

Nahua Perspectives and Linguistic Expressions in the Colonial Pictographic Catechisms: The Examples of Counting and Making

Perspectivas y expresiones lingüísticas nahuas en los catecismos pictográficos coloniales: los ejemplos de contar y hacer

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Abstract

The pictographic catechisms from colonial Mexico usually employ figural representations that depict the persona, actions, and objects expressed in the Catholic doctrinal texts. Although some images work via rebus to represent Nahua words and phrases, others represent ideas and actions that could be expressed by a range of words related to the same concept, usually some variation of the same indigenous root. This paper examines this process and shows how such symbolic images could convey a richer meaning not necessarily obvious in the specific words they signified. Rather, the images touched upon fundamental understandings and perspectives that were grounded in the practice of ordinary Nahua life. Two expressions in particular, those related to counting (*pohua*) and making (*chihua*), exemplify how Nahua understandings of the fundamental cultural actions shaped the expression of Catholic knowledge. These occur in a catechism from the colonial barrio of San Sebastián Atzacualco in Mexico City that is particularly rich in Nahuatl linguistic signification.

Keywords: Pictographic catechisms, Catholic doctrine, Nahua linguistic expressions, counting, weaving, Atzacualco

Resumen

Los catecismos pictográficos coloniales suelen emplear representaciones figurativas que describen las personas, las acciones y los objetos expresados en los textos doctrinales católicos. Aunque algunas imágenes funcionan vía rebus para representar palabras y frases nahuas, otras representan ideas y acciones que podrían ser expresadas por una gama de palabras relacionadas con un mismo concepto, generalmente alguna variación de la misma raíz indígena. Este artículo examina este proceso y muestra cómo tales imágenes simbólicas pueden transmitir un significado más rico que no es necesariamente obvio en las palabras específicas que significan. Más bien, las imágenes tocaban significados y perspectivas fundamentales que se basaban en la práctica de la vida cotidiana de los nahuas. Dos expresiones en particular, las relacionadas con contar (*pohua*) y hacer (*chihua*), ejemplifican cómo la comprensión nahua de acciones culturales

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fundamentales dio forma a la expresión del conocimiento católico. Éstas aparecen en un catecismo del barrio colonial de San Sebastián Atzacualco en la Ciudad de México que es particularmente rico en significado lingüístico náhuatl.

Palabras clave: *Catecismos pictográficos, doctrina católica, expresiones lingüísticas nahuas, contar, tejer, Atzacualco*

Throughout his long and distinguished career, Alfredo López Austin brought to light the perceptions, understandings, and labors of Nahua men and women. His focus was not on the aspirations and achievements of the political lords, but instead on the worldviews, ideologies, and situations of the population as a whole. Brilliantly, he has allowed us to understand how the Nahuas thought and to know something about the circumstances that shaped their daily lives. In this present essay, I pay tribute to Alfredo by showing how the mundane human tasks of counting items and making things came to be translated after the conquest into pictographic images that functioned purposefully in sacred Catholic orations and doctrinal texts. The painters who were versed in indigenous pictography drew on their Nahua linguistic roots to advance Catholic efforts.

When the Catholic catechism was introduced into Mexico shortly following the conquest, it represented a challenge for indigenous pictography, which had to confront, recognize, and eventually accommodate and embrace these new texts. Pictography had previously recorded and communicated indigenous ideologies by means of images organized in spatial grammars, in a pictographic writing system that recorded data, relationships, and systems but did not usually preserve the linear streams of linguistic texts. In contrast, Catholicism, as a religion of the book, was grounded in the “word” and was inextricably tied to texts written linguistically. The friars brought with them printed *cartillas* and *doctrinas* written in Latin and Spanish to spread knowledge of essential Catholic texts; soon they had versions printed in indigenous languages. As they taught and preached across languages, they sometimes also employed didactic *lienzos* featuring images of Catholic entities and events as visual aids. But they and the early indigenous converts both recognized the value of having a detailed pictographic expression of the catechism as an aid to instruction and memory. Indigenous painters accommodated this need by rendering the catechistic texts by means of serial images; these they organized horizontally across the pages of small books in the same way that the catechism was written in

Europe. This process effectively pulled the figuration of Mexican pictography out of its spatially constructed syntax and repurposed it to approach linear word writing.

Although some of the new images that were created for the pictographic catechisms conveyed phonetic information via rebus (where sounds were identified by images of items whose names resemble these sounds), many more were symbolic, representing ideas and actions that could be expressed by a range of words related to the same concept, usually some variation of the same indigenous root. This paper examines this process and shows how such symbolic images could convey a richer meaning not necessarily present in the specific words they signified. Rather, the images touched upon fundamental understandings and perspectives that were grounded in the practice of ordinary Nahua life. Two expressions in particular, those related to counting (*pohua*) and making (*chihua*), exemplify how Nahua phenomena shaped the expression of Catholic knowledge.¹

Pictographic catechisms

About 30 pictographic catechisms survive today: these include about 24 principal ones that date to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as well as some half dozen nineteenth-century copies (see Figure 1).² Although no surviving examples can be securely and uncontestedly dated to the sixteenth century, three chroniclers describe their properties and use during that century when the friars first arrived. Bartolomé de Las Casas ca. 1555 and Geronimo Mendieta in the 1590s both describe pictorial catechisms that employed symbolic images and phonetic hieroglyphs, the phonetic hieroglyphs rendering the sounds of Latin words. According to Las Casas (1967, 505) the indigenous painters use figures and symbols to represent the Christian doctrine by means of rebus. He gives as an example, the word

¹ This essay develops arguments advanced briefly by Burkhart and Boone in Boone, Burkhart and Tavárez (2017, 56-57, 64, 164, 182, 219, 231). I am very grateful to Louise Burkhart for her important comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this essay. The Nahuatl readings are drawn from her knowledge. I am also grateful to Bérénice Gaillemin, whose 2013 dissertation is a comprehensive analysis of the pictorial catechisms, especially their graphic vocabulary; she read a version of this article and offered thoughtful and valuable suggestions.

² See Boone, Burkhart and Tavárez (2017, 1-31) for a descriptive summary and census of the surviving corpus.



Figure 1. Pictographic catechism from the Mexico City barrio of San Sebastián Atzacualco, f. 2v-3r. Each page 15x10.5 cm, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Fonds Mexicain 399. Used with permission

Amen, which he said was signified by juxtaposing the signs for water (*atl*) and maguey (*metl*). Mendieta (1971, 246) notes how the phrase *Pater Noster* was represented by a banner (*pantli*) and nopal cactus (*nochtli*). None of the existing catechisms has this kind of rebus or this degree of phoneticism, however, nor do any clearly cue Latin texts. Instead, their pictography aligns more closely to José de Acosta's 1585 description of a catechism expressed in figural iconography, whereby images visually represented beings and concepts. Acosta gives the examples of God and the Virgin represented by figural likenesses and the phrase "I a sinner, I confess" by a figure kneeling before a friar (Acosta 1590, 409). When it is possible to discover the specific language of a catechism, the language most often being cued is Nahuatl, the principal language spoken in central Mexico at the time of the conquest.³

³ Burkhart (personal communication 2018) pointed out that two (BNF 78 and its cognate BNF 76) are presumed to cue Otomi, as Soustelle (1936, 16) proposed. Gaillemín (2013,

The corpus of pictographic catechisms is heterogeneous, which suggests that different versions were developed somewhat independently by different authors in different places over time; other variations then arose through copying. Five major families of cognates have survived, and there are another five individual exemplars.⁴ They vary in physical size, date, and figural style; they employ different pictorial and ideographic conventions; and they differ in their use of phoneticism. Most of the complete pictographic catechisms—those that are not clearly fragmentary—contain the basic orations and laws of the Catholic catechism, but they also include various other texts and order them differently. They are largely unsigned and undated, but excepting those that were created in the nineteenth-century out of antiquarian interest, most probably date to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, although a sixteenth-century date is possible for some. Physically most are like small manuscript books in the European bookmaking tradition, sized so that one could carry them around easily.

As one would expect, the iconography of the images derives from both European and Precolumbian traditions. Images that pertain to entities and things that are specifically Christian—God and Jesus Christ, for example—tend to follow European Catholic conventions (see Figure 2a, b), and these are the great majority. Other images, however, derive from indigenous Mexican conventions or reflect Precolumbian conceptual paradigms; for example, a speech scroll is used to signal speech, and a banner can signify the quantity of twenty (see Figure 3a, b). Indigenous conventions also qualify and shape some forms that are otherwise European, in a subtle conflation of traditions; jaguar spots, for example, can decorate thrones to signify the elite quality of these seats and the high status of those who occupy them (see Figure 4). Additionally, a number of signifying images are unique creations, not clearly derived from one tradition or the other but representing a new iconography developed out of the particularly colonial situation. The two examples discussed here—pertaining to counting and making—occur in a catechism that is particularly rich in Nahuatl linguistic signification; it is a manuscript from the ancient barrio of San Sebastián

538-40) determined that the nineteenth-century catechisms of the García Icazbalceta Group have a syntax close to Spanish and the others correspond to the syntax of Nahuatl, although she also notes that some manuscripts (e.g., Humboldt Fragment 16) are composed of symbols and illustrative scenes that could have been understood by speakers of multiple languages.

⁴ Anne Norman's pioneering study organized the manuscripts into families and unique works (1985, 455-58); her table is updated in Boone, Burkhart and Tavárez (2017, 22-29).



Figure 2. Glyphs of the European tradition: *a*) God the Father (P361), *b*) Christ on the cross to signify Jesus Christ (P53). Atzacualco catechism f. 12r and 3v. Drawings by Mary Kate Kelly

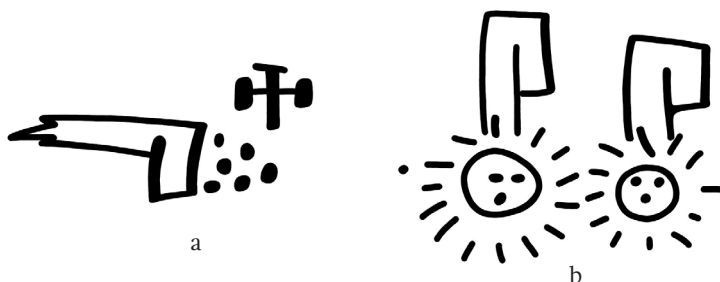


Figure 3. Glyphs of the indigenous tradition: *a*) speech scroll to signify speech acts, rulership, and command/commandments, here with a cross to signify holy speakership (P70); *b*) two banners on suns to signify forty (2 x 20) days (P355). Atzacualco catechism f. 14r and 11r. Drawings by Mary Kate Kelly



Figure 4. Mixed glyph: Friar seated on a jaguar-spotted throne hearing confession (P508). Atzacualco catechism f. 15v. Drawing by Mary Kate Kelly

Atzacualco in Tenochtitlan/Mexico City, probably painted in the seventeenth century and now in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF 399) (see Figure 1).⁵

Other pictographic examples of the culturally mixed symbols for counting and making also appear in other members of the corpus, and I discuss the major representatives here. Most of them, like the corpus of pictographic catechisms in general, are identified by the name of the institution that houses them or the individuals with whom they have been associated (erroneously or not). The comparative examples include three cognates with the Atzacualco manuscript—Brown 25, Bodmer, and Tulane—and five manuscripts that represent different families, some with their own set of cognates—BNF 77, BNF 78, Egerton, Gante I, and Libro de Oraciones.⁶ Following the convention established by Justino Cortés Castellanos (1987) for the Gante I catechism that consecutively numbers the individual pictographs, I refer to the pictographs with a P prefix (e.g., P224); for those manuscripts whose pictographs have not yet been numbered, I refer to the page and register.

Pohua and the concept of counting, pertaining

A pictographic convention that draws on both European and indigenous figuration is the composite glyph that involves the Nahuatl word family of *pohua*. The composite glyph is composed of a hand pointing down toward

⁵ Sometime after it was painted, glosses were added to seventy-two of its figures erroneously identifying these figures as Spanish and Nahua rulers, nobles, and officials. The glosses do not pertain to the content of the catechism itself.

⁶ Locations and major explanatory publications are: Brown 25: John Carter Brown Library, Codex Indianorum 25, unpublished, image online through library catalog. Bodmer: Foundation Marin Bodmer, Cod. Bodmer 905 (Bernand 2009). Tulane: Tulane University Latin American Library, Ms. Collection 49(8), unpublished, images online through library catalog. BNF 77: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Fonds Mexicain 77, Nahuatl text transcribed in Thouvenot (1994); images <http://amoxcalli.org.mx> (077 Testeteriano 2). BNF 78: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Fonds Mexicain 78 (Resines Llorente 1992, 255-374; 2007b, 119-48). Egerton: British Museum, Egerton Ms 2898 (Berger 2002). Gante I: Biblioteca Nacional de España, Ms. Vit 26-9 (Cortés Castellanos 1987; 1992; Resines Llorente 2007a; 2007b, 75-81). Libro de Oraciones: Biblioteca Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico, 35-53 (Basich de Canessi 1963; Anders 1988; Dean 1989; Resines Llorente 1996). See Boone, Burkhart and Tavárez (2017, 22-29) for fuller descriptions and more complete publication information.

several small disks or short vertical lines, qualified by a feather, and a small affix like an H (which has serifs on the bottom of the verticals but not the top) (see Figure 5). In the Atzacualco catechism this construction represents the Nahuatl phrase *itech pohui* (to him pertain) (Figure 5a) or *itech-tzinco pohui* (to him-honorific pertain) (see Figure 5b), which appears six times in the catechism.⁷ For example, it is used in the longer expression “The first seven Articles of the Faith pertain to our Lord God as a deity.” Louise Burkhart has suggested that the disks or short lines may cue *pohui* through its transitive form *pohua* “to count” (Boone, Burkhart and Tavárez 2017, 231). Indeed, the pointing hand is the kind of gesture one might use to count out a number of items before one.

The verb *pohua* covers a range of meanings. Molina (1970, second pagination 82v) translates *poa* thusly:

Poa.nite. contar a algunos, o encartarlos, o tener respecto a otro

Poa.nitla. contar cosa de cuenta o numero, o relatar proceso e historia, o leer, [...]

Poa.itechnic. aplicar algo a otro, dandole su parte delo que se reparte

Thus, *poa* not only has the meaning of reading and relating, but also of counting and pertaining. It is the last definition, the concept of pertaining, that the Atzacualco author required. He reached it by picturing the action of counting, which conjures up the same root and sound, and he added to this gesture two figural qualifiers to approach the intended meaning more closely, as explained below.

Pohua’s counting definition is a principal one; it cues the semantic arena of the Spanish *contar*, which also embraces reading and thus by extension also the reading of painted books. Most obvious is the use of *pohua* in the term *tonalpohualli*, literally day-count, which is the cycle of 260-days in the divinatory calendar. The *tonalpouhqui*, the one who counts the days, is the diviner who reads out the fates of the *tonalpohualli* (Molina 1970, second pagination 149v). An artist of Bernardino de Sahagún’s Florentine Codex pictures him holding a divinatory book and reading the fate for a young child born on the day 10 Rabbit; in this illustration the diviner points down to indicate the day sign in much the same way the hand points to the disks in the Atzacualco catechism (see Figure 6).

⁷ The “pertaining” construction in the Atzacualco catechism is at P224, P229, P236, P287, P432, and P436. Glyphs P229, P432, and P436 use short vertical lines rather than disks.



Figure 5. a) Composite glyph for *in itechtzinco pohui* (that to him pertain) (P236), and b) the fuller phrase *in itechtzinco pohui in totecuyo Dios* (that to him pertain our lord God) (P236-238). Atzacualco catechism f. 8v.
Drawings by Mary Kate Kelly



Figure 6. An aged day keeper reading the fate of a child who was born on the day 10 Rabbit, here pointing to a divinatory book. Florentine Codex, Bk. 4, f. 34v (vol. 1, f. 277v). Manuscript in the public domain. World Digital Library, *General History of the Things of New Spain* by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún: The Florentine Codex, image 566

Similarly, Sahagún (1950-82, bk. 10: 31) uses the term *tlapouhqui* (a counter of things) to refer to soothsayers: “*In qualli tlapouhqui tetonapouiani*,” (translated by Anderson and Dibble as “The good soothsayer [is] one who reads the day signs for one”).⁸ *Pohua* also figures in *xiuhpohualli* (literally year count), the cycle of 52-years. The *xiuhpouhqui* is then the one who reads the year count, who reads out the annals histories.⁹

Counting is implicated in the act of divination not just by the counting of the days but also by the counting of grains. According to several Nahuatl texts and accounts of the chroniclers written in Spanish, the first human couple created the calendar and other divinatory systems.¹⁰ Cipactonal, the male, is said to have devised the *tonalpohualli*, while Oxomoco, the female, invented the practice of divining by scattering and counting grains of maize.¹¹ Usually the two appear together in figural representations. They are thus carved together on a boulder near Yauhtepec, where the woman extends her cup of grains while the man points with a bone awl toward a divinatory codex, which he is either writing or reading (Anders and Jansen 1988, 112). They are painted together in the Codex Borbonicus, where, surrounded by year signs and augural lords, the woman scatters her grains (see Figure 7); in the Florentine Codex, it is Cipactonal who divines with scattered maize, while Oxomoco reads the fates in knotted cords (*Códice Florentino* 1979, bk. 4: f. 3v [1: f. 246v]). In the Codex Magliabechiano (f. 78r) a female physician divines by casting both maize and beans.¹² Since the hand in the Atzacualco catechism points to three disks, the gesture may refer to the counting of individual separate items, as in the counting of maize grains.

However, the Atzacualco author intended the sign to signify *pohui*, the transitive form of *pohua*, which means “to be counted” or “to count [for something]” (Burkhart personal communication 2018; Molina 1970, first

⁸ See also Molina 1970, second pagination 132v.

⁹ Motolinía (1951, 74) describes features of the year count annals history.

¹⁰ Sahagún (1950-82, bk. 4: 4), *History and Mythology of the Aztecs* (1992, 25), “Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas” (1979, 25), Mendieta (1971, 97), Ruiz de Alarcón (1984, 56, 151), Serna (1953, 252, 263). See also discussion in Seler (1963, 1: 114, 138; 1990-96, 2: 45), López Austin (1988, 1: 238), and Boone (2005, 13-15).

¹¹ See Tedlock (1982, 62-64, 153, 158-70) for divination by mixing, dividing, arranging, and counting seeds among the Quiche Maya of Momostenango. For rituals involving the precise counting and arrangement of objects among the Tlapanec and Mixe see Schultze Jena (1938, 140-51), Loo (1982), and Lipp (1985).

¹² The Magliabechiano text (f. 77v) explains that the arrangement of the fallen objects indicated the fate of the illness (Boone 1983, 214-15).



Figure 7. Oxomoco (left) and Cipactonal (right) in the *tonalamatl* section of the Codex Borbonicus, page 21, Bibliothèque de l'Assemblée Nationale, France. Used with permission

pagination 8v). He therefore added two affixes—the feather and the H—to guide the reader. Bérénice Gaillemín (2013, 324, 341–42) proposed that the feather (*ihhuítl*) could refer to *pohui* by way of a homophony of the *hui* of the second syllables (Boone, Burkhart and Tavárez 2017, 231). Indeed, as Gaillemín (2013, 341–45) has shown, the feather itself also carries connotations related to numbers, counting, and increase, likely derived from its Aztec use to signify the quantity of 400 (or, metaphorically, innumerable). As she notes, elsewhere in the Atzacualco catechism the feather rises vertically from a hand pointing straight to the right to signify the conjunction “and;” in Gante I it signifies totality (e.g., Figure 12f); and in

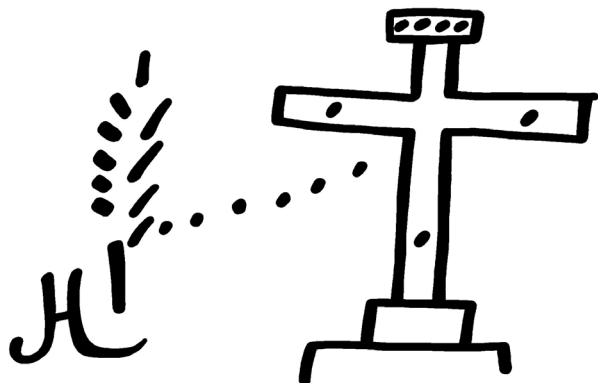


Figure 8. The phrase *itech cruz* (on the cross), with reference to Christ's having died on the cross (P738), where the H signals that the feather is to be read as *itech* rather than *ihhuítl*. Atzacualco catechism f. 24r.

Drawing by Mary Kate Kelly

BNF 78 and Atzacualco it contributes to the graphic expression of counting and pertaining.¹³

However, in the Atzacualco catechism, the author consistently adds the H to the graphic construction, which points to a specific phonetic reading. The added H suggests that the feather should be read as *itech*, for the feather corresponds to *itech* in four other instances when it is added before a cross to signify *in itech cruz* ("on the cross") (see Figure 8) (P323, P329, P738, P757); twice the H is also present (P738, 757). Throughout the catechism, the H is often employed as a phonetic complement that cues *x* or *ech* (Boone, Burkhart and Tavárez 2017, 64). Therefore, as part of the *itech pohui* construction it likely tells the viewer to read the feather as *itech* rather than *ihhuítl* (see Figure 8). Indeed, as Burkhart (personal communication 2018) pointed out *pohui* only means "pertain" when it is combined with the postposition *tech* to mean "it counts toward [the subject of *tech*]" or "is counted in connection with" that subject.

Thus, in order to signify the abstract concept of "pertain," which would be difficult to represent visually, the author began with the fundamental *pohua*/counting glyph, which carries the relevant Preconquest Nahuatl associations of "counting" and "pertaining." To this he added the

¹³ Soustelle (1936, 16) suggested that in the Otomi catechism BNF 76 the feather refers phonetically to the Otomi verbal prefix *xí-*.

feather, which carries its own associations with quantities and counting. Since the feather could be read variably as *ihhuatl* or *itech*, he applied the H affix then to specify the desired *itech* reading. The glyphic elements in the compound work together via Nahua understandings of counting, reading, relating, and pertaining.

Chihua and the concept of making and doing

The Atzacualco catechism, like most others, signifies many phrases that employ forms of the verb family “to make/create” and “to do” in English, “*hacer*” in Spanish, and “*chihua*” in Nahuatl. The catechisms speak often of good and sinful works and deeds, and they invoke God as the “creator of heaven and earth” and the “maker of all things;” his other title— “all powerful”— comes as a variation of this. Moreover, they close their prayers with versions of *Amen*, translated into Nahuatl as *ma iuh mochihua* “may it thus be done.”

Some manuscripts signify doing and making by figural action or gesture. For example, BNF 78 presents a figure holding a stick angled to the ground, which suggests the action of digging or working the soil and, by extension, working/doing in general.¹⁴ In this way the painter signifies “God as maker [of heaven and earth]” in both the Apostles Creed and the fifth Article of the Faith by using the image of a profile, bearded God—identified with the triangular halo of the trinity or a tripartite aura—holding such a stick as well as a smaller figure also holding a stick (P131, P385) (see Figure 9a). For this phrase, Gante I employs a profile figure pointing distinctly to the right, with two to four dots over the finger for emphasis, as if to direct attention to the hand as a principal agent of making things (P82, P545) (see Figure 9b).¹⁵

In other instances—for example, when the text says that Christ becomes or “is made” man—Gante I uses the glyph of a hand holding an indistinct rectangular shape bifurcated horizontally (P29, P161, P354, P384, P392, P827) (see Figure 10a). Cortés Castellanos (1987, 206-07) and Resines

¹⁴ It is not decidedly a digging stick, for some other figural images hold a similar stick as they walk (e.g., the “living” man [P165]), but the stick does appear elsewhere when a “doing/making” word might be called for (e.g., when Christ is made in the womb of Mary [P138, P144]).

¹⁵ A variation is the use of the pointed, dotted finger to signify a speech act, as when a kneeling confessor points before the seated priest (P797, P864) and a seated priest points and thereby advises the confessor (P951).



Figure 9. Figural images that signify God as the maker [of heaven and earth].

a) holding a stick and a small figure also with a stick (BNF 78 P131, f. 4r),

b) pointing with dots for emphasis (Gante I P82, pg. 9).

Drawings by Mary Kate Kelly

Llorente (2007a, 90) have suggested that this rectangular shape may be a fabric cloth or cape or a piece of paper, although it is not possible to identify the form with any certainty.¹⁶ In BNF 77 the glyph for doing/making is occasionally a hand pointing diagonally to the upper right and flanked by three differently colored triangles (see Figure 10b).¹⁷ This construction may well be related to the similar Gante I glyph, but it too is equally indecipherable. Both Gante I and BNF 78 use other glyphs to signify the concept of making/doing in other contexts, so this glyph of a gesturing hand that seems to hold geometric items is only one of the options available to the scribes.

A number of catechisms, including occasionally BNF 78 and Gante I, signify the “make/do” verb family with distinct and somewhat more abstracted symbols. In particular, many, including the Atzacualco catechism, use images related to fabric production and weaving.¹⁸ Since the verbs “to make/do” (*chihua*) and “to weave” (*ihquiti*) are very different in Nahuatl (Gaillemin, personal communication, 2022), the connection between the two is cognitive rather than phonetic.¹⁹ Cloth production was a particularly labor-intensive occupation in Aztec Mexico, where all fabric was hand wo-

¹⁶ The form differs from the glyph for a paper document—e.g., the Commandments (P681)—which more clearly pictures the pages of an open book with rows of text.

¹⁷ It appears on f. 1r registers 5 and 7, f. 1v registers 3 and 6, f. 3v register 1, and f. 4v register 1.

¹⁸ The late manuscripts of the García Icazbalceta group use what appears to be a wing (León 1900; Resines Llorente 2007b, 201-02), for reasons unknown.

¹⁹ Gaillemin (2013, 277-81, 368, 562-63) has analyzed the full range of images used in the catechisms to signify expressions involving making and doing.

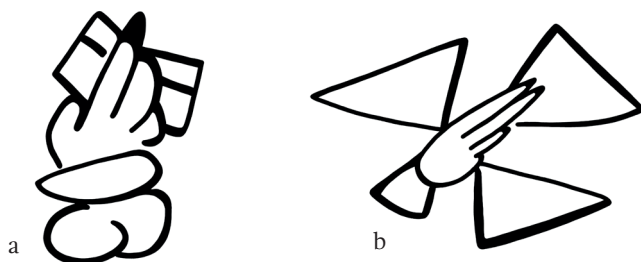


Figure 10. Gestural glyphs for making/creating/doing.

a) Gante I (P29, pg. 5). b) BNF 77 (f. 3v, register 1). Drawing by Mary Kate Kelly

ven from threads that were hand spun, from cotton that was laboriously picked, cleaned, and carded. Before the conquest, woven cloth was a major and valuable commodity sent regularly as tribute to Tenochtitlan.²⁰ The symbol employed by the Atzacualco author is a vertically concave arc that cups a round form qualified by parallel lines angled to the right (see Figure 11a). Burkhart and I have interpreted this as a ball of spun thread cupped by a form that preserves and echoes the ball's roundness (Boone, Burkhart and Tavárez 2017, 56-57). The edges of the arc turn back on themselves and work visually with the diagonal lines to impart energy to the glyph.

This identification of the symbol as a ball of thread finds support in related symbols for making/doing employed in several other catechisms. Two cognates of the Atzacualco catechism (Brown 25 and Tulane [see Figure 11c, d]) use an elongated diamond shape that resembles a spindle covered by its thread; these glyphs likewise feature parallel lines to suggest the continuous wrapping of the thread. Another cognate, Bodmer, employs what appears to be an abstracted, somewhat degenerated representation of a thickly threaded spindle that is rounded on the top and pointed on the bottom where the spindle meets the cup on which it twirls (see Figures 11b). The same glyph appears in Gante I in the phrase “May it thus be done” (see Figure 12f). In these instances, angled lines similarly indicate the winding of the thread around the core. A triangular base completes the glyph in Bodmer and Gante I.²¹

²⁰ For example, cotton mantles are included as tribute from many provinces in the Codex Mendoza and Matricula de Tributos.

²¹ Cortés Castellanos (1987, 198-99) identified this motif in Gante I (where it appears before Christ's initial in the *Amen* ending) as a baton, which he felt was in harmony with

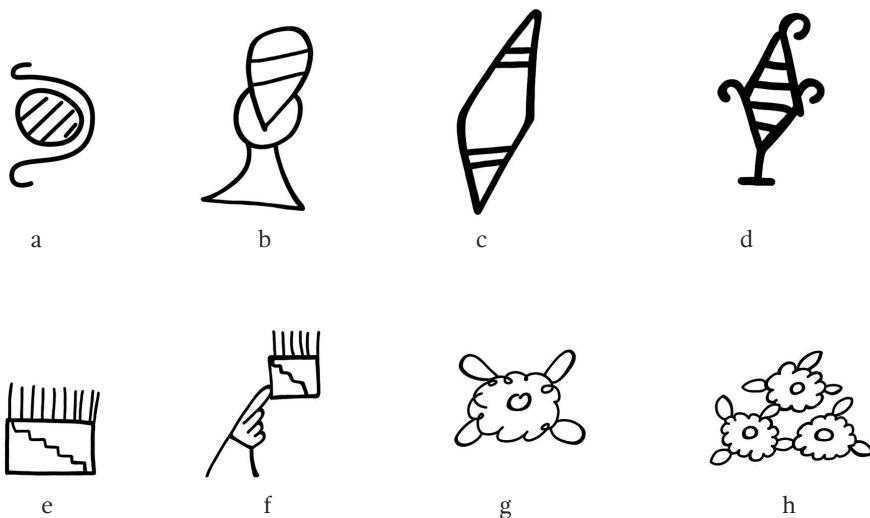


Figure 11. Symbols for words and phrases involving *chihua* (making, doing): a) Atzacualco (P215, f. 7v); b) Bodmer (f. 27r, register 4); c) Brown (f. 2r, register 4); d) Tulane (f. 4r, register 4); e) and; f) Libro de Oraciones (f. 1v, register 4; f. 2r, register 4); g) BNF 78 (P75, f. 2v); h) “works” in BNF 78 (P50, f. 2r).

Drawings by Mary Kate Kelly

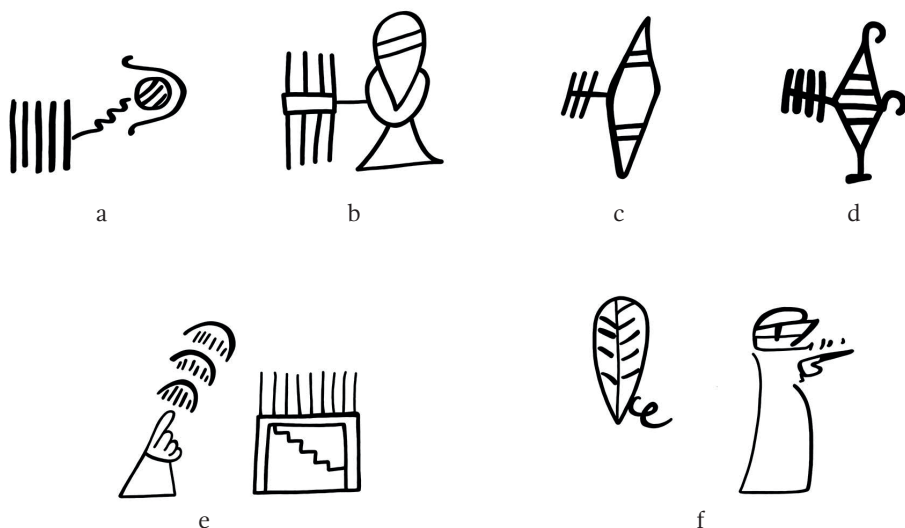


Figure 12. Glyph compounds for “Maker of all Things” or “All Powerful” as a title of God: a) Atzacualco (P131, f. 5v); b) Bodmer (f. 14v, register 3); c) Brown (f. 2r, register 4); d) Tulane (f. 2r, register 2); e) Libro de Oraciones (f. 4v, register 1); f) Gante I (P81-82, pg. 8). Drawings by Mary Kate Kelly

There are variations in other manuscripts that also seem to carry a fundamental reference to fabric production. In the *Libro de Oraciones* the motif is a rectangular piece of woven cloth, usually pictured with a fringed edge and having a stepped pattern (see Figure 11e, f).²² In BNF 78 it is a white scalloped oval that has a red disk in its center and two red and two green oblongs extending out like a St. Andrews cross (see Figure 11g); this is used on the occasions when a symbol rather than a figure in action is used to signify making/doing, as in the phrase “as is done.” Resines Llorente (1992, 276, 280; 2007b, 201-02) and Gaillemin (2011, 216) have identified this motif as a flower, and, indeed, the red center and green oblongs point in this direction. But elsewhere in the BNF 78 manuscript, flowers are consistently represented in the form of a green stem with a red and yellow bloom (e.g., P104, P74). Given the use of fabric imagery in the other manuscripts, I suggest that the scalloped form in BNF 78 more likely refers to a ball of cotton, which would fit the general fabric template. The red oval center and the oblongs might then be visual vestiges of the rust colored center and bracts of picked cotton. When, in BNF 78, three of these cotton-like scalloped ovals are grouped together they signify the plural “deeds” (P50, P567) or “works [of mercy]” (P467) (see Figure 11h).

The figural images and symbols for “do/make” frequently coordinate with glyphs that signify “all” or “many” to yield the title of God as the “maker of all things” or “all powerful.”²³ In the Atzacualco catechism and its cognates (Brown 25, Bodmer, and Tulane), “all” and “many” are symbolized by a set of four or five parallel lines, sometimes joined (see Figure 12a-d).²⁴ The *Libro de Oraciones* employs a related device: a hand pointing up to three sets of five or six short parallel lines, each set grouped by an arc, this being a version of the frequent practice of tallying units of

Christ’s persona and works. Resines Llorente (2007a, 87) described but did not attempt to identify it. Gaillemin (2011, 216) read it as a flower (*xochitl*), noting the flower that is part of the *Amen* in Egerton that signifies *mochicha*. This would be an attractive identification, given Gaillemin’s interpretation of the element in BNF 78 as a flower, but it does not hold when the motif appears apart from the *Amen* construction, and it fails to explain the ball in BNF 399 and the tall diamond-shaped “making/doing” motifs in Brown 25 and Tulane.

²² Anders (1988) and Dean (1989) associated this rectangular motif in *Libro de Oraciones* with the concepts of making and doing, but they did not identify it.

²³ León (1900, 728) was the first to identify the motif in Brown 26. Normann (1985, 295) first recognized the reading in Atzacualco (BNF 399), Brown 25, and Tulane. Dean (1989, 219) and Anders (1988, 238) recognized it in *Libro de Oraciones*.

²⁴ In the cognates the lines are joined together through the middle.

five (see Figure 12e).²⁵ Gante I symbolizes “all” with a feather, the common Aztec symbol for 400 or innumerable (see Figure 12f).²⁶ Consistently in these manuscripts the “all” glyph precedes the “do/make” glyph. Burkhart has linked this glyphic phrase in the Atzacualco catechism to *ixquich ihueli* (“able to do everything”), equivalent to “todopoderoso/all powerful,” according to the Nahuatl text that the Atzacualco catechism tracks (Boone, Burkhart and Tavárez 2017, 175). In this expression, then, the pictographer reached the phrase “all powerful” through the metaphor of the universal maker.

The individual versions of the doing/making glyphs usually then reappear at the end of many prayers to help signify the closing word *Amen*, translated as “may it thus be done”—*ma iuh mochihua* in Nahuatl (see Figure 13). The “make/do” symbol clearly signifies *mochihua*. The glyph often follows the head or body of a rodent, which represents the subordinating conjunction “as/so/like” (*iuh* in Nahuatl).²⁷ This construction is employed throughout the Atzacualco catechism, Bodmer, Tulane, BNF 78, and Libro de Oraciones, among others (see Figure 13 a-e).²⁸ Although this rodent has usually been identified as a mouse (*quimichin* in Nahuatl), Gaillemin (2011, 215-17; 2013, 366-69) has recently suggested it is better interpreted as an *ahuizotl* (water beast), which she felt is a better phonographic match to *iuh*.²⁹ Together the rodent and do/make glyph signify *Amen* in the Atzacualco manuscript, Bodmer, Brown 25, Tulane, BNF 78, and Libro de Oraciones.

Given the heterogeneity of the corpus of pictographic catechisms, one expects variations in how the *Amen* is ultimately signified and how the closing phrase of Catholic prayers are expressed. Several manuscripts add

²⁵ This device is employed to tally units of five in the Codex Xolotl and in various plans of property holdings: e.g., Humboldt Fragment 8, Codex Santa María Asunción, and Codex Vergara. See Williams and Harvey 1997.

²⁶ The feather glyph appears throughout the tribute section of the Codex Mendoza to signify the quantity of 400.

²⁷ This reading was first made by Orozco y Berra (1877, 203).

²⁸ These catechisms that use the rodent to signify “as” in the *Amen* also use the rodent elsewhere to cue the word “as,” which appears in statements such as Christ creating his kingdom “on earth as in heaven” in the *Our Father*.

²⁹ Orozco y Berra (1877, 203) was the first to identify the rodent as a rat, which he correctly noted stood for the subordinating conjunction “as” (*como* or *ansi* in Spanish) in the catechism he studied; that catechism (Orozco y Berra) uses a bird’s wing to represent “*Amen*.” Most other scholars (e. g., Normann 1985, 254-59; Van Acker 1995, 413) have agreed with the rat/mouse identification. Bernand (2009, 36) inexplicably identified the animal in the Bodmer as an ocelotl.

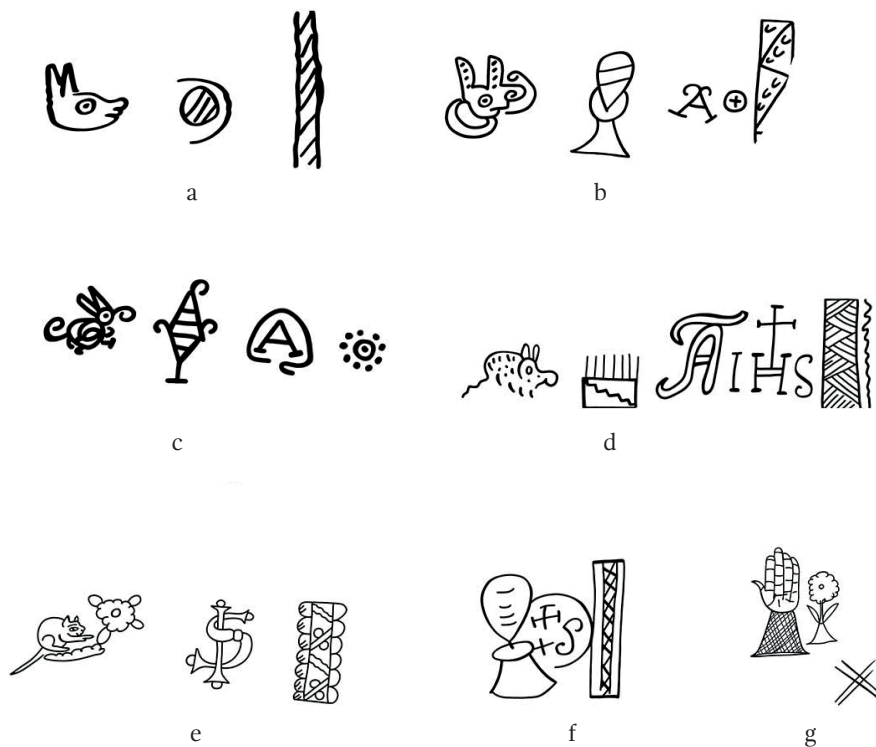


Figure 13. Pictograms for the phrase “Amen” and variants: translated as *ma iuh mochihua* (“may it thus be done”): a) Atzacualco (P125-126, f. 6r); b) Bodmer (27r, register 4); c) Tulane (f. 4r, register 4); d) Libro de Oraciones (f. 2r, register 6); e) BNF 78 (P65-66, f. 2r); f) Gante I (P48, pg. 7); g) Egerton (f. 2r, register 4).

Drawings by Mary Kate Kelly

to the “may it thus be done” glyphs a capital letter A and sometimes also a cross, symbol, and/or Christ’s monogram (e.g., Bodmer, Tulane, Libro de Oraciones [see Figure 13b-d]); BNF 78 follows with just an IS as Christ’s initials (see Figure 13e). Gante I and its cognates omit the rodent and feature only the stylized spindle, to signify only “done,” adding at the end a final cartouche with Christ’s initials or a cross (see Figure 13f).³⁰ BNF 77

³⁰ As explained earlier, Gante I does not use this spindle to signify “done” or “make” elsewhere in the catechism, but reserves it solely for the *Amen*. However, two manuscripts in the Gante group—Harvard and Orozco y Berra—do employ the rodent

uses only the “done” glyph (see Figure 10b). Uniquely, Egerton uses none of these motifs to signify *Amen* but instead relies on phonetic rebuses to represent the Nahuatl voicing. It uses an upright hand (*mahtl*) to cue the *ma* and a flower (*xochitl*) to cue the *mochihua*, yielding the phrase “*ma iuh mochihua*,” or “may it thus be done” (see Figure 13g) (Galarza and Monod Becquelin 1980, 96-97, 120-21; Berger 2002, 72). Burkhart (personal communication 2018) points out that the flower can read as “something growing,” since *mochihua* can also mean “it is growing,” a nice analogy to “making/doing.” As a concluding phrase to every prayer in these catechisms, *Amen* can be compressed into a single compound glyph (BNF 77, Gante I) or stretched out into a long statement of four images signifying “As is, Done, *Amen*, Jesus Christ” (Bodmer, Tulane, and Libro de Oraciones).

At the core of these words and phrases that relate to “doing,” “making/creating,” and “deeds/works” is a glyph that, although it varies somewhat from manuscript to manuscript, references the products and process of fabric making and weaving. It thus invokes weaving as a fundamental metaphor for creating and making, as well as things created and made. This conceptual link is found in other areas of indigenous ideology as well, as Cecelia Klein (1982) has shown. In arguing that Mesoamericans conceived of the heavens and surface of the earth as woven, in opposition to the tangled disorder of the underworld, Klein (1982, 6) proposed weaving as a paradigm for much Preconquest Mesoamerican thought. Relevant here to us the connection she noticed between weaving and creation, that Maya and Aztec creation and fertility goddesses, for example, were great weavers (Klein 1982, 15). Klein (1982, 25-29) and Alfredo López Austin (2016, 35-39) after her have also suggested that the Mesoamerican universe was conceptualized as being folded like cloth.

These making/doing glyphs that allude to fabric production are notable for uniting the symbolic vocabularies of a number of pictographic catechisms, including those within a family of cognates and those that belong to separate families. These include Atzacualco and its cognates Bodmer and Tulane, as well as the separate manuscripts Gante I, BNF 78, and Libro de Oraciones. It is one of the only sets of abstract symbols to appear so extensively. In contrast, the other glyphs that are found throughout the corpus tend to be figural images of Catholic being and concepts, such as versions

for “as” in other contexts, although not as part of the *Amen* (Orozco y Berra 1877, 203; León 1900, 728-29).

of God, Jesus, Christ, the Holy Spirit, Mary, and the sacraments. The remarkably wide distribution of the doing/making symbol points to the fundamental importance of indigenous labor.

Most of the pictography in the colonial Mexican glyphic catechisms is highly iconic in that its images represent figurally an aspect of what they signify. They picture the sacred actors and acts, e.g., confession. Despite written testimonies from sixteenth-century friars that describe rebus glyphs, there is relatively little use of rebus in the surviving corpus. The Atzacualco catechism is the exception in that it often employs phonetic complements to cue different sounds, thereby signaling to the reader which voicing is desired. The *pohua* [counting] glyph is one such example, where the feather and the H affix work together to signify that the glyph is to be read as “pertaining” rather than “counting.” The *chihua* [making/doing] glyphs in their several variations remain ideographic, so the reader relies on the context to reach the desired word or phrase in each passage. Both glyphs, however, carry with them associations that continue to channel Preconquest indigenous thought and action.

Pictographic catechisms are themselves a uniquely colonial blend of European and indigenous methods of graphic discourse. Physically they are small books in the European book tradition with texts displayed linearly across the pages in registers. And their purpose was specifically to document the laws and orations of the Catholic faith. However, these catholic texts are expressed in glyphs and figural images that reflect and draw on the deep tradition of Mexican pictography and painted codices. Although many of the images naturally stem from European Catholic iconography, others come directly from preconquest figuration, and still others were novel creations that reflect indigenous cultural practices and ways of thinking that continued after the conquest. The concepts of counting/pertaining and making/doing are two that represent the conceptual transport from the preconquest to the colonial world. They add to the well-established understanding that Nahua cognitive patterns, ways of expression, and practice continued vigorously after the conquest and profoundly shaped the early colonial world. Such transfers as these helped to mold European Catholicism into Mexican Catholicism, experienced, expressed, and understood according to Nahua cultural traditions.

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 Egerton: British Museum, Egerton Ms 2898.
 Gante I: Biblioteca Nacional de España Ms. Vit 26-9.
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