

SAHAGÚN'S NAHUATL TEXTS AS INDIGENIST DOCUMENTS

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Spain's conquests in the New World were both physical and spiritual; of these the latter was, certainly, more important. That Hispanicization succeeded to the degree that it did, however, must have been due largely to the way in which cultural changes were imposed. In the Nahua area, the very important body of information compiled by Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún's informants shows how some of the cultural changes in ancient Indian ways of life were coming about in the XVI Century.

Considering the precarious position of the new Spanish establishment during the decades immediately following the Conquest, the acceptance of the new patterns must account in part for the ease with which Spanish rule nevertheless persisted. Much of this was due to the assumption of the burden of acculturation by the Church, in which the process had been traditional for centuries.

This is evident in instructions given Mellitus by Pope St. Gregory I in A. D. 601, to transmit to St. Augustine, then engaged in converting pagans in Britain. The principles enunciated had been developed throughout the first six centuries of the growth of Christendom. They were, as organized by St. Gregory, that while the pagan idols should be destroyed, the holy places themselves should be made use of; while the heathen character of sacrifices should be abolished, the occasions should be observed in commemoration of the holy martyrs. Familiar places, celebrations, and customs might be used for Christian purposes; the substitutions would be found acceptable by the converts. The seven centuries of struggle against the Moors had made Spanish ecclesiastics somewhat less flexible than SS Gregory and Augustine, but

it is plain that they followed the same pattern in their conversion of the Indians of Mexico, with success to the degree that they understood the culture which they were transforming. Not everywhere in the New World did they understand the fundamental qualities of the aboriginal civilizations; hence the uneven quality of the conversions; hence, perhaps, the controversy which developed between enthusiastic Franciscans and cautious Dominicans over the validity of the wholesale baptisms and supposed conversions of the early XVI Century. Yet the work of the Church has been remarkably enduring; and its techniques have followed the course suggested by St. Gregory. In the Mexico of the Central Plateau, we see it in the location of the Cathedral in Mexico City on the site of the pyramid temples, or at Cholula; in the region now known as the American Southwest, in the placing over the kiva of chapel or church, as at Jémez, New Mexico, or at Awatovi, Arizona; in the way in which Indians dance in the churchyards on saints' days in the gradual process of religious acculturation. When the change was attempted abruptly, on levels which the Indian could not comprehend and accept, whether the Spanish agents were religious or civil, there might be setbacks, as there were, for instance, in 1680, when the Pueblo Indians revolted with temporary success for a dozen years.

One sees the same technique, with the same precautions, in action today on a secular level in Mexico, with the success of governmental agencies in introducing modern hygiene, medicine, agricultural methods, and the like, into rural, Indian areas.

Whether Sahagún himself, in the XVI Century, had been indoctrinated in the methods of implanting the Faith expressed by Pope St. Gregory, the approach seems to have been inherent in the policies of the Franciscan Order as it operated in the earlier half of that century. In contrast with the Dominicans and Augustinians, the Friars Minor exhibited more of a human sympathy, as Angel María Garibay points out in his *Historia de la literatura náhuatl*: "These, more intimately acquainted with the Indians, more painstaking in the preservation of what was theirs, were more devoted in the investigation and more zealous in the saving of their ways and modes of old [*antiguallas*]. . . Two tendencies were under

debate during the evangelistic stage: one, to put an end to everything indigenous, especially in the realm of ideas, even so far as to leave no sign of them; this was favored by the Dominicans and, in part, by the Augustinians; the other, to adapt and to raise to the level of the new [Spanish] culture all which might be capable of this ennoblement. Devoted helpers were the Franciscans, as if steeped in the spirit of him who conversed with the birds and protected even the ants with the warmth of his tenderness."

It was in this spirit that Sahagún worked. But in New Spain the tendency was plain, beginning even before Sahagún's preliminary work toward the *General History of the Things of New Spain*, the monument for which we now revere him most. This was as early as 1532 in the Nahua-speaking area, when Fr. Pedro de Gante founded an elementary school in Texcoco and later apparently another, a technical one, in Mexico. In the latter there appears to have been success in adapting the high skills of the natives to the necessities of the new Spanish civilization; for they were already second to none in many civilized techniques. But there was also, naturally, much attention given to non-material acculturation: the charming little *Catecismo de la doctrina cristiana* in picture writing attributed to Gante, to be seen in the Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid, shows an attempt to present this aspect of western civilization to the new converts in terms and techniques understandable by them. That it has survived these 450 years and that a comparable, though later (1614) and more sophisticated devotional book (*amatl yn itlatoltzin Dios*) in Nahuatl and picture writing (Egerton MS 2898 [Farnb.]), by Dom Lucas Mateo, is to be seen in the British Museum, London, indicate the good sense in adapting methods of transmitting ideas in a cultural context revered by the natives.

The development of this movement is seen in the founding in 1536 of the College of Santa Cruz de Tlaltelolco, which, for all its faults and vicissitudes, remained an influential instrument of acculturation until it disappeared early in the XVII Century. Here some of the best Franciscan minds, in the first decade of the College, at least —Sahagún, Olmos, Basacio, Gaona— taught their Indian pupils Spanish, Latin, rhetoric, logic, and philosophy; and they showed them how

to write their own Nahuatl. They undoubtedly gave them a classic mold based upon Pliny's *Natural History* for application to natural sciences, results of which are evident in such works as the *Badianus MS* (an Aztec herbal) and in certain parts of Sahagún's *Historia general* —Books VII, X, and XI, for instance. These would have been impossible achievements without the existence first of the trilingual, partly Hispanicized young men whom the Franciscans had trained. Even such work as was involved in XVI —century printing in Mexico— the *doctrinas*, the *catecismos*, the *sermonarios*, Molina's *Vocabulario* and his *Arte*— could not have been done without them; let alone the successful government of Mexico City in those days through native leaders like D. Antonio Valeriano, who understood both Indian and Spanish cultures; and certainly not Sahagún's extraordinarily complete and successful communication with the old men, his informants, who remembered pre-Hispanic Mexico in all its depth and detail; nor the transcription of their information, the interpretation and organization of all the evidence thus secured, and even the completion of Sahagún's beautifully written and organized works, such as one sees in the Madrid and Florentine MSS.

"... I had all the principal men assembled, along with the ruler of the town", Sahagún says of his method of procedure, in the Prologue to Book II of the *Historia general*. "... Having assembled them, I presented to them what I aspired to do, and I asked that they give me able and experienced persons with whom I could converse and who would know how to give an account of what I should ask them. They answered me that they would speak among themselves about what had been proposed, and that on the following day they would answer me, and so they took their leave of me. Next day the ruler came, with the principal men, and, having made a most solemn speech, as they then used to do, they assigned me as many as ten or twelve of the old principal men, and they told me that I could communicate with them, and that these would give me an account of everything that I might ask. There were present as many as four Latin scholars whom, a few years before, I had taught grammar in the College of Santa Cruz in Tlaltelolco.

"With these principal men and Latin scholars, who were also leading men, I talked for many days —almost two years— following the order of the memorandum which I had made.

"Everything about which we conferred they gave me by means of pictures, since that was the system of writing which they used in times of old, and the Latin scholars explained them in their tongue, writing the explanation at the foot of the picture..."

This procedure is vividly like that of the modern ethnologist: having the confidence of the leaders of the people he wishes to investigate, he arranges by their common consent for conferences with those assigned him, and, with the help of acculturated men whom he himself has taught, is given the answers to an adequately prepared questionnaire in the form which is natural to the civilization he investigates. Without the help of the young men he had trained, the process would not have been efficient; perhaps it would not have been possible. Furthermore, in previous interchanges, Sahagún's alert mind had come to appreciate many of the features of the old civilization, pagan though it was. This is emphasized repeatedly in Sahagún's prologues to the Books of the *Historia general*.

So he writes in the Prologue to Book I: "All this work will be of great benefit for understanding the excellences of these Mexican people, which has not yet been known, for there came upon them that curse which Jeremiah uttered in God's behalf against Judea and Jerusalem, saying, in Chapter v, 'Lo, I will bring a nation upon you from afar... it is a mighty nation, it is an ancient nation, a nation whose language thou knowest not, neither understandest what they say. Their quiver is an open sepulchre, they are all mighty men. And they shall eat up thy harvest, and thy bread, which thy sons and daughters should eat; they shall eat up thy flocks and thy herds; they shall eat up thy vines and thy figtrees; they shall beat down thy fortified cities, wherein thou trustest, with the sword.' Such has literally come to pass to these Indians with the [coming of the] Spaniards; they were so completely trampled upon and destroyed that nothing remained to them of what they once were. So they are held to be barbarians and people of the lowest attainments —whereas, in

truth, in matters of polity they are ahead of many other nations which are very conceited as to their public affairs, aside from some tyranny which their methods of rule had."

Being worth saving as individuals, the means must be found. He writes in his Prologue to Book I: "The physician cannot with certainty prescribe medicine to the sick unless he first knows from what... cause the sickness proceeds... preachers and confessors are physicians of the soul... nor can the ministers be careless in this conversion by saying that among these people there are no sins other than drunkenness, robbery, and lust, for there are many other sins among them much more serious in great need of remedy;... idolatry and idolatrous rites, and idolatrous superstitions and omens, and idolatrous abuses and ceremonies..."

"To preach against these things, and even to know whether they exist, it is necessary to know how they were practised in the times of their idolatry, since by not knowing this they do many idolatrous things in our presence without our understanding them... and the confessors neither ask them about them nor think there exist such things, nor know the terminology to ask about them, nor can understand them even if they are told..."

"This work is like a dragnet to bring to light all the words of this language with their exact and metaphorical meanings, and all their ways of speaking, and most of their ancient customs, good and bad..."

In Sahagún's studies, as well as those of such colleagues as Olmos and Motolinía, much came to light morally admirable to Spaniard and Indian alike. Often it existed in usable form without change by the missionaries; often modifications were necessary. Philosophical and moral precepts were at once appreciated. They are equally so today; some because of their universal applicability, some because of the light they throw upon pre-Hispanic Indian mentality, much of which still persists without much change, or at least colors the attitudes, behavior, or reactions of large sections of the populations of Indian ancestry.

What is involved can be appreciated in León-Portilla's *Filosofía náhuatl*, or in Garibay's *Literatura náhuatl* and his many translations of Aztec songs, of the moral sentiments expressed in parts of Book VI of the *Florentine Codex*, of the

Huehuetlatolli or discourses of the old men which he traces back in the literature to the writings of Andrés de Olmos in 1547 or earlier. Much more will come from both Garibay and León-Portilla to indicate the depth and quality of poetry and philosophy in pre-Columbian New Spain; and there is no doubt that these precepts, memorized and passed by word of mouth from one generation to the next, are still living forces in Indian populations of Mexico (not necessarily Nahuaspeaking); that there is therefore a continuity in ideals from prehistoric times to the present, which time and cultural changes have not obliterated; and that in being able to appreciate the mental ideals and processes crystallized by Sahagún and his informants in the Madrid MSS of the Biblioteca del Real Palacio and the Academia de la Historia and in the *Florentine Codex*, one can also gain an insight into the ideals and mental processes of many of the Mesoamerican Indian groups of today.

"All dissolved, like a dream, León-Portilla writes in *La filosofía náhuatl*: 'the quetzal feathers were rent, the works of jade were broken up. . . ' and only the memory remained." Some of the old disappeared because the shock of conquest killed it; some because what still remained was insufficient to maintain the old values even if they were acceptable in the new culture. Some still persisted.

Despite some ruthlessness and errors on the part of the conquerors, they remained successful though comparatively few in numbers. The subjected Indian population neither expelled the Spaniards nor refused all new culture traits. Some substitutions were successfully made: Tepeacac, ancient site sacred to Tonantzin, became identified with Our Lady of Guadalupe, Sahagún tells us in Book XI —still in those times called Tonantzin (Our Mother) by the Indians and then as now object of long pilgrimages and other devotions, of which, it must be admitted, Sahagún was rather suspicious. There were many other such replacements.

Not even the best of Sahagún's and other Franciscans' pupils informants made good Friars Minor. The boys did, however, keep the priests informed of the Indians' lapses into non-Christian practices, and the latter would then take corrective steps. That these boys got into no more trouble than they sometimes did with the general populace may have

been due to similarities between their regime under the Franciscans to what it would have been in the *calmecacalli*, the highly revered institution of higher priestly learning in pre-Hispanic days.

From informants, whether the old men whose memories reached back to the days of Moctezuma or the trilingual young men who interpreted and recorded what they told, much that Sahagún and his colleagues approved or disapproved took form in the *Historia general*. Aside from the grosser and more obvious idolatrous practices and bloody rites which had been extirpated by the Conquest, observances and beliefs connected with the old ceremonial calendar survived, had to be detected, and were combated —although no less a figure than Motolinía thought them quite innocent, as is developed in the Appendix to Book IV and in recent writings of Luis Nicolau d'Olwer on Sahagún and Motolinía. Of less import though troublesome because rooted in the folklore were the various superstitious beliefs and practices described in Book V (which Garibay, in his edition of the *Historia general*, suggests Sahagún may have shortened in order to save himself embarrassment because of the nature of the subject-matter). That these were deep-rooted parts of aboriginal life is attested by the survival of some of them to this day: one could name others besides beliefs and sayings about the bad luck indicated by the owl. Likewise other situations current even in these days are given perspective and some explanation because of the good work of Sahagún's informants: the work and methods of *curanderos* can be traced through the descriptions in the *Historia general* to times much more remote; they survive today. So do certain practitioners thought to control the weather, the *teciuhltlazque*, thought able to divert or otherwise control hailstorms. How tenacious and troublesome these minor manifestations were, is indicated by Sahagún's final words in Book V, that they were like a mange which sickened the Faith; and by the writings of J. de la Serna, Pedro Ponce, Pedro de Feria, Ruiz de Alarcón, Sánchez de Aguilar, and Gonzalo de Balsalobre, to name a few in the first part of the XVII Century, who appear to have felt that the situation was getting out of hand, although the accounts indicate that the original pre-Hispanic practices had by then become so extremely degenerated as, often, to be difficult to recognize.

The ideal was to save as much as could accepted by the protagonists of the new culture, however, and one receives the impression that Sahagún and his colleagues would gladly have preserved more than they were able to. Much Aztec medical lore was of extreme interest, not alone to the Franciscans. To them, and perhaps particularly to Sahagún, it was very important. We owe to them and to the informants what Books X and XI of the *Historia general* have to tell us of the medicinal properties of plants, as well as what the *Badianus* MS records; and it is of very considerable value. The work of Dr. Francisco Hernández in Mexico at this same time had the same purpose, and what has survived of his reports is of great or greater value. Some of his success was undoubtedly due to informants of whom Sahagún among others had made use. That moderns like Maximino Martínez still depend upon these sources for references to herbs in common use in Mexico speaks for the good work that the informants did along these lines. Likewise parts of Book XI other than those dealing with vegetable life are of extreme value, in identifying animals, according to the aboriginal system, or in throwing light upon ideas, both fact and fiction, concerning minerals. Quite likely the chapter describing substances and mixtures used for producing colors (for the codices, and the like) has not been sufficiently appreciated.

In a few instances, though the informants were at hand with their information, Sahagún did not translate it. His version of the long section in Book X cataloguing the parts of the body would have saved moderns some puzzles in interpreting the Aztec terms; and relating them to particular cultural developments would have been most helpful. And Sahagún —good Franciscan that he was— had no interest in goldwork or jewelry. Of goldworkers, he says in the *Florentine Codex* (Book IX; Spanish column): "The meaning of this chapter is of little importance for either the Faith or the virtues, for it is merely a geometrical profession; if anyone [should wish] to learn words [and] fine ways of speaking, he will be able to ask the workmen who do this work, who may be found everywhere." Likewise, in similar terms, he dismisses the lapidaries and feather artisans, and there is no Spanish version. Though he has a few words here and there about house building, there is little about techniques;

neither is there anything about the potter's art. One wonders if the Mexican potters were more materialistic, less bound to religious connections with their profession, standing, and techniques than other skilled artisans were.

For, in the main, it was this which interested Sahagún and stimulated him to develop the research system which he used; to anticipate the methods of the present-day ethnologist by centuries. "When the nonsense which [the natives] held as faith concerning their false gods is understood, they may come more easily, through evangelical preaching, to know the true God; and to know that those they took for gods were not gods but lying and deceiving devils", he writes in his prologue to Book III.

That the process of Hispanicization had progressed in Sahagún's time is evident in the reading of the Nahuatl texts of the Madrid and Florentine MSS. It shows in the command which Sahagún's assistants, trained at the College of Santa Cruz, exhibited in the use of Spanish; in the occasional, matter-of-fact recourse to a Spanish term now and then in the Nahuatl text; in the adoption of some European terminology and perhaps methods in native techniques such as goldcasting, with the acceptance of these additions as if they had always been in Aztec culture; in the illustrations of the *Florentine Codex* —more European, perhaps, than Indian, whereas those of the Madrid MSS are more Indian than European; in what appears to be a certain tendency of simplification and standardization of Nahuatl itself; in the use of terms of opprobrium when the ancient gods are referred to (devils, demons), or ancient rites (superstitions, abuses); in the reverence expressed for the missionaries, especially the early ones, and for ecclesiastical and Spanish civil authority; in matter-of-fact references to changes in place-names; or in the application of old techniques to new purposes, as in goldcasting; and so on.

Tremendous quantities of information were gathered for Sahagún by his informants and assistants. His informants must have numbered hundreds; although he specifically mentions only the dozen or so old men of Tepepulco, of Tlatelolco, and perhaps of Mexico, he undoubtedly added much more information from many others. And there were those also who are here referred to as assistants, more in the nature

of informant-assistants: the partly or perhaps wholly Hispanicized men who had been trained in Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco in its first decade. These Sahagún names in the Prologue to Book I: "The most important and most learned was Antonio de Valeriano, resident of Azcapotzalco; another, little less [outstanding] than he, was Alonso Vegerano, resident of Cuauhtitlan; another was Martín Jacovita... Another, Pedro de San Buenaventura, resident of Cuauhtitlan; all expert in three languages, Latin, Spanish and Indian. The scribes who wrote all the works in a good hand are Diego de Grado, resident of Tlatelolco...; Bonifacio Maximiliano, resident of Tlatelolco...; Mateo Severino, resident of Xochimilco..." Informants on medical matters are meticulously listed. In Book X, at the end of Chapter 28, the Florentine and the Academia de la Historia MSS, in somewhat differing wording, acknowledge the collaboration of Juan and Pedro Pérez, Pedro and Joseph Hernández, Miguel García, Francisco de la Cruz, Baltazar Juárez, and Antonio Martínez, of Mexico: they assisted in compiling the very interesting list of sicknesses and their treatments. Chapter 7 of Book XI lists medical men of Tlatelolco who collaborated in the passages dealing with medicinal herbs and the like: Gaspar García, Pedro de Santiago, Francisco Simón, Miguel Damián, Felipe Hernández, Pedro de Requena, Miguel García, and Miguel Motolinía.

Possibly a modern ethnologist would have coordinated the data given by these medical men who are named, and by others who are not named. Doing so would have provided a better integrated piece of work, though not necessarily a greater contribution. In fact, one of the beauties of Sahagún's work is that he lets his people speak unhampered and unguided. There are some lacks of consonance, but the individuality of the informants is respected, and the differences of opinion, and sometimes the error, remains to be seen. In fact, the descriptions of the horrendous Tlacaxipehualiztli ceremonies of Book II does not exactly correspond to the one given in Book IX; the account of the Toltecs in Book III differs in some details from the one in Book X; and so on. The sources were different, and each equally honorable. In Book XII we have a daring experiment in the deliberate perpetuation by a representative of the conquering culture of the story of the Conquest by a conquered survivor. It is remarka-

ble how little rancor there is in it —though how much grief; it breaks off at the end of the Book in an unfinished episode of Cortés's triumph over Cuauhtémoc and his colleagues, as if there were no longer any use continuing. All things come to an end—

*Even jade is broken,
Even gold is shattered,
Even quetzal feathers are rent;
Not for ever does one persist on earth: only
for a little time is one here.*

There is little anger or rancor anywhere in the Nahuatl texts of Sahagún; nostalgia and sorrow there is. But those who may have hoped, or feared, that they would, with the freedom Sahagún gave his informants, and under the cloak of a language mysterious to practically all of the conquerors, express a violent hatred of Spanish overlord or priest, will be disappointed. As far as Sahagún and his colleagues had gone, they had promoted a process of cultural change with considerable success. And one strong reason for their general success must have been in their seeking out, meeting, and understanding what was best and most suitable in the spiritual resources of which the *tlamatinime* (sages), *temachtianime* (teachers), *teixcuitianime* (psychologists), *teyacayanime* (pedagogues), *tetezcavianime* (moralists), *cemanahuactlahuianime* (knowers of nature), *mictlanmatinime* (metaphysicians), and *netlacanecohuianime* (humanizers of desires) were guardians. It was at the level of ideas, ideals, longings, and beliefs that Sahagún, Motolinía, Gante, Olmos, and their fellows could meet the Indians entrusted to them, and did meet them honestly, accepted what they had which was good, and gave them much that was better. In Chimalpahin's record that when Sahagún died, all the Indian leaders went to the Convent of San Francisco, in Mexico, where he lay, to take their leave of him, we have some indication of the conquest that he had made.

Fundamentally, little has changed where the best interests of the aboriginal are served in the process of bringing in such improvements as western civilization can offer. There are many such centers of the best forms of diffusion of our ideas, and in the spirit in which they operate, Sahagún and his informants are still with us.