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HUMANISTICA

Minor Languages, Minor Literatures,  
Minor Cultures

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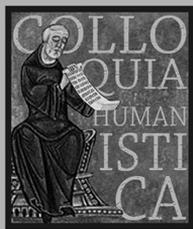
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## Empire, Colony, and Globalization. A Brief History of the Nahuatl Language<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

One of the most important cultural groups of native America at the time of the first contact with the Europeans, the speakers of Nahuatl occupied vast areas of central Mexico as well as more peripheral regions to the north, south and east; in each of these zones they coexisted with speakers of other languages. Nahuatl enjoyed great importance in the pre-Hispanic world over a long period of time, and its speakers have survived to this day in significant numbers, inhabiting several regions of Mexico. The preconquest history of Nahuatl in Mesoamerica probably extends at least into the Classic period, that is, roughly speaking, the first millennium AD. Nevertheless, best documented are the Central Mexican Nahuas who at the time of the Spanish conquest populated numerous local ethnic states (*altepetl*), most of which before 1519 were in some way involved with the powerful organization of the Triple Alliance, often called the Aztec empire by scholars today. Although the empire collapsed, the local states survived, not only in regard to much of their political organization, but also in many other aspects of their culture and in spite of becoming part of New Spain and the object of prolonged Hispanization. In the following centuries native *altepetl* continued as the seats of Indian municipal government based on European models, and Nahuatl thrived in the new colonial contexts. The language was also widely used for administrative and religious purposes across Spanish Mesoamerica, including regions where other native tongues prevailed.

In today's Mexico many varieties of Nahuatl and other elements of indigenous culture continue to flourish in traditional communities, attesting to the strength and vitality of native traditions after centuries of strong exposure to European influence. From the first decades of contact, Nahuatl

<sup>1</sup> This paper was prepared as part of the research project "Encounters between the Old and New Worlds" funded within the Focus Program of the Foundation for Polish Science.



and other native languages began to evolve in response to the strong and long-term impact of Spanish, undergoing profound changes in a process that continues today. In spite of this heavy influence and a constantly growing number of bilinguals—now a clear majority in native communities—local variants of the language reveal strong continuity with colonial Nahuatl. The state of language change in each region today depends on the degree of contact and urbanization, as well as on more subtle cultural processes. However, both in more heavily urbanized zones, such as Tlaxcala, and peripheral locations, such as northern Veracruz, close correspondence with earlier stages of language development are patent. Unlike numerous other cultures that became dominated by European impact and lost their integrity or virtually disappeared, the history of Nahuatl and the Nahuas is in many ways a unique example of survival and change, as well as continuity and transformation that can be viewed within a very broad temporal and spatial framework. Once the language of empire and colony, one of the dominant tongues in the entire pre-Columbian world, spoken by cosmopolitan elites and traders and widely used as a *lingua franca*, Nahuatl is today on the verge of becoming an endangered minority language. The numbers of speakers fall drastically every decade due to catastrophic educational and language policies as well as widespread practices of discrimination toward native speakers. And these adverse tendencies are exacerbated by current globalization processes.

## Early History

The Uto-Aztecan family, to which Nahuatl belongs, extends today from the southwestern United States to Salvador and Nicaragua. According to the traditional and most widespread view, the Uto-Aztecs originated in what is now the Southwestern United States and northwestern Mexico. In line with this reconstruction, agriculture is believed to have spread north from Mesoamerica and was adopted in the Southwest by foraging peoples speaking not only Uto-Aztecan, but also belonging to other groups. Crucial to this process were speakers of the Uto-Aztecan languages populating the frontier regions of Mesoamerica, including Cora, Huichol, and Aztecan. In this scenario, plant domestication, early cultivation and the developments associated with early civilization are attributed to another group, most probably speakers of Mixe-Zoquean, a language family still present today in Oaxaca and Veracruz (Campbell & Kaufman 1976). However, according to an alternative hypothesis based on new linguistic data related to agricultural vocabulary (Hill 2001: 913–934) the Proto-Uto-Aztecan community developed in Mesoamerica between the time when maize was

first domesticated (5600 B.P. according to Hill; now the date has been moved back to ca. 7500 BP) and 4500 B.P, followed later by a northward expansion of this population. As a result, an initial chain of dialects became fully differentiated into several distinct languages, including Proto-Northern Uto-Aztecan, Proto-Tepiman, Proto-Tarachitan, Proto-Tubar, and Proto-Corachol-Aztecan.

If this second line of reasoning is valid, speakers of early Nahuatl would have been present in Mesoamerica considerably earlier than traditionally envisioned. In fact, the appearance of Nahua groups is usually linked with the formation of Toltec culture and its main power center in Tula (Hidalgo) in the Epiclassic/Early Postclassic period (ca. 750-1150 AD). Accordingly, it has been assumed that the Nahuas could not have been culturally influential in Mesoamerica before the Toltec period. Thus, they could not have played a major political, economic, or religious role in the Teotihuacan empire, where one of the dominant languages was supposedly a “northern” branch of the Mixe-Zoque family, probably coexisting there with speakers of a Totonacan language (Kaufman & Justeson 2007: 232-323). However, a competing scenario proposes that some version of Nahuatl was spoken, probably along with other languages, in the powerful city of Teotihuacan in the first half of the first millennium AD (Dakin & Wichman 2000; Hasler 2011: 34-35). This view is supported by the presence of Nahuatl loans in Mayan, registered in glyphic records from the fourth and fifth centuries AD, a period of intense political and cultural interaction between Teotihuacan and lowland Maya kingdoms (Macri &Looper 2003).

While identification of the dominant language of Teotihuacan remains a controversial issue, it is generally acknowledged that the Toltecs spoke Nahuatl, although speakers of Otomi could have been an important ethnic component as well. However, the exact linguistic relationship between the Toltec Nahua-speakers and the remaining population of Teotihuacan culture remains obscure, since they settled in central Mexico long before the arrival of the Chichimec groups, who themselves came in several waves after ca. 1200 AD. There was probably a major dichotomy characterizing the Nahuatl dialects, consisting on the one hand, of the early arrivers identified as “Toltecs,” and on the other, of the later Chichimec migrants. In addition, as a result of population shifts, movements, and influences branching in many directions in central Mexico, the traits which at one time characterized these two major groups would have been modified, blurred or lost (Canger 1988: 63). Thus, it has been proposed that the first group of Nahuatl speakers, including the “Toltecs” in central Mexico and further south were the ancestors of today’s users of the variants of La Huasteca, Sierra de Puebla, Isthmus, and Pipil. On the other hand, later incomers

would have spread into the Valley of Mexico and to the east and south, including Tlaxcala, central Puebla, Morelos, and to a certain degree Central Guerrero, perhaps contributing to a three way geographical split in the early group: La Huasteca, Sierra de Puebla, and Isthmus (Canger 1988: 64–65). However, although there seems to be considerable linguistic similarity in colonial written texts from central Mexico, local differences are nevertheless noticeable, which implies that the Nahuatl-speaking population of this area was certainly not a homogeneous group. Surely different arrivals and waves of migrants that entered central Mexico gradually and over several centuries played a role, but the picture gets increasingly complex when we consider that some of them were speakers of other languages that mixed with the local populations, a process that began in the Valley of Mexico at least as early as the Toltec period.

## The Language of Empire

Although the common view associates the Nahuas, also called Aztecs,<sup>2</sup> with the relatively recent arrival of different groups of nomadic Chichimecs from the north or northwest over several centuries, they actually represented a highly advanced culture that was linked in numerous ways to other past and contemporary Mesoamerican traditions. Most of these Central Mexican communities shared the mythical-historical tradition of being founded by migrating ancestors, consisting either of dispersed Toltec groups settling in the Valley of Mexico after the collapse of their state or, more frequently, warlike Chichimecs identified with the barbarous north, who took possession of the land and intermarried with local inhabitants. Indeed, the archaeological record seems to support the notion that major groups of migrants arrived in central Mexico at the onset of the Aztec period (ca. 1200 AD; Smith 1984; 2008: 76–77), and alleged Chichimec

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<sup>2</sup> Widely used by the public and some scholars, the term “Aztec” or “Aztecs” gained popularity in the nineteenth century. It originally described the mythical ancestors of the Mexihcah at the moment of departure from their place of origin, Aztlan, and did not serve as an ethnic name at the time of contact. The word has been used in different ways, in a narrow sense referring to the Mexihcah-Tenochcah of Tenochtitlan, but also designating other Nahuatl-speaking groups. Today the term “Aztecs” is commonly employed to designate all inhabitants of the Valley of Mexico at the time of the Spanish conquest (e.g. Smith & Berdan 1996: 3), and sometimes even speakers of Nahuatl in neighboring regions (Smith 1997). Its use is more common among scholars focusing on the perspective of the “Aztec empire” of Tenochtitlan, Tetzco and Tlahcopan. The term also serves as the conventional reference to archaeological “Aztec culture” of the Middle and Late Postclassic period (ca. 1200-1521). A name coined more recently is “the Nahuas,” and is accepted by most scholars studying postconquest societies. It emphasizes the localized sense of identity of particular groups, including both wider (Acolhuahqueh or Tepanecah) and narrower ethnonyms (Tenochcah, Tlatelolcah, Quauhtinchtlan and many others).

roots remained an important point of cultural reference in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Little is known about the language of the Chichimec incomers; while some of them could have spoken northern variants of Nahuatl, many were certainly Otomi speakers and acquired Nahuatl in the process of interaction with the inhabitants of Central Mexico.

Central to Nahua sociopolitical organization were ethnic states called *altepetl*, continuing after the Spanish conquest and carrying a strong sense of microethnicity. These numerous entities, differing in size, rank, and ethnic composition, were scattered throughout the Valley of Mexico and surrounding areas wherever the Nahuas lived. Consisting basically of groups of people holding rights to certain territories, they could be either entirely sovereign units or subordinated to other *altepetl* to which they owed tribute. *Altepetl* had a cellular structure encompassing symmetrical and self-contained parts of the whole, which operated on a rotational basis (Lockhart 1992: 14-25). The head of each *altepetl* was a dynastic ruler called a *tlahtoani* (“the speaker”), who usually represented the highest-ranking sub-entity and received tribute and labor duties from the entire polity. Although rulers of Nahua *altepetl* sat at the top of the regional social hierarchy, they could be subordinated to other *tlahtoqhueh*. Across central Mexico particular *tlahtohcayotl*, or rulerships, were often small and their hereditary leaders constantly engaged in competition and conflicts with their peers. In complex *altepetl* the constituent parts ruled by separate *tlahtohqhueh* preserved a rotational and symmetrical arrangement. Such entities could accommodate distinct ethnic groups, who tended to form rival factions (Reyes García 1988; Lockhart 1992: 18–21, 24). A typical *altepetl* in the Valley of Mexico probably had a population of between 10,000 and 15,000. An exception to this pattern was the imperial capital Tenochtitlan, the tremendous size of which can be explained by its political and economic role within the Triple Alliance (Smith 2008: 90, 195–196). This organization is often referred to as the Aztec empire by modern scholars. The term “empire” crops up also in sixteenth-century sources to designate the Triple Alliance of Tenochtitlan, Tetzcoco and Tlahcopan, called *excan tlahtoloyan* (“triple place of rule”) in the original Nahuatl terminology.

The formation of the Triple Alliance postdated the so-called Tepanec war that broke out in the late 1420s and continued into the early 1430s. During this time of turmoil, the Mexihcah of Tenochtitlan, the Acolhuahqueh of Tetzcoco and Tepanecah of Tlahcopan together with their allies overthrew the formerly hegemonic Tepanec state of Azcapotzalco. Although each *altepetl* initially may have governed its territory autonomously, by AD 1519 Tenochtitlan had emerged as the dominant power center. Tetzcoco and Tlahcopan reportedly participated in wars under Mexihcah command

and contributed to public works in Tenochtitlan as subordinate *altepetl* (Carrasco 1996: 600–601). The rank of the sovereign of Tenochtitlan was highlighted by his title of *huei tlahtoani* (“great ruler”), claiming superiority vis-a-vis other *tlahtoqueh*. By the time of the Spanish conquest he enjoyed an incomparably high status in the Nahua world, his position being enveloped in esoteric lore expressed by elaborate ceremonies, sophisticated courtly etiquette, and precious insignia.

The core area of the Aztec empire corresponded roughly with the Valley of Mexico, and conquered imperial domains extended in almost all directions, encompassing significant portions of the present states of Hidalgo, Guerrero, Morelos, Puebla, Oaxaca, and Veracruz, thus including numerous areas inhabited by speakers of Nahuatl. Often viewed by modern scholars as a hegemonic empire, the Triple Alliance expanded both through military conquests and the mere threat of martial intervention, adjusting its goals to different local historical, geographic, economic and military factors (Hassig 1988; Berdan et al. 1996; Berdan 2007: 133–136). Local rulers could also profit from their connections to the empire in many ways, especially in political struggles against neighboring enemies or traditional rivals (Berdan 2006: 160–163; Chance & Stark 2007: 219–224). A very important dimension of this process of co-opting local elites was the spread of Nahua language, ideology, and culture. Provincial nobles enjoyed the advantages of a friendly association with the empire and often emulated their overlords by adopting prestigious status markers, iconography of rank and courtly art, all of which merged with local traditions. This widespread phenomenon, revealing numerous traits that can be attributed to early imperial impact, is clearly reflected in early colonial pictorial manuscripts from areas previously subordinated to the Triple Alliance, especially in portions of the current states of Guerrero, Hidalgo, Puebla, and Veracruz (Olko 2006, 2008). As implied by an example of the *Códices Azoyú* from the kingdom of Tlapan in Guerrero, interaction with Tenochtitlan involved not only the use of Nahuatl as the language of external politics and communication with the hegemon, but also resulted in the reinforcement of Nahuatl-speaking factions within local populations (Oudijk 2011). Thus, combined cultural, political, and economic interactions across the domains of the Triple Alliance and beyond contributed to the spread and consolidation of the role of Nahuatl across Mesoamerica in the last decades preceding the arrival of the Spaniards.

In fact, the creation of extensive networks connecting elites both at the central and peripheral levels, involving such aspects of high culture as writing and artistic expressions, preceded the formation of the Aztec empire (Berdan & Smith 1996: 211; Boone & Smith 2003: 192). These networks

could have been based, at least to a certain degree, on the prior geographical extension of Nahuatl, not only as the actual language of communities located peripherally with respect to the Valley of Mexico, but as an interregional language. As will be further argued below, it seems very probable that the continued expansion of Nahuatl, especially as the second language used by other ethnic groups across Mesoamerica, was the direct effect of the administrative practices and the cultural policy of the Triple Alliance. Seen in this light, the role of Spanish colonial administrators and ecclesiastics in positioning Nahuatl as a *lingua franca* may be overestimated. Though their policies no doubt contributed to the unwavering importance of Nahuatl and its usage for different official purposes across the colonial era, they probably benefited from several preexisting circumstances, including the vast geographical presence of Nahua communities across different regions of Mesoamerica, the common use of Nahuatl as a second language among other ethnic groups, and, finally, the administrative and cultural practices developed by the Aztec empire, possibly modeled on an earlier cultural and political history of Nahuatl.

### Postcontact Rearrangements: Nahuatl during the Colony

Although officially only a few elements of preconquest culture persisted after the Spanish conquest, the fundamental feature of Nahua sociopolitical organization (the *altepetl*), as well as the whole system of beliefs, cultural practices and artistic expressions, continued largely unaltered, sometimes only transformed on the surface under the guise of the new municipal order and Christianity. Initiating their rule, Spaniards usually dealt directly with particular *altepetl*, just as the Triple Alliance did before the conquest. This reliance on indigenous organization reinforced the unity of precontact entities, enhancing their importance in the early colonial period (Gibson 1964: 63–74; Lockhart 1992: 28–29; Horn 1997: 19). In most cases they respected preexisting political-territorial units and divisions when introducing the most important European institutional forms that affected and transformed the native world. Thus, a single *altepetl*, with its borders and constituent parts, could successively become an *encomienda* (a grant of Indian tribute and labor to a Spaniard), a parish, and then, beginning in the 1530s, a Spanish-style municipality, thus acquiring the status among Spaniards of a *cabecera*, or head town (Lockhart 1992: 29). Across the sixteenth century native *altepetl* continued as the seats of Indian municipal government based on European models organized as *cabildos* or town councils, as well as centers of tribute collection and labor organization in the traditional manner. Thanks to the Spanish recognition of local ruling

dynasties in the formation of municipal councils, the *tlahtoani* was frequently appointed to the office of the first governor, or *cabildo* chief. This dual role indigenous lords often managed to play was frequently described as “cacique y gobernador,” that is, a native ruler and municipal officer. The domestication of the new system also entailed its adjustment to the traditional structure of the native *altepetl*. Perceived correspondences were often based on cultural misunderstandings between the two sides, helping the indigenous elite to take advantage of the Spaniards’ limited understanding of native organization. They also benefited from the Spanish crown’s formal recognition of the local hereditary nobility and its rights, successfully maintaining their privileged position within the new political and economic reality. Indeed, it has become increasingly clear to modern scholars exploring the Nahua world through its own sources that the results of ongoing cross-cultural transfers, as well as the nature of the corresponding transformations were strongly influenced by precontact sociopolitical structures and key cultural concepts. At the same time, however, the Nahua population as a whole was heavily affected by catastrophic epidemics, while taxation became increasingly excessive in view of the huge population decline.

The preconquest tradition of books and glyphic records prepared the Nahuas well for the arrival of alphabetic writing. They immediately assimilated this tool and used it prolifically, producing an extremely rich and complex corpus of written texts that attests to the vitality of their culture across the colonial period. This body of writing embraces historical annals, speeches, plays, petitions, assertions of local traditions and rights called “titles,” religious texts (among them translations and reinterpretations of European sources) and a mass of everyday documentation including wills, bills of sale, parish records, and censuses. The source base for Nahuatl writing remains largely unparalleled on the American continents, even taking into account the substantial textual records left by other advanced cultures of the Mesoamerican region, such as the Maya, Mixtecs or Zapotecs. This corpus makes it possible to study numerous aspects of the history of Nahuatl in the postconquest era, including contact-induced change, different forms of adaptations to colonial ways, and the role of alphabetic writing itself as a repository of tradition and native concepts. It constitutes the primary source for accessing the core operating ideas of the native people: those that continued unchanged after contact, those that although indigenous in origin were affected by Spanish, as well as those that were Spanish in origin but became transformed by the Nahuas. The speed and efficacy with which the preconquest Nahua written and visual traditions adopted European elements and traditions attests to their flexibility and versatility (Navarrete 2011: 190). It has been emphasized

that the different “ways of conceptualizing transcription—the European array of writing and figuration on the one hand, and Mexican pictography on the other—were culturally commensurate” (Boone 2001: 197). But even if preconquest continuities are more readily recognized in pictorial records combining elements of indigenous and European origin, numerous elements of the preconquest tradition, forms of expression and concepts thrived in the form of alphabetic writing in Nahuatl. It provides a very direct and profound access to the forms of usage of the native language as well as its sociopolitical and cultural role in the postcontact situation.

The vitality of Nahua culture and language, along with its ability to expand into new spaces, is manifest in alphabetic genres, many of them borrowed from European writing, but modified and adapted to native concepts and forms of expression. However, some of these were derived from preconquest pictorial genres or, at the very least incorporated some of their traits. The tradition of native books flourished in the communities of Late Postclassic central Mexico, serving a variety of needs. Preconquest documents used native glyphic writing, which in the case of the Nahuas was a mixture of logographs and phonetic signs, with local variants differing in the degree of phoneticism (Lacadena 2008). Native manuscript painting, along with certain glyphic records, continued to develop under Spanish influence until the end of the sixteenth century, and persisted in altered forms well beyond that. There are several types of native pictorial records, employing different materials, including deerskin, local bark paper (*amate*), cloth and European paper.<sup>3</sup> After the conquest many native manuscripts, especially those commissioned by Spaniards, were also made in a European book format. As a result, in the sixteenth century one document could combine glyphic records with alphabetic glosses, annotations, and texts, these two “layers” not necessarily made by the same hands and at the same moment. On the basis of thematic content, native pictorial documents fall into several genres, some of them with mixed characteristics. They embrace ritual-calendrical, historical, genealogical, cartographic, and economic manuscripts. Extending this basic classification and following the native tendency of blending different forms of presentations within one space, often based on the map format, some documents can be described as cartographic-genealogical, cartographic-economic, genealogical-economic, and so forth (Glass 1975: 28).

Although the pictorial and glyphic component remained important across the sixteenth century and beyond, the newly developed types of alphabetic writing in Nahuatl show some thematic overlapping in content

<sup>3</sup> Preconquest and early colonial manuscripts could take the form of the *tira*, a relatively narrow strip composed of sheets of animal hide or paper glued together; the screenfold, which can be seen as a specific variant of the *tira*; the *lienzo* (cotton cloth, canvas) and the single-panel formats.

and function with pictorial genres. Thus, pictorial year-count records soon became alphabetized and flourished as written historical annals, tribute lists found close parallels in economic documents and censuses, alphabetic land titles describing terrains and their borders paralleled preconquest maps, ritual-calendrical books were replaced by doctrinal texts (made not only by Spaniards, but also by native authors), while genealogical components came to surface in historical texts, court documents and wills. However, in spite of these correspondences between pictorial and alphabetic forms of expression, the latter became more closely equivalent to the extensive oral component accompanying the documents with pictorial and glyphic content. Many textual genres, such as songs, poems, speeches and theatrical plays, provided the means to record extremely rich native oral tradition. Indigenous orality is also well manifest in native annals, letters, petitions and even wills.

The rapid development of the Nahua writing tradition was made possible by adapting the orthographic conventions of the Roman alphabet in the 1530s in such major centers as Mexihco-Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco. Friars, who not only tried to become familiar with the native tradition, but also started to teach the local nobility to write in their own language, were instrumental in this process. Beginning in the 1540s various kinds of writing in Nahuatl expanded quickly across the core area of Nahua culture and beyond, and served as a kind of “alphabetic bridge” with other ethnic groups whose written records developed later, but were never so widely acknowledged by Spaniards as documents composed in Nahuatl. By the third quarter of the sixteenth century the number of nobles capable of writing in the new mode was constantly growing. By that time even the small *altepetl* had a notary associated with the municipal government, while many such figures were busy producing textual records in larger and more populous towns, providing service to the municipal government and individuals (Lockhart 1992: 330–331). The creation and development of Nahuatl orthography was a task undertaken simultaneously by several friars and their indigenous assistants. It was based on the Spanish values of the Roman alphabet representing similar sounds in Nahuatl, a process which was facilitated by the fact that Spanish had close equivalents for the majority of phonetic elements in the native language. In fact it was Nahuatl that lacked more of the Peninsular sounds. Several phonological features of Nahuatl nevertheless posed a serious challenge. The glottal stop and vowel length were usually left unmarked, but other non-compatible elements were coped with quite well. The native sounds *tl* and *tz* were rendered as digraphs, while the double *l*, lacking in Spanish, was modeled on the Latin *ll*; early orthographers also became aware of the fact that in Nahuatl voiced

consonants are voiceless at the end of a syllable, so they changed prevocalic *hu-* [w] to *-uh* in syllable-final positions, doing the same with *-uc* and *-cuh* for the sound [k<sup>w</sup>].

This system, first developed by the ecclesiastics, was immediately reshaped by native scribes and authors, whose primary concern, —differing from the European priority given to standardized, conventional forms—, was to reproduce not only orality, but also phonetic features that could change as a result of phonetic interaction with the sounds of neighboring words. Unlike for Spaniards, the word as such was neither an important nor easily recognizable entity for the Nahuas, who tended to record sounds in an ongoing string of letters (Lockhart 1992: 336–339). Thus, although the native authors of an earliest known and surviving body of alphabetic Nahuatl, the Cuernavaca-region census records of the late 1530s and/or early 1540s, reveal instruction in an orthographic canon developed by friars, they use the script in their own ways. This native adaptation and the relative flexibility governing use of the orthographic conventions does not disappear over time and never gives way to full standardization. Rather, it gives priority to the phonetic characteristics of real speech. Thus, in the devotional text written by native authors toward the end of the sixteenth century (Codex Ind. 7, John Carter Brown Library) the same terms are often written in different ways, including loanwords (*pillato* - *villāto*), *n* is often added in a syllable-final position (*tocanyontilloc* for *tocayotiloc*, *tlatovanni* for *tlahtoani*, *quicanhuāya* for *quicahuaya*), *h* is sometimes added before a word-initial *o*, while the replacement of alveolar consonants *t* for *d* and *d* for *t* is not limited to Spanish loanwords (*presitente* for *presidente*; *hoquimicdi* for *oquimictih*). Once the first generation of indigenous notaries had begun working, the participation of the Catholic Church in the training process lost importance because the scribes in each town took over the process of preparing their successors.

Although there were further attempts of standardization undertaken by the Europeans, such as Horacio Carochi who published his outstanding *Gramática de la Lengua Mexicana* in 1645,<sup>4</sup> these had little impact on the traditions of literacy and ways of writing in native communities. Toward Stage 3, in the late seventeenth and through the eighteenth centuries the orthography in indigenous writing became more regionalized, reflecting local, unstandardized variants of spelling (Lockhart 1991: 122–134; Pizzigoni 2007: 35–39). Local and regional differences thus come to surface in the written language, and, to a certain degree, in the native handling

<sup>4</sup> Carochi proposed the use of a system of diacritics to represent vocalic length and the glottal stop; nevertheless, and as a rule, indigenous writers never considered the representation of these two language characteristics important.

of orthography. Too little is yet known about local variants of “Classical” Nahuatl, but despite apparent uniformity differences and regional traits are perceptible. It has also been suggested that the relative homogeneity of “Classical” (colonial) Nahuatl should be perhaps associated with the strategy of the noble group to assert their identity with other nobility as opposed to the commoners from their own ethnic group, and since most of the authors were nobles, this linguistic attitude was reflected in written texts. According to this hypothesis, the upper class would speak a more or less homogeneous version of the language in most of central Mexico, whereas the commoners from each ethnic group would have used more local variants with slightly distinctive characteristics (Canger 1988: 52). Most often, however, written statements are associated with persons of varying social status and position, as well as social roles. Further, there would be different processes for training scribes and notaries, and this too should be reflected in the characteristics of the written language. The further destandardization of Nahuatl orthography toward the end of the colonial period is best explained not as a result of phonological evolution; rather, it should be attributed to the decreasing involvement of the native nobility who spoke a more standardized Nahuatl than the commoners and gradually switched to Spanish. The more localized Nahuatl spoken by the lower-ranking people became more dominant in written texts (Lockhart 1991: 134). Beyond a doubt, more research on this topic is greatly needed; especially useful would be a systematic comparison between regions as well as between higher and lower-ranking scribes/authors within a given locality.

Another challenging issue is the nature and forms of use of the older Nahuatl language in other regions, including the periphery where other languages were dominant. As has been mentioned, the language’s pan-regional presence was probably a precontact phenomenon. This is evidenced in the Nahuatl recorded in colonial texts from the southern and northern peripheries, which reveals numerous archaic and specifically peripheral traits not characteristic of a language recently imposed by Spaniards and their Central Mexican allies (Sullivan 2007: 15–18).

However, legal steps, such as the decision of Philip II in 1570 to make Nahuatl the language of conversion and for the training of priests and friars working with the native people in different regions, no doubt contributed to its growing importance in Spanish Mesoamerica. It is becoming clear that the use of Nahuatl in the colonial world was not limited to a specially trained group of scribes, notaries and other officials. Members of the nobility belonging to other ethnic groups as well as numerous non-elite figures of different backgrounds, including Spaniards, used spoken and written Nahuatl to facilitate communication in different aspects of colonial

life (Yannanakis 2012: 669–670; Nesvig 2012: 739–758). One of the basic postconquest uses of Nahuatl beyond Nahuatl-speaking communities was Christian instruction carried out by friars and priests, who were allowed to be ordained a *título de lengua*<sup>5</sup>, for the purpose of working as a kind of doctrinal interpreter in indigenous languages. Nahuatl was by far the most commonly spoken indigenous tongue among ecclesiastics. They used it as the language of instruction within linguistically-mixed communities whose members knew Nahuatl as an additional language and in regions dominated by other ethnic groups, such as the diocese of Oaxaca, where Nahuatl had already served widely as a *lingua franca* (Schwaller 2012: 678–687). Thus, rather than introducing Nahuatl themselves, the ecclesiastics benefited from an existing linguistic situation based on the pan-regional presence of Nahuatl in many Mesoamerican regions.

Despite its apparently wide presence in peripheral regions, the majority of Nahua writing comes from the core, Central Mexican Nahuatl-speaking region. For this reason, while it is difficult to reconstruct the historical trajectory and characteristics of peripheral Nahuatl and its regional variants, many deep insights may be obtained with respect to the form, evolution and uses of language in the very heart of the Nahua culture area. Basically, Nahuas appropriated alphabetic writing, creatively adapting it to their own purposes and forms of expression. They used the orthographic conventions proposed initially by their ecclesiastic tutors flexibly, and slowly proceeded toward standardization as they became independent of these tutors. The Nahua adhesion to orality and elements of dialogue and narrative led to the development of typically indigenous forms of writing and profoundly transformed originally Spanish genres. Another common trait was to include conventions of elegant, polite speech that crop up in private letters, official petitions, speeches and admonitions. The oral component is probably most striking in an important genre of Nahua writing: historical records structured as annals. Called *xiuhpohualli*, or “year counts,” they were based partly on preconquest glyphic and pictorial prototypes capable of recording only rudimentary information, including for example royal accessions, deaths, war, and natural events, and partly on the extensive oral recitations that accompanied the pictorials. Continuing to thrive after the conquest, they quickly became adapted to an alphabetic mode of expression, but some preserved the strong pictorial component until the end of the sixteenth century. This was not a linear development, however, for other texts were composed at a relatively early date as entirely alphabetic accounts, accommodating a much wider range of topics and

<sup>5</sup> “By right of competence in an indigenous language (Taylor 1996: 94–95).”

traditional concepts than any other genre of postconquest Nahuatl writing. In addition to the chronological presentation of key events from the point of view of a given *altepetl*, they sometimes contain dialogic forms and speech taken from the oral tradition that originally played a crucial role in complementing the abbreviated year-count records.

The oral component is manifest in the writings of one of the most outstanding Nahuatl annalists, don Domingo de San Antón Muñón Chimalpahin Quauhtlehuanitzin, active in the early seventeenth century. He was born in Chalco Amaquemehcan, but stayed most of his life in Mexihco-Tenochtitlan having access to some Mexihcah sources. However, the primary sources for his work were available in his own *altepetl* where Chimalpahin interviewed notable leaders and made use of their ancient manuscripts, both pictorial and alphabetic, including those collected by his grandfather, don Domingo Hernández Ayopochtzin (Schroeder 1991: 14–24). A good example of the profoundly indigenous textual structure of his work is the year entry *13 acatl* or 1427 contained in one of his accounts (Chimalpahin 1997: 132–138) and corresponding to an important event in the history of the Valley of Mexico: the beginning of the war between the dominant Tepanecs on one side, and the Mexihcah and their allies on the other. The entry begins with detailed information on the death of the ruler of Tenochtitlan and gives information on his offspring, continues with the accession of his successor and other important officials, and then reports the outbreak of the military conflict with the Tepanec center of Azcapotzalco. This is followed by ritualized and partly metaphorical dialogues and statements made by both the Mexihcah and Tepanec protagonists of the event. They include counsels and instructions given by the patron god of the Mexihcah, as well as episodes in which the Tepanecs present humiliating female clothes to their opponents, the Mexihcah perform songs, and both sides arm for war.

Nahuatl annals were particularly productive in regard to postconquest history. Usually expressed from the point of view of a citizen identifying himself with a specific subdivision of the native state, these records convey the local vision of political life and cultural changes; attest to the survival of earlier concepts, structures and offices; and shed light on interactions with competing indigenous entities and with the Spanish world, as well as all manner of current concerns of the community. This information is communicated in traditional vocabulary, which nevertheless reflects ongoing language change. A more conservative form of expression, almost devoid of loanwords, is usually employed when speaking about the pre-conquest past, as is the case with the *Anales de Tlatelolco* or the *Anales de Quauhtitlan*. Annals recorded in Nahuatl were produced in the Valley of Mexico by 1650 and in Tlaxcala and Puebla they continued into the

first half of the eighteenth century. In the seventeenth century a new, very common form of native writing appeared, the so-called *títulos primordiales*. These documents, which purport to be corporate titles to land, were often enriched with a pictorial component. Created in times of growing pressure on available land resources, they are directly associated with legal litigation related to the claims of a given indigenous community. Manuscripts within this genre of writing were intentionally archaized, that they might pass for sixteenth-century documents. They also contained elements of native tradition and historical memory, usually profoundly transformed and reinterpreted through the lens of late colonial reality.

The vitality of the native tradition also manifests itself in the huge and diverse body of Nahuatl mundane documents focusing on legal and economic issues. Sometimes an additional pictorial content was preserved in those genres that were recorded pictorially/glyphically in preconquest times. Some genres, such as wills, were closely patterned on Spanish models, but others, such as petitions and letters, in spite of some European influence, basically reflected Nahuatl conventions of formal and elevated speech. It is not infrequent to find numerous expressions and conventions transmitted from native oral expression into alphabetic texts, and especially in letters and petitions, sometimes considerably deviating from their European models. Elements of orality, dramatization and spontaneity are also found in native wills. Closely following the Spanish prototype and becoming strongly conventionalized, they nevertheless absorbed some of the speechlike and declamatory characteristics typical of the native mode of expression, including traditional native admonitions and exhortations. The role of witnesses also deviated from the Spanish model, acquiring the function of giving assent and legitimacy to the content of the will on behalf of the community (Lockhart 1992: 364–371). Nahuatl testaments were produced from the sixteenth to the end of the eighteenth century; however, this tradition continued in some places, such as the Valley of Toluca, well into the nineteenth century (Melton-Villanueva 2012).

A good example of the concurrence of almost all typically native elements in one Nahuatl document is a complaint about a bad priest submitted by the representatives of the town, Coatlan de Puertos Abajo in Jalisco 1637 (McAfee Collection, 339). This relatively short petition contains elements of polite, noble speech, a colorful narrative enriched with many details, as well as statements belonging to indirect speech that reflect the importance of orality. In addition, the argumentation is skillfully enhanced by the use of metaphorical comparison based on the Old Testament, perhaps intending to show the indigenous familiarity with the Christian tradition. Taken as a whole, the document is a proficient attempt to influence colonial reality

and change power relations directly affecting the life of the community. As with numerous other comparable documents written by native people throughout the colonial era, it should be seen as a proactive defense of native rights and community autonomy, launched through the use of alphabetic writing in Nahuatl. Thus, the Nahuas practiced and pursued forms of writing in their own language for their own benefits rather than as a mere response to administrative or legal requirements of the Spanish crown.

“Very honorable representative of our Lord Jesus Christ, we, your children, rulers/notables here in the *altepetl* of Coatlan, address you, bow humbly before you, we politely kiss your honorable hands and feet, we implore you to help us, the subjects of God, with a priest of ours who was ruling the children of God here in our *altepetl*, but we are not satisfied [with him]. [...] And we gave him a woman, whom they took to the salt works, where she prepared meals for the salt workers, and he does not want to pay two Indians, if they request [their pay], he then gets angry, he wants to beat them. Although they are women, he really mistreats them, he whips them repeatedly, he pulls them by their hair, and he really mistreated another woman and he even kicked her repeatedly all over [her body], he even used spurs on her all over [her body]. And we do not know where that woman went, it is as though we have lost her. And he says I will not go, I will serve another year here, that is what the lord bishop wrote me; I cannot go. May he no longer be in our *altepetl* at your orders, let him leave. Help us, let it happen by order of our Lord God, as with the Egyptians, that the children of Israel were freed from the hands of the king pharaoh by order of God. That is all that you have heard of the affliction and weeping of us, the subjects of God.”<sup>6</sup>

There are other genres of alphabetic writing important in the colonial history of Nahua culture. Traditional songs and speeches record preconquest oral tradition. Religious genres record Christian or Christianized content in the native language. Devotional genres represent a separate category of Nahuatl texts, produced under Spanish ecclesiastical auspices, strongly

<sup>6</sup> “v yn çenca timahuiztililoni yn tehuatzin yn tixipltatzin tt<sup>o</sup> Js<sup>o</sup> Tehuantin timopilhuan titlatoque nican altepetl cohuatl timitztotlatlauhtilia mixpantzinco tontopechteca tictotlaçotemamiqulia yn momahuizmatzin yhuan in moycxitzin timitztotlatlauhtilia ma huel xitechmopalehuili tehuantin timaçehualhuan Dios yn itechcopa çe toteopixcauh nican onca ypan toaltepeuh quipachoticatca ypillhuan Dios auh amo pachihui toyolo [...]. yhuan cihuatl ticmomaquilique salinas oquihiucaque ompa quinchuiliaya tlaquali salineros yhuan home maçehuali amo quintlaxtlahuiznequi aço quitlatlanilia ca niman qualani qimictiznequi ymanel cihuame huel quintolinia quinhuihuitequi quintilanilia yntzon yhuan oc ce cihuatl huel oquitolini mochican oquiteliciçac oquiyspuliado mochican yhuan amo ticmati capa yca oyac yn cihuatl çan yoquin hoticpoloque. yhuan quitohua hamo nias oc ce xivitl nicchihuaz nican yoquin nechtlacuilhui tlatohuani hobispo amo huel niaz auh ma motencopatzinco macayocmo onca ya ypan toaltepeuh ma quiça auh xitechmopalehuili ma ytencopatzinco tt<sup>o</sup> Dios in maca çan yoqui egiptotlaca in Rey faraon ynic ymacpa maquixtiloque yn isRael ypillhuan ytencopatzinco Dios ya yxquich oticmocaquiti yn tonetoliniliz yn tochoquiliz yn imacehualhuan Dios.”

based on European prototypes and reflecting the goals of religious policy and instruction. Among them are catechisms, prayers and confessionaries composed by Spanish priests with the help of native assistants. The songs and traditional speeches were probably also produced under ecclesiastical auspices. Although many ecclesiastics favored the publication of doctrinal materials in Nahuatl, they were not convinced that doctrinal truth could be adequately rendered in a native language, considered by many as clearly inferior to Latin. This concern was expressed by the First Mexican Provincial Council in 1555 and by later pronouncements, which strengthened ecclesiastical control over the process of translating religious materials (Christensen 2012: 693). It is not surprising, then, that Spanish authors of devotional texts in native languages avoided crediting their indigenous aides, who surely must have played an important, if not joint role in their production (Burkhart 1989: 25; Sell 1993: 81). Usually serving the very practical needs of friars working in local communities, these texts also contain features of preconquest orality and some of the elegant language of the upper class. It is also becoming increasingly clear that many devotional texts were produced by the Nahua authors themselves, with little or no supervision by friars or priests. Such works make it possible to better understand the process of Christianization and the “domestication” of the new religion among the indigenous people. The Nahuatl language, adapted to new conceptual spaces, was fundamental for transferring pre-Hispanic religious and ritual concepts into Christianity, such as the terms for God, a supreme creator deity, the devil, demons, the soul, sin, confession, hell, sacrifice, offerings, as well as the very gestures and postures associated with religious devotion. This is particularly true of the vocabulary serving Christian needs but embedded in the indigenous tradition, and thus often characterized as “Nahua Christian.”

Somewhere in between predominantly native and Hispanized literature are the Nahuatl plays composed by diverse authors. They incorporate preconquest forms of expression and terminology, as well as sociopolitical, cultural and often, even religious concepts into a generally European framework. Thus, for example, Old World characters are often directly transferred into the reality of indigenous sociopolitical organization, with Abraham becoming the *tilahtoani* of an *altepetl*, surrounded by noblemen referred to as the *pipiltin*, whereas greetings and formulas of courtesy uttered by biblical personages are directly based on the precontact Nahua code of formal speech. Although these works date from the seventeenth century onward, there is strong evidence suggesting that native-language plays were being composed and performed from the 1530s onward, becoming an essential part of the cultural life of the native people (Lockhart 1992: 401, 406–407).

The colonial vitality and survival of Nahuatl was also strengthened by the composition of extensive native-language texts authored or compiled by Spaniards or produced under their direct supervision. The Nahuatl works compiled by fray Bernardino de Sahagún with the help of his native informants and aides are of unique importance for studying native culture and language. Thanks to a method of data collection giving priority to original terminology and often combining textual data with visual representations, the pioneering “ethnographic” manuscripts known as the *Primeros Memoriales* and the *Florentine Codex* constituted “native encyclopedias”.<sup>7</sup> Based on existing European models, they nevertheless embraced much of the native forms of expression and recorded veins of tradition that would have been otherwise almost entirely lost to posterity.

### Contact-induced change in Nahuatl

An inherent part of the postcontact history of the Nahuatl language is the gradual change it experienced under the impact of Spanish, and more broadly, European culture. The pioneering research on Nahuatl in postconquest times was done by Frances Karttunen and James Lockhart (1976), who published the first listing of Spanish loanwords and analyzed their temporal distribution and phonetic adaptations, postulating three main phases of adjustment to Spanish. This study was further developed by Lockhart (1992), who expanded the three phases to include the study of general sociocultural change under European impact, as it reflected the increasing frequency and intensity of contact between Nahuas and Spaniards. He has been able to show that linguistic phenomena are among the most sensitive indicators of the nature, extent, and trajectory of contact between the two cultures. The process began in Nahuatl with the creation of neologisms, descriptions and extensions of meaning. Nouns were the first lexical items to be incorporated from Spanish, and this increased in intensity with time, followed later by the borrowing of verbs and particles, as well as phonetic and syntactic elements. Lockhart’s model reflects successive reactions to culture contact, marking an ongoing transformation.

Thus, in Stage 1 extending from the arrival of the Spaniards to ca. 1540-1550 Nahuatl remained largely unaffected. The Nahuas relied on the

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<sup>7</sup> The first of these manuscripts was probably made in the early 1560s, possibly with the active assistance of indigenous informants from Tepepolco, where Sahagún stayed between 1558 and 1561 (Nicholson 1997: 6–13; León-Portilla 1999: 111–133). This extensive and lavishly illustrated opus, ordering data from the indigenous world according to the concept of an European encyclopedia, was probably prepared between 1578 and 1580 as one of the versions of Sahagún’s now lost principal work, the *Historia general*.

resources of their own language to describe the new, resorting to neologisms or extensions of meaning. In Stage 2, dating approximately from the mid sixteenth to the mid seventeenth century, the language underwent little change aside from the widespread borrowing of Spanish nouns. In Stage 3, which begins in the mid seventeenth century and continues to the present, embracing the Nahuatl spoken in indigenous communities today, many simultaneous changes take place, including the borrowing of verbs and particles, the adoption of plural forms and sounds missing earlier in Nahuatl, and the creation of relationships of equivalence. Contrary to earlier stages, introductions are motivated by linguistic differences between Spanish and Nahuatl, and no longer solely by new objects and concepts. A fourth, partly overlapping stage, is characterized by the development of a heavily Nahuatlized version of Spanish (Lockhart 1991: 105–121; Melton-Villanueva 2012), corresponding with the notion of interference through shift (Thomason & Kaufman 1988) or imposition (Coetsem 1988).

Lockhart's framework roughly correlates with the concept of the "borrowing scale," ranging from casual contact (1) through two intermediate levels of more intense contact (2, 3) to intense contact (4) marked by heavy borrowing and structural change (Thomason & Kaufman 1988: 74–94; Thomason 2001: 70). The model emphasizes the intensity of contact, rather than its duration and longevity. These last two factors, however, appear to be crucial for reconstructing Nahuatl-Spanish interaction, in which the intensity of contact varied greatly between specific localities and regions. Although there are important indicators that language phenomena from different geographic regions and undergoing different degrees of exposure to cross-cultural contact reflect some broad, shared types of adjustment, more recent evidence implies that this picture is far from uniform and that local patterns of change should be studied more closely.

The contextual, systematic analysis of language data associated with the colonial period reveals a parallel, prolonged use of neologisms and loanwords, a widespread "Nahuatlization" of foreign terms as well as different forms of adoption of Spanish ideas and cultural stereotypes. The most obvious case of linguistic coining are neologisms. They were often produced by combining existing words or by giving words new affixes. Whereas we cannot be certain about the use of neologisms extending beyond that attested in early dictionaries, those that figure in texts produced by the Nahuas themselves indeed seem to point to vocabulary that entered everyday language. One of numerous examples is *tlapohualtepoztlī*, meaning "copper/iron for counting," and used for "a striking clock". The word appears first in the municipal records of Tlaxcala in 1550 (Lockhart, Berdan & Anderson 1986: 70), and is still attested toward the end of the

seventeenth century in the annals of Zapata y Mendoza (1995: 160). The process of coining neologisms continued well beyond the first stage of contact into times when noun borrowing became widespread; moreover, it continues as a common phenomenon in present varieties of Nahuatl.

Another common phenomenon of language change in Nahuatl was the extension of meaning. This common and inevitable mechanism for incorporating new referents could be employed whenever there existed a close similarity between the functions, appearances or meanings of native and Spanish objects and concepts. Thus, *amatl*, meaning native bark paper, was employed in reference to European paper, and by extension to a written document or a letter. Perhaps the most immediately visible and patent signs of language change are loanwords. Once a loan was incorporated, it underwent phonetic and morphological adaptations according to the rules of Nahuatl. For example, *imagen* was reinterpreted as *magen* or *maxen*, losing the initial vowel identified by the Nahuas as the subordinating particle *in*. And *regidor* could become *lexitol*, in compliance with native phonology (Karttunen & Lockhart 1976). A separate category of borrowings consists of combinations of morphemes of different origin, corresponding to the linguistic category of loanblends (Winford 2003: 45). These include derivational blends based on imported stems and native affixes used to produce new grammatical categories. Traditional suffixes were thus employed to produce the absolutive (e.g. *camisa*, shirt, was given an absolutive suffix becoming *camixatli*<sup>8</sup>), abstract or collective nouns (*teniente*, “deputy,” becoming *tenienteyotl* meaning “the office of a deputy” or “deputyship”) or denominal verbs (*firma*, “a signature” leading to *firmatia*, “to sign”; *sabadoti*, “to be Saturday” from *sábado*, “Saturday”). Less common are imported affixes added to native stems, usually pointing to a more complex and sustained interaction between the two languages. This is especially the case of backward borrowings, that is, native words adapted first by Spaniards and then returning in a transformed version to the speakers of Nahuatl. Thus, the Spanish *chocolatera*, a chocolate vendor, created initially from the Nahuatl *xocolatl* and the Spanish suffix *-era*, is attested in a 1650 Nahuatl will from Xochimilco (Rojas Rabiela et al. 2002, 3: 239). Much more common were “compound blends” composed of Spanish and native stems merged into one new word designating foreign concepts, personnel or objects. Thus, it is common to find names of new professions, such as *bolsanamacac* (“seller of bags”) or *candelachihuahqui* (“candlemaker”), new materials and elements of material culture such as *letrachihualoni* (“medium for writing” for a kind of ink) or *xocpalguantes* (“foot-gloves” for footwear of the Japanese), new plants (*aceitunasquahuitl*,

<sup>8</sup> The addition of the indigenous absolutive ending to loan nouns was relatively rare and largely confined to things that were almost always possessed.

“olive tree”) or functions (e.g. *cabildotlacatl*, “cabildo person,” for municipal officials). Some of them were clearly created *ad hoc* and did not enter the language on a larger scale. Thus, for example, *cihuamadre* based on *cihuatl*, “woman” in Nahuatl, combined with the Spanish word for mother was employed for a nun by the authors of a devotional manuscript (Cod. Ind. 7, John Carter Brown Library) and is apparently unattested elsewhere.

Contact-induced phenomena also include calques, literal or word-for-word translations of foreign idiomatic expressions. These appear ubiquitously in religious contexts as formulaic translations. Thus *cemihcac ichpochtli* stood for Eternal Virgin, *ilhuicac tlahtohcaoytl* for the Kingdom of Heaven and *yancuic cemanahuac* for the New World. All of these Nahuatl expressions were built on existing Spanish vocabulary but appear in phraseological units, which would not make much sense without their European referents. Lexical calques embrace equivalence relationships, employing a particular Nahuatl word to reproduce typical usages of a Spanish word. They appear to be late, primarily Stage 3 developments. Among the most common were *piya*, originally “to have custody of” becoming a counterpart of *tener*, “to have” (used also today in such calques as *-piya para* for “tener que”) and *quenami* (originally meaning “how, in a certain manner”) that formed an equivalence relationship with *como*, “how, as, like” (Lockhart 1992: 313–315). Calquing could lead to the reinterpretation of a native term within a new grammatical category. This was the case with the noun *tocaitl*, “name,” that later began to be used as a verb, becoming the equivalent of the Spanish *llamar*. Thus, an expression *ninotoca* [Juan] would be an exact counterpart of “me llamo [Juan],” replacing the traditional *notoca* [Juan], “my name [is][Juan].” This change is attested in the northern periphery already at the onset of the seventeenth century (Sullivan 2007: 15). Prolonged contact across several centuries resulted in numerous morphological, phonological and syntactic adaptations that included the pluralization of inanimate nouns (though even in modern variants of Nahuatl not completely replacing the traditional form of pluralization limited to animate objects) or the new roles of *tle/tlen/tlein* acquiring the functions of the Spanish subordinator *que* and of the preposition *de*. Many of these phenomena, probably spurred by a growing presence of bilingual speakers, were typical for Stage 3 and extend in significant ways to modern variants of Nahuatl, revealing different degrees of exposure to Spanish impact and different states of contact-induced change.

## Nahuatl today

With the end of the Mexican War of Independence in 1821 the Spanish Imperial infrastructure that employed Nahuatl alphabetic writing as an

official medium for documentation and communication disappeared. The new succession of governments did not make important advances toward integrating indigenous communities into national life, and writing ceased to link Nahua people and their communities to each other within and between regions where the language was spoken. As a result, these communities became more and more isolated from each other and the differences between regional linguistic variants increased. They also remained largely isolated from the rest of Mexican society, and for this reason during the following one hundred fifty years, the pace of Stage 3 Nahuatl language change slowed to a crawl. During this period, with the exception of a set of ordenanzas issued by the government of Emperor Maximilian I (Maximiliano de Hapsburgo, León Portilla 2003) and the works of Faustino Galicia Chimalpopoca (1854, 1859, 1869 and 1870), Nahuatl writing became very scarce, and did not reappear in force until the second half of the twentieth century. At this time, a number of factors including economic integration, the extension of public education and the spread of communications media initiated a renewal of intense contact resulting in a steady loss of native speakers and the progression of Nahuatl toward endangered language status.

The views of modern Nahuatl in academic research have also contributed to the current depreciated status of the language and its speakers. The notion of “Classical Nahuatl” has long been considered the only correct and original form of the language, while modern “dialects” are often still seen as its corrupted, Spanish-influenced developments. As a result, Nahuatl dialectology has attracted surprisingly little attention among scholars dealing with different aspects of Nahua culture (Canger 1988: 29). In addition, there are serious discrepancies between existing classifications and attempts to reconstruct the historical development and mutual relationships between variants of older and modern Nahuatl. None of these reconstructions has been based on extensive linguistic information that would fully combine modern and historical data and none have gained full acceptance. The first classification covering close to the full geographical area where Nahuatl is spoken was proposed by Juan Hasler, who divided the area into four dialects: Eastern, Northern, Central, and Western (Hasler 1958, 1961), but his definition of dialects was criticized for not having been based on extensive and coherent linguistic knowledge (Canger 1988: 39). Other scholars, such as Yolanda Lastra, emphasized the fact that the lack of data constitutes an obstacle to positing a historical classification but maintain nevertheless that there is a basic division between Central and Gulf Coast dialects (Lastra 1974). Later on, in her important work “Las áreas dialectales del náhuatl moderno” (1986) Lastra analyzed and compared numerous

phonological, morphological and lexical traits of the varieties of modern Nahuatl, proposing to distinguish four areas: Center, La Huasteca, Western Periphery and Eastern Periphery. Una Canger prefers to make a fundamental distinction between Central and Peripheral groups of Nahuatl, the latter being defined simply by their lack of a number of descriptive features present in Central varieties. Central groups would embrace dialects which share many important features spoken in the Valley of Mexico, Northern and Central Puebla, Morelos, and Tlaxcala. Huastecan and Central Guerrero Nahuatl are also classified as Central dialects, but possess features that are specific to the two regiones they share with neighboring Peripheral variants. The latter include the Western Periphery, Northern Guerrero, Sierra de Puebla, Isthmus, and Pipil (Canger 1988: 45-59).

Leaving aside dialectal classifications for a moment, today Nahuatl-speaking communities fall roughly into two cultural categories: those in the central area of Mexico, such as Tlaxcala, that experienced intense early contact with Spanish civilization and currently practice a syncretic form of catholicism; and those from peripheral areas such as the Huasteca that never underwent intense contact with Europeans and practice a religion centered around traditional natural deities. Nevertheless, the linguistic variants spoken by all of these communities share similar characteristics of a language that continues to evolve, on the one hand, under the normal parameters established by its own inherent structure, and on the other hand, influenced by its contact with Spanish. Examples of intrinsic evolution are continuations of the process of final vowel or suffix reduction in ways that would cause readers of older Nahuatl to pale. Class 1 verbs ending in *-ca*, such as *choca*, “to cry” are considered immune to reduction, although technically there is no reason why a verb ending in the sequence VCV should not be able to reduce. So while in older Nahuatl the singular preterite form of “to cry” is *chocac*, in modern Huastecan Nahuatl it is *chocqui*, consisting of the Class 2 reduced root *choc* and the older preterite suffix *-qui*. In older Nahuatl the disappearance of the singular absolutive suffix is only associated with combining forms, the possessive and personal names. In modern Tlaxcalan Nahuatl reduction of the *-li* suffix is normal in the absolutive, so that the only marker of the possessed noun is the presence of the possessive prefix: *tlaxcal*, “it is a tortilla”; *notlaxcal*, “it is my tortilla”. A firm rule in older Nahuatl is the impossibility of the sequence of two word-final consonants; however, active action nouns which in older Nahuatl would end in *-liztli* (*nemiliztli*, “life, conduct”) end in *-liztl* (*nemiliztl*) in modern Tlaxcalan Nahuatl.

Nahuatl today continues to evolve as a result of contact with Spanish. It still incorporates loan nouns within the Stage 2 framework, adapting them to its sound system, and applying inflectional and derivational mor-

phology. In an example from the Huasteca, the Spanish word *bolsa*, “bag” becomes *folzah*, and then can itself take on an incorporated Nahuatl nounstem, *amatl*, “paper”, resulting in *amafolzah*, “paper bag”, or employ a possessor, *no-*, “my” and the suffix of inherent possession, *-yo*, to form *nofolzahyo*, “my pocket”. More interesting are current Stage 3 transformations in Nahuatl morphology and syntax under the influence of Spanish. Again from the Huasteca, relational words are progressively losing their possessors. In some cases, such as with *pampa*, “because”, the loss and corresponding fossilization is complete and permanent. In others, the loss is in progress, as with *ipan*, “long ago”, *nopan huetzi*, “he, she or it falls on me” and *pan cuamezah*, “on the table”. Inanimate nouns, which in older Nahuatl, *tetl*, “rock(s)” were never pluralized are now beginning to receive plural number suffixes: *temeh*, “rocks” and *calmeh*, “houses”. And speech, which has been traditionally reported in a direct manner, *Niquillih noconeuh*, ‘*Xiyauh tianquizco*’, “I told my child, ‘Go to the market’”, is now being reported indirectly, *Niquillih noconeuh ma yohui tianquizco* or *Niquillih noconeuh para yohui tianquizco*, “I told my child to go to the market.”

The contemporary stage in the evolution of Nahuatl language and culture in its relationship to the West begins in the fifth decade of the twentieth century. After the Mexican Revolution, intellectuals began to forge a new national identity, based in part on pride in a mythologized version of Mexico’s indigenous past. However, modern indigenous people, considered culturally backward and an obstacle to modernization, needed to be Hispanized, and their languages needed to be eliminated as quickly as possible. The institutional basis for this project was established between 1939 and 1948 with the founding of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia<sup>9</sup>, the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia<sup>10</sup>, and the Instituto Nacional Indigenista<sup>11</sup>. While government agencies, the educational system, organized religions and the mass media all participate today to some degree in this Hispanization, many independent individuals, organizations and indigenous communities themselves struggle to promote the cultural and linguistic plurality upon which Mexico’s viability as a country will depend in the future.

The use of public education as a focused instrument of Hispanization began in 1964 when the first generation of bilingual educators was recruited by the federal Secretaría de Educación Pública<sup>12</sup> for the purpose of assuring

<sup>9</sup> National School of Anthropology and History

<sup>10</sup> National Indigenous Institute

<sup>11</sup> Secretary of Public Education

<sup>12</sup> National Autonomous University of Mexico

that indigenous school children gain literacy in Spanish. This in itself is a good thing. Nahuatl and other indigenous languages lack the huge and crucial repository of works on every imaginable topic, to be found in libraries and online, that is available in Spanish and in all the major world languages. Indigenous people must have access to it if they are to be truly educated for successful participation in an ever more global and multicultural society. Moreover, through the natural workings of intergroup relations over time, the majority of indigenous-language speakers are bilingual and already have potential access to the material in Spanish. A truly multilingual program of education would not seek to replace indigenous languages with Spanish or English; rather it would cultivate in children the unique perspective and cognitive tools available to them through their native language, and complement this with additional perspectives and tools from other languages.

Mexican bilingual education grew after its creation and continues to expand to this day, but its goal of replacing indigenous languages with Spanish has not changed. Mexican elementary education is highly centralized, with materials and curricula produced almost exclusively by the federal Secretary of Education. Traditionally individual teachers do not participate in curriculum development, but are trained as technicians who implement the ready-made material. The preparation of bilingual teachers takes place, for the most part, in Spanish, and they are not encouraged to participate in innovating curriculum development and research in the language spoken by their students. This is particularly harmful for indigenous languages, for textbooks are only produced for a limited amount of their variants. When these are distributed in communities that speak another variant, they are useless. In any case, the texts are rarely used as the basis for classroom instruction. Further, the sons and daughters of bilingual teachers, most of whom are raised speaking Spanish, inherit their parent's job upon retirement. And new bilingual teachers are routinely given jobs in communities that speak variants and even languages different from their own. Children are encouraged to stop speaking their native language at school; and teachers advise parents to speak only Spanish to their children.

These overt methods of coercion yield to more subtle forms of discrimination that constitute structural, but as yet, unexamined aspects of Mexican society when the students enter junior high, high school and college. During the presidency of Vicente Fox (2000-2006) the federal government abandoned an initial proposal to promote spaces for indigenous education in the public universities. Instead, a new system of intercultural universities was created. However, most of these underfunded institutions do no more than offer traditional careers in Spanish to a largely indigenous student population. Curiously absent at all Mexican universities, including the

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México<sup>13</sup>, with its flagship program, “Mexico Nación Multicultural”<sup>14</sup>, is the one mode of activity with which these institutions could trigger a national movement of indigenous linguistic and cultural revitalization: the large scale practice of curriculum development, teaching and research done entirely within an indigenous language. And yet, in the face of this unwritten national policy of Hispanization and the general lack of institutional opportunities for the practice and development of indigenous languages and cultures, many courageous individuals, groups and communities, bilingual teachers, professors and institutions promote, practice and develop native languages and cultures, some quietly and some in open defiance of the system.

2003 saw the creation of a federal law<sup>15</sup> designed to protect the linguistic rights of Mexican indigenous people; simultaneously, federal education legislation was modified, guaranteeing speakers of indigenous languages access to basic education in their native tongue. At this time the National Institute of Indigenous Languages (INALI) was founded. It was charged with overseeing the implementation of the law, within a context of national governmental decentralization. In other words, its primary function was to promote and coordinate the foundation of indigenous language institutes, legislation, and most importantly, statutes providing means of enforcement of this legislation at the level of the individual states. To date INALI has carried out linguistic research and published a national catalogue of languages; it has produced numerous works in and on indigenous languages, including multiple translations of the Mexican constitution and other governmental documents; it has created norms for the preparation and licensing of translators and interpreters; and it has provided limited legal advice in individual cases of linguistic discrimination. However, state legislation in the area of linguistic rights is practically non-existent; only a few of the thirty-one states have created indigenous language institutes; and INALI has not undertaken or sponsored concrete programs of massive language revitalization. Finally, INALI has been silent in regard to certain key issues, such as the fact that in spite of the aforementioned reform of national education legislation, the majority of native speakers of indigenous languages still do not have access to basic education in their native tongue, as well as the implementation of national standardized testing (ENLACE<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> National Institute of Anthropology and History

<sup>14</sup> Mexico: Multicultural Nation. <http://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx>

<sup>15</sup> Ley general de derechos lingüísticos de los pueblos indígenas (<http://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/pdf/257.pdf>)

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.enlace.sep.gob.mx>

and EXANI/EGEL<sup>17</sup>) that clearly discriminates against non-native speakers of Spanish.

There are government agencies, such as INALI, the Dirección General de Culturas Populares<sup>18</sup> and the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes<sup>19</sup> that provide financing for publications and carry out limited work promoting indigenous language and culture. However, in our opinion, the best hope for positive results in revitalization activities lies in the implementation of projects involving collaboration between government agencies and non-governmental organizations, such as Escritores en Lenguas Indígenas, A.C.<sup>20</sup>, Fundación Cultural Macuilxochitl<sup>21</sup>, and Instituto de Docencia e Investigación Etnológica de Zacatecas<sup>22</sup>. IDIEZ works with Nahua immigrants from the Huasteca region who are studying at the Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas. Offering an alternative to the general function of the Mexican university as the last step in the educational process of Hispanization, these students are provided with a monolingual space in which to continue practicing and developing their language and culture. Parallel to the careers they study in Spanish, they are trained to teach Nahuatl and they actively collaborate with Western academics in many types of research projects. Mexican education denies Nahua students access to the Prehispanic codices and colonial alphabetic texts written by their ancestors, and as a rule, discourages independent thinking. At IDIEZ, young indigenous scholars study these materials, as well as works written by contemporary authors, and are encouraged for the first time in their academic lives, to formulate and express their own opinions. Currently, the Institute is developing monolingual reference materials and curricula in preparation for the creation of a monolingual master's degree program in Nahua Civilization at the Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas.

We believe that it is important to stimulate indigenous students to participate in academic activities in their own language, through the reading and commentary of texts written by their ancestors. This had always been a long term goal at IDIEZ and has been intensified through collaboration in a number of international joint projects coordinated by the University of Warsaw's Faculty of "Artes Liberales". Specifically, the projects "Language Encounters between the Old and New Worlds" and "Europe and America in Contact. A Multidisciplinary Study of Cross-Cultural Transfer in the

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.ceneval.edu.mx>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.culturaspopulareseindigenas.gob.mx/cp/>

<sup>19</sup> <http://sic.conaculta.gob.mx>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/eliac/menu/01quienes.html>

<sup>21</sup> <http://fc-macuilxochitl.blogspot.mx>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.macehualli.org>

New World Across Time” are formally involving indigenous students and researchers at IDIEZ in the reading and analysis of older Nahuatl manuscripts and modern Nahuatl texts. These projects now constitute a pilot enterprise, allowing indigenous people to directly experience the fundamental relation of continuity between older and modern Nahuatl language and culture.<sup>23</sup> This research will link, for the first time, the history of colonial Nahuatl with its present-day legacy, examining the full trajectory of its evolution in contact with Spanish

Crucial for this enterprise is the restitution of literacy in the native language and the unification of its orthography in close relationship to the older tradition of writing in Nahuatl. These goals encounter several major obstacles in Mexico today. There are currently two different types of orthographies used for modern Nahuatl. One group has developed independently of the earlier colonial conventions, grounding itself in linguistic considerations that seek to rationalize spelling: digraphs originating in Spanish orthography are eliminated whenever possible; glottal stops and vocalic length are represented. In general, these systems confuse the concept of everyday writing with that of phonetic documentation. Finally, they constitute an obstacle to language revitalization and native literacy in several important ways. First, no attempt has been made to standardize any of these systems by means of monolingual dictionaries that could codify the spelling of all words; and this lack of standardization prohibits native speakers from using writing to communicate across variants. Second, their attempt to distance themselves from the earlier writing system widens the artificial academic division between older and modern Nahuatl language and culture. But perhaps more importantly, it discourages indigenous people from reading and studying the great corpus of older works that constitute the written cultural legacy of the Nahua civilization.

Four factors have contributed to a general feeling of animosity toward older writing conventions that exists in Mexico today. The modern resurgence of Nahuatl writing actually began in the middle of the twentieth century when Protestant missionary linguists, working under the umbrella of the Summer Institute of Linguistics and later in cooperation with the Mexican Secretaría de Educación Pública, began producing bible translations in various indigenous languages. Missionary and governmental goals coincided for a time, for each group believed that indigenous people needed to be redeemed, on the one hand from their pagan religion, and on

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<sup>23</sup> “Language Encounters between the Old and New Worlds” sponsored by the Foundation for Polish Science (Focus Program 2010-2013) and “Europe and America in Contact. A Multidisciplinary Study of Cross-Cultural Transfer in the New World Across Time,” funded by the European Research Council (Ideas Program 2012-2017); <http://www.encounters.al.uw.edu.pl>

the other hand from their backward culture. Older spelling conventions were seen as bridges to the past that needed to be burned. Many people see the use of the modern linguistic conventions as a political statement in favor of the independence of indigenous languages with respect to the Mexican hegemonic culture of Hispanization. And finally, academics who studied older Nahuatl also contributed to the problem, alienating indigenous people by stating that their modern culture and language was no more than a deformed and pauperized version of the glorious civilization of the past.<sup>24</sup>

Two other schools of thought use what can be called enriched traditional orthographies. Both are based on older writing systems and include modifications, such as the use of the “h” to represent the glottal stop or aspiration. Members of the Asociación de Escritores Indígenas, A.C.,<sup>25</sup> base their system on Alonso de Molina’s dictionary. And the Instituto de Docencia e Investigación Etnológica de Zacatecas uses the enriched traditional orthography based on Horacio Carochi’s grammar and modified by Richard Andrews in his *Introduction to Classical Nahuatl* (2003). Frances Karttunen in her *Analytical Dictionary of Nahuatl* (1992) and Joe Campbell and Frances Karttunen in their *Foundation Course in Nahuatl Grammar* (1989). IDIEZ is preparing a monolingual dictionary of Modern Huastecan Nahuatl in order to codify this orthography, and it is collaborating in the “Totlahtol” series of monolingual publications of modern Nahuatl literature that was created at the Faculty of “Artes Liberales” of the University of Warsaw, one of the purposes of which is to extend this orthography to other variants.

In the 1970s, approximately ten years after the first generation of bilingual teachers were recruited, we begin to see works of literature in poetry, narrative, theatre and essay published in indigenous languages. Many of these writers, such as Natalio Hernández, whose first books were authored under a pseudonym for obvious reasons, emerged from the ranks of these teachers who had become disillusioned with the system.<sup>26</sup> Although mainstream mass media in Mexico has consistently been an instrument

<sup>24</sup> A relatively recent justification for the use of modern orthographies can be found in Anuschka van’t Hooft’s *The Ways of the Water. A Reconstruction of Huastecan Nahua Society Through Its Oral Tradition* (Hooft 2007: 11–12).

<sup>25</sup> Some of the members of the Asociación de Escritores Indígenas, A.C. include Librado Silva, Francisco Morales and Natalio Hernández, all of which are participants in the Seminario de Cultura Náhuatl that Miguel León Portilla has directed for over fifty years at the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

<sup>26</sup> Other published authors in Nahuatl include Crescencia Cortés Flores, Ethel Xochitiotzin Flores, María Antonieta Orlando Rojas Alta, Yolanda Matías García, Edith Vicente Flores, Eugenia Ramos Hipólito, Fabiola Carrillo Tieco, María del Carmen Manuela Pérez Rivera, Maribel Hernández Bautista, Gustavo Zapoteco Sideño, Juan Hernández Ramírez, Crispín Amador Ramírez, Román Güemes Jiménez, Idelfonso Maya, Marcos Matías Alonso, Eliseo Aguilar, Mardoquio Carballo, and Librado Silva Galeano.

of replacive Hispanization, this vein also has a potential for promoting native languages. While selected aspects of past and present indigenous culture are offered to the society in Spanish as components of national patrimony and identity, a practice reminiscent of “blackface” as well as contrived pronunciation, whereby non-indigenous actors portray highly stereotyped indigenous characters in movies, soap operas, variety shows and radio programs is commonplace today. In spite of this widespread tendency, heartening are the many shows conducted monolingually in native languages at some radio stations in heavily indigenous regions of Mexico. One such case is that of musical composer and performer Crispín Martínez Rosas who hosts a program in the state of Hidalgo conducted in Nahuatl at XECARH, *la Voz del Pueblo Hñahñu*<sup>27</sup>, an enterprise sponsored by the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas<sup>28</sup>.

The success of Nahuatl revitalization efforts in the coming years will depend to a large degree on the ability of native speakers from different regions of Mexico to communicate with each other in order to discuss common problems and plan the future of their civilization. Until recently, geographic distance and the differences between linguistic variants constituted what was considered an insurmountable barrier to the possibility of interregional communication. However, in December of 2011, as part of a research project funded by the US National Endowment for the Humanities<sup>29</sup>, IDIEZ brought together twenty native speakers representing approximately ten variants of Nahuatl for a five-day workshop in Zacatecas. Topics were decided on by consensus, and the only rule was that all participants must speak monolingually in their own variant of Nahuatl. Before that week, no one really knew if there would be a sufficient level of intelligibility to permit interdialectal communication. It became apparent immediately that communication was indeed possible and we spent the week conversing about a diverse array of topics, including identity, revitalization, rituals and local festivals, ways of greeting, education, grammatical terminology, linguistic policy, migration, gender issues and interculturality. Participants agreed that more interdialectal encounters should be planned and that representatives of all variants should be invited. We also saw the need to employ some form of videoconferencing technology that would eliminate the obstacle of geographic distance and allow for more frequent, live, virtual meetings. A listserv was then

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<sup>27</sup> XECARH, Voice of the Otomí People. <http://ecos.cdi.gob.mx/xecarh.html>

<sup>28</sup> National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples. <http://www.cdi.gob.mx>

<sup>29</sup> The project, *An Online Nahuatl (nci, nhe, nhw) Lexical Database: Bridging Past, Present, and Future Speakers*, was directed by the University of Oregon's Dr. Stephanie Wood from 2009 to 2012. <http://whp.uoregon.edu/dictionaries/nahuatl>

set up through the University of Oregon. Interestingly, however, and perhaps indicative of the current tendencies in electronic correspondence, monolingual communication soon gravitated to already existing Facebook sites, such as “Nahuatlahtolli”. Because of the universal, unrestricted and uncensored communication it offers, social media will undoubtedly be a pillar of all successful revitalization efforts.

Today in Mexico, the pervasive ideology, shared by indigenous and non-indigenous people alike and crossing all professions and walks of life, is that native languages are “dialects”, and cannot be considered languages, such as Spanish and English. It’s not surprising then that indigenous people, especially after migrating to the cities, deny that they speak their native tongue and do not pass it on to their children. Nahuatl is indeed on its way to becoming an endangered language. Yet, in 2009 there were approximately 1.4 million people<sup>30</sup> speaking twenty-nine variants of Nahuatl in Mexico<sup>31</sup>, and continuing to practice and develop diverse aspects of culture rooted in pre-Hispanic times. The Nahuas today in the Huastecan region of Veracruz live their daily lives in an intimate relationship with the same deities that were worshipped by their ancestors at the time of the first contact with the Europeans, demonstrating many forms of continuity in the evolution of their civilization that has been interrupted neither by internal nor external political events.

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<sup>30</sup> According to the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (Mexican National Institute of Statistics and Geography). [http://www.inegi.org.mx/prod\\_serv/contenidos/espanol/bvinegi/productos/censos/poblacion/poblacion\\_indigena/leng\\_indi/PHLI.pdf](http://www.inegi.org.mx/prod_serv/contenidos/espanol/bvinegi/productos/censos/poblacion/poblacion_indigena/leng_indi/PHLI.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> From INALI’s Catálogo de las Lenguas Indígenas Nacionales (Catalogue of the Nation’s In-digenous Languages). [http://www.inali.gob.mx/pdf/CLIN\\_completo.pdf](http://www.inali.gob.mx/pdf/CLIN_completo.pdf).

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## **Imperium, kolonia i globalizacja. Krótka historia języka nahuatl**

Artykuł jest pierwszą próbą zarysowania kulturowej i społeczno-politycznej historii języka nahuatl, jednego z najważniejszych języków tubylczych Ameryki, począwszy od czasów przedhiszpańskich, a zwłaszcza jego roli w imperium azteckim, przez czasy kolonialne aż po sytuację obecną. Przedmiotem dyskusji są najważniejsze elementy związane z tradycją piśmiennictwa w tym języku, jego zmiany pod wpływem kontaktu z kulturą europejską i językiem hiszpańskim, aktualne zagrożenia oraz możliwe scenariusze jego rewitalizacji.

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## **Empire, Colony, and Globalization. A Brief History of the Nahuatl Language**

This paper is the first attempt to outline the cultural and sociopolitical history of Nahuatl, one of the most important native languages of America, beginning with pre-conquest times, focusing on its role in the Aztec empire, and continuing through the colonial period until the present. We discuss the most important elements of the Nahuatl writing tradition, its changes under contact with European culture and Spanish, as well as modern threats to its survival. We finish with current prospects for revitalization.

**Key words:** Nahuatl, native culture, revitalization, Aztec empire, colony