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Hand Spinning and Cotton in the Aztec Empire,
as Revealed by the *Codex Mendoza*

Susan M. Strawn

At a lecture titled “Growing Up Aztec,” art historian Jill Furst illustrated Aztec childhood with images from the *Codex Mendoza*, an extraordinary, post-Hispanic pictorial manuscript from central Mexico. The *Mendoza* specified the lessons, punishments, and even the number of tortillas appropriate for boys and girls during each year of childhood. Interestingly, the *Codex Mendoza* showed spinning as the only instruction given to Aztec girls between the ages of four and thirteen years. In 1992, the University of California Press published a full color facsimile of the *Codex Mendoza*¹ with a translation into English and with extensive interpretation in four volumes edited by Frances F. Berdan and Patricia Rieff Anawalt. Following the editors’ dedication to those interested in studying MesoAmerica (“May you find a good road”), I read the *Codex Mendoza* for references and images specific to spinning, spinners, and cotton fiber. The work of Berdan and Anawalt made it possible to look at Aztec history from within the craft of hand spinning.

Questions about the Aztecs and spinning included: Why did the *Codex Mendoza* show that learning to spin was the only instruction given to little girls aged four to thirteen? Little boys learned a variety of skills. Preparing enough fiber and spinning enough yarn for a garment using a spindle takes considerable time, but did it require educating presumably half the Aztec population only in spinning? What else might the *Codex Mendoza* reveal about the place of hand spinning in everyday Aztec life? What roles the spinner play and what fibers did they spin? After a brief description of the original *Codex Mendoza* and the facsimile edition, this paper describes spinning, spinners, and cotton as revealed by the *Codex Mendoza* and suggests one connection between quantities of handspun cotton and female childhoods devoted to learning hand spinning.

The *Codex Mendoza*

The original *Codex Mendoza* has a colorful history. Anthropologist H. B. Nicholson has studied the *Mendoza*, the complex and ambiguous circumstances of its preparation, and the history of its travels among subsequent owners before it came to reside at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, England. Evidence indicates the *Mendoza* was prepared at the request of Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza in Mexico City in the 1540s, some 20 years after Spanish conquest.²

¹ Frances F. Berdan, and Patricia R. Anawalt, eds., *The Codex Mendoza* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992).

² H. B. Nicholson, “The History of the *Codex Mendoza*,” in *The Codex Mendoza*, ed. Frances F. Berdan and Patricia R. Anawalt, vol. 1 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1992), 2-10.

The *Codex Mendoza* is a European format book on sixteenth-century, Spanish paper with typical European watermark designs.³ It contains both pictorial glyphs and Spanish commentary. An indigenous scribe or scribes painted glyphs onto its seventy-two pictorial pages using indigenous pictorial styles for a European patron who selected the content. This made the book a “hybrid, a European commission grafted onto an indigenous tradition.”⁴ Scribes were craftsmen, probably sons of the nobility, trained by priests to paint the form of conventional pictorial glyphs, including representations of place and personal names, events and activities, calendar and number values, and various objects. Pictorial glyphs served as mnemonic reminders for stories embedded in Aztec oral traditions.⁵ Spanish annotators added the sixty-three pages of commentary written in Spanish.

The *Mendoza* consists of three sections, each with different categories of information. Part 1 establishes the power of Aztec rulers with a chronicle of their victories. Part 2 lists tribute paid to Aztec rulers by conquered regions. Part 3 describes various aspects of everyday Aztec life. Pictorial styles indicate that parts 1 and 2 were copied from a pre-Conquest manuscript but that part 3 was original to the *Mendoza*.⁶ Scribes allowed space around the pictorial glyphs for descriptive Spanish annotations. On some folios, the Spanish annotator apologizes for the crudeness of his hurried writing, which he blames on the slowness of the scribes.⁷

The *Codex Mendoza* was prepared for the Spanish crown. Evidence indicates that French pirates intercepted the ship that carried it to Spain. Its ownership after that has been traced to France and then to England where, by 1659, the book had entered into the collection of the Bodleian Library.⁸ The first complete photo reproduction of the *Codex Mendoza* was the 1938 John Cooper Clark edition, which was published in London and included an English translation and interpretation. Tragically, nearly all those volumes were destroyed during the London Blitz of World War II.⁹

³ Wayne Ruwet, “A Physical Description of the *Codex Mendoza*,” in *The Codex Mendoza*, ed. Frances F. Berdan and Patricia R. Anawalt, vol. 1 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1992), 13.

⁴ Kathleen S. Howe, “The Relationship of Indigenous and European Styles in the *Codex Mendoza*: An Analysis of Pictorial Style,” in *The Codex Mendoza*, ed. Frances F. Berdan and Patricia R. Anawalt, vol. 1 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1992), 25.

⁵ Frances F. Berdan. “Glyphic Conventions of the *Codex Mendoza*,” in *The Codex Mendoza*, ed. Frances F. Berdan and Patricia R. Anawalt, vol. 1 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1992), 93-98.

⁶ Howe, 31.

⁷ Frances F. Berdan. “The Imperial Tribute Roll of the *Codex Mendoza*,” in *The Codex Mendoza*, ed. Frances F. Berdan and Patricia R. Anawalt, vol. 1 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1992), 55.

⁸ Nicholson, 7-10.

⁹ Nicholson, 1.

The Aztecs

The Aztecs were descendents of hunting and gathering groups that began their migration from the northern deserts about A.D.1168 and had built their powerful empire in the Valley of Mexico by A.D.1325. For nearly two hundred years, the Aztec Empire consisted of Aztec nobility who lived in the capitol at the site of today's Mexico City and the conquered outlying towns, from which they extracted enormous quantities of tribute, including textiles. Aztec domination of Mesoamerica ended in 1519, after Spanish conquest.¹⁰

Spinning in the *Codex Mendoza*

The *Codex Mendoza* can be read for its references to spinning thanks to the four volumes in the University of California Press facsimile edition with its English translations and scholarly discussion of the contents of the original book. Volume 1 of the University of California Press edition contains interpretation of different aspects and themes of the *Mendoza*, including extensive analyses of costume, glyphic traditions, and maps that delineate conquered regions according to the tribute paid to Aztec nobility. Volume 1 also includes appendices that organize information about such topics as tribute, name glyphs, and warrior costumes. Volume 2 provides descriptive meanings and ethnographic data about each pictorial glyph related to sixteenth-century Aztec life. Volume 3 is the page-by-page facsimile printed from transparencies of direct photographs of the original *Codex Mendoza*. Volume 4 contains a line drawing replica of each page, with English translation of the Spanish commentaries.¹¹

The first reference to spinning appears on folio 57. At a baby girl's bathing and naming ritual, just four days after her birth, a midwife introduced spinning tools. The midwife bathed the infant, gave her a name, and then handed her to her mother. For a baby girl, "the symbol they gave her was a distaff with its spindle and its basket, and a broom, which were the things she would use when she grew up."¹² A baby boy was given a symbol that represented his father's occupation, which might be warrior, carpenter, featherworker, goldsmith, or scribe.¹³ Interestingly, the Spanish annotation includes "distaff" among the names for spinning tools, but the glyph depicts only the spindle, cotton, and workbasket. Perhaps the Spanish annotator recalled the term distaff familiar to European spinning traditions.¹⁴

The *Mendoza* dedicates three full pages to Aztec methods of raising children. Page 58 shows instructions from ages three to six years, page 59 shows ages seven to ten years, and page 60 shows ages eleven to fourteen. The Aztecs considered a fifteen-year-old girl ready for marriage, and page 68 shows the

¹⁰ P. Westheim. "History of the Ancient Mexican Civilizations," in *Ciba Review*, 70 (1948): 2554-2562.

¹¹ Frances F. Berdan. *The Codex Mendoza*, ed. Frances F. Berdan and Patricia R. Anawalt, vol 1 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1992), xiii-xiv.

¹² *Ibid.*, vol 4, 118.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 119-125, 141.

young bride in one role, spinner. Throughout these years, fathers are shown teaching their sons a variety of skills and activities that include gathering firewood, gathering spilled grain in the marketplace, collecting bulrushes in canoes, and fishing with nets.¹⁵

The mother of a three-year-old daughter simply talks to her and gives her good advice, but she does not introduce her to spinning implements. At three years, both boys and girls receive half a tortilla to eat at each meal. When her daughter is four years old, her mother talks to her about the spindle with its bright red whorl, cotton fiber, spinning bowl, and the workbasket. The little girl has moved up from half a tortilla at age three to a whole tortilla at age four. Could this be related to her impending usefulness as a spinner? When her daughter reaches five years old, her mother demonstrates how to hold the spindle. Again, the Spanish annotation refers to a distaff, although the glyph shows only a spindle, spinning bowl, workbasket and cotton. At six, the mother teaches her daughter how to hold the spindle, and once the little girl has her hands on a spindle, she gets to eat one and a half tortillas. Although the little girl supports the spindle in the spinning bowl, she could not spin with the cotton roving held lower than the top of the spindle, as shown in the glyph. Spanish commentary for this age expresses concern that Aztec children keep busy so “they [do] not spend their time in idleness, and to avoid the bad vices that idleness tends to bring.”¹⁶

At seven years, the little girl begins to spin, although she creates only a very short piece of yarn. She holds the cotton roving above her supported spindle, a position from which she can actually spin. Her mother continues to warn her against idleness. Instruction for eight-, nine-, and ten-year-olds shifts to discipline, primarily as punishment for rebellion and idleness. The glyphs for spindle, a raw cotton boll, and workbasket lie idle in front of the ten-year-old girl while her mother punishes her. This suggests the mother punishes her daughter for not processing and spinning her cotton. Processing raw cotton for spinning requires seed and debris removal before beating and fluffing into a bat or roving that can be spun. It is understandable that a young girl might rebel against such tedious work.¹⁷

Punishment for idleness becomes more severe for older children. The mother of an eleven-year-old girl might force her to inhale chile smoke, and a twelve-year-old could be made to get up during the night and sweep the house and street. Finally, at thirteen, a young girl finds variety in her education when her mother teaches her to grind maize and to cook. She graduates to two tortillas at each meal. The fourteen-year-old girl at last receives instruction from her mother in weaving on a backstrap loom all that yarn she has spun.¹⁸

The Aztecs considered a fifteen-year-old girl ready for marriage. Page 68 depicts a young married woman in the role of accomplished spinner who can pull

¹⁵ Ibid., 121, 123, 125.

¹⁶ Ibid., 120-121.

¹⁷ Ibid., 122-123.

¹⁸ Ibid., 124-125.

out a long twist of cotton yarn she has spun.¹⁹ Aztec culture associated filled spindles with fertility. Several other Mesoamerican codices depict a fertility deity Tlazolteotl, with two filled spindles stuck in her headdress.²⁰

Fibers for Spinning

The *Codex Mendoza* shows little girls learning to spin cotton. White cotton, *Gossypium hirsutum*, had been grown in Mexico since around 1700B.C. Both noblewomen and commoners spun, but contents of their workbaskets reflected their relative status. A common woman needed larger, heavier spindles and special processing tools to work maguey, palm, or yucca fibers she spun for her family's clothing, but she also needed smaller, lighter spindles and weaving tools to spin and weave cotton textiles she paid as tribute. A noblewoman's workbasket held only the smaller, lighter spindles and weaving tools used for cotton, which she sometimes spun and wove with feathers and rabbit fur.²¹ The cotton prized by Aztec nobility would not grow at the high altitude of the Valley of Mexico, the center of the Aztec empire. Aztec nobility traded for cotton or, more likely, conquered semitropical regions to the west and in the northern deserts, below an elevation of 5,000 feet, and required towns in those regions to pay cotton to them as tribute. In addition to white cotton, the Aztecs grew brown cotton, *Gossypium mexicanum*, that was also shown as tribute paid from the western region of Cihuatlan.²²

Paying Tribute

Part 1 of the *Codex Mendoza* documents Aztec military conquests that added territory from which the Aztec could extract tribute, defined as the "revenue collected by a militarily dominant state from its conquered regions."²³ The thirty-nine pages of part 2 of the *Mendoza* record staggering quantities of clothing, raw cotton, warrior costumes, grains, and such other resources as bags of feathers, seeds, honey, jade beads, and copper bells paid as tribute from specific conquered regions. Thirty-six of the thirty-eight provinces paid clothing as part of their tribute.

Tribute recorded on page 53 records two towns that "gave in tribute to the lords of Mexico" the following every six months:

First, eight hundred loads of cloaks, richly worked in red and white, with their green, yellow, red, and blue borders;

Also four hundred loads of loincloths;

Also four hundred loads of large white cloaks, each cloak four *brazas* [in length]—all of which they gave in tribute every six months;

And they also paid in tribute one thousand two hundred bales of cotton, once a year.²⁴

¹⁹ Ibid., 140-141.

²⁰ Ibid., vol 2, 149.

²¹ Ibid., 149, 155.

²² Ibid., 159.

²³ Ibid., vol 1, 55.

²⁴ Ibid., vol 4, 110.

Frequency of payment and the size and definition of loads have been debated, based on information in the *Mendoza* and other Mesoamerican codices. However, a word in Nahuatl, the Aztec spoken language, indicates that a load of cloaks meant twenty, so eight hundred loads equaled sixteen thousand cloaks. Some towns paid once or twice a year, according to production and seasonal capacities, but others paid every 80 days.²⁵

Page 54 records five outlying towns in another region gave in tribute the following:

- First, four hundred loads of white cloaks with their borders of red, blue, green, and yellow;
- Also four hundred loads of *maxtlatl*, which is underclothing;
- Also eight hundred loads of large white cloaks, each cloak four *brazas* [in length];
- Also four hundred loads of skirts and tunics, which is women's clothing—all of this clothing they paid in tribute every six months;
- And also they gave in tribute two warrior costumes with their shields trimmed with rich feathers of the kind drawn;
- Also eight hundred bales of cotton—all of which they gave in tribute once a year;
- 400 loads of dry chiles.²⁶

This quantity of clothing paid as tribute suggests one reason that the *Codex Mendoza* shows spinning as the only education given to Aztec girls age three to thirteen, and why it depicts the young married woman as a spinner. For commoners, especially in the conquered towns, the ability not only to grow, but to process, spin, and weave cotton for tribute could spell survival under the demands of Aztec lords of Mexico. It also suggests why the *Mendoza* shows a mother who disciplined her daughter so severely into the role of spinner. Only successive generations of frenetically productive spinners could meet the enormous demands for clothing tribute. Anawalt has pointed out that “making of prehispanic cloth might have consumed more hours of labor per year than ceramic and food production combined.”²⁷

This look at spinning and cotton in the *Codex Mendoza* is a beginning effort and acknowledges that research often raises more questions than it answers. What do other pictorials reveal when read specifically for the place of spinning among the Aztecs and other Mesoamericans? The Florentine Codex contrasts the “good spinner” with the “bad spinner,” which suggests the spinners depicted in the *Codex Mendoza* may represent idealized images of women. The *Codex Mendoza* has inspired many research questions. Brumfiel, for example, explored the question: Did spinners and weavers under Aztec rule eventually rebel against

²⁵ Ibid., vol 1, 62-63.

²⁶ Ibid., vol 4, 112-113.

²⁷ Patricia R. Anawalt, “Textile Research from the Mesoamerican Perspective,” in *Beyond Cloth and Cordage: Archaeological Textile Research in the Americas*, ed. Penelope B. Drooker, and Laurie D. Webster. (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2000), 227.

the demand for tribute cloth and begin to spin and weave poor quality textiles? She examined the geographic distribution of spindle whorls specific to their size and weight. Smaller, lighter spindle whorls were used to spin cotton textiles, the cloth usually paid for tribute. Larger, heavier spindle whorls were used to spin maguey fibers, which were intended for household use. If spindle whorls became larger and heavier during late Aztec and colonial rule, as she expected, it could mean that spinners rebelled by producing coarser, poor quality cloth. However, her data about spindle whorls indicated that Aztec spinners continued to produce fine cotton yarn for high quality tribute cloth.²⁸

Reading the *Codex Mendoza* specifically for hand spinning and cotton demonstrates one way that looking at history from within a craft may cast more light on our understanding of the everyday lives of Aztec and other Mesoamerican people.

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²⁸ Elizabeth J. Brumfiel, "The Quality of Tribute Cloth: the Place of Evidence in Archaeological Argument," *American Antiquity* 61, no. 3 (1996): 453-462.