



This is a repository copy of *Insights from the Ancient Word: The use of colonial sources in the study of Aztec society*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/98075/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Book Section:**

Dodds Pennock, C. (2011) *Insights from the Ancient Word: The use of colonial sources in the study of Aztec society*. In: Roque, R. and Wagner, K.A., (eds.) *Engaging Colonial Knowledge: Reading European Archives in World History*. Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series . Palgrave Macmillan , Basingstoke , pp. 115-134. ISBN 9780230241985

---

**Reuse**

Unless indicated otherwise, fulltext items are protected by copyright with all rights reserved. The copyright exception in section 29 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 allows the making of a single copy solely for the purpose of non-commercial research or private study within the limits of fair dealing. The publisher or other rights-holder may allow further reproduction and re-use of this version - refer to the White Rose Research Online record for this item. Where records identify the publisher as the copyright holder, users can verify any specific terms of use on the publisher's website.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

*Insights from the 'Ancient Word':*  
**The use of colonial sources in the study of Aztec society**

**Caroline Dodds Pennock**

When the Spanish conquistadors invaded Mexico in 1519, they found themselves confronted with a society who regarded the fundamentals of civilization in an entirely different way. Not only did the Aztecs practice mass human sacrifice but, according to many European commentators, they also lacked many of the markers of a civilized society.<sup>1</sup> Prominent amongst these indicators was writing. According to the arch critic of the Indians, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, 'These people possess neither science nor even an alphabet, nor do they preserve their history except for some obscure paintings, nor do they have written laws, but barbarous institutions and customs'.<sup>2</sup> In reality, the Aztecs possessed a complex and sophisticated system of recording, but these indigenous 'books' were rarely recognized as 'writing' by their Spanish conquerors.

Lacking an alphabetic language, the Aztecs relied heavily upon oral and visual culture in transmitting their values and histories; lavish pictorial documents combined artistic, phonetic and symbolic values to record religious, historical, genealogical, mythical and administrative material.<sup>3</sup> Oral culture was critical to the transmission of knowledge, but this knowledge was also inextricably tied to texts and prominent individuals relied upon detailed documents to help them to recall information or 'to sing the pictures of the books' as an indigenous song rather more eloquently expressed it. According to the chronicler Fernando Alvarado Tezozomoc, who claimed to be the grandson of Moctezuma II, his informants after the conquest could remember songs and texts because 'the ancient men and women, our fathers

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, the term 'Aztec' refers particularly to the inhabitants of Tenochtitlan, a group frequently referred to as the 'Mexica'. I recognize the difficulties and possible anachronisms of the term, but will use it as the most familiar term for a non-specialist audience.

<sup>2</sup> Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, 'Democrates Alter, sive de justis belli causis apud Indos' in John H. Parry and Robert G. Keith (eds), *New Iberian World: A Documentary History of the Discovery and Settlement of Latin America to the Early 17<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: Times Books, 1984), vol. 2, p.325.

<sup>3</sup> There is much controversy regarding the precise nature of Aztec writing and the balance between phonetic and ideogrammatic elements. See especially: Charles E. Dibble, 'Writing in Central Mexico', in *Handbook of Middle American Indians, Volume 10, Archaeology of Northern Mesoamerica, Part 1* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), pp.322-32; and H.B. Nicholson, 'Phoneticism in the Late Pre-Hispanic Central Mexican Writing System', in Elizabeth P. Benson (ed.), *Mesoamerican Writing Systems: a conference at Dumbarton Oaks, October 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup>, 1971* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1973), pp.1-46.

our mothers... told them, repeated them, had them painted for us also in their books'.<sup>4</sup> For the Aztecs, writing was a compound act, merging visual, textual and oral composition.

The great corpus of indigenous documents which was the product of this creativity was devastated by the earliest conquistadors and missionaries. Convinced of the potentially corrupting nature of the Aztec material and fired with religious zeal, they indiscriminately destroyed religious and secular records alike. This sweeping antipathy was particularly characteristic of the first flush of the conquest however, and after this fervour had subsided a number of scholars, particularly missionary friars, began seriously to collect and collate information about pre-conquest societies and to try seriously to understand indigenous beliefs and cultures. This was a time of both confusion and creativity. As the world began to open up, a global process of exchange began and, in this vibrant synthetic and creative environment, the first alphabetic records of Aztec culture were produced. Ironically, the passionate friars who sought to wipe out the 'pagan' rituals and beliefs of the pre-conquest world were also key instruments in their preservation for history. Striving to understand their charges, these religious men created remarkable records of Aztec life. The Spanish conquest of the Aztecs in 1521 was therefore a watershed not only in Mexican history, but also in its historiography, as a fundamental transition from iconographic Aztec script to European alphabetic text brought the very nature of writing into question. The moment of the Spanish invasion caused a rupture with the past, breaking traditions of recording and remembering, and creating a rift which has troubled historians ever since.<sup>5</sup> The historian who hopes to reach across this divide to discover the Aztec world is faced with the challenge of working primarily from sources which were produced or, in some cases, reproduced under the aegis of European influence.

Amongst historians of the post-conquest period, the interpretation of colonial texts, especially those in Nahuatl (the Aztec language, and a widely spoken lingua franca amongst the Central

---

<sup>4</sup> Miguel León-Portilla, *Fifteen Poets of the Aztec World* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), pp.4-5.

<sup>5</sup> Even before the devastating intervention of the conquistadors, questions of history were inherently confused by the deliberate creation of a sanctioned state account following a 'burning of books' in 1431 during the reign of the tlatoani (ruler) Itzcoatl as the elite aimed to support and perpetuate their authority through the creation of an official state narrative. See Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex, General History of the Things of New Spain*, trans. and ed. Charles E. Dibble and Arthur J. O. Anderson, 12 books in 13 vols, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Santa Fe: School of American Research and University of Utah Press, 1950-82), 10: 29: 191. Hereafter *Florentine Codex*. To prevent confusion between different editions and enable cross-referencing to alternative versions, references are given in the form of book: chapter: page number. (Page references are to the revised edition where applicable.)

American peoples), has flourished in recent years and our understanding of Nahua communities has moved on apace as indigenous perspectives have increasingly become the focus of ethnohistorical studies.<sup>6</sup> As sources for pre-conquest society, however, the colonial alphabetic texts (a term I use to distinguish them from alternative forms of visual and pictographic ‘text’) have become increasingly unfashionable as fears of Eurocentrism and the absence of incontrovertibly ‘indigenous’ written testimonies have threatened our ability to trace Aztec attitudes and ideas. Especially in the past three decades, since the publication of Said’s *Orientalism*, colonial documents have rightly been problematized as sources for indigenous society. Said’s assertion that all documents are ‘representations, are embedded first in the language, culture, institutions, and the political ambience of the representer’ is undoubtedly valid here and it is critical to recognize the context of these documents and remain aware of their mestizo nature.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, the consequent challenge to historical ‘truth’ which has stemmed from such arguments has led to the increasing unpopularity of sixteenth-century texts as sources for pre-conquest society, as texts written in Spanish or under Spanish domination have become inextricably linked with a narrative of subjection and resistance which frequently disregards the indigenous contribution and fails to recognise the agency of conquered peoples. In the past three decades, the belief that colonial texts form only a narrative of colonial concerns has meant the neglect of these unique documents and scholars have turned increasingly to the perceived clarity of archaeology and to the more ‘authentic’ vision of pictorial sources from contemporaneous Mexican cultures.<sup>8</sup> The widespread practice of human sacrifice in Aztec

---

<sup>6</sup> The most significant of this work has come from the research of James Lockhart and the so-called ‘Lockhart School’. For a survey of this field, which is increasingly known as the ‘New Philology’, see Matthew Restall, ‘A History of the New Philology and the New Philology in History’, *Latin American Research Review*, 38.1 (2003), 113-34.

<sup>7</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 272.

<sup>8</sup> No pre-conquest Nahua sources survive, but the work of a number of similar traditions has enabled scholars to access pre-conquest iconic tradition and convention. Valuable works of art and history in their own right, such documents also indicate a continuity of visual conventions into the early colonial period and in recent years the interpretation of such colonial documents has advanced significantly. Iconic script has been increasingly identified and interpreted as its possibilities as a channel to access indigenous thought have been recognized. For recent research on pictorial sources see Elizabeth Hill Boone, *Stories in Red and Black: Pictorial Histories of the Aztecs and Mixtecs* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000); Gordon Brotherston, *Painted Books From Mexico: Codices in UK collections and the world they represent* (London: British Museum Press, 1995); Frances Karttunen, ‘Indigenous Writing as a Vehicle of Postconquest Continuity and Change in Mesoamerica’, in Elizabeth Hill Boone and Tom Cummins (eds), *Native Traditions in the Postconquest World* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1998), pp.421-47; and Donald Robertson, *Mexican Manuscript Painting of the Early Colonial Period* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994). For recent archaeological work see, for example, Leonardo López Luján, *The Offerings of the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan*, trans. Bernard R. Ortiz de

culture has made these postcolonial debates more than usually fraught as ‘neo-Mexica’ groups have attempted to ‘reclaim’ the indigenous past, maintaining that histories of violent practices are European inventions designed to justify conquest.<sup>9</sup> But despite the undoubted value of material and artistic evidence and the validity of challenges to uncontested colonial narratives, the alphabetic texts of the colonial period have an important role to play in the study of Aztec society. I cannot agree more strongly with Cecelia Klein when she writes: ‘To refrain from trying to understand pre-contact Latin American history so as to avoid Eurocentric misrepresentation of the “other” is ... to foreclose all hope of ever perceiving the full range of human representational practices.’<sup>10</sup>

This is not to say that the early alphabetic texts should not be approached with genuine caution. Scholars such as Serge Gruzinski have rightly removed the colonial documents from the simplistic framework of a superimposition or opposition of European forms and indigenous ones, identifying them as products of a unique creativity in their own right. Unfortunately for those of us who hope to access the Aztec world through these texts however, Gruzinski’s work also highlights the futility of attempting to reach back to the pre-contact world from such sources, emphasizing the irretrievably mestizo nature of these texts.<sup>11</sup> I would argue, however, that by acknowledging the mixed heritage of these documents it is possible to rehabilitate them as sources for pre-conquest Aztec culture. By recognizing and engaging with the complex nature of colonial sources, it is possible to address some of their conceptual and theoretical difficulties and to move toward their greater comprehension. The explicit acknowledgement of the mestizo nature of these texts, whilst it cannot wipe away the difficulties of colonial corruption, permits us to address underlying Eurocentric preconceptions and hopefully to reintegrate these texts into the study of Aztec society. With careful handling, these sources can provide important insights, insights which cannot be offered through the methods of other disciplines, and in attempting to trace, so far as is possible, the Aztec experience of daily life, it is necessary to return to these documents.

---

Montellano and Thelma Ortiz de Montellano (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1994); and Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, *Life and Death in the Templo Mayor* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> Probably the most prominent exponent of this tradition is Kurly Tlapoyawa. See his ‘Did “Mexika Human Sacrifice” Exist?’, <http://www.mexika.org/TlapoSac.htm> (accessed 30 November 2007); and his *We Will Rise: Rebuilding the Mexikah Nation* (Victoria: Trafford, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Cecelia F. Klein, ‘Wild Woman in Colonial Mexico: An Encounter of European and Aztec Concepts of the Other’, in C. Farago (ed.), *Reframing the Renaissance: Visual Culture in Europe and Latin America, 1450-1650* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 263.

<sup>11</sup> Serge Gruzinski, *The Mestizo Mind: The intellectual dynamics of colonization and globalization* (London: Routledge, 2002).

Although undoubtedly problematic, these sources offer a unique opportunity to gain insights into the individual and personal perspective and so, while they must certainly be handled with care, they also deserve to be revisited and reinterpreted. In the essentially oral culture of the Valley of Mexico, imagery, ceremony and ritual activity were vital elements of existence, but language was also essential and, through careful work with the sources, it is even possible to access the words of the Aztec people themselves.

One particularly important set of sources are the records of the *huehuetlahtolli*, the ‘ancient word’ or ‘speeches of the elders’ which were collected by early colonial chroniclers and missionaries. These are the great speeches which structured Aztec life, marking key points in both their individual and collective existence and through these ritual discourses we can perhaps hope to hear the voices of the Aztecs and to access the rhetoric, poetry and song which were so deeply embedded in their culture. The Aztecs were highly expressive people with a sophisticated oral culture. The first words of children were greeted with joy as markers of full entry into the community, and elegant and elaborate speech was taught in the institutions of the comprehensive educational system which embraced all children.<sup>12</sup> The ability to speak eloquently, within the great traditions of Aztec oratory, was a fundamental skill to anyone with aspirations of public office and even ordinary people were expected to be gracious, restrained and articulate. Speech and text were closely tied together for the Aztecs and, in the priestly *calmecac* schools, youths were taught to read and to write the beautiful codices, to interpret their pictographic, ideographic and phonetic signs, and to memorize the great histories, myths and teachings of the nation with the help of the painted books. The *huehuetlahtolli* were vital components in this system for the transmission of ideals and information from generation to generation; these ritual dialogues and formal speeches marked important moments of transition in the lives of Aztecs, from birth and marriage to the investiture of a new *tlatoani* or ruler. The official orations appear frequently in the early alphabetic sources, and offer the opportunity to hear the words of the Aztecs, albeit in a formal and carefully structured fashion.

---

<sup>12</sup> For the celebration of children’s first words, see Bernardino de Sahagún, *Primeros Memoriales*, paleography and trans. Thelma D. Sullivan, completed and revised with additions H.B. Nicholson, Arthur J.O. Anderson, Charles E. Dibble, Eloise Quiñones Keber and Wayne Ruwet (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), p.89. The Aztec educational system was critical to establishing this highly-developed tradition of rhetoric. See Caroline Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood: Gender, Lifecycle and Sacrifice in Aztec Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp.66-88.

The nature of the huehuetlahtolli has been the subject of significant debate, and recent work has inclined to the view that the genre, if not in all cases the substance of the discourse, is of pre-Cortesian origin.<sup>13</sup> The speeches appear in the work of a number of early chroniclers and notable similarities between different transcriptions have helped to corroborate the content of the texts.<sup>14</sup> Not all historians have been convinced, however, and the authenticity of the speeches has frequently been challenged. Based on her analysis of the implicit Christian messages of the recorded huehuetlahtolli Louise Burkhart rightly asserted that to assume ‘that the texts are ... verbatim preconquest discourses would be naïve’.<sup>15</sup> Her suspicion is undoubtedly justifiable, and indeed is a precondition for the analysis of these challenging texts, but I would argue that such caution need not necessarily equate to a rejection of these sources as a channel to access pre-conquest ideologies.

It is vital to acknowledge the mestizo context in which these documents were researched and recorded for, added to the difficulty of penetrating the curtain of colonialism, is the question of indigenous influence and intentions in the construction of these texts. Even if it were possible to remove any colonial misunderstanding, interpretation, corruption or omission from the early accounts, leaving a ‘true’ record of the information which the authors received, the possible agendas of the informants inevitably remain obscure. In the volatile environment of sixteenth-century Mexico City, a host of potential motives for dissimulation existed, from a desire to defy the colonial authorities to an attempt to present pre-conquest traditions in the most positive possible light, in what Pierre Bourdieu described as the process of ‘regularization’ by which colonized people attempt to conform to the ideals of the dominant group.<sup>16</sup> Over and above the possibility of deliberate misdirection, the effects of colonialism on indigenous testimony or colonial recording are extremely difficult to determine. Although Christianizing tendencies are sometimes relatively accessible, it is impossible simply to peel

---

<sup>13</sup> For the pre-conquest origins of the huehuetlahtolli see, for example, Miguel León-Portilla and Librado Silva Galeana, *Huehuetlahtolli: Testimonios de la Antigua Palabra* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1991), pp.7-45; Joanne Harwood, *Disguising Ritual: A Re-assessment of Part 3 of the Codex Mendoza* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Essex, 2002), pp.138-40; Birgitta Leander, ‘La educación de los jóvenes en la sociedad Azteca, según los huehuetlahtolli – “*Platicas de los viejos*”’, in José Alcina Franch (ed.), *Azteca Mexica: Las culturas del México antiguo* (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal Quinto Centenario and Lunwerg Editores, 1992), pp.265-9; and Elizabeth Hill Boone, ‘Pictorial Documents and Visual Thinking in Postconquest Mexico’, in Elizabeth Hill Boone and Tom Cummins (eds), *Native Traditions in the Postconquest World* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1998), pp.150-5.

<sup>14</sup> Miguel León-Portilla, *Bernardino de Sahagún: First Anthropologist* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), pp.117-18.

<sup>15</sup> Louise Burkhart, ‘Gender in Nahuatl Texts of the Early Colonial Period: Native “Tradition” and the Dialogue with Christianity’, in Cecelia F. Klein (ed.), *Gender in Pre-Hispanic America: a symposium at Dumbarton Oaks*, 12 and 13 October 1996 (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2001), p.87.

<sup>16</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p.22.

away the other European influences which are present in the sources. The available texts are compound creations, products of the synthesis and syncretism of cultures which occurred in Central Mexico in the sixteenth century. Responding to fresh cultural ideas, absorbing, adapting and creating, missionary chroniclers, their informants and their assistants produced unique documents which display both continuity and originality.<sup>17</sup>

Particularly notable amongst the early chroniclers is the Franciscan friar, Bernardino de Sahagún. A renowned recorder and interpreter of Aztec culture, Sahagún arrived in New Spain only eight years after the Spanish invasion when he still had access to considerable numbers of indigenous informants with significant memory of pre-conquest practices. Alongside his tireless evangelical and missionary work, Sahagún dedicated his life to investigating, understanding and recording the culture of the indigenous people he encountered. With the assistance of scores of informants and the youthful indigenous ‘trilinguals’ who had learned Spanish, Nahuatl and Latin at the Franciscan college at Tlatelolco, Sahagún produced an impressive corpus of ethnographic material, most notably the thirteen-volume Florentine Codex (or the *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España* as it is sometimes known). So conscientious and methodical was his approach to the study of Aztec society that it has earned him a reputation as the ‘creator of a rigorous methodology for ethnographic research’.<sup>18</sup> A commemorative stone, laid in the cloister of the University of Salamanca on 12 January 1966, describes Sahagún as ‘the father of anthropology in the New World’ and, although he was not the first of the chroniclers of Aztec culture, the extensive Nahuatl and Spanish texts he produced are certainly the greatest of the sources which have survived.<sup>19</sup> The popularity of this material has wavered over the years as scholars have focused more or less on the corrupting potential of the colonial context in which it was produced.<sup>20</sup> Sahagún’s dedicated efforts have frequently been the subject of admiration, but the limitations of his viewpoint have been a source of constant concern.

---

<sup>17</sup> On the mestizo nature of colonial texts see Serge Gruzinski, *The Mestizo Mind: The Intellectual Dynamics of Colonization and Globalization* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> Luis Nicolau D’ Olwer, *Fray Bernardino de Sahagún (1499–1590)* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987), p. xiv.

<sup>19</sup> In the original, the text is: ‘el padre de la antropología en el Nuevo Mundo.’ See also M. León-Portilla’s *Bernardino de Sahagún: First Anthropologist* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002). For detailed information on the earliest chroniclers of Aztec culture, many of whose work is now lost, see Georges Baudot, *Utopia and History in Mexico: The First Chronicles of Mexican Civilization, 1520–1569* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1995).

<sup>20</sup> For more on the varying popularity and perceived reliability of colonial sources see Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *How to Write the History of the New World: Histories, Epistemologies, and Identities in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), especially pp.60-129.



In the case of the huehuetlahtolli, the great scholar of the early missionary historians, Georges Baudot, has suggested that the transcriptions made by Sahagún are particularly accurate; made as they were ‘when much of the millenarian dream had been shown to be impossible, [he] did not hesitate to transcribe them literally, just as they were, and therefore with a deep idolatrous resonance’.<sup>21</sup> The sixth book of the Florentine Codex, the book of Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy, contains a rich collection of huehuetlahtolli which cover a wide range of subjects and circumstances. This, the second-largest book in the codex, records, in broadly chronological order, speeches which were given at significant moments during the lifecycle, from the words addressed to a pregnant woman by her midwife, parents and other relatives, to the homilies appropriate to the appointment of a new tlatoani (ruler), and the cautionary advice given by parents to their children upon the occasion of their coming of age. These ritual orations form an indispensable corpus of information for the examination of social norms, although their usefulness is more apparent as a source for public ideals than private realities. But although the speeches are certainly an expression of official standards and morals, sensitive consideration of their content and the context of their transmission enables us to flesh out our picture of the personal relationships and experiences of Aztec families and individuals.

One particularly interesting group of discourses in the book of Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy is the exhortations of guidance which were made to young Aztec men and women when they reached the ‘age of discretion’.<sup>22</sup> The exact age meant by this regularly-used term is not clear, but in view of context and content, it seems likely to be the age at point at which young men and women were deemed ready for marriage, the time when they were thought to be reaching maturity and capable of assimilating for themselves the nuances and implications of social behaviour. Combining devout and elaborately poetic language with practical advice and traditional wisdom, the huehuetlahtolli instructed young Aztec men and women in their respective roles and responsibilities and helped them to find their place in the world. This small group of speeches exemplifies the issues surrounding the analysis of the early alphabetic texts, illustrating the many challenges and multiple layers of meaning which may be found in these fascinating documents. Methodically presented and formal in tone, these

---

<sup>21</sup> Georges Baudot, *Utopia and History in Mexico: The First Chronicles of Mexican Civilization, 1520-1569* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1995), p.232.

<sup>22</sup> Florentine Codex, 6: 17-22: 87-126.

speeches have frequently been used for the analysis of ‘official’ ideals, but they can also be used to deepen our understanding of individual interactions and personal expectations, demonstrating the many values and complexities of these early colonial texts as sources for pre-conquest Aztec society.

The Florentine Codex contains six chapters of *huehuetlahtolli* addressed to children by their parents ‘when they had already reached the age of discretion’. Each chapter is prefaced by a brief introduction by Sahagún, who considered the speeches to be ‘very good discourse ... especially useful for the youths, for the maidens’.<sup>23</sup> This commendation of the moral values transmitted in the *huehuetlahtolli* reveals explicitly the editorial hand behind these texts, which frequently purport to be verbatim transcriptions. This tacit, although at times possibly unintentional, influence must be carefully considered in any analysis of the colonial sources, but an analysis of the content of the speeches does not suggest a significant degree of European textual corruption. Although these discourses certainly urge young people, particularly girls, to discretion and virtue, the overall picture they present is a far cry from the penetratingly patriarchal nature of Spanish social expectations, making it highly unlikely that this depiction of Aztec life was imposed by editorial intent.

Urgings to chastity, decency and good behaviour were presumably largely responsible for Sahagún’s approval of the discourses, but even apparently conventional urgings offer an array of perspectives which permit us to see beyond the formal and conventional. As well as the usual appeals for purity and decency, a considerable degree of self-possession and composure was apparently demanded of every female. In an extremely familiar scene, a mother urged her daughter:

Thou art not to travel in great haste, nor art thou to amble; for [to amble] achieveth pompousness; [haste] meaneth recklessness ... But when thou findest it necessary, go swiftly, use discretion. Jump at thy jumping place in order that thou wilt not become a fat one, an inflated one.<sup>24</sup>

Although women were required to be graceful and unhurried, indolence and obesity were an undesirable quality even for noble ladies. In a world of activity and energy, the occasional necessity to act with haste was acknowledged and, even in the most privileged of households,

---

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 6: 19: 99.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 6: 19: 100.

the luxury and lethargy implied by being overweight were unacceptable. Appealing to her daughter's vanity, the mother betrays an almost modern attitude to female fitness; sadly we have no more information about the 'jumping place' which is so reminiscent of modern attitudes to physical fitness and regular exercise.

In his introductions to the chapters, as well as expressing his approval (or in some cases disapproval) Sahagún reveals one of the most prevalent and problematic propensities of the early sources – the likelihood that they are derived from and biased toward elite informants. Unlike other chapters concerning birth and pregnancy, the forewords to the coming of age discourses suggest clearly that the 'exhortations' in question were uttered by members of the nobility, in particular the 'rulers'. In compiling his work, Sahagún regarded the collaboration of his indigenous informants as vital; he saw them as the 'sieve' through which his work was sifted for accuracy. Unfortunately, although perhaps inevitably, the majority of his collaborators were derived from the elite group of indigenous people who had been educated in the traditional calmecac schools and were therefore familiar with the history, rhetoric, ritual, law and religion of their culture. Although undoubtedly an invaluable source of information, the students of these schools were mostly of noble birth, although some talented commoners also attended the calmecac, and there is therefore likely to be an unintentional bias toward noble perspectives in the material.

We must therefore remain aware of the possibility that the *huehuetlahtolli* may refer to a limited section of the population, but there is significant evidence which suggests that the precepts laid down in the discourses may legitimately be extended to other sectors of society. While status undoubtedly impacted significantly on individuals' day-to-day experience, Aztec civilization was continually reliant upon community cooperation and interaction and in many ways noble existence differed from others only in economic terms. The underlying responsibilities and obligations of all men and women were remarkably consistent, shared moralities and ideals stretching across boundaries of rank. It was fundamental to the nature of Aztec society that each person was assigned their proper duty and place and the essence of this tenet appears to have been substantially unchanged amongst the elite. The father's speech to his daughter admonishes her to obligations of conscientious industry which seem remarkably similar to those of her common counterparts. She was admonished to hold vigil at night, to offer incense and wash the mouths of the gods, and to sweep the house diligently

(both a religious and a household obligation).<sup>25</sup> These are the chores and duties of the domestic sphere, the realm of woman, and although her home may have been more luxurious than the average, the lot of a noblewoman was clearly far from indolent. The father's instructions to his son also advocated conscientiousness and industry in his obligations to the gods: 'By night thou art to rise, thou art to pass the night awake ... And thou art to turn quickly to the sweeping, thou art to take care as thou art to hold vigil, as thou art to arise, in the offering of incense.'<sup>26</sup> Urgings regarding wakefulness and diligence are conspicuously similar for men and women of all classes; religious observance was the responsibility of both sexes at all levels of society. Sweeping, the offering of incense, and the maintaining of vigil were tasks related intrinsically to religious conviction; such practices were common throughout Tenochtitlan and are a ubiquitous element of daily life in the sources. Every individual was responsible for maintaining the beliefs of the community, and the centrality of faith to Aztec life dictated that religious conventions were applied at every level of the social hierarchy. Social proprieties were also expected throughout society and, in a culture where success was dependent on community interaction, the law was used to enforce many of the ideals advocated by parental discourses, revealing their broad relevance. The strict application of the death penalty for adultery is perhaps the most prominent of these enforced ideals.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, although there are grounds to suggest that aspects of the early alphabetic sources are derived principally from noble informants, the material derived from these perspectives should not necessarily be dismissed as purely elitist in its relevance.

Three key interactions are revealed in the six chapters of *huehuetlahtolli* that were addressed to children at their coming of age: father and son; father and daughter; and mother and daughter. Analyzing these texts in a purely structural sense, the absence of a mother-son interaction is perhaps revealing. Many western cultures have made much of the significance of the maternal bond, especially in the modern era with reference to its Freudian connotations. There seems little reason to doubt that a powerful and organic connection existed between mother and child in Aztec culture. Women were the primary carers of unweaned infants and even noble mothers nursed their babies if they were able.<sup>28</sup> Beyond

---

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 6: 18: 95.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 6: 22: 121.

<sup>27</sup> Caroline Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood: Gender, Lifecycle and Sacrifice in Aztec Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp.137-40.

<sup>28</sup> Alonso de Zorita, *The Lords of New Spain: The Brief and Summary Relation of the Lords of New Spain*, trans. and ed. Benjamin Keen (London: Phoenix, 1965), p.135. Inga Clendinnen has argued that suckling and nursing

infancy, however, childcare was divided by sex in Aztec culture, and fathers assumed direct responsibility for their male children at an early age. This gendered distribution of education may be responsible for the lack of a mother-son discourse in the Florentine Codex as for a mother to resume a formal instructional role at the point of her son reaching maturity would presumably be considered inappropriate. Theorists who argue that parallel childcare was designed to prevent the corruption of 'pure' gender identities might also contend that the absence of female influence at such a vital transitional stage is reflective of the more critical nature of purity to, or perhaps the greater susceptibility to corruption of, masculinity.<sup>29</sup> The speeches also reflect social preconceptions and practicalities – Sahagún's informants were mostly (perhaps exclusively) male and, in both European and indigenous eyes, it was rarely fitting for a woman to make any formal public declaration; the vast majority of the huehuetlahtolli were intended to be delivered by men. The nature of the advice also helps to explain why it was more likely to have been delivered by a father than a mother – the advice largely addresses practical issues of male life, which a father would have been better equipped to tackle, and much of it deals with issues of sexuality. It seems unlikely that young men would have been any more willing to accept sexual advice from their mothers in the Aztec world than today!

The dual educational system does not account for the unbalancing presence of a father-daughter discourse, however, and perhaps the most convincing explanation for the absence of a mother-son discourse is a simple one. The father's exhortations to his daughter appear to have been primarily moral and ideological in nature, whilst the mother was responsible for giving practical advice, as one who knew the conventions and expectations of women in the world. The father gives equivalent pragmatic advice to his son, as seems reasonable and sensible, whilst a second speech provides ethical guidance. The nature of the paternal dialogues with both son and daughter therefore suggest that it was the father's role to convey broader ideological and principled messages in all cases, helping to explain the absence of an 'official' mother-son interaction. Whilst moral responsibilities certainly did not lie outside of women's scope, issues of preservation of familial and ancestral honour (which preoccupy the father's huehuetlahtolli) were principally, and certainly publically, the province of men. Women were fully integrated into personal and household rituals honouring the ancestors, but

---

were a fundamental aspect of Aztec ideology, closely associated with conceptions of paradise. See her *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.184-8, 195-7.

<sup>29</sup> Cecelia F. Klein, 'None of the Above: Gender Ambiguity in Nahua Ideology', in Cecelia F. Klein (ed.), *Gender in Pre-Hispanic America* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2001), pp.183-253.

the public maintenance of dignity and lineage was usually a male matter. It was the duty of both men and women to live by the ideals of their ancestors, but whilst women were responsible for the preservation of purity and virtue in the home, it was the men who were chiefly obliged to safeguard such ideals in the public sphere. The absence of any formal motherly discourse to male children is therefore perhaps explicable in the sense that it was deemed unnecessary. Father and mother each gave practical advice to the children of their respective genders, in accordance with the parallel gendered system of upbringing, but it was the obligation of the father to convey ideas of family duty. This is not to say that women were exempt from the transmission of such ideas, but it does not appear to have been considered their function in a formal sense; theirs was primarily rather a collaborative and corroborative role. The mother's supportive role is made even clearer in her words to her daughter, in which she confirmed and upheld her husband's advice, investing his counsel with seemingly irresistible authority. She urged her daughter to heed her father's words, to: 'Take them, guard them, place them by thy heart, inscribe them on thy heart'.<sup>30</sup>

The absence of a formal mother-son interaction from the huehuetlahtolli is interesting, but perhaps the most intriguing of the relationships exposed by these discourses is that of the mother and daughter. The nineteenth chapter, in which a mother speaks to her daughter, is unusual in this group of exhortations, and amongst early texts in general, because it represents a purely female interaction. Although certainly recorded by men, and therefore potentially corrupted by their mediating perceptions, this passage offers a rare chance to discern the voices of women. Most indigenous records are dominated by male voices, or occasionally by the recording of female words through a male narrator. This chapter is extremely valuable because, at least theoretically, in its original context women were responsible for both its transmission and reception. The chapter technically records a formal oration, but it is also an account of an intimate and individual moment of communication between mother and daughter. Appealing to her daughter's emotions as a means of engaging her interest, the mother's ostensibly official advice shows warmth and tenderness.

And behold a second word which I give thee, which I say to thee, my child, little one. Look to me, for I am thy mother. I carried thee for so many months. And when they were ended I was lulling [thee] to sleep. I was laying thee in the cradle; I was placing thee on my thigh. And certainly with my milk I gave thee strength.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Florentine Codex, 6: 19: 100.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 6: 19: 100.

For many years, the distinctively bloody nature of Aztec culture has tempted history to place them beyond the norms of human social behaviour, accounting for their brutal rituals by removing them from the expectations of civilization. The discourses have been acknowledged as personal interactions, but their compassionate or intimate nature has been diminished and their participants dehumanized, or at least treated somewhat perfunctorily and collectively, reducing their individual and emotive potential. Formal ceremonies and punctilious addresses have been unquestioningly accepted as indicative of the assiduous ordering and restraining of society to bend it to the bureaucratic will.<sup>32</sup> Interpretations of the huehuetlahtolli have been influenced by this dehumanization; inevitably, the early alphabetic sources lend themselves more obviously to interpretations of official standards. Passages such as the mother's words to her daughter are vital to our understanding of Aztec society. The huehuetlahtolli were not sterile recitations, but fluid dialogues infused with human interaction and connection and they repudiate assertions of inhumanity and widen our comprehension of those aspects of life which are the most common, and yet often the hardest to discern. The compassion and closeness in the mother's words are evident, even though they are framed in formal rhetoric.

In the mother's advice to her daughter regarding matters of communication and proper performance in speech, the multiplicity of possible angles from which the early sources may be approached is revealed.

As thou art to go, thou art not to look here and there, not to look from side to side, not constantly to look upward, nor art thou to be a hypocrite. Nor art thou to put hatred in thine eyes; thou art not to put hatred in thy face. Look joyously at everyone. And also, that no one will have occasion to despise thee, put anger in the spirit at the proper time. And behold, never concern thyself with words; let what is said be said. Do not speak with others; pretend that thou dost not hear it. With thee will the words end.<sup>33</sup>

A dense passage of advice, this is a complex picture of the manner in which young women were expected to interact with those they encountered. Beyond the cursory encouragements always to look upon people with joy and to set hatred aside, the mother's words also carry more subtle implications and propositions. Although happiness and openness were important, unwarranted passivity and thoughtless cheerfulness could also be causes for disgust. At the appropriate time, 'anger in the spirit' was a social necessity and a clear expectation. Although rarely involved in warfare, in the military Aztec world women were presumed to possess the

---

<sup>32</sup> The obvious exception to such rather dehumanizing approaches is Inga Clendinnen's unique *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>33</sup> Florentine Codex, 6: 19: 101

capacity for proper strength and rational anger, provided it was experienced for an appropriate reason and in a fitting fashion. In ordinary circumstances, however, young women appear to have been urged to remain aloof and impartial when they were goaded or tempted to anger. The mother exhorted her daughter, not to silence, but to reticence in the face of negative words; she was not counseled against all speech, only damaging words. The tendency to gossip and quarrel was obviously perceived as a potential problem in the communal and cooperative Aztec world.

The father too admonished his son to take care of the disruptive potential of speech, but men's relationship with language was regarded as distinctly different. Whilst the advice, to ignore gossip, is very similar to that of the mother to her daughter, the potential consequences of incautious speech for men reveal a distinctly gendered inference. Whilst girls were exhorted to reticence for principled reasons, injudicious speech for a man appears to have potentially serious consequences: '... if thou lendest a word, if thou speakest among others – on thee it will be laid; ... and thou wilt be taken, thou wilt be seized. And furthermore thou wilt be imprisoned'. In the constantly competitive male arena, a young Aztec had to be aware of the possibility that he might be 'made a fool' and bring injury upon himself.<sup>34</sup> Personal interest rather than simple honour appears to have prevailed in the male arena.

The structured and methodological manner in which the texts are organised, excerpted from the more complex realities of life in which they would have been delivered, sometimes serves to obscure the distinction between civic ritual and private interaction, but the diverse layers of meaning in the *huehuetlahtolli* offer us a fascinating window onto the Aztec world. Life in the Aztec capital is frequently portrayed as violent, harsh and laborious, but the words of a noble father to his daughter, although certainly making the afflictions of life apparent, also offer a positive and hopeful perspective.

Hear well, O my daughter, O my child, the earth is not a good place. It is not a place of joy, it is not a place of contentment ... In order that we may not go weeping forever, may not die of sorrow, it is our merit that our lord gave us laughter, sleep, and our sustenance, our strength, our force, and also carnal knowledge in order that there be peopling.

All make life gay on earth in order that no one go weeping ... For there is living on earth; there is one's becoming a lord; there is one's becoming a ruler; there is one's become a nobleman; there is one's becoming an eagle warrior ... Who is just yielding

---

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 6: 33: 122.



to death? For there is the doing of things; there is the providing of livelihood; there is the building of houses; there is labor; there is the seeking of women; there is marriage; there is the marriage of women to men; there is the marriage of men to women.<sup>35</sup>

The parallel urgings to young men and women by their parents were designed to prepare them for marriage and the father's words to his daughter offered hope that a conjugal life might provide happiness and contentment to alleviate the suffering which was the fate of every Aztec. For women, the future held torment and affliction: there was no uncertainty about this. Unambiguously harsh, the speech nonetheless allows some 'laughter', suggesting the possibility of a productive and contented existence. Indicating the remarkable complexity of the sources, although this homily was addressed to a young woman, the majority of the gifts offered by the gods to ease life's trials appear to be chiefly masculine in nature. Perplexingly, the ruler offered to his daughter as consolation for the tribulations of mortal existence a number of aspects of human life which she was unlikely ever to experience, primarily associated with the military career which was accessible to young women. Industrious men were called to public success, whilst diligent women were expected to toil in private. Able to earn pride and find fulfillment in martial and political success, Aztec men possessed opportunities for accomplishment beyond the realm of household and community to which women were largely restricted. However, energy and activity were apparently sources of satisfaction for both sexes and, in the catalogue of domestic tasks and desires fundamental to individual existence, marriage seems to have been the culmination and aspiration of personal endeavour, the root of Aztec success and satisfaction. And, despite urgings to young women of decorum and purity, one apparent source of happiness was to be found in 'carnal knowledge'. Sexuality was a source of joy for both men and women, albeit only within the appropriate forum of marriage.

The content of the *huehuetlahtolli* varies considerably depending on the context, as does their value to the historian. But even a brief study of such a small excerpt from this rich source demonstrates an intriguing range of both explicit and veiled interactions. Despite their potential textual corruptions and omissions, alphabetic texts such as the *huehuetlahtolli* remain one of the most comprehensive and most contemporary sources for Aztec society extant. Although they are a detailed and fascinating source, however, there are obviously considerable difficulties with the texts, not least the mediation of colonial influence which

---

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 6: 18: 93-4.

must inevitably affect them. The evangelical agenda of the friars who recorded the huehuetlahtolli inevitably led them to promote aspects of indigenous culture which supported the ‘humanity’ of their charges and their capacity for conversion. The desire to find shared moral authority is clear in Sahagún’s explicitly-expressed approval for some of these ‘very good discourse[s] of admonition’.<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately, in the current postcolonial climate, fears of such tacit Eurocentrism have at times led to the failure of scholars to even attempt to peer past the filters of colonialism and perceive the Aztec world. We are right to fear inaccuracy, misapprehension and presumption – only by recognizing these problems can one hope to make careful and critical use of the documents available. Especially in attempting to reach beyond the public and political to reach the minutiae of private existence and personal life, an abundance of issues obscures and complicates the evidence. The effects of colonialism on indigenous testimony are extremely difficult to determine, but indigenous regularization, complications in communication, and Catholic Spanish perspectives all undoubtedly impact on our sources to a great or lesser degree. But without wishing to overstate the reliability of the early texts, it seems unlikely that the view of Aztec society they present was invented by the Spanish, either by intention or omission, so dissimilar from European realities is the picture they present. Sahagún defended his writings from his detractors and those who claimed his work was fabrication saying: ‘the inventing of that which is written in this Book is not within the understanding of human beings, nor is there a living man who could invent the language which is in it’.<sup>37</sup> The unrelenting efforts of the Spanish authorities to suppress Sahagún’s work are testament to his efforts to record accurately the disappearing Aztec culture. So diligent was the great Franciscan in recording indigenous material that he found himself accused of fostering idolatry.<sup>38</sup>

The early alphabetic texts are undoubtedly complex and challenging sources for preconquest society. Beyond the overt obstacles presented by the context of their production, the Aztec perception of the past fundamentally differed from that of their Spanish conquerors, and the

---

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 6: 17: 87. The importance of the debate over the ‘humanity of the Indians’ in legitimizing the Spanish conquest and the evangelical endeavour is well known. For one helpful overview of the issues impacting on the religious recorders of the huehuetlahtolli see Patricia Seed, ‘Are These Not Also Men? The Indians’ Humanity and Capacity for Spanish Civilisation’, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 25, 3 (1993), 629-52. The agendas of individual chroniclers also affect the text in highly specific ways at times. For example, the writings of the Dominican friar Diego Durán reflect his conviction that the Aztecs were descended from one of the lost tribes of Israel.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, Introductions: 6: 65.

<sup>38</sup> Georges Baudot, *Utopia and History in Mexico: The First Chronicles of Mexican Civilization, 1520-1569* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1995), pp. 491–524; and Miguel León-Portilla, *Bernardino de Sahagún: First Anthropologist* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), pp. 199–202, 208–12, 216–20.

mestizo creativity which is expressed in the early colonial documents is a beguiling blend of indigenous tradition and European narrative conventions. Although this might be troublesome at times, I hope I have demonstrated through this study of the huehuetlahtolli that a sympathetic reading of these texts can provide valuable insights into the pre-colonial world, shedding occasional shafts of light onto personal perspectives which are frequently hidden. Although relatively recent, the Aztec world is relegated to the realm of the ancient by the historiographical fracture which occurred at the moment of the Spanish invasion. Paul Wheatley, looking at the sources for the chronologically more ancient but similarly textually remote world of second-millennium BC China, beautifully captures the intricacy and ambiguity of such analysis.

Evaluating such evidence is rather like trying to grasp a fish at the bottom of a deep s the intruding hand shatters the shadowy image, so the irruption of the 20<sup>th</sup> century mind into the conceptual framework of the ancient world inevitably induces cultural refractions of such magnitude that the image of the quarry at best undergoes distortion, at worst is wholly lost from sight. But recognition of the limitation imposed by this anamorphosis is a condition of entry into the traditional world, and the social scientist who would concern himself with urban genesis must be resigned for the present to seeing his elusive fish disintegrate into a thousand glittering fragments as he reaches toward the bottom of what is a very deep pool indeed.<sup>39</sup>

As Wheatley implies, there can be no certainty about the understanding of sources which attempt to reach such culturally and textually distant worlds. Every tentative reading leads to countless more interpretative avenues, each with their own possibilities and permutations. But, despite their challenges and complexities, early alphabetic texts such as the huehuetlahtolli remain one of the most comprehensive and contemporary sources for Aztec society extant and, with careful handling and sensitive interpretation, they offer us the opportunity to reinvest the Aztecs with a humanity and individuality which they have frequently been denied. The text can never tell the whole story, but it has an important and distinctive part of the story to tell.

---

<sup>39</sup> Paul Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters: A Preliminary Enquiry Into the Origins and Character of the Ancient Chinese City* (Chicago: Aldine, 1971), xv.