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The Northwest of New Spain: Nahuatl in Nayarit, 1652

Jim Braun, Barry Sell and Kevin Terraciano

INTRODUCTION

At this point in the historiography of early colonial Mexico, the importance of indigenous language sources such as testaments, land sales, petitions and correspondence is widely recognized. The translation and analysis of these documents has considerably broadened the perspective on early colonial social history far beyond what had previously been possible utilizing only traditional Spanish language sources. Historians and linguists working with this rich source have begun to balance the scales by allowing the indigenous world to speak for itself.

The overwhelming majority of this work has been done with documents written in Nahuatl, the *lingua franca* of the indigenous peoples of colonial Mesoamerica. Nahuatl influence impacted the outermost reaches of colonial New Spain. In terms of the administration of Indian communities and the attempt to bring them into the sphere of the Spanish legal system, it appears that Spanish authorities found it far more expedient to have Nahuatl-speaking central Mexicans teach outlying indigenous communities to use Nahuatl than to have Spaniards attempt to teach them Spanish. Although Saltillo is the northernmost Spanish town to date to yield Nahuatl documents, this may well be for reasons concerning the survival of documents rather than their creation. Evidence suggests that there were significant numbers of Nahuatl speakers as far

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north as Santa Fe, New Mexico.¹

If there were large numbers of Nahuatl speakers in the far north, the lack of documentation similar to that found in other areas is easily explained by the Pueblo Revolt of 1680-1692 which resulted in the total destruction of all local documentation north of El Paso del Norte for the entire seventeenth century.

To the South, Nahuatl made inroads as far as Nicaragua, though as in the north, verifiable documentation has been found no farther than Guatemala.²

Though a good deal of circumstantial evidence exists to lead us to believe that this practice of Nahuatl documentation was geographically wide-spread, the obvious task at hand is to verify as much of this supposition as possible. It is with this goal in mind that the following documents are presented.

The McAfee Collection at the University of California, Los Angeles, contains sixty-six folders of Nahuatl and Spanish documents covering a broad expanse both geographically and chronologically. Documents come from the regions of central Mexico to the near north, and date from as early as 1564 to as late as 1810. Much of this material has yet to be transcribed or translated.

The Nahuatl documents translated here originated from northwestern Nueva Galicia, from the towns of San Sebastian Huajicori and San Antonio Quiuquinta, in the colonial jurisdiction of Acajoneta, about two hundred miles northwest of Guadalajara. Located in the northwest corner of the state of Nayarit, very close to the border of Sinaloa, all three towns

¹Oral Tradition has it that large numbers of Nahuatl speakers from the Tlaxcala-Puebla region moved en masse as entire communities to Santa Fe. The Franciscan priests at the San Miguel chapel in Santa Fe claim that the original building was built by Tlaxcalans in 1610. The neighborhood surrounding the chapel is to this day called "Analco", a Nahuatl word meaning "place across the water," which is a common place name for such Nahuatl-speaking communities. As further evidence, one need only observe the contemporary Spanish spoken in Hispanic communities along the Rio Arriba region of north central New Mexico to see that it is full of Nahuatl words to this day. For example: chimal < chimalli = a rawhide shield; jumate < xumatl = a ladle made from a gourd; metlcahuatl [remains unaltered] = a pole used for drying skins; shocoque < xococ = to sour; tilma < tilmatli = a short Indian saddle blanket [in Nahuatl tilmatli = cape]; and zoquete < zoquitl = mud or plaster. One of the most interesting examples is the word which speakers of Spanish in the American Southwest use for their language: totacho < to = our, and tahtli = father.

²See *Beyond the Codices*, by Anderson, Berdan, and Lockhart, pp. 190-105. Letter from members of the Council of San Pedro Huehuetlan, Soconusco to Licentiate Francisco Briceno, visitor general in Santiago de Guatemala, 1565.

still exist and can be located on any good contemporary map. [see map at end of article]

The fact that these petitions were written in Nahuatl rather than Spanish is not at all surprising. Nahuatl often served as the official language of non-Nahua indigenous communities. Nahuatl was the best studied and most widely recognized indigenous language in colonial Mexico. Acaponeta, small as it was, had an official Nahuatl/Spanish translator. The real significance of the Huajicori and Quiuiquinta documents is that they now extend the area of known Nahuatl documents to the northwest coastal area bounded by the west by the Pacific Ocean and on the east by the Sierra Madre Occidental. Further, because they originate from this comparatively remote area, both the substance of the documents and the linguistic evidence they supply tell us about not only the social history of the area but reinforce theories of the linguistic development of Nahuatl in the mid-seventeenth century.

At the time of initial Spanish contact, Acaponeta and neighboring Astatlan were the center of an important indigenous state. The principal language was Totorame, a language related to Cora. The settlements were located on artificial mounds along the alluvial plain of the Acaponeta River. The conquest of this area was complete by the 1550's when the Franciscans began to establish churches. However, a series of rebellions and attacks by semi-sedentary Tepehuanes from the mountains destroyed many of these churches, forcing the Spaniards to build a *presidio*³ at Acaponeta. It was not until the 1620's that the Franciscans resettled in the Totorame towns to the north, like Huajicori and Quiuiquinta.⁴

A Franciscan report from Acaponeta written in 1673, two decades after the Nahuatl petitions discussed in this article, by fray Antonio Arias de Saavedra to his superiors in Guadalajara, testifies to the tenuous nature of Spanish settlement on this northern frontier. Characteristically, Arias complains about the persistence of "barbarous ceremonies" and laments his inability to stop his parishioners from fleeing to the mountains to escape conversion and tribute. One of the local gods, according to the

³*Presidios* were created in response to the difficult situation in the north, where groups of nomadic Indians wreaked havoc on small, widely separated communities of settlers and miners. The *presidios* were permanent military installations manned by soldiers paid by the Crown.

⁴Peter Gerhard, *The North Frontier of New Spain*. pp. 56-59.

beleaguered friar, took the form of a crab and invoked pacts with individuals who must drink peyote after fasting five days. Obviously, conversion to Christianity was progressing just about at a crab's pace.⁵

Arias came to the region in 1653 and began to administer the Doctrina of Our Lady of the Assumption of Acaponeta three years later. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, Arias makes no mention of his predecessor, fray Juan de Vizcarra, who is the central non-Indian character in the documents below.

(continued)

⁵Kieran McCarty (trans. by Dan S. Matson) "Franciscan Report on the Indians of Nayarit, 1673." *Ethnohistory* v. 22 no. 3 (Summer 1975) pp. 193-221.

THE DOCUMENTS

On the third of May, 1652, church officials in Guadalajara were assembling charges brought against the Franciscan priest Vizcarra by his indigenous parishioners from the towns Huajicori and Quiuquinta.

The following excerpts from the first petition, dated 18 April, 1652 by the town officials of Huajicori to the Spanish authorities at Acaponeta, is representative of the general tone of all four documents:

Ma totecuiio dios mitz motlantzinco ye tlacatlatoquanie
motlacomaguiztocatzin don pedro de Sorit Senor capitan yn
titoalcalde mayor justicia mayor tionca ypa altepetl acaponeta
moypantzinco tinextilo topedicion tonetequipacholis teguantin
dimopilguan

guel miec otechtolini ttotatzin guartian axca ypan tonali
miercoles nican oquita alcalde guaxicori neguatl lucas alcalde
guaxicori onihualaya nican nicoguaya tepiton elot amo nicmati
yquenami oguala san niman oc ypan moquextica caguala
onexguiguitec yca quavitl yguan amo nicmati yn ton ipapa niman
otemo niman ocSepa onechvitec Sanyoqui onenemi yquac yn ooquito
quenami nechmaylpisque yguan onechilui guel nic ylpisquiaya
xacopo auh amo niuilpi yca opegua ypapa amo nicmati yn ten
ytlatlacol xacopo.

Yguan neguatl notoca Simon pillipe onechvitec yca quavitl
ypanpa onicpalegui alcalde guaxicori.

Yguan neguatl notoca matheo Juan noyoqui nicpaleuiaya
alcalde vaxicori oguala oquiquixti ycochilo quineguiaya nexixilis
guartian yguac in onoquito quinchichinos calme [...]
yntlacamo ce cihuatl yehuatl oquilui quenami mochi mochichinos
yychcauh yguac yn oomocagua guel yguac techtotocaz yguac yn o
guel gualas mochi quipixcas tomilpas aco san moxicogua [...] ma
ypampa dios huel titechmopaleuilis yca mohuelitilis axca ypan
cemana Santa otictini momantamiento [...] oquito axca ynin
guartian quenami tacpac quinpilos ycxiguan quimecauitequis
motitan yguan quicalactis texochti ypan ycuichil

May our lord God be with you, o ruler of people whose dear honored name is Don Pedro de Sorita, lord Captain, you, our *alcalde mayor* [district magistrate] and *justicia mayor* [chief judge]. You are in the town of Acaponeta. Before you we present our petition, our suffering. We your children are greatly mistreated.

Today, Wednesday, our father guardian [fray Juan de Vizcarra] saw the *alcalde* of Huajicori. I, Lucas, *alcalde* of Huajicori was coming here to buy a little corn. Suddenly, he [Vizcarra] came out of nowhere, riding his horse. He beat me repeatedly with a stick, and I do not know on account of what. Then he got down and beat me again. Then he said that they would arrest me. And he said [that] I should take Jacobo into custody. Because I did not, he began to beat him some more, I do not know why. What is Jacobo's crime?

And my name is Simon Felipe; he [Vizcarra] beat me with a stick because I helped the *alcalde* of Huajicori.

And my name is Mateo Juan; I too helped the *alcalde* of Huajicori. The guardian came and took out his knife; he wanted to stab me. Then he said he would burn the houses [and he might have] if a woman had not said to him, "but all the cotton will be burned." He was silent, then he said he will run us off and harvest all our fields. For God's sake help us with your power. Now in Holy Week you sent your order [...] Today this guardian said that he will hang your messenger [who brought the order] up by his feet whip him, and stick a burning ember in his backside.

The other three petitions and the accompanying Spanish documents make similar accusations: complaints of physical abuse and economic exploitation. The central Indian figure in these proceedings was Lucas de la Cruz, *alcalde* of Huajicori. Not only was his story of the beating he

allegedly received from Vizcarra the most damning of all the testimony, but he was a signator of the first, second and fourth petitions. Figuring almost as prominently was Sebastian Garcia, alcalde of Quiuquinta. His accusations make up the majority of the third and longest petition.

According to Garcia, the priest seized his property and threatened to place him in stocks. In an attempt to gain sympathy, Garcia appealed directly to the Bishop of Guadalajara:

ycá ynín yoquí nínentínemí amo hualnimotlalia san
nínemí ynnahuac nocnihuán niyáuí acaponeta niaquí misa
acmo niqinmita nopilhuan.

Because of this I simply wander about, not settling down.
I live with my friends and go Acaponeta in order
to hear mass. I can no longer see my children.

From the subsequent Spanish documents that addressed the situation it is obvious that fray Vizcarra was not without supporters. In the third petition Garcia mentioned that the priest had ordered the seizure of his livestock. The fact that this command was apparently carried out by unnamed town and church officials combined with the absence of anything resembling a full town council in the signatures on all the petitions suggests the presence of opposing factions in both towns.

Certain features of colonial Mexican life are well-illustrated in the documents. The petitioners' strongly-worded and sometimes provocative statements are typical of many Nahuatl-language petitions. Also typical is the way in which such petitioners took advantage of competing colonial jurisdictions. Aside from attempting to exert pressure on a member of the regular clergy (in this case a Franciscan), they appealed to local Spanish authorities for action against a church official. Juan de la Cruz and Sebastian Garcia seem to have taken advantage of the inevitable tensions between their local Spanish civil and religious authorities. Their petitions were processed immediately in Acaponeta and sent to Guadalajara because the chief local civil official, Don Pedro de Zurita, seems to have been rather critical of fray Vizcarra. In a statement written the same day as the original petition (18 April 1652) and sent along with the other documents to Guadalajara, Zurita claimed that there was "perpetual clamor" among the Indians and that the women and children were "fleeing for the hills" rather than endure "continual suffering among the faithful."

Zurita immediately added the disclaimer that he is only providing information and states that in all his years in Acaponeta, the situation with fray Vizcarra had been the only problem that could not be resolved.

This situation is quite typical of many Nahuatl petitions. An indigenous community demanding the removal of their priest is quite common. The factionalism among the Indians is also to be expected as well as the competition between the Spanish authorities. What is different in this case is the nature of the complaints against Vizcarra. Generally speaking, charges against priests are far more vague and sweeping, usually involving general sexual misconduct. In Vizcarra's case, the accusations are quite pointed and restricted to specific events. The wording in the first petition leads one to believe that the complaint was written the day of the alleged incidents. In addition, the handwriting in this document suggests that Lucas, the *alcalde*, wrote the petition himself.

This evidence combined with the fact that subsequent documents in Spanish reveal that Vizcarra was actually removed, strongly suggest that these charges may have been based in fact.

In addition to the historical evidence discernible from the narrative, there is much to be learned from the linguistic evidence these documents provide. In many respects the four petitions are indistinguishable from the general run of contemporary Nahuatl documentation. The use of such Spanish loanwords as *alcalde* (municipal judge), *cuchillo* (as in "ycochilo" using the possessive "y" [his knife]), and *Semana Santa* (Holy Week) is quite standard. Also typical is the consistently non-standard spelling of the Spanish loanword *guardian* as "guartian". The explanation for the consistency is that it has a linguistic logic behind it rather than simple orthographic ignorance. Nahuatl had only the devoiced side of the following pairs of voiced and devoiced Spanish plosive consonants: /d/ and /t/; /b/ and /p/; and /g/ and /k/. Lacking voiced /d/, native speakers often wrote devoiced /t/ as the closest substitute. In the third petition *bueyes* (oxen) is spelled "peuyes" and "bleyto" should be read as *pleito* (lawsuit). In the same petition are good examples of the failure of Nahuas to distinguish between the two front rounded vowels /o/ and /u/. *Mulas* (mules) becomes "molas" and "yontas" appears in place of *yuntas* (yokes).

These documents contain several other examples which demonstrate that the Nahuatl of this remote northwestern town was undergoing the same fundamental changes evident in the rest of the Nahuatl-speaking

world in the mid-seventeenth century. Those changes included a strategy for borrowing Spanish verbs, the extensive use of Spanish particles, and the pluralization of inanimate nouns.

The third petition contains three examples of the borrowing of the Spanish verb *presentar* (to present). Once the "Nahuatilizing" suffix -*oa* was added to any Spanish verb in the infinitive, it was then treated like a Nahuatl verb. (e.g., *nicpresentar_{oa}* = ni=I, c=direct object, *presentar_{oa}* = verb "to present" [I present it]). The same document includes an example of the borrowing of the Spanish particle *hasta* (until). The first petition has an example of pluralization of an inanimate noun. The use of the Nahuatl plural marker *-me* on the word "*calme*" (house; singular = *calli*) is a notable departure from earlier pluralization of only animate nouns in the direction of Spanish grammatical convention which demanded the marking of all plurals, animate or inanimate.

These three features demonstrate that the Nahuatl of Huajicori and Quiuquinta was utilized and developed in much the same fashion as Nahuatl did throughout colonial New Spain. Though the petitions would have been readable by Nahuatl speakers in central Mexico, the language used shows distinct signs of regional variation. As might be expected from such distant and relatively isolated non-Nahua communities, it is clear that the writers of these petitions were uncomfortable with even very basic aspects of Nahuatl.

Notable deviations from standard Nahuatl appears in the first line of the first petition:

ma totecui_o dios mitz motlantzinco ye tlatlatloguani

May our lord God be with you, o ruler of people

The second person singular pronoun "mitz-" stands alone, unattached to a verb. The standard use of "mitz-" is as either a direct or indirect object in combination with a verb (e.g., "nimitzitta" = I-you-see [I see you] or "nimitzmaca in tlaxcalli" = I-to-you-give the bread [I give you the bread]). The prefixial element of the following word, "mo-" is the second person singular possessive, which makes the use of "mitz" redundant as well as grammatically incorrect as it can never stand alone as a separate element.

In the excerpt from Sebastian Garcia, he uses the word-phrase

"hualnimotlalia." In this usage the prefixial elements are reversed. The expected order of elements would be "nihualmotlalia" (ni=I hual=direction hither mo=reflexive, tlalia=to settle down [I settle down]).

Perhaps the most prominent departure from standard Nahuatl is the constant use in all four documents of nonactive verb forms in place of active forms. It is clear that at the beginning of the first petition that "lucas alcalde" is saying: "before you we present our petition and suffering." However, translated literally, this passage (moyxpantzinco tinextilo topedicion tonetoquipacholis) says: "before you our petition and suffering is presented to us."

Such non-native use of the language occurs frequently throughout these documents. This strongly suggests that the writers of these petitions were non-native speakers. However, in this case we do not have to rely solely on this linguistic evidence. In the second petition the residents of Quiquinta actually refer to themselves as "totoyamis", identifying their native language as Totorame.

The presence of Nahuatl speakers from central Mexico is the most plausible explanation for the type of Nahuatl used in these petitions. The first two petitions are written in an untrained scrawl while the fourth petition appears to have been written by a Spanish notary (perhaps in Guadalajara) under the direction of Lucas de la Cruz and Sebastian Garcia. The beautiful and precise handwriting in the third petition appears to be that of a person trained as a central Mexican Nahua notary.

There is further evidence, that the origin of this strain of Nahuatl is the Tlaxcala-Puebla region in central Mexico. Nahuatl speakers from this area had the particular characteristic of using the reflexive element "mo-" where other speakers of the standard Nahuatl would have used "no-" [to me] or "to-" [to us]. This usage is evident in the petitions.

Central Mexican Nahuatl speakers from this region teaching the residents of Acaponeta, Huajicori and Quiquinta their form of Nahuatl combined with the inevitable influence of their own language(s) would account for the idiosyncratic Nahuatl found in these documents.

In conclusion, these petitions are significant, not only because they extend the geographic boundary of Nahuatl documentation, but because we find just what we would expect to find. Standard patterns in linguistic evolution as well as indigenous-Spanish relations that have been established by historians and linguists in many other areas are clearly demonstrated in this remote frontier area.



Northern New Spain
1650

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