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DEPENDENT LABOR IN PREHISPANIC MEXICO

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Yet there were many situations which required a person, either as a private individual or by virtue of his official position, to obtain the services of workers who would be dependent on him and obligated to carry out his instructions. There were other situations whereby a person needed to gain a livelihood, but had neither kin nor productive resources on which he could rely; he had only his labor to offer. These are situations which in modern European-derived societies would be met by offering wages or by seeking to earn them. How were they met in prehispanic Mexico?

In this paper we will first examine some of the structural features of Central Mexican society that led to a demand for dependent labor, and the kind of work that needed to be done. We will then look at some factors which may have led people to offer their labor, and finally, we will examine more closely the principal forms of dependent labor, with special emphasis on two statuses, that of the *mayeque* (farm laborers or tenants) and that of the *tlacohtin* (pawns or slaves). Our principal concern will be with labor in the "private" domain: those who had to obtain labor without the direct coercive intervention of the state, and those whose offer of labor was beyond the normal requirements of a tribute-paying citizen. The line between "private" and "public" (or better, "state") is rather vague, however. To put it in its proper perspective, we will first briefly review some features of work for the state.

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Labor and the State

The various institutions through which Central Mexico was governed, on the eve of the Spanish conquest, were supported by lands set aside for the purpose, plus in some cases tribute from subjugated towns. These lands were known by various terms: *tecpantlalli* or *tlatocamilli* for the lands supporting the palace (*tecpan*) and its associated administrative personnel; *milchimalli* for the support of the army, particularly in distant areas; *teopantlalli* for those supporting the priesthood and its activities, and others. Individual officials might also be provided with lands for their support, if support from the above sources was not convenient. This was the case, for example, with *calpixque* (tribute collectors) stationed in distant areas subject to Tenochtitlan. All of these lands were worked by rotational labor services performed by commoners (*macelhualtin, sing*: *macehualli*) as part of their regular tribute to the state, or by them under various temporary institutional arrangements, as by youths in the *calmecac* or *telpochcalli* (youth's houses). The commoners who performed this labor were in most cases members of *calpulli* (wards) and held community lands in usufruct, but sometimes they were attached to the institutions involved, as were the *tecpanpouhque* who worked on the *tecpantlalli*.[1]

The power to command the labor of all citizens in rotation, and to requisition additional labor from them or other subject people whenever the need arose, was an attribute of the ruling stratum. It was the principal way work for the state got done, including the construction and maintenance of temples, palaces, and other public buildings, and public works of all kinds, as well as providing sustenance for officials. The state also maintained specialized craftsmen, supported by the lands of the institutions for which they worked.

Nobles, including apparently all holders of political office, held patrimonial lands, inherited and bequeathed to their heirs. Additional grants of land, usually in widely scattered localities, were occasionally made by the king to these nobles, chiefly as a reward for loyalty and meritorious service. As Zorita expressed it,[2] such land grants functioned as salaries. If a noble incurred the animosity of the ruling monarch,

[1] Alva Ixtlilxóchitl 1965, II: 168-170; Carrasco, 1964: 1971, Caso 1963; Katz 1966, Ch. 4; Kirchoff 1954-5; Litvak King 1971: 18-20; Zorita 1941, Ch. 5.

[2] Zorita 1941: 100.

or if another state conquered his, he and his heirs might lose their lands.

These landholdings have been called "private" to distinguish them from *calpulli* lands or institutional lands,[3] but they were granted as part of the political process, and must have functioned to enable the ruler to consolidate his control over the territory they were in. The ruler retained the right to re-allocate them if political circumstances required it. But they could not be worked by labor drafts or rotational service by *calpulli* members.[4] Most evidence seems to indicate that it was up to the noble landholder to find and retain the labor he needed.

A noble evidently sought to make of his household a minor redistributive center, attracting kinsmen and other followers with gifts, banquets and other forms of hospitality. His gifts might include land with which his kinsmen and followers could support themselves. If his landholdings were large enough, he might be elevated to the rank of *teuctli* (pl: *teteuctin*), and his lesser noble kinsmen (*pipiltin*, sing: *pilli*) might receive relatively large amounts of land, for the support of their own noble households, and on which their own dependent labor would be gathered.[5]

Control over a large amount of land was thus desired in part because of what could be produced on it, to be dispensed in feasts and as gifts, but even more for the labor it could support. Not only did this labor work the land, for its own support and that of the noble's household, but it provided them with a wide variety of services, and if need be, it could also be organized as a fighting force .

The Demand for Labor

Workers in the service of the nobles or other individuals seem to have been engaged chiefly in the following tasks:

1) *Agriculture.* The extensive landholdings of the nobles needed labor to be made productive. The land had to be cultivated, and the harvest processed and delivered. Apparently the prevailing customs was to assign a worker one or more plots of land, of which a specified

[3] Caso 1963: 870ff.

[4] Although the king might order a labor draft for the service of his nobles, as did Ahuitzotl for the repair of their houses after a flood in Tenochtitlan caused by his miscalculations (Durán 1867-80, 1: 394-395).

[5] Carrasco 1966: 1972. Fuenleal 1870: 253; Muñoz Camargo 1892: 99-100, 104-105 Título de Santa Isabel Tola 1897: 9.

portion —generally about one-fifth of the total— was to be cultivated for his lord, and the remainder for himself, except that from this remainder he might be required to give a certain amount of processed tribute (e.g., spun cotton). There are no indications that gangs of laborers worked together on single large plots.[6]

2) *Household maintenance.* Houses had to be kept supplied with water and firewood, and corn had to be ground regularly. These tasks are the ones most frequently mentioned when domestic labor is discussed, but sweeping, house building and repair, and food preparation are also noted.[7]

3) *Spinning and Weaving.* Every woman was supposed to know how to spin and weave, and the labor contributions of women consisted very largely of these activities. Cotton cloths served as a medium of exchange for many purposes, were a common item of tribute, and were often given as gifts, so it was desirable to have more of them than a single family could produce for its own use.[8]

4) *Other craft activities.* Although skilled artisans enjoyed a relatively high status for commoners, some were included among the *"terrazgueros"* (tenants) of every reasonably large noble establishment for which early colonial records are available.[9] Among them are makers of cigarettes, sandals, carrying baskets, petates, and many other items, as well as service specialists such as barbers, carpenters, florists, and even merchants.

5) *Burden bearers.* Most goods in Mexico moved on the backs of men. Nobles frequently had to transport tribute some distance to their ruler, and doubtless also from their scattered landholdings to the principal household. In addition, merchants were heavy users of burden bearers.[10]

A great many minor tasks are also mentioned in the early sources, such as messengers or errand-runners, or simply people to be on call for whatever need might arise. While there were artisans in the service of individual nobles, there were no shops in which large numbers of them worked under supervision for a master.

There are some data which enable us to form at least a rough idea

[6] Carrasco 1963: 103-104, 115; 1969; Ahumada, in Carrasco 1967: 132.

[7] E. g., H. Cortés 1865: 542; M. Cortés 1865: 450; Ahumada, in Carrasco 1967: 132.

[8] Carrasco 1963; 1971; Leander 1967: 87.

[9] E. g. Carrasco 1963; 1970; Matrícula de Huexotzinco. A photocopy of this document was kindly made available to me by H. B. Nicholson.

[10] H. Cortés 1865: 542; Sahagún 1950-69, x: 14-15.

of the extent of the demand for labor. Nobles apparently accounted for the bulk of this demand, and it has been estimated that nobles constituted from 5 to 14 percent of the population in Central Mexico.[11] Not every noble and labor at his disposal however; some lesser nobles apparently worked their land themselves.[12] The number of commoner house-holds recorded as working for and dependent on any one individual noble ranges from a low of one (several cases in Yecapixtla, Morelos),[13] to a high of 1,570 households subject, often indirectly through dependent pipiltin, to the grandaughter of the Cacique of Tepeaca, Puebla, in 1581.[14] In Yecapixtla, in 1564, 55 persons were served by an average of 13.4 dependent households each; the actual number varied from 1 to 46.[15] Sixteenth Century census figures from the regions of Huejotzingo, Puebla, and Tepoztlán, Morelos, suggest that from 20 to 50 percent of the macehualli population was subject to one or another native nobleman rather than belonging to a calpulli.[16] Nobles may not have been the only source of demand for labor. The commoner residents of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco, for instance, were largely supported by tribute from subject areas, so as to be free for military activity.[17] Many of them may have been able to support extra domestic labor.

The Offer of Labor

Under ideal conditions, it should seldom have been necessary for a person to seek to exchange his labor for a livelihood. A family that belonged to a *calpulli* was, ideally, assured of land to supply the necessities of life and a little surplus, or the right to be supported in exchange for work in a craft at which he was skilled.[18] Families attached to *tecpantlalli* (palace lands), *tlatocatlalli* (royal lands), and *teuctlalli* or *pillalli* (the patrimonial lands of the lords) would presumably have had the same assurances. Under ideal conditions, only very severe misfortune or exceptional personal irresponsibility should have required a person to seek to change his status and offer to sell

[11] Borah and Cook 1960: 71, 1963: 68; Warren 1968.
[12] Carrasco 1972: 231-233.
[13] Nuevos Documentos/Cortés 1946: 185ff.
[14] Carrasco 1963.
[15] Nuevos Documentos/Cortés 1946.
[16] Warren 1968; Carrasco 1964a; Borah and Cook 1960: 74.
[17] L. de Velasco, A. de Zorita, in Scholes and Adams 1958: 29, 52.
[18] H. Cortés 1865: 541-542.

his labor. Ideal conditions are static ones, however, and conditions in late preconquest Mexico were anything but static.

We can suggest the following circumstances as having served to generate a labor supply:

1) *Natural calamity.* A prolonged drought, grasshopper plague, untimely frost, or other such unavoidable disasters are known to have disrupted normal labor arrengements on at least some occasions.[19] Best known and most fully described was the three-years drought of 1454-1457.[20] Most of the Valley of Mexico, and some regions beyond, were affected, and the Mexica commoners either emigrated in search of better conditions elsewhere, or sold themselves or their children to slave dealers as *tlacohtin* (see below), and were taken away to work in exchange for food for their families.

2) *Warfare.* Many historical accounts describe the destruction that resulted from warfare, including the destruction of fields and the burning of food stores. Many a farmer must have survived a war only to find his means of livelihood gone, and his only hope in emigration. Muñoz Camargo, writing of the devastation of Huejotzingo in a war with Tlaxcala, in the course of which the Tlaxcalans destroyed the palaces which presumably contained the food stores, notes that the war

> causó a los de Huexotzinco el año siguiente que no tuviesen cosecha de panes, de que les causó gran hambre que tuvieron necesidad de irse a las provincias de México a valerse de su necesidad.[21]

On another occasion, the Mexica assault on Chalco was so destructive that many sought to flee toward Huejotzingo, where they would have stayed but for the persuasions of the Mexico conquerors.[22] Generally it is not known in what status such fugitives maintained themselves in the areas to which they fled, but Muñoz Camargo states that the Mexica gave land to the Huexotzinca refugees in the case mentioned above. In any case, warfare would seem to have helped to generate a labor supply.

3) *Loss of lands through expropriation.* The historical accounts, particularly those of the *Crónica X* series (Durán, Alvarado Tezozómoc, Tovar), frequently describe the awarding of land grants to

[19] Kovar 1970.

[20] Alvarado Tezozómoc 1944: 167-70 has the best account of response to this disaster; Kovar 1970 list other references.

[21] Muñoz Camargo 1892: 115

[22] Durán 1867, 1: 151.

Mexica nobles in regions conquered by the Mexica. They are usually unclear as to which lands were thus expropiated and redistributed, but there are a few clues. Following the defeat of Coyoacán by the Mexica, the lords of Coyoacán, according to Durán,[23] "hicieron dexación de todas las tierras comunes para que fuesen repartidas entre los mexicanos . . ." *Tierras comunes* is a term often used in the early accounts to refer to *calpulli* or *altepetl* (town) lands, in which case it would appear that *macehualtin* who were *calpulli* members were affected by this redistribution. The people who labored on the patrimonial lands of the lords have become known as *mayeque,* and it has been suggested that most of them were *calpulli* members whose status became altered following conquest and the redistribution of their lands.[24] But if so, they probably did not simply carry on as before, giving their tribute and labor to a different lord. Tovar states that when lands in Azcapotzalco were redistributed, "quedaron los de Azcaputzalco tan estrechos y necesitados que apenas tenían dónde hacer una sementera".[25] Were they then evicted from the expropiated lands, perhaps so that the noble grantee could settle his own followers on them? If so, it must have intensified the pressure on the remaining *calpulli* lands, encouraging some *calpulli* members to seek other sources of livelihood. We will consider the mayeque status in more detail later in this paper; for now, we suggest expropriation of land as another factor that might have led a commoner to offer his labor.

4) *Excessive tribute.* If one state was subjugated by another, its people had to give tribute not only for the support of their own native nobility, but to the victorious state as well, and sometimes this became intolerably oppressive. The *Crónica X* histories recount the suffering of the Mexica due to the excessive tribute demands of their Tepanec overlords, prior to their successful rebellion under Itzcoatl. Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, writing of events in the late fourteenth century, describes an instance in which

> vinieron otros otomíes del reyno de los tepanecas y de la provincia de Cuahuacán para que los amparase y les diese tierras en que poblar, porque Tezozómoc su señor los tenía muy oprimidos con pechos y tributos excesivos que cada día les imponía . . .[26]

[23] Durán 1867-80, I: 100-101.
[24] Caso 1963: 871.
[25] Códice Ramírez 1944: 66.
[26] Alva Ixtlilxóchitl 1965, II: 78.

Tlaxcala also reportedly received Xaltocameca, Chalca, and some Otomí refugees from Mexica tyranny.[27] Writing in 1554, Fr. Domingo de la Anunciación states that *tecutlalli* lands were settled by "los que se venían de otros pueblos y provincias huyendo . . .", and they remained as tributaries and workers for a noble who treated them well.[28]

5) *Personal ineffectiveness.* The contracting of debts beyond one's capacity to repay, through gambling, drunkenness, or excessive sexual lust, is mentioned in various early Spanish accounts as circumstances which might lead to one becoming a *tlacohtli,* one status in which a person might work for another.[29] But the picture we are so often given, of a class of people apparently willing to sell themselves into virtual slavery to satisfy momentary cravings, is only the tip of an iceberg. It suggests, but does not explain, the existence of mechanisms by which a small percentage of the population was regularly driven to such desperate acts, customary channels for carrying them out, and a demand for a kind of labor that could only be supplied in this way. The *tlacohtli* status will be examined in this light later in this paper.

Before considering the various forms of dependent labor, we must note that a *calpulli* member with access to insufficient land did not necessarily have to offer just his labor to obtain la livelihood. Zorita notes a provision whereby a *calpulli* member might rent lands belonging to a noble, or in some cases to another *calpulli,* while retaining his *calpulli* affiliation:

> Los renteros que están en tierras ajenas pagan por ellas renta al Señor de ellas . . . y son diferentes de los mayeques porque toman a renta las tierras por un año o dos o más, y no dan otra cosa al señor de ellas, porque al Señor universal o supremo [i.e., tlatoani] acuden con el servicio que los demás, y ayudan a las sementeras que para ellos se hacen, que es el tributo.[30]

He might do this, Zorita[31] explains because of an insufficient quantity or quality of lands available to him in his own *calpulli.* In at least some instances, he may also have rented royal lands.[32]

[27] Torquemada 1969, I: 199.
[28] Anunciación 1940: 262.
[29] Bosch García 1944: 55-58; Durán 1867-80, II: 236-237; Motolinía 1970, Ch. 20; Torquemada 1969, II: 565.
[30] Zorita 1941: 152, and 87 for rental of *calpulli* lands.
[31] Zorita 1941: 88.
[32] Zorita 1941: 144.

The Mayeque

The workers on the lands of individual noblemen have come to be known among modern scholars as *mayeque* (sing: *mayectli*),[33] a term apparently introduced into the literature by Zorita in the late sixteenht century. The *mayeque* may in some cases have resided in *calpulli* communities,[34] but they did not receive use rights to *calpulli* lands. They were tenants on the patrimonial lands of the nobles, and in lieu of paying tribute to the state directly, they paid it to their noble overlord. They received an allotment of land for ther own use, and in return were required to cultivate their master's land, provide domestic service, keep his household supplied with water and firewood, supply kitchen help, give one or more turkeys at specified intervals, spin and weave fibres, and provide other goods and services on a regular basis.[35]

A number of writers have pictured the *mayeque* as a serf-like class, bound to the land and inherited with it, a condition presumably different from, and harder and more servile than, that of *calpulli* members.[36] This picture of serfdom is, however, drawn entirely from a single source, albeit an exceptionally good one: Alonso de Zorita's *Breve y sumaria relación*. Zorita wrote:

> No se podían ir estos *mayeques* de unas tierras a otras, ni se vio que se fuesen ni dejasen las que labraban, ni que tal intentasen, porque no había quien osase ir contra lo que era obligado; y en estas tierras sucedían los hijos y herederos del Señor dellas, y pasaban a ellos con los *mayeques* que en ellas había, y con la carga y obligación del servicio y renta que pagaban por ellas, como habían pagado sus predecesores, sin haber en ello novedad ni mudanza.[37]

No other early source is as explicit as this, although some others remark, almost wistfully, on the supposed stability of residence and labor in Motecuzoma's time.[38] Zorita was writing at a time (circa

[33] According to the Siméon dictionary. After this article was in press, Pedro Carrasco stated to me that *mayeque* is the plural of *mayé*, derived from *maitl*, "arm" or "hand".

[34] Carrasco 1970 Matrícula de Huexotzinco.

[35] H. Cortés 1865: 542-543; see also Carrasco 1963: 98-99, 115-116 for a particularly varied list of duties.

[36] E. g., Borah and Cook 1960: 61; Caso 1963: 871.

[37] Zorita 1941: 143.

[38] E. g., Ahumada, in Carrasco 1967: 152.

1570) when the Spanish were having great problems keeping their Indian labor on the land — problems which, it seemed to them, were not present in precolonial times. But if serfdom has any meaning at all, it must mean that if the serf left the land, his master could go after him and bring him back, and could call upon the state to use its power to help him, and probably punish the fugitive as well. If this was not the case, then the *mayectli* is no more "bound to the land" than anyone else is bound to this source of livelihood. Yet all Zorita says on this matter is that they did not leave their place of work "because there was no one who dared act contrary to his obligations". There are no accounts which indicate that a noble had any right to restrain a *mayectli,* and no accounts of punishment given runaway *mayeque* — a rather striking omission considering the detailed accounts we have concerning the punishment of *tlacohtin,* and even of *calpulli* members who failed to cultivate their lands, and the eagerness with which the Spanish usually gathered such useful information. Occupational mobility is necessarily more limited when one is paid in non-negotiable land use rights than when one is paid in money, but such limitations must have affected *calpulli* members the same as *mayeque.* We have found no specific evidence that the *mayeque* were any more tied to the land they worked than *calpulli* members were to theirs.

Since a *mayectli* ordinarily passed his position on the land to his descendants, and a noble's patrimonial lands passed to his heirs, the effect in a stable situation was as if the noble had obtained his *mayeque* by inheritance. If a lord gave part of his landholdings to another noble whom he wished to have subject to him, the *mayeque* would likewise remain on the land as before.[39] But what if a noble were granted additional lands, or new lands made available to an expanding nobility? Where then did the new *mayeque* come from?

I suggest that the normal procedure was for a noble to attract workers to his land by whatever means the social system provided (bearing in mind that coercion by the state may well have been one such means), and that in most cases any previous occupants or users of the land vacated it.

This seems to be implied in two documents expressly concerned with the recruitment and obligations of labor. Hernán Cortés, writing in 1538, says

[39] Alva Ixtlilxóchitl 1965, 1: 234-235.

> Y para beneficiar [las tierras] y cultivarlas, alquilan gentes y las ponen en ellas, dellos casados con sus mujeres y hijos y dellos solteros, y tienen con ellos esta manera de paga: que les señalan un pedazo de su tierra donde haga una casa, que es una choza de paja, y aquél pueda sembrar de lo que él quisiese; y unos destos danle al dueño de la tierra . . . [there follows a long list of payments and duties].[40]

Cortés does not say where or how the nobles got these men to put on the land, but Domingo de la Anunciación, in 1554, wrote

> . . . otras tierras eran de los señores y principales que los señores pasados les dieron y a éstas llamaban *tecutlalli* y en estas tierras recogían los señores principales a los que se venían de otros pueblos huyendo y según el tratamiento les hacían así holgaban o no de les servir y obedecer en lo que les mandaban, y éstos eran los tributarios de los señores y principales.[41]

Other sources, although less explicit, tell of lands which "nuestros . . . antepasados . . . han poseído por suyos, e los vecinos dellos hanse ido puestos por sus manos . ."[42] or describe the arrival of strangers who, in one case, said to the señor, "Dadnos tierra por la que tributemos y ya no iremos a nuestro pueblo".[43]

To say that a noble had to "attract workers to his land" is of course not enough. There must be pressures on potential workers to make them find his land attractive. We have suggested the loss of land through expropriation as one process in the generation of a labor force. Even if a large proportion of the *mayeque* were former calpulli members whose lands had been divided among the nobles following a conquest, a shift in residence and re-structuring of communities must certainly have taken place. This is suggested by certain differences between a *calpulli* and a nobleman's estate. The kinship element in the structure of the *calpulli* has not been reported for the *mayeque* on a noble's lands, and the variation in size of lands worked by *calpulli* families[44] is replaced by a high degree of uniformity in the size of *mayeque* allotments.[45] The expropriation of lands for the benefit of nobles must have put considerable pressure on the land re-

[40] H. Cortés 1865: 542.
[41] Anunciación 1940: 262.
[42] Vecinos de Tlatelulco 1884: 143.
[43] Carrasco 1972: 237.
[44] H. Cortés 1865: 542; Leander 1967: 77.
[45] Carrasco 1968: 98, 115; 1969: 24; Cline 1966.

sources of a *calpulli,* and forced many *calpulli* members to seek *mayectli* status.

The normal objetive of a noble —to build a following loyal to him and serving his interest— would be hard to realize if he had to take over an existing *calpulli* structure (or part therof), with its established network of interpersonal and kin relationships, and its own patron deity and leadership figures, in an alien community probably resentful of his presence. It would be far more practical for him to recruit tenant-workers from a variety of places, who would then be united only be their common dependence on the same lord. However, the advantages would not be present if the lands granted had belonged to another noble, who had his own *mayeque* already settled on them.

It would be helpful if we could compare systematically the tribute, in services and goods, rendered by *calpulli* members with that rendered by *mayeque,* under prehispanic conditions, to get some objective measure of how unequal (if at all) the two statuses really were. But data for such a comparison are apprently lacking. Many of the institutions through which *calpulli* labor tribute was channeled, such as the *telpochcalli*[46] and the temple lands,[47] were abolished with the Spanish conquest. The depopulation of towns early in the colonial period, while their tribute obligations remained unchanged, further complicates the matter.

Could a *mayectli* become a *calpulli* member? Probably not. The statements by Zorita and Ahumada that the *mayeque* could not easily leave their lands, and their failure to explain what might happen to them if they did, may mean that, barring unusual good fortune, a *mayectli* had no place to go but down. This would in turn suggest that, while a *calpulli* member might become a *mayectli,* the reverse was very unlikely.

It should be noted that the term *mayeque* very rarely occurs in the primary sources. Zorita is the only one who makes much use of it, and he alone uses it as if to refer to a distinct social class. While gathering data por this paper, I have encountered the word in only three sources: 1) Zorita's *Breve y sumaria relación,* 2) a letter from Martín Cortés to the king,[48] and 3) the records of legal proceedings involving Martín Cortés, in wihch Zorita was a presiding judge.[49] A

[46] Fuenleal 1870: 256; Sahagún 1969, 1: 301.
[47] Caso 1963: 869; M. Cortés 1865: 444.
[48] Martín Cortés 1865: 450.
[49] Nuevos Documentos/Cortés 1946.

great many other sources refer to labor on the lands of the nobles, and most of them regularly use the Nahuatl terms for native social categories, but *macegual* is the only native term they use for commoners, whether *mayeque* (or *terrazgueros*) or not. It seems particularly strange that the word does not occur in those few passages in Nahuatl I have seen which refer to this form of labor.[50] In these passages, people are described simply as "working for" or "belonging to" a particular person, but Carrasco[51] reports that the term *tequinanamique* was used to refer to the "renteros" (*mayeque*) of a barrio of Yautepec, Morelos, in the late 1530's.

There seems little reason to believe that the Aztec regarded the *mayeque* as comprising a distinct social class, although for purposes of analysis we may treat them as such. Prior to the Spanish conquest, they seem to have been simply *macehualtin* who differed from others only in regard to where they lived, to whom they paid tribute, and in some details of land use rights. There is no good evidence that the life of a *mayectli* was very much harder, on the average, than that of a *calpulli* member, although it was almost certainly no easier. The distinction become much more important after the Spanish conquest, when *calpulli* members were required to pay a heavy tribute to the Spanish, while the *mayeque* were exempt. By the mid-sixteenth century, this distinction had come to be of such continuous concern to the Spanish that Zorita, in order to explain clearly the tribute system and its precolonial antecedents, had to formalize it by using a special term for tribute-exempt laborers. It may well be that it is Zorita, not the Aztec, to whom we owe the concept of the *mayeque* as a distinct social class.

The Tlacohtin

A person in urgent need of goods which he could not obtain in any other way could pawn himself, or be pawned by a spouse or parent, to someone able to provide what was needed. The person pawned became a *tlacohtli* (pl. *tlacohtin,* or sometimes *tlatlacohtin*), a status frequently described or referred to in the early sources. The provider of the needed goods acquired a lien on the *tlacohtli*'s labor, either until the goods were repaid, or for a specified period of time, or in

[50] Nuevos Documentos/Cortés 1946; 185-203; Carrasco 1972; Matrícula de Huexotzinco, f. 615v.

[51] Carrasco 1970: 375-376.

perpetuity — sometimes, within a family, over generations. In this latter case, a family might be obligated to provide one of its members to serve the lienholder at all times.[52] A male *tlacohtli* owned only his labor. He was juridically free to marry, acquire property, and often to maintain his own household. Female *tlacohtin* often served as concubines, and their juridical status is less clear. In any case, it was a hard life, which one entered only by coercion or extreme misfortune. *Tlacohtli* status was a common punishment for crime; thieves and certain other kinds of offenders were bound over to the victims of their offenses. If need be, the *tlacohtli* could be fitted with the collar of servitude (*cuauhcozcatl*). If he misbehaved or performed inadequately, his master could subject him to a public warning before a judge, and after a number of such warnings, he could be sold for sacrificial purposes.[53]

The early Spanish accounts usually translate *tlacohtli* as "slave", but this word was also used for other statuses, such as war captives who were not *tlacohtin,* and sometimes, I suspect, even for *mayeque.*[54] One cannot assume, therefore, that all references to "slaves" in early literature refer to the same class or status.

The *tlacohtin* were used most commonly for household service. Women sometimes served as concubines, and sometimes apparently also as prostitutes.[55] While *tlacohtin* might help with farm work, they do not appear to have been used systematically as agricultural labor on a large scale. A distinctive and important feature of *tlacohtli* labor is that they were not provide with lands. In return for their labor they received only bare necessities, unless their master was able and willing to be especially generous. They could also be given away or wagered in gambling. Women, who seem to figure rather prominently among the *tlacohtin* mentioned in the early sources, were apparently valued as gifts; Cortés, for example, received quite a few during his march to Tenochtitlan.

At least in rural areas, the number of *tlacohtin* was apparently quite small. Out of a population of 3,100 in the barrio of Tlacatecpan, Tepoztlán, in the late 1530's, there were only 45 *tlacohtin* (in-

[52] Torquemada 1965, II: Carrasco 1971: 356; Katz 1966; 142-147; Motolinía 1970, Ch. 20, 21.

[53] Durán 1867-80, II: 221-222; Motolinía 1970, Ch. 21; Torquemada 1965, II: 567; López Austin 1961: 74, Bosch García 1944: 50-53.

[54] E. g., Motolinía 1941: 135.

[55] Bosch García 1944: 57.

cluding their spouses and children). Compared with 1,262 persons identified as tenants on the chief's lands, rather than *calpulli* members, this is a mere drop in the labor bucket.[56] But this form of labor would seem to be particularly suited either to an urban environment, where lands to support labor were not readily at hand, or to other situations where it would be impractical to compensate labor with lands. In Central Mexico, their numbers were probably greatest in urban centers or in the more extensive households of major lords and rulers.

For one to become a *tlacohtli* rather than a *mayectli,* he or a family member would have to be faced with an urgent and immediate need which would not be satisfied except through theft or *tlacohtli* status, and the former was often punishable by the latter.

Natural calamity, affecting not only an individual's family, but his kinsmen or the *calpulli* organizations that he would ordinarily turn to for help, would be one factor here. Indeed, one of the best descriptions of large numbers of people becoming *tlacohtin* is Alvarado Tezozómoc's account of the drought which began in 1 Rabbit (1454) in the Valley of Mexico,[57] when slave dealers arrived in Tenochtitlan from various regions to offer food in exchange for people. It is interesting to note that, according to Alvarado Tezozómoc, among the places to which these poor unfortunates were taken to work were Cuitláhuac, Mízquic, and Chalco. These towns, in the chinampa region of the southern Valley, were at this time tributary to Tenochtitlan, and were often called upon to contribute warriors or construction materials for that city. Yet they were not required on this occasion to contribute food, which some among them evidently had, to feed the *macehualtin* after the royal stores gave out. On the contrary, Motecuzoma I and his advisor Tlacaelel are said to have advised the people to pawn themselves. Were these rulers actively encouraging the formation of a labor force?

There may have been some conscious efforts to lure people into situations that would result in their servitude. Gambling in particular, and the drinking that often accompanied it, were frequently mentioned as vices that might lead to such misfortune. Durán, after describing gambling activities, writes.

[56] Carrasco 1964.

[57] Alvarado Tezozómoc 1944: 167 see also Durán 1867-80, I: 248-249; Sahagún 1959-60, VIII: 23-24.

> A los que eran tahures y dados a este vicio de jugar y los tenían por uso y costumbre y por fin, teníanlos por gente infame y de mal vivir, por gente haragana y viciosa, enemiga del trabajo; huían de su conversación la gente que presumía de honra, a así los padres aconsejaban a sus hijos que se apartasen y huyesen de ellos y de su conversación como de perjudicial compañía, temiendo no los aficionasen y enseñasen a jugar, sabiendo que nunca aquéllos paraban en bien . . .[58]

It is hard to avoid being reminded of modern dope pushers. Yet the rulers themselves set an example by their gambling.[59]

Who were these people who were apparently so readily available to supply the goods needed to bring a man into slavery? Those who arrived in Tenochtitlan with food during the great drought and famine were described by Alvarado Tezozómoc:

> Y así vinieron muchos tecpanecas y acolhuaques, y mayordomos calpixques, y mercaderes a comprar esclavos . . .[60]

Sahagún[61] describes only their personal qualities, noting that they were avaricious and niggardly (*tlatlametl, tzotzoca*), but also that they were wealthy, and managed their affairs well and with foresight (*tlaixtamachiuhqui, tlapachoani, tlamalhuiani*). It may be significant that he does not mention *pochteca* nor any of the synonyms for this class of merchants. The *pochteca* clearly dealt in *tlacohtin,*[62] but it would appear that wealthy private individuals could also acquire them, without the services of the *pochteca.*

Other forms of Dependent Labor

A house-by-house census conducted during the 1530's of Tepoztlan and Yautepec (probably), Morelos, revealed that a number of households included persons, unrelated to the household head, who were apparently maintained in exchange for helping out with domestic or other chores. These people, termed *icnotlacatl,* "orphan" or "poor person", or sometimes *nenqui,* "mantenido, criado", were distinct from *tlacohtin*; Carrasco[63] calls them "attached poor". Apparently

[58] Durán 1867-80, II: 236, punctuation added.
[59] Sahagún 1950-69, IX: 29-30.
[60] Alvarado Tezozómoc 1944: 167.
[61] Sahagún 1950-69, VIII: 23.
[62] Sahagún 1950-69, X: Bk. 9, Ch. 4.
[63] Carrasco 1964a: 205-206.

most of them were single persons, at least some of whom had in fact been orphaned or otherwise abandoned in their youth.[64] There is little that can be said about these inconspicuous people, except that they represent an additional possibility for one in a position of having to offer his labor.

The market must also have provided opportunities for a few people without resources of their own. Sahagún has a reference to people "sin provecho y miserables, que andan por las montañas y las sabanas buscando yerbas para comer y leña para vender".[65] But a noble father warns his son against associating with such people, "porque son burladores y su manera de vivir es cosa de burla".[66] We do not know how many people may have eked out a livelihood this way, but it seems likely that the amount of free resources, on which they depend, must have been quite limited by the beginning of the sixteenth century. They, along with a few lucky gamblers, may have been among the last people able to maintain a relatively independent existence in a civilization characterized by increasingly close control and supervision of all people.

Summary and Conclusions

On the eve of the Spanish conquest, civilization in Central Mexico had evolved to a point where control over most of the desirable and easily-available productive resources had been concentrated in the hands of a few individuals or institutions. Land was by far the most important of these resources, and control over its disposition enabled nobles and state officials to acquire a body of dependents by granting or with holding the rights to use the land. This was a major way of obtaining dependent labor, but with increasing urbanization and the rising importance of activities not directly associated with the land, there was developing a demand for a form of labor which could be had without giving land to cultivate in exchange. The compensation of labor with land use rights necessarily left the laborer with some measure of freedom and independence. But without a system of wages, paid in universally-exchangeable money, an employer who, for whatever reason, could not compensate his workers with land use rights,

[64] Carrasco 1964a; 1964b; 1970; 1972.
[65] Sahagún 1969, II: 149.
[66] *Ibid.*

could not give them a comparable degree of freedom; hence the *tlacohtin*. Some of them did work in agriculture, but by the early sixteenth century, it seems likely that the class was primarily urban.

I have presented the *mayeque* as *macehualtin* who were perhaps somewhat poorer, on the average, than *calpulli* members but who were not appreciably less free in a juridical sense. This differs from the picture often presented of the *mayeque* as an oppressed and enserfed underclass, and the difference is important. To maintain a work force enserfed or enslaved requires an expenditure of effort and responsability which it would made sense to avoid if possible. Long ago, the Dutch ethnologist H. J. Nieboer surveyed the data then available on slavery and related institutions in pre-industrial societies, and concluded, in essence, that slavery, serfdom, or other forms of involuntary labor are most likely to be prevalent where a state-organized society exists under conditions of "open resources", that is, where land or other means of livelihood are so readily available that no one need be dependent on another for his livelihood. Under such conditions, Nieboer wrote, "every able-bodied man can, by taking a piece of land into cultivation, provide for himself. Hence it follows that nobody voluntarily serves another; he who wants a labourer must subject him, and this subjection will often assume the character of slavery".[67]

It seems unlikely that conditions of open resources existed in Central Mexico in late Postclassic times. The population density on the eve of the Spanish conquest is estimated to have been from 75 to 170 per km^2, depending on the region.[68] Virtually all desirable land was under the effective control of either the state, one or another state-related institution, the *calpulli,* or individual nobles. Even entry into the more rewarding craft specialties or professions was restricted. Short of taking off for the distant barrancas of Metztitlan or elsewhere,[69] an individual seldom had any choice but to subject himself to one master or another, under a very limited range of conditions, all of them set by the master. Why, then, should serfdom have been necessary?[70]

[67] Nieboer 1900: 306.

[68] Sanders 1970.

[69] Davies 1968: 48-49.

[70] The Spanish, to be sure, found it necessary to introduce forced labor, (the *repartimiento*), but this was because of the breakdown of much of the earlier system of control over resources, and the sudden changes in the organization of work. Depopulation may have been an additional factor.

Such high population densities, however, are fairly recent. Archaeological surveys indicate that, with the exception of the Teotihuacan Valley, the population densities of the Valley of Mexico and Puebla-Tlaxcala were only about one-tenth as high in the Classic era, some 800 years previously, as they were in 1500.[71] Yet a stratified society certainly existed since the first appearance of ceremonial centers, in the Formative era. In the light of Nieboer's theory, it would seem that serfdom or some form of bound labor is more likely to have been present in the Classic than at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

There is, however, another consideration. Tenantry, whether bound of free, is dependent on landlordism, and landlordism, in turn, depends upon a system of intensive agriculture that favors fixed landholdings, rather than shifting agriculture. Writing about Africa, Goody points out that in those parts of Africa where shifting cultivation prevails, there are no large landholdings; wealth is more likely to consist of control over labor than over land, and slaves, rather than tenants, are often employed in farm work. Tenantry is found only where continuous cultivation is possible.

In Mesoamerica, shifting agriculture was characteristic of many regions, but the *mayeque* status was probably limited to regions where continuous cultivation was possible. Central Mexico was one such region, and probably had been since the Classic if not earlier.[72] In such regions, the *mayeque* are more likely to have been juridically bound to the land when population density was low than when it was high. Slavery was widespread throughout Mesoamerica in precolonial times, and probably had considerable antiquity, but in Central Mexico, *tlacohtin* played only a minor role in agricultural activities. There were many other tasks, however, for which *tlacohtin* were better suited than *mayeque*. Because the *mayectli* had to be granted time to cultivate his plot, which was on the average about four times as large as what he cultivated for his lord, his labor service was periodic, except for what he provided on his own time, such as cloth, turkeys, or any special crops which his lord might have demanded in tribute. The same applies to the labor service of *calpulli* members. Neither was ideal for tasks which required the same person to be continuously available. Nor were they entirely suitable for household maintenance

[71] Parsons 1971; Dumond 1972.
[72] Sanders and Price 1968: 148.

or other activities performed for one who was not in a position to provide lands; that is, predominantly urban activities. For these, the *tlacohtin,* or the attached poor, were used. Their numbers may have increased with the increasing urbanism of the Postclassic.

Enough is known about state-organized societies in general to permit the generalization that a dependent labor force, whether slave or free, is unlikely to exist unless steps are taken by the state, or with its active support, to convert a portion of the population from independent to dependent status. In describing such occurrences as the apparent failure to import food in time of famine, the toleration and implicit encouragement of gambling indebtedness, and of course the expropriation of land in newly-subjugated areas, we have tentatively posed the question, was the state, in these instances, actively helping to create a dependent labor force? We leave the question unanswered, but surely some such steps were taken in prehispanic Mexico, and these may have been among them.[73]

[73] I would like to thank H. B. Nicholson, Frances Frei Berdan, and Pedro Carrasco, for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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