respondieron que se hablaría cerca de lo propuesto, y que otro día me responderían. [...] Otro día vinieron el señor con los principales, y hecho un solemne parlamento, como ellos entonces usaban hacer, señalaronme hasta diez o doce principales ancianos, y dijéronme que con aquellos podía comunicar y que ellos me darían razón de todo lo que les preguntase. [...] Todas las cosas que conferimos me las dieron por pinturas, que aquella era la escritura que ellos antiguamente usaban, y los gramáticos las declararon en su lengua, escribiendo la declaración al pie de la pintura."

<sup>285</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book II. Prologue. P. 106. Original wording: "[In Tlatelolco] me señalaron hasta ocho o diez principales, escogidos entre todos, muy hábiles en su lengua y en las cosas de sus antiguallas, con los cuales, con cuatro o cinco collegiales, [...] se enmendó, declaró, y añadió todo lo que de Tepepulco traje escrito."

information, took their time in responding, made a speech, granted permission, and offered those who would give answers. None of these were passive actions. In fact, the elite group's agency never stopped manifesting itself, and began to affect Sahagún long before the compendium's result, the *Historia*, was anywhere in sight. It began with the persistence of the indigenous people's attachment to their belief systems, which demonstrated the independence of their agency, and forced Sahagún to dedicate much of his adult life to what became his obsession: The eradication of those indigenous beliefs that he perceived as idolatrous so that he, and his cultural partners, might then establish their own belief system and maintain control. Subsequently, Nahua participants' agency continued to express itself through the elite's direct participation in the development of the compendium, and the insertion of their own agendas.

The Tlatelolcan elite "represented a position somewhat critical of the Aztec elite who conquered them nearly a century before."<sup>286</sup> This colored the information, particularly their version of the Conquest, and arguably, it helped create the image of a weak Moctezuma: "When Moctezuma heard what the messengers said, how the Spaniards very much wanted to see him, he was filled with such anguish that he thought he should run away or hide,"<sup>287</sup> and again, "he was worried, filled with terror and fear."<sup>288</sup> After all,

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<sup>286</sup> David Carrasco. *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. P. 48.

<sup>287</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume V. Book XII. Chapter IX. P. 35. Original wording: "Cuando oía Moctēuczoma la relación de los mensajeros, cómo los españoles preguntaban mucho de él, y que deseaban mucho de verle, angustiábase en gran manera, pensó de huir o esconderse."

<sup>288</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume V. Book XII. Chapter VIII. P. 95. Original wording: "[E]staba preocupado; lleno de terror, de miedo."

it was the Aztec proper that lost the empire. Distance from the losers might have helped the Tlatelolcans in their attempts to re-negotiate power relations with the outsiders. Much of the information gathered in Tlatelolco, the Merchant Capital, also came from a particular sub-group of the elite: The *Pochtecas*, or organized merchant class.<sup>289</sup> The rather specific nature of this group helped present the biased voice of people who “were active within the upper echelons of the governmental [and economic] system[s]; it says relatively little about the situation of the thousands of *pipiltin* who had little connection with the imperial court.”<sup>290</sup> The specialized nature of the group also valorized their particular version, their particular perspective, of the Nahuatl world over others. It also provided for the self-congratulatory definition of their particular class, and of this group’s rightful claim to leadership:

After the merchants, having fought for four years, conquered the Province of *Anáhuac*, [...] the most important among them said: Oh Mexican merchants! Already our Lord *Huitzilopochtli*, God of War, has done his job by helping us to conquer this Province. [...] When they arrived to Mexico, [...] they headed straight for the house of the lord *Ahuitzotzin* [...] Having done this, one of them started to speak, telling him: Our lord, [...] here at your feet we have placed the bounty because your uncles the *pochtecas* who are here risked our heads and our lives, [...] and although we call our selves merchants, we are more like captains and soldiers that with dissimulation went out conquering.<sup>291</sup>

<sup>289</sup> Alfredo López Austin. In Edmonson, 1974. P. 140.

<sup>290</sup> Edward E. Calnek. *The Sahagún Texts as a Source of Sociological Information*. In Edmonson, 1974. P. 190.

<sup>291</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book IX. Chapter II. “*De como los mercaderes comenzaron a ser tenidos por señores y honrados como tales.*” (How the merchants began to be held as lords and honored as such.) P. 17-18. Original wording: “*Después que los mercaderes, peleando por espacio de cuatro años, conquistaron la provincia de Anáhuac [...] tomó la mano el más principal de ellos y dijo: ¡Oh mercaderes mexicanos! Ya nuestro señor Huitzilopochtli, dios de la guerra, ha hecho su oficio en favorecernos en que hayamos conquistado esta provincia. [...] Y como hubieron llegado a México, [...] fueron derechos a la casa del señor Ahuitzotzin [...] Habiendo hecho esto, comenzó uno de ellos a hablar al señor diciendole: ‘Señor nuestro [...] aquí en tu presencia hemos puesto el precio, porque tus tíos los pochtecas que estamos aquí pusimos nuestras cabezas y vidas a riesgo, [...] que aunque nos llamamos mercaderes y lo parecemos, somos capitanes y soldados, que disimuladamente andamos a conquistar.’*”

The information gathered in Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco gave greater value to merchant traditions, celebrations, and beliefs: "The informants [were] cultured and educated men of pre-Hispanic Mexico. However, the importance they g[a]ve to *Y[i]acatecuhtli* [Guiding God, God of Travelers], to travel, and to feasts given to the organized merchants make one suppose that at least some of them belonged to the merchant's guild."<sup>292</sup> These ten to twelve elders were not representative of the entire culture, and can hardly be the source of a Universal, or General History. The interest of their participation resides on their particularity, not on their alleged representative status. The versions that they represented did not reflect the interests of the commoners, of women, of children, or of many of the specialized priests who had died in the hands of the Spaniards. They reflected the interests of elitist groups of men, and in Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco, of a particular upper class, the merchants. But this was not entirely new for the Nahuatl, after all, "the recording and reading of the past were the exclusive knowledge of the ruling class."<sup>293</sup>

The information given to the Franciscan was particularly affected by the absence of an important informing group, the priests who held sacred knowledge. The copious materials in religious matters could have only come from the perspective of novices or from the public perspectives of the ceremonies and celebrations. As author Inga Clendinnen noted in her 1991 study on the Aztec: "Few priests, easily identifiable as they

<sup>292</sup> Alfredo López Austin. In Edmonson, 1974. P. 124.

<sup>293</sup> Enrique Florescano, 1994. P. 41.

were, survived the phobic hatred of the Spanish conquerors, and the destruction of their finely articulated ecclesiastic structure must have cast those few survivors into a social and cognitive void. Priestly doings were concealed from outsiders.”<sup>294</sup>

#### The Integration of New Aspects of the Supernatural and of New Systems

The indigenous people of the Americas conceptualized the universe in absolutely different modes from those of the Spanish. Since the pre-Hispanic “conceptions of the divine was not governed by the principles of exclusive monotheism, [...] the Christian image was integrated into the native field.”<sup>295</sup> It seemed natural for the Nahua to simply adopt the new God, or Gods into their already busy pantheon. It can be argued that the claims of Catholic monotheism might have not appeared as clear cut for people who had just begun to conceptualize Christian mythology. The tripartite Christian God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, plus the Virgin Mary and the host of saints created an impression of a more plural cosmology. Plurality would then appear familiar to the multicultural people of New Spain. It was within Nahua tradition to incorporate the Gods of the victor: “[V]ictory was prima facie evidence of the strength of the victor’s god. One expected a conqueror to impose his god in some fashion, without fully displacing one’s own; the new god in any case always proved to be an agglomeration of attributes familiar from the local pantheon and hence easy to assimilate.”<sup>296</sup> To add to the apparent Christian polytheism,

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<sup>294</sup> Inga Clendinnen, 1991. P. 129-130.

<sup>295</sup> Serge Gruzinski, 1993. P. 188.

<sup>296</sup> James Lockhart. The Nahuas After the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1992. P. 203.



the different approaches to evangelization, and even the differences between “the philosophical traditions of the Franciscans and Dominicans,”<sup>297</sup> created the illusion of shared multiplicity. This multiplicity was a familiar concept for the Nahuatl.

In 1539, Don Carlos Ometochtzin, Cacique of Tezcoco, “exposed a plural world view in speeches to his town.”<sup>298</sup> His exposition would eventually cause him to be put on trial, and executed by the Inquisition. In those speeches Ometochtzin explained Nahuatl acceptance of plurality and their use of Christian internal differences to validate the continuation of their own:

Consider that the friars and the secular clergy each has its own form of penance; consider that the Franciscan friars have one manner of doctrine and one way of life and one dress; and the Agustinians another; and the Dominicans another; and the secular clergy another...and it was also like this among those who kept our gods, so that the ones from Mexico had one way of dress and prayer...and other towns had another; each town had its own way of sacrificing.<sup>299</sup>

Sahagún noted how the indigenous people, after having received the sacrament of baptism, would declare that they believed in the Catholic tripartite God: “God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,”<sup>300</sup> while “inside they do not stop considering their gods as gods, or lending them service, offerings and celebrations.”<sup>301</sup> Although the Franciscan was limited to an either/or proposition, where the Nahuatl either converted truthfully or

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<sup>297</sup> José Rabasa. “Franciscans and Dominicans Under the Gaze of Tlacuilo: Plural-World Dwelling in an Indian Pictorial Codex.” *Morrison Library Inaugural Address Series*. Number 14. 1998. P. 22.

<sup>298</sup> José Rabasa, 1998. P. 1.

<sup>299</sup> José Rabasa, 1998. P. 1.

<sup>300</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. In Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 383 column 1. Original wording: “*Dios Padre, Hijo y Espiritu Santo.*”

<sup>301</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. In Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 383 column 2. Original wording: “[E]n lo interior no dejan de tener a sus dioses por dioses, ni de hacerles servicio, ofrendas y fiestas.”

lied, for the indigenous people the adoption these new Gods was part of their tradition: “And in this manner they multiplied the gods amongst themselves, taking those who were settled the gods of those who arrived, and those taking the gods of the ones who were settled.”<sup>302</sup> It was a strategy for survival, not so much to please the Spanish, but as a way to access the potency of the new Gods. They might be able to help them face the new situation, their new burdens and diseases brought to them also by the Spaniards. The attempt to integrate Christianity to establish a proper relation with the new aspects of the Supernatural, did not imply an abandonment of the old ways. The familiar Gods had still their places and purposes. Their significance was braided with the people’s identities and histories. Sharing their importance with Sahagún might ensure the survival of the old ways in the face of persecution by the *Santo Oficio de la Inquisición*. The threat was very real. There can be no doubt, given the Nahuatl traditional use of messengers and trade/communication networks,<sup>303</sup> and given the fact that Mexican friars had received information,<sup>304</sup> that the Nahuatl elite was aware of events such as the *auto de fe* that Franciscans Ciudad de Rodrigo and Diego de Landa conducted in Yucatán (1562). There, more than 4,500 Indians were tortured, and 158 had lost their lives “as a direct

<sup>302</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. In Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 383 column 1. Original wording: “[Y] así se multiplicaron los dioses entre ellos, tomando los que estaban ya poblados el dios de los que llegaban, y éstos el dios de los ya poblados.”

<sup>303</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún wrote in Book XII about Mochtecuizoma, who sent messengers to keep him informed of the Spaniards movements. In one section the Mexica leader is quoted saying to his messengers: “*Id con prisa y no os detengáis.*” (Go fast, and do not delay) Volume IV. Book XII. Chapter IV. P. 29.

<sup>304</sup> In her thoughtful study *Ambivalent Conquests*, (1987) Inga Clendinnen wrote about Father Francisco de Toral, who arrived as the first Bishop of Yucatán in 1562. The struggles between Toral, who tried to stop the illegal suffering of the Indians perpetrated by the Provincial Diego de Landa and his friars, reached both Mexican Church authorities and Spain’s Council of the Indies. P. 72-111.

result of the interrogations,<sup>305</sup> after the Franciscans discovered that they continued to adore their Gods in secrecy.

In his 1564 work, now known as *El Libro perdido de las Pláticas o Coloquios de los Doce Primeros Misioneros de México*,<sup>306</sup> Sahagún recorded the alleged response of the indigenous elders to the first Twelve, in 1524. In it, they expressed their connection to their Gods:

It is best, our lords, to act on this matter very slowly, with great deliberation. We are not satisfied or convinced by what you have told us, nor do we understand or give credit to what has been said of our gods. It gives us anguish, lords and fathers, to speak in this way. Here present are the lords charged with governing the kingdom and republics of this world. All of us together feel that it is enough to have lost, enough that the power and royal jurisdiction have been taken from us. As for our gods, we will die before giving up serving and worshipping them. This is our determination; do what you will. This will serve in reply and contradiction to what you have said. we have no more to say, lords.<sup>307</sup>

In *Totecuyocane*, the Náhuatl document that records the answers given to the first Twelve in 1524, the elders move from “self-abasement and apparent humility [...] slowly and inexorably [...] to a passionate defense of their past beliefs.”<sup>308</sup> The following is an excerpt of the translation by Gordon Brotherston, published in 1992, from his compelling work on Native American literature:

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<sup>305</sup> Inga Clendinnen, 1987. P 76.

<sup>306</sup> Charles E. Dibble. *The Nahuatlization of Christianity*. In Edmonson, 1974. 225-233. P. 229.

<sup>307</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. “*El Libro perdido de las Pláticas o Coloquios de los Doce Primeros Misioneros de México*,” (Now kept in the Vatican Archives). *The Lords and Holy Men of Tenochtitlan Reply to the Franciscans, 1524*. Kenneth Mills and William B. Taylor, 1998. P. 22. There are questions about the origin and significance of this speech recorded decades after the event. Leading Sahagunian scholar Miguel León-Portilla has concluded that it is was crafted to aid evangelization, but offers “an authentic glimpse of the Aztec religion and vision of the world and response to Spanish colonization.” As quoted in Kenneth Mills and William B. Taylor, 1998. P. 19.

<sup>308</sup> Gordon Brotherston. *Book of the Fourth World: Reading the Native Americas Through Their Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. P. 315.

So, as we stand here,  
 we see, we address,  
 the one through whom everything lives,  
 the night, the Wind,  
 whose representatives you are.

And we have felt the breath, the word  
 of our lord the Omneity,  
 which you have brought with you.  
 The speaker of the world sent you because of us.  
 Here we are, amazed by this.  
 You brought his book with you, his script.  
 heaven's word, the word of god.

...  
 You say  
 that we don't know  
 the Omneity of heaven and earth.  
 You say that our gods are not original.  
 That's news to us  
 and it drives us crazy.  
 It's a shock and it's a scandal,  
 for our ancestors came to earth  
 and they spoke quite differently.<sup>309</sup>

The Nahua, even as they integrated Christianity, did not forsake their Gods. In fact, Sahagún does not seem to have been aware of the internal argument the Nahua managed to make part of the compendium. The image is compelling: Sahagún stood on one side, convinced of the superiority and rightfulness of his vision, and with self-absorbed eloquence condemned the Nahua belief system, even mocking it at times. In his corner, Sahagún lectured the Nahua about the fallacy of their Gods: "It follows clearly that *Huitzilopochtli*, in not a god, nor is *Tláloc*, nor *Quetzalcóatl*; *Cihuacóatl* is not a goddess,

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<sup>309</sup> *Totecuyoane* quoted and translated by Gordon Brotherson, 1992. 49-50. P. 50.

*Chicomecóatl* is not a goddess.”<sup>310</sup> Fray Bernardino continued his one-by-one condemnation and ended by saying: “They are all demons,” and he further validated his statement with scriptural evidence, which said that “all the gods of the gentiles are demons.”<sup>311</sup> On the other side, the Nahuá informants, with delicate subtlety, presented and defended their Gods. The argument is evident, even within the context of the highly contaminated Spanish version. The elders lectured the Friar in turn, defending their attachment to those they held as *Teotl*.<sup>312</sup> “The god called *Huitzilopochtli* [...] was very robust, of great strength, and war-like [...] He was like a live fire and was feared by his enemies [...] because of his strength and dexterity in war, the Mexicans held him in great esteem.”<sup>313</sup> Again: “The god *Tezcatlipoca* was held as true god, invisible, who was every where, and they said that only he understood the rules of the world.”<sup>314</sup> One after another the Nahuá explained their Gods and their significance, giving enough details to fill most of the first volume with their information, stories, and celebrations. Indigenous attachment to their Sacred did not, and could not have ceased. It was imbedded in Nahuá identity.

<sup>310</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. *Confutación*. P. 86. Original wording: “*Síguese aquí claramente que Huitzilopochtli, no es dios, ni tampoco Tláloc, ni tampoco Quetzalcóatl; Cihuacóatl no es diosa, Chicomecóatl no es diosa.*”

<sup>311</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. *Confutación*. P. 86. Original wording: “[T]odos son demonios: Así lo testifica la Sagrada escritura diciendo, omnes diigentium demonia, que quiere decir todos los dioses se los gentiles son demonios.”

<sup>312</sup> “[Q]ue es dios.” Who is god. Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book X. P. 209.

<sup>313</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. P. 43. Original wording: “*Este dios llamado Huitzilopochtli [...] fué robustísimo, de grandes fuerzas y muy belicoso [...] era como fuego vivo muy temeroso a sus contrarios [...] por su fortaleza y destreza en la guerra, le tuvieron por mucho los mexicanos.*”

<sup>314</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. P. 44. Original wording: “*El dios Tezcatlipoca era tenido por verdadero dios, e invisible, el cual andaba en todo lugar [...] y decían él sólo ser el que entendía en el regimiento del mundo.*”

Sahagún's perception of deceit was simplistic: "They completely lost the faith that was preached to them and returned to their old idolatry."<sup>315</sup>

The Nahua elite was not responding to the Friar and his culture as inferiors looking from the bottom up. That perspective of the indigenous peoples was Sahagún's own limitation. Concurrent with their pre-Hispanic social experience,<sup>316</sup> these elite groups continued to look at the world around them from their superior placement in the Nahua hierarchy. Even when subjection was not anything new for those held under tribute to the pre-conquest "Confederacy of Anauk,"<sup>317</sup> or when acceptance of subjugation was a Spanish perception, initially, at least in this Nahua elite's perspective, "an ethnocentric feeling of superiority was also an element"<sup>318</sup> in Nahua perception of the outsider: "Warriors of Tlatelolco, now is the time! Who are these savages?"<sup>319</sup>

The Nahua inspired the compendium and then used it to their advantage following traditional Nahua elitist pre-encounter rules. Both sides of the struggle were firmly rooted in a mutual lack of ability to step out of those categorical assumptions each held as truth. The "contradictory interests and objectives [...produced] a cascade of compromises. [...There] emerged individual and collective experiences that mixed interpretation with

<sup>315</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book XI. Chapter XIII: *De Todos Los Mantenimientos*. P. 360. Original wording: "[P]erdieron del todo la Fe que les fué predicada, y se volvieron a las idolatrias antiguas."

<sup>316</sup> One must here point out the interconnectedness of the Nahua cosmological spheres (such as religious, political, and social) separated only under the Euro-Western microscope.

<sup>317</sup> Alicja Iwanska. *The Truth of Others: An Essay on Nativistic Intellectuals in México*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Schenkman Publishing Company, INC., 1977. P. 57.

<sup>318</sup> James Lockhart. 1992. P. 445.

<sup>319</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume IV. Book XII. Chapter XXXIV. P. 148. Original wording: "¡Guerreros de Tlatelolco, ahora es cuando...! ¿Quiénes son esos salvajes?"

improvisation.<sup>320</sup> The ‘double-mistaken-identity’ logic allowed each side to perceive the other as functioning within familiar parameters. It expressed itself continuously, as each side attempted to make the new experiences coherent, and as each side imagined itself in control of the production of the *Historia*. As scholar Michael de Certeau argued in 1984: “They metaphorized the dominant order: They made it function in another register.”<sup>321</sup>

Sahagún complained bitterly about the Nahuatl transformation of the Spanish-Catholic sacred into their own:

And they already had *Tonantzin*, and *Tocitzin*, and *Telpochtli* who in the outside resemble, or are made to resemble Saint Mary, Saint Ann, and Saint John the Evangelist, or Batiste; inside the people [...] it is clear that it is all the same [...] In a concealed manner they venerate and make offerings to the idols, hiding them in the celebrations that the church has for God and his Saints.<sup>322</sup>

The indigenous people saw the Spanish from their own ‘point-of-perspective’ and assimilated them into their own pre-existing patterns. In the eighth chapter of Book III, titled *De las costumbres que se guardaban en el Calmécac* (Of the Customs Kept at the *Calmécac*), there is an eloquent description, by Sahagún, of the Nahuatl Ministers who worked in the pre-Hispanic indigenous school: “The ministers of the gods pledged vows of chastity, not having carnal knowledge of woman, and they ate moderately, and did not

<sup>320</sup> Serge Gruzinski, 1993. P. 282.

<sup>321</sup> Michel de Certeau. *In the Practices of Everyday Life*. Steven F. Rendall, Trans. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984. P. 31-32.

<sup>322</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book XI. *Apendice: Adición Sobre Supersticiones*. P. 354. Original wording: “[Y]a tenían *Tonantzin*, y *Tocitzin*, y al *Telpochtli*, que exteriormente suena, o les ha hecho sonar a Santa María y a Santa Ana, y a San Juan Evangelista, o Bautista, y en lo interior de la gente popular [...] esta claro que no es sino lo antiguo [...] paliadamente se hace reverencia y ofrenda a los ídolos, con disimulación de las fiestas que la Iglesia celebra a Dios y a sus Santos.”

tell lies, and lived devoutly, fearing god.”<sup>323</sup> This description is hardly conflicting with that of a friar. The Nahua could coherently integrate and understand the Franciscans, aided with a bit of ‘double-mistaken-identity’ and cross-talking, as the new teachers at the new *Calmécac*. The teacher-friars were easily digested in Native pre-existing definitions. The apparent coincidence of the similarity between *los ministros de los dioses* (the ministers of the Gods) and the friars, and between *El Colegio Imperial de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco*<sup>324</sup> and the *Calmécac*, served to provide the illusion that, beyond some necessary adaptations, the ‘Other(s)’, the friars to the indigenous people, and vice-versa, was not altogether unlike the ‘Self’, that the world was still familiar. The Nahua informants explained the value of their *Calmécac*, and they explained it in terms perfectly digestible to a Franciscan friar: “In the house of the *Calmécac* there were very good customs, doctrines, exercises, and rough life, and there were not any sort of shameful or reprehensible thing, nor any affront to the customs used by the ministers of the idols that were educated there.”<sup>325</sup> Furthermore, the Nahua elite established the right of their offspring to the school: “The house where the noble lords were raised,”<sup>326</sup> and again: “And if the boy was the son of the lord of principal person [...] and if he was of a proper

<sup>323</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book III. Chapter VIII. P. 307. Original wording: “[L]os ministros de los ídolos tenían voto de vivir castamente, sin conocer a mujer carnalmente, y comer templadamente ni decir mentiras y vivir devotamente y temer a dios.”

<sup>324</sup> The Imperial School of de Holy Cross of Tlatelolco. Information found in León-Portilla, 1994. P. 13.

<sup>325</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book III. P. 303. Original wording: “[E]n la casa del *Calmécac* había buenas costumbres, y doctrinas y ejercicios, y áspera y casta vida, y no había cosa de desvergüenzas, ni reprehensión, ni afrenta ninguna de las costumbres que allí usaban los ministros de los ídolos, que se criaban en aquella casa.”

<sup>326</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book III. P. 304. Original wording: “[L]a casa [...] donde se criaban los señores nobles.”



age to live and remain in the house of the *Calmécac*, they left him there under the care of the priests and ministers of the idols, who raised him and taught them all customs.”<sup>327</sup>

Given the perceived similarities between the *Colegio* and the *Calmécac*, this right should be properly extended to the new system, and the Franciscans’ initial selection of elite children as pupils validated such assumption.

The similarities, the mixture of imperfect-yet-consequential coincidences, provided no guarantee that there were any true meeting points, in fact, most of the time there were not. Still, the apparent coincidences lulled both sides of the exchange into a sense of familiarity, into the survival of pre-existing categories. Sahagún saw exercises in deceit: “it is nothing but a great idolatrous lie.”<sup>328</sup> However, the Nahuas were simply maintaining their modes of thinking and interpreting events in their world, including the outsiders, from within their “[pre-]existing images and categories.”<sup>329</sup> Indigenous people’s agency was not predicated on European constructions but on their own.

Sahagún insistently recorded that there was an obvious and powerful continuance of indigenous practices. Even as those practices became accommodated, or altered, or perceived as such by the outsider, the attachment of the Nahua to their gods did not end: “If any one thinks that these things are so well forgotten and lost, [...] I know for certain

<sup>327</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book III. P. 305. Original wording: “Y si el muchacho era hijo del señor o principal [...] y si era ya de edad conveniente para vivir y estar en la casa de Calmécac, luego le dejaban allí en poder de los sacerdotes y ministros de los idolos, para criarle y enseñarle todas las costumbres.”

<sup>328</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. In Icazcalceta, 1954. P. 384 column 2. Original wording: “[L]o cual no es sino gran mentira idolátrica.”

<sup>329</sup> Olivia Harris. “The Coming of the White People: Reflections on the Mythologization of History in Latin America.” Kenneth Mills and William B. Taylor, 1998. P. 34-45.

that the Devil does not sleep nor is he forgotten.”<sup>330</sup> Indeed the Franciscan recorded the reason for the failure of the conversions without, seemingly, understanding it:

According to the old custom that they had, when foreign people came to live near by [...] They took as god the god of those who has just arrived. [And] in that manner they multiplied their gods amongst themselves [...]. In the same manner, they were inclined to take as god the god of the Spaniards; but not to abandon their old ones.<sup>331</sup>

Applying the theory of ‘double mistaken identity,’<sup>332</sup> it is possible to see how the initial appearance of complete and profound conversion was built upon imperfect, yet consequential, coincidences that allowed each side to imagine a connection, a “superficial compatibility.”<sup>333</sup> It is highly questionable that the initial, or any of the conversions that Sahagún had as false were born out of deceit, from a “conspiracy that they had, among the principal people and priests, to receive Jesus Christ among their gods as one of them.”<sup>334</sup>

They were the result of indigenous pre-existing categories being applied to new experiences.

The Nahua traditions had meaning of their own, and so, they remained meaningful in spite of Spanish intrusions. Ritual and cultural indigenous voices rose loudly enough to

<sup>330</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book III. Prologue. P. 269. Original wording: “[S]i alguno piensa que estas cosas están tan olvidadas y perdidas, [...] sé de cierto que el diablo ni duerme ni está olvidado.”

<sup>331</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. In Icazalceta, 1954. P. 382 column 2 and 383 column 1. Original wording: “[C]onforme a la costumbre antigua que tenían, que cuando venia alguna gente forastera a poblar cerca [...] tomaban por dios al dios que traían los recién llegados. [...] así se multiplicaron los dioses entre ellos [...]. De esta manera se inclinaron con facilidad a tomar por dios al Dios de los españoles; pero no para que dejasen los suyos antiguos.”

<sup>332</sup> James Lockhart, 1985. P. 465-482.

<sup>333</sup> Walden Browne, 1996. P.109.

<sup>334</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. In Icazalceta, 1954. P. 382 column 2. Original wording: “[C]onspiración que ellos habían hecho entre sí los principales y sátrapas de recibis a Jesucristo entre sus dioses como uno de ellos.”

create 'tension cracks' between the millenarist first twelve Franciscans and Sahagún, and within Sahagún himself. "Sahagún, one of their number [Franciscans], complained bitterly in his *Arte Adivinatoria* (1585) of the gullibility of his predecessors and the precious time that had been lost listening to their advice."<sup>335</sup> The indigenous reality produced the disintegration of the self-congratulatory, self-deluded, and self-interested claims of the first Franciscans:

About the preaching of the Gospel in these parts, there is much doubt if it has been preached before or it has not. I have always held the opinion that the Gospel was never preached to them, because I never have found anything that alluded to the Catholic Faith, but to the contrary, and everything is so idolatrous that I can't believe the Gospel was ever preached to them.<sup>336</sup>

Meanwhile, the Nahua elite were not up to anything new. In fact, they had always "periodically reconstructed the interpretation of the past [...] and adjusted it to the present situation."<sup>337</sup>

### The Assimilation of Sahagún

The Nahua voice expressed itself in yet another way. The Native informants assimilated Sahagún, and used him as a vehicle of instruction for the young (Euro-claimed-hispanized) elite. As Miguel León-Portilla established:

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<sup>335</sup> Walden Browne, 1996. P. 104. The author paraphrases Sahagún in his *Arte Adivinatoria*, as printed in Joaquín García Icazbalceta's, *Bibliografía mexicana del siglo XVI*. Agustín Millares Carlo, Edt. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1981. 376-387.

<sup>336</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book XI. Chapter XIII: *De Todos Los Mantenimientos*. P. 358. Original wording: "Acerca de la predicación del Evangelio en estas partes, ha habido mucha duda si han sido predicadas antes de ahora, o no; y yo siempre he tenido opinión que nunca les fué predicado el Evangelio, porque nunca jamás he hallado cosa que aluda a la Fe Católica, sino todo lo contrario, y todo tan idolátrico que no puedo creer que les haya sido predicado el Evangelio en ningún tiempo."

<sup>337</sup> Enrique Florescano, 1994. P. 40.

Without being conscious of it,...Sahagún w[as] reenacting the ancient indigenous procedure followed in the transmission of knowledge...Oral tradition anchored in the pictographic books was the form of transmitting the ancient word, the songs, the historical accounts, the prayers, and so on, both to the young people in the ancient schools and to the friars.<sup>338</sup>

Sahagún, as a member of the faculty at the *Colegio de Tlatelolco*, which mirrored the Nahua's own educational institution, the *Calmécac*, was the perfect vehicle for the Nahua elite to record, and make permanent their vision, within the framework of the colonial system. The Nahua elders achieved access and opportunity by assimilating Sahagún, banking on the power of his role as teacher at the *Colegio*. They could re-educate their young, who were exposed to the traditional knowledge through their roles as translators, interpreters, and scribes of the *Historia*. The elders could find out about the intricacies of the dominating system through those same youth, and they could re-establish their authority over the elite offspring by establishing for them the relevance of their social, religious and cultural positions. Sophisticated means of subversion and pre-existing categories mixed in the Nahua expression, validated the independent status of their cultural constructs, and their agency. The 'voices-less-often-heard' continued to establish their own discourse.

The re-education of the young was particularly important, not only to be able to pass down the indigenous traditions, but also to repair the damage done by Sahagún himself and the other Friars. They had trained those boys, as Fray Bernardino explained in the *Relación del Autor, digna de ser notada*, in Book X, "to destroy the idolatrous

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<sup>338</sup> Miguel León-Portilla, 1994. P. 16.

rites.<sup>339</sup> To accomplish said extirpation of idolatry through the boys, the Friars would send the Nahua youths, as a Franciscan police force, to break down celebrations, and punish the participants. The technique was successful enough as to create a deep gap between the boys and their people:

The people gained such fear of those boys raised with us that after a few days it was not necessary to go with them, or to send many [...] just sending only ten or twenty they were able to capture and tied all those in the celebrations [...] even if there were one hundred or two hundred. In this manner many idolatrous things were destroyed, in such way that no one dared do anything idolatrous in public, nor in any other possible way.<sup>340</sup>

The *Colegio*, in fact, proved to function in two registers. On the one hand, it aided the missionary efforts, and on the other, it acquired the reputation of being a “source of heresy.”<sup>341</sup> There was a chilling example of the success of the re-education of the elite Nahua youth, back into traditional modes: “An ex-student [of the *Colegio*], a chief, Don Carlos Chichimectecotl of Texcuco, was discovered seeking to inculcate certain heretical doctrines in his associates. He was brought before the Inquisition and was the first victim of the Holy Office to be burned in Mexico.”<sup>342</sup> Don Carlos’ story proves the enduring quality of the Nahua attachment to their pre-Hispanic ways, in spite of traditional

<sup>339</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book X. *Relación del Autor Digna de Ser notada*. P. 163. Original wording: “[P]ara destripar los ritos idolátricos.”

<sup>340</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book X. *Relación del Autor Digna de Ser notada*. P. 163-164. Original wording: “Fúe tan grande el temor que toda la gente popular cobró de estos muchachos que con nosotros se criaban, que después de pocos días no era menester ir con ellos, ni enviar muchos [...] que enviando diez o veinte de ellos prendian y ataban a todos los de la fiesta [...] aunque fuesen cien o doscientos, y de esta manera se destruyeron las cosas de la idolatría, que nadie en público ni de manera que se pudiese saber osaba hacer nada que fuese de cosas de idolatría.”

<sup>341</sup> Charles S. Branden. *Religious Aspects of the Conquest of Mexico*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1930. P. 149.

<sup>342</sup> Charles S. Branden, 1930. P. 149.

historiographical tendencies to view the elite's young as acculturated, carrying what James Lockhart called: "the implication that an individual or group is taking on a new culture, all of it, ignoring the possibility of cultural retention or the crucial question of convergences."<sup>343</sup>

### Indigenous Sophisticated Strategies

Another mode of Nahua expression in Sahagún's compendium was represented by the choices made by the Native *principales* on what they would disclose to Sahagún, and what they would not. It is difficult to find the silences, particularly in the Spanish version, but the indigenous people were perfectly capable of sophisticated strategies. One example of such withholding policies is included in Robert Ricard's study *The Spiritual Conquest of México*:

Moreover, when México City was occupied for the second time [1521], the Indians carried off the five principal idols of the great temple and took them to the house of an Indian named Miguel, who kept them for ten days. They were soon collected again and taken to a place which he, even under torture, declared he did not know. Indeed, they were so carefully hidden that, in spite of minute investigations, it was impossible to find them, and their resting place today is still unknown.<sup>344</sup>

The indigenous capacity to actively participate in the construction of historiography, finds evidence in the Aztec account of the conquest edited by Miguel León-Portilla. In this account, the Aztec lords decided to erase their old history to make

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<sup>343</sup> James Lockhart, 1992. P. 446.

<sup>344</sup> Quoted from Francisco de Burgoa's *Geográfica Descripción de la Parte Septentrional, del Polo Ártico de la América, y Nueva Iglesia de la América de las Indias Occidentales, y sitio astronómico de estas Provincias de Predicadores de Antequera Valle de Oaxaca...*, ff. 168, vº- 169 rº. México, 1674. Found in Robert Ricard's *The Spiritual Conquest of México: An Essay on the Apostolate and the Evangelizing Methods of the Mendicant Orders in New Spain: 1523-1572*. Lesley Byrd Simpson, Trans. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966. P. 274.

room for a new one. "In the new version, recorded in a number of extant documents, the Aztec claimed to be descended from the Toltec nobility."<sup>345</sup>

They preserved an account of their history,  
but later it was burnt,  
during the reign of Itzcoatl.  
The lords of México decreed it,  
the lords of México declared:  
"It is not fitting that our people  
should know these pictures.  
Our people, our subjects, will be lost  
and our land destroyed,  
for these pictures are full of lies..."<sup>346</sup>

The indigenous elite made the same claim in the *Historia General*: "It is enough to say a bit more about said Toltecs, and that is that all those who speak clearly the Mexican language are their descendants."<sup>347</sup>

This sort of sophisticated construction of identity had survived the conquest, and manifested itself when given the opportunity. Sahagún's compendium provided just such opportunity. The examples cited above present an image contrary to that of the voiceless people often portrayed. Their subjection to an outside power was a reality, their perceived voicelessness, or lack of sophisticated, strategic thinking and responses were not. Those Eurocentric self-serving images only served to perpetuate 'inferior-superior' relationships, between Indians and Europeans. However, for the Nahuatl, the 'inferior-

<sup>345</sup> Miguel León-Portilla, Edt. *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of México*. Expanded and Updated Edition. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992. P. xxxviii.

<sup>346</sup> Miguel León-Portilla, Edt., 1992. P. xxxviii.

<sup>347</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book X. P. 189. Original wording: "Resta decir otro poco de los dichos toltecas, y es que todos los que hablan claro la lengua mexicana, que les llaman náhuas, son descendientes de los dichos toltecas."

superior<sup>7</sup> relationships had little to do with the outsiders. The construction of descent from the Toltec valorized the Nahuatl over other people, it provided them with ancient rights. The descriptions of the Toltec, clearly and in no uncertain terms, created a most distinguished image of their claimed ancestors:

And said Toltecs were so curious that they knew all sorts of mechanic trades, and in every one they were the top and best artisans [...] they were knowledgeable [...] So capable in the natural astrology [...] that they were the first to have a time count [...] they were so wise and knowledgeable that they knew the stars in the heavens and had named them [...] they were good men and were attached to virtue because they did not lie [...] Enough it is to say [that the Nahuatl] are descendants of said Toltecs.<sup>348</sup>

Given the Nahuatl rank consciousness, what today one might call Nahuatl ego-centrism, or sense of superiority, was still more specific. It did not refer only to the Nahuatl-Toltec relationship, and the constructed separation between Nahuatl and non-Nahuatl. It applied to internal class distinctions as well. The *pilli-macehualli* separation was apparent, not only because of the asymmetrical amount of information given to the upper class, but also through direct compartmentalization. In the information about the celebrations offered when a baby was born, interpreted by Sahagún as baptism, the separation was clear:

The lords, and principal people, and merchants and rich men, every one in his way, celebrated and invited many people. [...] That happened amongst the lords, principal people, merchants, and rich men, but the poor

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<sup>348</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book X. Chapter XXIX. P. 187-189. Original wording: "Y tan curiosos eran los dichos toltecas que sabían casi todos los oficios mecánicos, y en todos ellos eran únicos y primeros oficiales [...] eran de buen conocimiento [...] tan hábiles en la Astrología Natural [...] que ellos fueron los primeros que tuvieron cuenta [...] eran tan entendidos y sabios que conocían las estrellas de los cielos y las tenían puestos nombres [...] eran buenos hombres y allegados a la virtud, porque no decían mentiras. [...] Rest decir [...] que los náhuas] son descendientes de los dichos toltecas."



and lower people made their celebrations as poor and rustic people, who have little, and know little, and offered flowers of little value.<sup>349</sup>

Certainly, the Nahuatl world, and by extension the indigenous world, was affected by the actions of Spain and its representatives. Certainly, there were many repercussions. In the religious arena “many were left without direction, *nepantla*. Only reduced [and not destroyed] the triumph of the Native priests and wise men made possible the hiding, and partial preservation of this under the appearance of the new rites and beliefs.”<sup>350</sup>

Although, in the use of the Nahuatl term *nepantla*, as ‘without direction’, the colonial discourse satisfies only itself. “[T]he concept of *nepantla*, neither here nor there, neither in the ancient order nor in the Christian, can also be understood in terms of a-not-being-really-convinced-of-the-necessity-of-dwelling-in-only-one-world.”<sup>351</sup> Sahagún’s involvement, and various levels of indigenous participation validate arguments about the complexity of events.

<sup>349</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book IV. Chapter XXXVII. P. 364-365. Original wording: “[L]os señores y principales, y mercaderes y hombres ricos, cada uno según su manera, hacía convite y convidaba mucha gente [...] Esto acontece entre los señores y principales, y mercaderes y hombres ricos; pero la gente baja y pobre hace sus convites como pobres y rústicos, que tienen poco y saben poco. y dan flores de poco valor.”

<sup>350</sup> Miguel León-Portilla. “Testimonios Nahuas Sobre la Conquista Espiritual.” *Estudios de Cultura Nahuatl*. México City, D.F., México. V.11, 1974. 11-36. P. 33. Original wording: *hubo ciertamente conversiones..., muchos se quedaron sin rumbo nepantla...Solo menguado [y no destruido] triunfo de los sacerdotes y sabios nativos fue hacer posible el ocultamiento y la preservación parcial de lo propio bajo la apariencia de los nuevos ritos y creencias.*”

<sup>351</sup> José Rabasa, 1998. P. 23.

## CHAPTER 5

## CONCLUSION

The encounter exchanges reflected in Sahagún's compendium constituted a polyphony, that even though may have achieved harmonized moments was nevertheless, as a testament to its nature, intricately chaotic due to its lack of symmetry, and due to Fray Bernardino's internal struggles, and his external conflicts with the colonial system of which he was a part. Fray Bernardino's and the Nahuatl participant's texts, and others such as these, have the ability to show that the conquest, and its aftermath, were equivocal, contradictory, ambivalent, and complex processes that involved many peoples, most of whom were not members of the European Imperial cast. The indigenous people were not the flat surfaces upon which Europe wrote history, but they were people with sophisticated and distinct cultural constructs of their own, complex languages and historical recording processes that were not limited always to oral histories. They were people with serious attachments to their gods and to their traditions.

Sahagún's voice often spoke loud enough to preclude him from hearing anything except his own monologue, or a sort of directed dialogue. His voice, as one of the voices of the victor, carried throughout the texts. The Friar's apostolic dream never did fully coalesce. However, the information gathered, after a period of darkness arose as precious information. It reached the present as a record of the encounter between Sahagún and the Nahuatl participants. It told, not only of indigenous matters, pre-Conquest memoirs, Nahuatl

elite's historical revisions, and rank strategies, but it also challenged the present's image of the Conquest itself by showing the struggles involved in the evangelical project, the internal dissension between the Church's representatives, and the inner struggles that arose when the two worlds collided. In spite of the fact that Fray Bernardino's work was contaminated by his own impositions, for someone of his time, he "followed [...] the most rigorous and demanding methods in his study."<sup>352</sup> His impositions on themselves provide illuminating knowledge about the conflicted nature of his experience-near participation with the people of the New World.

The Nahua elite also made itself heard, as it becomes clear to anyone who chooses to step away from Eurocentrism. The poorest of the poor, women, and other groups had more difficulty, since their case was only represented by others, often in minimalist descriptions. Still, the Nahua remained 'voiced', and they expressed themselves in ultra-European modes, in Native modes, with all their multiplicity. In an exercise in transculturation,<sup>353</sup> they used European opportunities such as that one presented by Sahagún's compendium.

Only recently, the indigenous people's voices and versions of history have begun to resound among scholars and activists. However, still today the dialogue is internal and field specific. The value of Sahagún's four hundred year old texts resides in the potential

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<sup>352</sup> Alfredo López Austin. "The Reserach Method of Sahagún: The Questionnaires." *Sixteenth Century Mexico: The Work of Sahagún*. Munro S. Edmonson, Ed. A School of American Research Book. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974.

<sup>353</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, 1992. P. 6. Pratt defines transculturation as a "phenomenon of the contact zone." It is the dynamic process through which "subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture."

trickle down effect of its information into main stream society. The information he recorded may reach out to the common people and begin to adjust the stereotypes imposed on indigenous people, and the historic assumptions that still today function to subjugate those people imagined as the vanquished, the voiceless, those who somehow vanished. The works of scholars like Miguel León-Portilla, Munro Edmonson, Arthur J.O. Anderson, Thelma D. Sullivan, Alfredo López Austin, Angel Maria Garibay K., Inga Clendinnen, and Charles Dibble stand at the beginning of the process of transforming popular perceptions by using Sahagún's works. Translations such as the one written by Garibay of Fray Bernardino's *Historia*, and texts such as León-Portilla's publication of indigenous versions of the Conquest, in his 1962 and 1992 *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, and Inga Clendinnen's 1991 publication of her study *The Aztec: An Interpretation*, together with a series of essays by Austin, Anderson, Sullivan, and Dibble, among others, in Edmonson's collection *Sixteenth Century Mexico: The Work of Sahagún*, all using material gathered by the Friar, have made the indigenous voices more available than before to scholars, students, and interested member's of the public. Sahagún's works in this venture are priceless.

As León-Portilla wrote: "[A] few remarkable missionaries, particularly Bernardino de Sahagún [...], undertook to gather up whatever they could of indigenous literature. [...His] major accomplishment was to save a great many of the old songs and narratives that were still faith fully remembered after the Conquest."<sup>354</sup> The translations from

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<sup>354</sup> Miguel León-Portilla. *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992. P. xlvi-xvlii.

Náhuatl sources would not be possible without Sahagún's and a few of his contemporaries' Náhuatl studies. His knowledge still makes him an invaluable source for those trying to access the pre-Hispanic indigenous experience, and those seeking to understand the changes and accommodations made by the Nahuas. That specific knowledge can function to break down Eurocentric popular myths, and to promote further study of the self-representations of the 'voices-less-often-heard.'

Sahagún's encyclopedic work, in spite of Sahaguntine<sup>355</sup> contamination, unintentionally allowed particular aspects of the indigenous world to represent themselves because the building of the compendium depended on the recruitment of indigenous helpers and informants. The Friar's agendas and feelings about the Nahuas, as conflicted and equivocal as they were, somehow coexisted, not only within the man, but with the Nahuas elite's own agendas, without common agreement. Those divergent expressive desires managed to coalesce into the *Historia*, while each side arguably missed each other in the exchange. Fray Bernardino's work, and the indigenous participation can only be understood by accepting the multiplicity and the ambiguity of the exchange. Its significance is well rooted on the unintended, and perhaps inadvertent dialogue that was born, both between the Franciscan and the Nahuas, and between the sixteenth Century and today.

The strange dance between Sahagún's voice and the Nahuas', where seemingly each side missed the steps the other made, introduced a process that functioned at levels

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<sup>355</sup> James Lockhart, 1992. P. 582.

made up of individuals and small communities. The Conquest was more complex than the grandiose machinations of an omnipresent, all-powerful empire made up of homogenous Europeans. The conquered were not just a two continent (plus its isthmus) wide tribe of unified aborigines: The Pan-Indians. Sahagún's compendium showed how in the meeting of worlds with little, if anything, in common, participants scrambled to understand, to see as familiar what was not. In the process, they mistook each other in what James Lockhart called, 'double mistaken identity.'<sup>356</sup>

Sadly, the exchange was asymmetrical, and although each side effectively affected and changed the other, the disproportionate attrition rates among the indigenous population, "the general dominance of the Spaniards, and the fact that they came in sufficient numbers to create a viable"<sup>357</sup> society, eventually created a huge group of dispossessed people in their own homeland. Their dispossession has endured through time and manifests itself today in their generally poor living conditions, their lack of access to power, the violation of their human, traditional property and cultural rights, and their appropriation as the class of people, still defined today under Aristotelian principles, who should properly do the jobs that the Euro-Westeners do not wish to do.

Sahagún, adopted by modern scholars, and the Nahua voices, translated by specialists, have the power to transcend time and break the stereotypes that define indigenous social, economic, and political reality. The Conqueror was not a providential,

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<sup>356</sup> James Lockhart. The Nahuas After The Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Century Through Eighteenth Centuries. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992. P. 445.

<sup>357</sup> James Lockhart. P. 435.

self-asserted hero, and the indigenous people were not savages, but the representatives of multicultural perspectives, and a set of cosmologies like no other the West had ever know.

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