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Indigenous Writing and Literacy in Colonial Mexico

Kevin Terraciano and Matthew Restall

*Ma quimatican Yn quexquichtin quitasque yhuan
quipohuasque Ynin esCritura de Benta ticchihua Yn
tehuantin...*

Let those know who should see and read this instrument
of sale made by us...

*cin ualic u >ibtabal in testamento tu tanil in yum Batab y
Justicias...*

I state my will for it to be written down before the batab
and magistrates...

yodzanacahui tutu yaha dzaha ñudzahui...

Let this document in the "Mixtec" language be read...¹

Introduction to Indigenous Writing

Soon after the arrival of Europeans in the land that they called New Spain, Franciscan and Dominican friars taught the art of alphabetic writing to members of the indigenous elite. As a result, indigenous peoples during the colonial Mexican period produced (mostly legal) documentation in their own languages using the Roman alphabet. The first group to do this were the Nahuas (sometimes called "Aztecs") of central Mexico; material in Nahuatl has survived in greater quantities than sources from other

language-groups and has been studied far more by scholars.² Additional work has also been published on Yucatec Maya and Cakchiquel sources and, more recently, on Mixtec documentation. There are also sources, known of but unstudied by scholars, in Zapotec, Chocho, Quiché, Otomí, Tarascan and no doubt other Mesoamerican languages.³ Smaller bodies of documents that have not surfaced or survived may have been written in lesser-spoken languages (see Figure 1: Map of Mesoamerican Languages).

This chapter makes general remarks about indigenous-language documentation of colonial Mexico, but our specific comments refer only to the sources with which we are familiar--those in Nahuatl, Mixtec and (Yucatec) Maya. Our concern is to draw attention to the existence of these sources, to the ethnohistorical work in which they have been utilized, and to the potential this material holds for future study. In discussing the characteristics of indigenous sources in three different languages, we are hereby contributing a comparative framework that has yet to receive adequate attention, as well as working towards the disintegration of the term "Indian"--found by ethnohistorians to be increasingly inaccurate and unhelpful, save in its reflection of the Spaniards' racial perspective.

Preconquest Precedents

The indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica had their own systems of written communication, ranging from the hieroglyphs of the Maya and Zapotec to the pictographs and painted codices of the Mixtec and Nahua. The earliest examples of such writing are painted or carved on stone and pottery; those from the immediate preconquest period are painted on deer hide or native paper. Such texts tended to be restricted to the recording of dates, place names, personal names, and historical, mythical, or cosmological events; some pictorials elaborated entire origin myths and ritual, divinatory information, and approached an extended narrative form of expression. Literacy was presumably a privilege of the priestly and noble classes.

Although no Mesoamerican group had developed a full syllabary by the time of the conquest, syllabic writing was one of many devices employed. Indigenous writing combined pictorial representation (direct depiction by images) with a sophisticated numerical and calendrical system, logograms or images (which conveyed a word or idea), as well as phonetic representation of indi-

vidual syllables or roots of words. The possibilities of phonetic expression were expanded by the use of homonyms or "tone puns." All three fundamental techniques often operated simultaneously. At any rate, preconquest writing systems were not less capable of communication than the alphabetic system that ultimately replaced them.

The style and method of interpreting late preconquest-style codices were likely extremely subtle and complex. They were not "read" in the conventional sense of reading to oneself silently, but were rendered in a more public setting, like scores for performance; the meaning of the texts was elaborated orally and was subject to extrapolation with each recounting. Thus, there was probably never one "proper" reading, performance, or interpretation. It is unclear how interpretive the writing system was and to what extent memory and context guided the speaker/reader. Its rendition was flexible but not entirely subjective and definitely not random. Many of the texts were meant to be visibly displayed in a public setting before an informed audience.

Clearly, the existence of a time-honored and sophisticated writing system which included syllabic notation facilitated the adoption of the alphabet. This fact helps explain the readiness with which the Nahua, Mixtec, Maya and other native groups took to generating documentation in their own languages using the Roman alphabet.⁴ In all three of these languages, postconquest terminology for the instruments and act of reading and writing is drawn from the preconquest tradition; for example, the indigenous word for "paper" continued to be used throughout the colonial period: *amatl* (Nahuatl); *tutu* (Mixtec); and *hun* (Maya). The Andean indigenous peoples, despite being fully sedentary, had not developed a writing system by the time of the conquest. Consequently, there are but a few examples of colonial-era documents in Quechua (see Chapter 5), and no extensive indigenous-language notarial tradition has yet come to light in any area outside Mesoamerica.⁵ In the Philippines, a native syllabic writing system (using characters instead of pictorial images) already existed and may have competed with the Roman alphabet introduced by Spaniards. Despite the existence of postconquest Tagalog texts, there is little evidence of a widely-practiced notarial tradition in this area at this time (see Chapter 7).

The well-developed writing tradition in Mesoamerica did not preclude the primarily oral transmission of potential texts such as speeches, chronicles and perhaps even testaments before the intro-

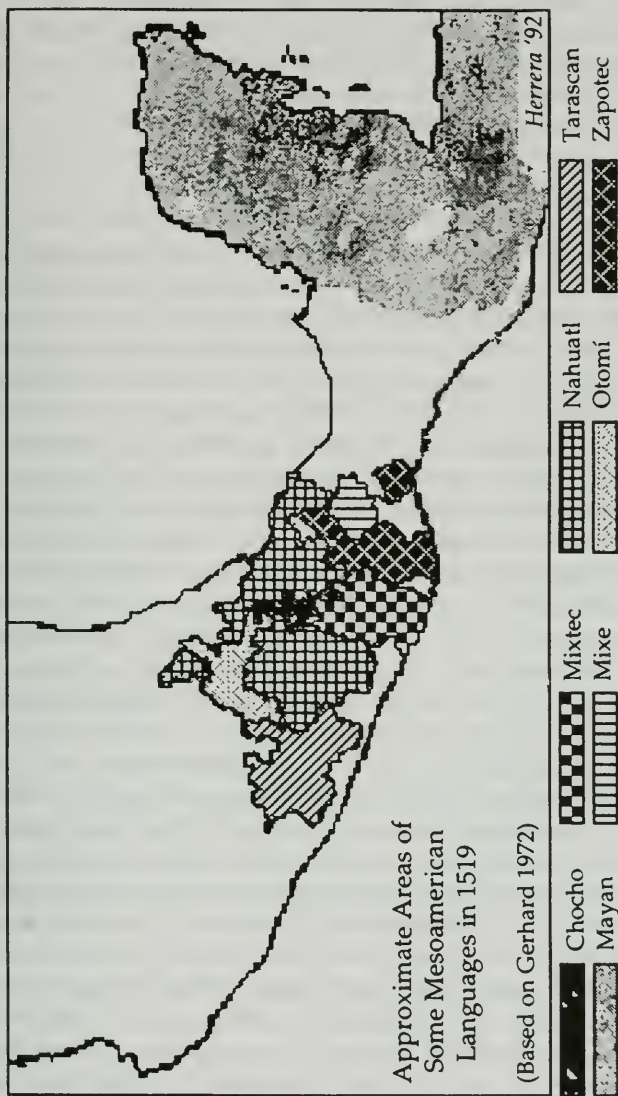


Figure 1: Map of Mesoamerican Languages

duction of the alphabet. Preconquest writing always complemented the oral tradition. Likewise, this oral tradition surfaces in the style and context of much postconquest indigenous documentation. While Mesoamerican writing may have eased the transition to the many genres of Spanish legal documentation, it proved difficult to reconcile this primarily pictorial writing with the exacting requirements of the Spanish legal system.

Postconquest Literacy

In the 1520s, friars in central Mexico began to experiment with pictorial communication but concentrated on rendering spoken Nahuatl in alphabetic form. Beginning in the 1540s, documents of many types and styles were produced in central Mexico as alphabetic writing in Nahuatl spread rapidly to become a dominant form of expression in the latter half of the century. The first extant Mixtec documents did not appear until the late 1560s, in part because the Mixtec pictorial tradition was too inveterate to be quickly superseded by pure alphabetism. Indeed, there are scores of pictorial manuscripts from the early sixteenth-century Mixteca, some of which contain alphabetic glosses in Mixtec (or Nahuatl or Chocho).⁶ With significant regional variation, alphabetic text at first complemented, then shared space with, and eventually displaced pictorial text. The pictorial tradition in Yucatan, on the other hand, was far weaker, and the syllabic system perhaps more developed, so that alphabetic writing in Maya took root in the 1550s, just a decade after the conquest of the region.

In central Mexico literacy first passed from friars to their indigenous aides, and then to the *altepetl* (Nahua municipal community) elite. A similar process occurred in the Mixteca and in Yucatan. Many of the earliest examples of postconquest documents in Mixtec are authored by *yya toniñe* (native municipal rulers/governors, referred to as *caciques* by Spaniards), while the first postconquest generation of literate Maya appear to have come from the native ruling families of Yucatan. Literacy persisted among the Mixtec high nobility throughout the colonial period, but in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Yucatan there are signs that few *batabs* (native municipal governors) and virtually no other officials beyond the community notary were literate.

It is fair to say that in all three areas the indigenous *escribano* (notary) was the primary practitioner of literacy. Most documents in native languages can be defined as notarial, in that they were

written by the community notary, authored by local officials, and more or less conformed to Spanish legal practice. Unlike Spanish notarial material, most indigenous documents were products of the municipal community (the Nahuatl *altepetl*; the Mixtec *ñuu*; the Maya *cah*). Unlike their Spanish counterparts, native notaries were members of the local ruling elite and enjoyed a social standing close to that of the governor (the Nahuatl *tlatoani*; the Mixtec *yya toniñe*; the Maya *batab*). Native notaries were an integral part of the local political structure; for the Nahuatl and the Maya the office was a prestigious rung on the ladder that could lead eligible nobles to the governorship, but the Mixtec notary, despite being noble, never seems to have gone on to become *yya toniñe*.⁷

Literacy among Nahuatl and Mixtec, unlike Maya, spread beyond the male elite to include some men of lesser social status and, in the Mixtec case, some noble women. There is no evidence that any Nahuatl or Maya women were literate before the twentieth century. The nature of corporate documentation directed by the all-male *cabildo* and notaries tended to exclude indigenous women from the act of writing. Though women are represented in almost every genre in all three language areas, only in Mixtec-language sources have we found examples of women signing their own names to documents and, in a few isolated cases, apparently writing entire records.⁸

Distribution and Genre

A study of Maya notarial material concluded that there were five features of such documents which may be broadly applied to notarial texts in Nahuatl and Mixtec as well.⁹ These characteristics include a date of completion, provenance, signatures or names identifying witnesses and/or local officers, an elaborate opening, and an explicit ending. The central importance of the community in indigenous society (*altepetl*; *ñuu*; *cah*) is the chief link between these features, in that the opening and closing phrases often contained formulas that stated the community of origin and the *cabildo* officers ruling in that year. Most of these documents were internal records written for a local audience.

Nahuatl-language writing evolved evenly throughout central Mexico, spreading rapidly from Spanish centers to most Nahuatl *altepetl*. By 1570, at the latest, every *altepetl* had its own notary. Sources written in Nahuatl first appear as early as the 1540s, reaching a peak in terms of variety and quality, and perhaps quan-

tity, in the period 1580-1610. After 1770 writing in Spanish eclipsed Nahuatl-language script, partly as a result of official decrees that Nahuatl cease to be used for notarial purposes, but mainly because many communities were now able to do so. Consequently, the numbers of surviving Nahuatl documents decline sharply and virtually disappear by the turn of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ We must remember that surviving documents represent a mere fraction of the hundreds of thousands of indigenous-language sources produced in New Spain. The total number of extant Nahua sources is difficult to estimate, as it has been growing rapidly in the last fifteen years; in addition, the varied nature and length of texts makes it hard to define what is a single document and what is a corpus. Suffice it to say that in collections in Mexico, the United States, and Europe, there are probably tens of thousands of manuscripts.¹¹ The sources are complemented by material only now surfacing from other parts of Mesoamerica, where Nahuatl was written by both Nahua satellite communities and non-Nahua indigenous groups in lieu of their own spoken languages (such as Amuzgo, Mazatec, Trique, Ixcatec, Chocho, Cuicatec, Chatino, Totorame, Mixe, etc.), as far south as Guatemala and north to Saltillo.

Maya documents have likewise survived from the entire colonial Yucatec area, but their temporal distribution contrasts strongly with that of central Mexico. The sixteenth century is not well represented in Yucatan--a question, perhaps, of survival, as Maya writing skills appear fully developed within a generation of the conquest (1542). Manuscript numbers increase steadily after 1640, climaxing in the very period of written Nahuatl's decline (1770-1820). The last Maya notarial document that we have seen is dated 1850, a tribute to the perseverance of Maya-language writing in the relative absence of Spanish-language speakers. Variations in quality tend to be regional, rather than temporal (a reflection of a general Yucatec pattern). Only very recently has an effort been made to locate all Maya-language sources; so far, the total is some 1,500, but this many again may surface in the coming decades.¹² Collections exist in the United States and in archives in Seville, Mexico City, and Mérida, Yucatan. Unlike in other parts of New Spain, sub-regional collections in Yucatan have been lost, destroyed, sold, or acquired by archival and private collections in Mérida.

Mixtec-language documents were produced in the major centers of Dominican activity by the 1560s, though the length and sophis-

tication of these texts, and extensive *doctrinas* printed in 1567 and 1568, would indicate a much earlier date for the advent of alphabetic writing in the Mixteca Alta. By 1600, writing was well-known in all the larger Mixtec communities. The peak period of quantity and quality was 1670-1720, when writing in central areas such as Yanhuitlan and Teposcolula coincided with its practice in a number of smaller communities, many of which had won independence from parent municipalities during this time. Over seventy ñuu (pueblos) are represented and few years pass without a sample of Mixtec writing, until the first decade of the nineteenth century; extant documents abate steadily after 1770, ending in 1807. Bilingual Mixtecs were speaking and writing Spanish as early as the late seventeenth century, so that the decrease of Mixtec-language texts did not necessarily signal the end of Mixtec literacy. Thus, the temporal decline in Mixtec-language documentation seems to represent a midpoint in terms of the evolution of Nahuatl and Maya writing. The search for Mixtec-language sources in local and national archives has only recently begun but has already uncovered several hundred documents, most from the Mixteca Alta region.¹³

By quality of documentation we are referring not only to the legibility, length and condition of the papers--often ravaged by water, humidity, fungus, worms, ink acids, and maltreatment--but to the ethnohistorical potential of the sources. By this definition, a testament that consists solely of formula and a few lines is not as useful as one in which the testator details his/her estate and perhaps digresses with informal comments on the property and heirs in question. Similarly, a corpus of the same genre enables the reconstruction of social patterns, although the occasional single unique document can prove invaluable in revealing practices usually assumed and thus not recorded by the indigenous notary. Criminal records, for example, frequently diverge from a predictable, structured formula and reveal information on indigenous patterns of behavior which are otherwise difficult to address.

An obvious characteristic of indigenous writing is its visual appearance. The usual tidy clarity of native script stands in contrast to the often hurried, cursive hand of Spaniards.¹⁴ This difference may be due to the influence of the more precise clerical hand on native notaries, to the high volume of writing demanded of Spanish notaries, and perhaps even to the tight and ordered style of traditional native depiction as found in codices, bas-re-

xcahuas de la guerra de la guerra
 mēa de la guerra de la guerra

X y naxca castoh nabi ylhuitl nemi meztli fagerya
 ynhuac domingo tica bngmi thati andres xololteatl ali
 comoni dnd melabac bngmitac juāher nandez yhuā
 xpisth ynto a ju yhuā ju garza yhuā matheo gar
 cia nabi oia thera ^{te} o y m fa melabac yhuā bngmi
 thati andres ali yhuā cē abatl bngmitac ynto aca
 tharima ynhuac qm m m dmi bntli d

yaa x mi y e tla matli bntli y abatl bntla tlayey amobay
 pak yhuā yey hama may x catl yhuā bnpali pē
 sos ynpān ma mli pē sos mochi ypatiuh y abatl
 y tē p p u t y o m o m d a d b n t l a t l a

X y n p a p a c e t l a u t l b n t l a t l a c o b n q m i a b a y a i b a u h
 yhuā bna ma na cē abatl bna y na mic bngm bica ti
 nemi bncalagmice altētl bng o b ynpāva bmo sy
 tēgm totatz bngm tē m i t t u t z i t e t o p i l e b n
 xub yma bac b j t a c o m i x t h a b a c a b n a m a c u b h u a l a n
 b y p a p a g m i t o a a n d r e s m e x i c a l q m i t o a m a p a y n e
 q n i l p i z y m a q u i n q u e a z q u e y n a b a c m a c e b a l i x g l e s i a
 y u b g n i q u i t o a x n a b a c t a t u a m i y n a b a c f s c a l a u h q m
 t o a t l a t o a m i b c o l h u a l a z c e a t l d e s i n y a u h e s t a c i a y h u ā
 p a x t o y a z y y a m a u h t o t a t z i q m i a g n i z b j q u e q m
 e o z q u e n i m o c o t e q m i z m i m a t i c h i h u a z q u e s e n t t e c i a
 y u b q m b n q m i t e t l a t o a m i y h u ā f s c a l y n p a p a m i c o p e l a
 b q u a l a m i a n d r e s m e x i c a l y p a p a b n t l a t i c a b i c o m o m d a d
 x y h u ā c a c i b a t l y n t o a m a s s i y c h a n m o b i a y m e a u h
 y a h u e t a u h q m i b i a t i n e m i a u h a x t a b n t l a t i y n p i t z i
 y e b a t l b n g m i t l a t i t e m a z a l i b m o t e m a l y h u ā c e u b a t l
 y n t o a d a n t h o a l a g m i y c h a q m i c h i b a y m e a u h y e z t l a t o h
 m e c a t e q m i a b a z y m m i c m o c h i p a y c h a m o t l a t i c i b a t l
 y n m a a b a l d e n s a n d u

X y h u ā t l a x i g m i q m i c h i b a u t l i m o c h i p a t l a b a n a y n
 q u a m o c h i b a a t l d e s y h u ā q m i m a c a b e t l i c o m i m a c e b a l i
 m o t l a t e y c h a n y n t o a j u

Figure 2: Nahuatl handwriting from 1575.

liefs, *lienzos*, and other pictorial genres (see Figures 2 and 3: Comparison of sixteenth-century indigenous and Spanish handwriting).

We might organize indigenous-language material into two categories: official notarial documentation, defined as legal *cabildo*-generated documents fulfilling the requirements of the Spanish ecclesiastical or civil court system; and unofficial, non-notarial manuscripts. With respect to central Mexico, much of the unofficial material has been classified by scholars as "Classical Nahuatl" and includes poems, annals and dialogues. There is also a fair amount of personal correspondence and records and a few census reports.¹⁵ For the Yucatan, unofficial writing includes the Books of Chilam Balam (compilations of fables, myth/history, calendrical and medicinal information; see Chapter 4), with the so-called "chronicles" falling in between the two categories. In the Mixteca, personal letters and records constitute the unofficial category. Nahuatl and Mixtec "primordial titles," like the Yucatec chronicles, performed both official and unofficial roles and seemed to combine features of many genres at once (see Chapter 3). Naturally, the more these genres are studied in detail, the more simple categories become unhelpful. Much indigenous writing fulfilled functions in both the Spanish legal world and the local sphere of the native community--testaments are a prime example of this convergence.

Official notarial documentation comprises the vast majority of extant writing. Table 1 below lists the principal, known surviving genres and their incidence in the three areas under study. The intent is to give a broad impression; we use four relative levels of incidence (abundant, common, rare, and none).¹⁶ A few brief words might be said about each genre.

About half of all surviving Maya and Mixtec documents are testaments; wills in Nahuatl are also plentiful and may account for a similar proportion of material in that language. The success of this genre can be explained by the fact that it represented a continuation of an indigenous oral tradition, and fulfilled both religious and secular requirements of the Church and the native communities. The existence of a model Nahuatl will in the 1569 edition of fray Alonso de Molina's *Confesionario Mayor*, and evidence of the inspection of Maya wills by eighteenth-century Yucatec bishops, demonstrate that the basic format of the native will was imposed by the Spaniards. A comparative study of the opening religious formula of early modern wills in Maya, Nahuatl, Spanish, and

TABLE 1: Incidence of Genres

<u>Genre</u>	<u>Nahuatl</u>	<u>Mixtec</u>	<u>Maya</u>
Testaments	abundant	abundant	abundant
Land transactions	common	common	common
Sales of other property	common	common	none
Petitions	common	common	common
Election records	common	rare	common
Criminal records	common	common	rare
Ratifications of			
Spanish records	none	none	common
Community budget records	rare	rare	rare
Tribute records	rare	rare	rare
Records of church business	common	rare	rare
Census Reports (<i>padrones</i>)	rare	none	none
Church-sponsored			
published texts	abundant	rare	rare

English reveals a common origin of form, while also showing that indigenous notaries varied this format according to community tradition and practice, ultimately reshaping it to suit their own needs.¹⁷ For indigenous communities, testaments not only allowed the testator to die in a state of grace, to provide for his/her burial and purgatory mass, and to settle his/her estate, but also gave the community a written, legal record of property distribution and genealogical relationships. Thus, the role of indigenous testaments was far more expansive than that of the Spanish will. Many members of the native community acted as effective witnesses to the testamentary ritual, validated by the presence and signatures of the *cabildo* officers.¹⁸

After wills, the best represented genre is that of land transactions. Wills were in a sense also land documents, but legal transactions involving the exchange of land were more specific. The process of sale or donation of land under Spanish law entailed a number of stages, some of which were often not observed by either Spaniards or natives; furthermore, indigenous use of the relevant Spanish legal terms tended to be inconsistent. It is therefore not practical to break this genre down further, beyond observing that the most common sub-genres were bills of sale (*escritura/carta de venta*) and acknowledgments (*conocimiento*, sometimes called a title, deed, or receipt). Sub-categories of land documents, as well as civil categories of land classification, are abundant for central

Mexico; in the Yucatan, a common sub-genre is that of the boundary agreement; in the Mixteca, unlike Yucatan, there are records of land rentals and sales of other property, such as businesses. Geographical determinants appear to have been central to regional variation in land tenure; these variants have been studied to some degree by ethnohistorians.¹⁹

The remaining genres are unevenly represented; they are presented and analyzed in much of the work already cited.²⁰ We shall provide only a few examples in this limited context. Spanish legal investigations of criminal acts alleged in indigenous communities tended to produce more correspondence and testimony in Mixtec than they did in Nahuatl and Maya. Likewise Maya cabildo ratifications of Spanish business in rural Yucatan was a genre apparently not found in other regions. Additionally, there is a paucity of church records in Maya (such as dispensations to marry and lists of marriages). It is presently unclear why and to what extent such differences may exist; perhaps the survival of certain genres and languages is nothing more than a matter of simple fortune. In any case, the extant record may not be an accurate guide to the existence or absence of certain writing genres in a given region, for many documents have been lost or damaged over the centuries.

Church-sponsored materials done mainly under the auspices of the Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians and Jesuits were often the first indigenous-language alphabetic texts to be produced and usually the only writing to be printed. Manuscripts and imprints cover a wide variety of genres: dictionaries and grammars; confessional manuals and *doctrinas*; songs, plays, and ethnographic works such as the *Florentine Codex* (the latter exist for Nahuatl only). The impression that friars often took sole responsibility for these works should not conceal the fact that indigenous aides and bilingual (and sometimes trilingual) speakers were at least contributing authors, and often participated in every level of production and printing. It also appears that many of these ecclesiastical texts were intended for the use of literate indigenous laity as well as clerics.²¹ There are about one hundred extant examples of Nahuatl church-sponsored publications (see Chapter 6), but there are less than a dozen for each of the other major Mesoamerican languages.

Multilingualism

The preeminence of written Nahuatl in the central area affected the development of writing in other indigenous languages, a result both of preconquest Nahua dominance and the prominence given to Nahuatl and the Nahua area by the Spaniards. While a province as relatively isolated as Yucatan reveals no written use of Nahuatl, this language was a *lingua franca* in much of the rest of New Spain (including coastal Guatemala); in Oaxaca, Nahuatl served as a mediating language between Spaniards and relatively small indigenous groups, like the Chocho, Cuicatec, Mixe, Chatino, and Trique. Nahuatl-language documentation in the Mixteca Alta predates alphabetic Mixtec writing for a brief period, but then is quickly supplanted in all but the most peripheral areas. The importance of Nahuatl is especially evident in the case of interpreters and notaries in sixteenth-century Oaxaca, who were often fluent in Nahuatl and one other language. Two interpreters would often be necessary for any translation assignment: one who knew Spanish and Nahuatl and another who spoke Mixtec and Nahuatl. Nahuatl was so instrumental in this early period that the term "Nahuatlato" became synonymous with "interpreter," even when this *lingua franca* was not one of the languages involved.²²

Legal proceedings in New Spain tended to be bilingual. Whenever indigenous communities were involved as plaintiffs or defendants, indigenous-language testaments and land transaction records were placed in (or copied into) the case as evidence. The proceedings themselves, with the exception of the petitions that initiated the case, would be in Spanish. Some notable exceptions have survived (for example, a 1746 Amecameca case in Nahuatl, and three in Mixtec from Yanhuitlan in the 1680s), prompting the possibility that legal proceedings between indigenous groups may sometimes have started in the native language or even been carried out in the absence of Spaniards.²³ It seems as if the further an indigenous-language document traveled (in original or copied form) from its originating native community towards the pinnacle of the Spanish court system (Mexico City, or even Seville), the greater the likelihood of its survival.

Studies of the impact of Spanish on Nahuatl and Maya has made possible a comparison between the evolution of two major indigenous languages since the conquest.²⁴ Nahuatl evolved by contact with Spanish in three stages: the first extended from the arrival of Spaniards to around 1550, when linguistic change was min-

imal and confined to the adoption of Spanish personal names. Nahuas employed neologisms to describe newly introduced items in their own language. In stage two (around 1550-1650), Nahuas freely borrowed nouns of all types, revealing their increased contact with Spaniards. Stage three (1650 onward) was characterized by the full borrowing of verbs, particles and expressions, representing the many changes occurring within indigenous society itself.²⁵

In comparison to the three stages outlined for Nahuatl, Maya appears to have almost immediately entered into "stage two" and remained in that acculturative state well into the nineteenth century. Variations from *cah* to *cah* do not appear to constitute an acculturative ripple-effect from Spanish centers, but rather reflect a broader pattern of *cah* individualism. Mixtec seems to exhibit Nahuatl's basic evolutionary pattern, though somewhat delayed as a result of a weaker Spanish presence, and shows greater regional variation. For example, Mixtec's transition to "stage three" may have occurred at least a quarter-century after Nahuatl's mid-seventeenth century shift, depending on the proximity of a community to a Mixtec/Hispanic center (especially the road running from Mexico City to Oaxaca). Change in Mixtec seems to correspond to the development and evolution of writing in that language, with greater retention in smaller, peripheral and monolingual places, in the relative absence of Spaniards and mestizos.

These linguistic changes, as general barometers of cultural interaction, reveal a complex process of adaptation and rejection, a tenacious maintenance of indigenous traditions as well as a willingness to embrace change when it was perceived as useful and/or prestigious. Thus, in some respects, continuity took the form of change. One aspect of this interaction which our brief comparative sketch of linguistic change does not directly represent is the degree to which indigenous individuals became bilingual and bicultural, either choosing from two terms or from two semantic worlds, or employing both, as deemed useful or applicable. Our rapidly evolving perspective of this process, and its relation to indigenous identity and consciousness, is a result of studying indigenous literacy during the colonial period.

Conclusion: Implications of Indigenous Literacy

The elaboration of the nature of Nahua self-perception in recent ethnohistorical work can be confirmed by the study of Mixtec and Maya material.²⁶ The discovery that Nahuas thought of

themselves primarily and overwhelmingly as members of a specific altepetl compares favorably with the revelation of a Maya self-identity and world-view based exclusively on the cah. Mixtec identity was clearly associated with the local ñuu but was complemented and transcended, at least in the Mixteca Alta, by a distinct linguistic and ethnic identity which originated in preconquest times. In both notarial and church texts, people from this region consistently referred to themselves, their region, and their language with the term *Ñudzahui* (see Chapter 3).

The most visible expression of community identity, autonomy, and empowerment, was the notarial document in Nahuatl, Mixtec, or Maya. Indigenous writing was cultivated by the friars and encouraged by civil authorities in order to facilitate the evangelization and colonial administration of the "Indians." Indigenous communities took the alphabet and gained access through the Spanish genres of notarial writing to the Spanish court system. Native communities used these skills and opportunities to fight for local land rights and political privileges--often confronting and sometimes prevailing over Spaniards. The strength of the indigenous community is evident in the fact that individual members could challenge each other using the court system without destroying the integrity of the community. This is not to say that indigenous litigants always gained justice; there was in many cases an inevitable bias toward Spaniards, despite the frequent provision of free attorneys to native communities. The inability of the system to cope with incoming volume could prolong cases for decades. Yet most native lawsuits were against other natives. Furthermore, part of the reason for this volume was the readiness of indigenous communities to take advantage of their access to the system, especially the right of appeal--against which only the king was immune.²⁷

The transition from native-language writing to Spanish did not spell the end of indigenous literacy and need not signify the disempowerment of native communities. In many of the more centrally located areas, writing in Spanish became more practical and widely recognized, much like alphabetic writing had been more pragmatic than pictorials some two to three centuries earlier. Indigenous communities adopted alphabetic writing to preserve their own traditions while accommodating demands of the external Spanish world. The eventual use of Spanish reflects deep-seated changes within indigenous communities as they came into increasing contact with a steadily growing mestizo population.

Indigenous literacy ultimately facilitated the function of local indigenous self-government and daily business, recording the details of political office, land tenure, property exchange, the wishes of the dying, the complaints of the injured, and the collection, expenditure and payment of community funds and taxes. If this is the information of the text, the subtext conveys the matter of sociopolitical organization and of social relations among and within the subgroups of the altepetl, ñuu, and cah. Our knowledge of indigenous patterns and daily practices has been revolutionized by the study of these native-language sources.

Notes

1. Nahuatl: 1738 sale; McAfee Collection, UCLA Research Library. Maya: Testament of Rosa Balam, Ebtun, 1812; document # 269 in Roys 1939. Mixtec: 1684 criminal record; Archivo Judicial de Teposcolula, (Oaxaca), Criminal 5: 581.

2. See the historiographical essays in Lockhart 1991.

3. For recent studies using Maya sources see Thompson 1978, Restall 1992 and Sigal forthcoming; Hill (see 1991) has studied Cakchiquel sources; Terraciano forthcoming, uses Mixtec sources; Terraciano and Lisa Sousa have seen sources in the Oaxaca-region languages listed above, as well as rare samples of Cuicatec and Mixe writing. Studies of individual Maya and Mixtec documents by Restall and Terraciano have appeared in the *UCLA Historical Journal* volumes 9 (1989), 10 (1990) and 11 (1991). "Mesoamerica" is an anthropological term referring to a cultural area which to a large extent persisted after the Conquest and roughly coincided with the colonial jurisdiction called New Spain, which extended from modern-day New Mexico to El Salvador.

4. Karttunen 1982: 388-89.

5. It is thought that a system of colored, knotted strings called the *quipu* served a record-keeping function among the preconquest Andean groups similar to writing in Mesoamerica.

6. The early use of Nahuatl as a *lingua franca* in the Mixteca, the friars' difficulty with the tonality and dialectal variations of Mixtec, and the relatively small number of Dominicans in the area, all contributed to the delay in Mixtec alphabetic writing.

7. These remarks inevitably do not do justice to the complexity and variation of indigenous community politics (Wood 1984; Haskett 1985; Horn 1989; Restall 1992; Terraciano forthcoming).

8. The first known, extant archival document written in Mixtec concerns one doña María Lopez, who apparently could read and write; she el-

egantly signed her own testament and bequeathed several books, including a copy of one of the first published doctrinas. Significantly, this document is accompanied by a preconquest-style pictorial portion documenting the genealogy of the cacica. AGN Tierras v. 59, exp. 2. There is an example of a Nahuatl woman (though probably mestiza) signing documents: doña Petronila de Hinojosa from Cuernavaca, in Haskett 1991: 94.

9. Restall 1992: 44-46.

10. See Haskett 1985.

11. These sources are being electronically recorded in a vast catalog and correspondence system, a computer user service called Nahuatl-1. See also Lockhart 1992: 434; Haskett 1985: chap. 3.

12. See Restall 1992; also William Hanks of the University of Chicago is currently cataloging Maya sources.

13. Terraciano forthcoming: chap. 2. Ronald Spores of Vanderbilt University is currently engaged in archival construction and restoration in the Mixteca.

14. See the various samples of indigenous-language handwriting at the beginning of each chapter below, and compare with typical sixteenth-century Spanish script.

15. See Karttunen 1982: 412.

16. Table 1 is based on a survey of the archival sources by the authors (see also Restall 1992 and Terraciano forthcoming), with assistance on Nahuatl sources from James Lockhart, personal communication.

17. See Restall 1992: 46-49. Mixtec and Cakchiquel wills also conformed to the basic structure of this opening religious formula. The Molina Testament is presented by Lockhart 1992: 468-74.

18. Nahuatl wills are the subject of Cline 1981, 1986; Cline and León-Portilla 1984, and are given much attention in Anderson, Berdan and Lockhart 1986 and Lockhart 1992. Maya wills are a major source of Thompson 1978 and Restall 1992. Mixtec wills are studied in Terraciano forthcoming. Hill 1991 includes some discussion of Cakchiquel wills.

19. The most detailed studies of Nahuatl land practices are Wood 1984, Horn 1989, and Lockhart 1992; see also Harvey and Prem 1984, and Harvey 1991. For a comparison of Maya and Nahuatl land tenure and description see Restall 1992: chap. 6. Terraciano forthcoming draws Mixtec-Nahuatl-Maya comparisons. Spores 1967 also discusses Mixtec land use.

20. Especially, for Nahuatl: Cline 1986, Wood 1984, Haskett 1985, Horn 1989, Lockhart 1992; for Maya: Roys 1939, Thompson 1978, Restall 1992; for Mixtec: Terraciano forthcoming.

21. Sell, forthcoming: chap. 2.; Terraciano, forthcoming: chap. 2. See also Chapter 7 below for a discussion of a Tagalog text directed to a literate indigenous audience.

22. "Nahuatlato" is "one who speaks Nahuatl" or literally "one who speaks clearly and intelligibly." See Terraciano, forthcoming for a discussion of Nahua and Mixtec interaction in the sixteenth century.

23. For the Nahuatl case, see Karttunen and Lockhart 1978.

24. Karttunen 1985; Karttunen and Lockhart 1976; Lockhart 1992; Restall 1992.

25. Karttunen and Lockhart 1976; Lockhart 1992.

26. See Lockhart 1992: 442-446.

27. On the Spanish legal system, see Borah 1982. That most indigenous litigants were suing other natives was partly the result of the demographic balance of New Spain and the relative isolation of most indigenous communities and individuals from Spaniards.

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