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**The Monk and the *Mariposa*:  
Franciscan acculturation in Mexico 1520-1550**

**Thesis submitted for the degree of MPhil, University of Kent**

**October 2015**

**Penelope Reilly**

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## Abstract

### Acculturation by the Franciscan Friars in Mexico from 1520-1550

This thesis sets out to examine the process of acculturation as experienced by the Franciscan friars during the first years of their mission in Mexico at the beginning of the sixteenth century. It will suggest that the acculturation was a two-way affair; that the Franciscans were as much changed by their contact with the indigenous people as were the natives by their contact with the friars.

It begins with a study of the various changing interpretations of the notion of 'acculturation' and argues that beside the classical linear interpretation such expressions as 'reverse acculturation', 'transculturation' and 'co-acculturation' may be more appropriate for these particular circumstances. It then examines how the friars came to be in Mexico and the Aztec culture which they encountered which both shocked by its human sacrifice and yet provided striking examples of parallels with the Christian religion, thus indicating an early example of possible mutual accommodation.

Next the thesis looks at the ways in which the friars prepared the ground for their mission: destroying many of the temples, settling the natives in '*pueblos*' and above all, learning a range of local languages so that they could both converse with the Aztecs and preach to them. This can be seen as an excellent example of how the missionaries themselves were open to the process of acculturation; instead of insisting on the language of the coloniser, as was the practice of later missionaries, they carried the word to the natives by speaking their own tongues. The thesis goes on to examine the process of evangelizing, suggesting that in this area the greatest degree of 'transculturation' can be observed. Shortages of resources and manpower and sheer pressure of numbers made it necessary to take 'short cuts' in the administration of the sacraments, adopting for instance a '*missa secca*' (where there was no wine) and dispensing with the use of white gowns and salt, which were in short supply, for the baptismal ceremony.

In cultural areas of their work the friars found themselves exposed to another form of 'acculturation' – a phenomenon which might be termed 'co-acculturation'. Thus in some of the songs of Pedro de Gante Christian and Aztec references sit side by side. Monastic architecture combines classical Spanish design with innovations like the '*capilla abierta*'. The Tlaxcaltecs, having been taught by the missionaries the art of using perspective, used this same art to extract more favourable terms from the Spanish authorities.

However, it is in that astonishing art form the *auto* that the best example of both 'trans-acculturation' and 'co-acculturation' can be found. Here an attempt has been made to show that what are basically well-known Bible stories have been overlaid by Aztec religious and cultural references which are not only a form of 'hidden resistance' to Spanish rule but the most impressive example of the blending of two cultures under the aegis and inspiration of the Franciscan friars. The result is a moment of sublime dramatic co-operation which was never to be repeated.

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## Introduction

When Cortés landed with a group of companions at Ulúa on Maundy Thursday, April 21<sup>st</sup>, 1519, the first thing he did was to order the erection of a cross. Mexico's long process of religious acculturation had begun.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the nature of this 'acculturation' and the Franciscan friars' role in it. It will ask the question how thorough was it, how deeply did it penetrate into the psyche of the Mexica, how much resistance, if any, did it meet and what was the effect of this evangelizing mission on the friars themselves. It will also consider the nature of the religious legacy which the friars left behind them and the effect which this legacy might have had on the later history of Mexico.

Why have the Franciscan friars been chosen as the topic for this discussion? What was special about them? It is not that they were all saints. They were not. Studies of the period contain instances of their squabbles with the other Orders and their harsh treatment of the natives. Neither have they been used as a defence of colonialism, most of which is indefensible. It is rather a study of the peculiar qualities of the Franciscans which set them apart from the other missionaries of the sixteenth century and made their interpretation and implementation of religious acculturation unique. To begin with, they were the first to arrive in Mexico. Chosen by Cortés, endorsed by the Spanish King Charles V, facing many and great dangers, they found themselves implanted in a strange and hostile land. They were charged, to paraphrase Canning's speech to the House of Commons in December, 1826, with the responsibility of bringing the Faith to the New World to redress the failures of the Old, the consequences of which were to change the character of Mexico for ever. In the execution of this grave responsibility one has to admire their courage and shining idealism which found expression in the most astonishing energy. They built over 70 convents and monastic houses by 1570, including vast, imposing churches. They were responsible for the introduction of the first printing presses in Latin America, on which they wrote sermons, treatises and grammars in both Latin and the native languages.

Despite all this, and one of the reasons for selecting them as the subject of this thesis, is the fact that since the seventeenth century, the Franciscans seem to have been largely forgotten in the Mexican national narrative, as the neglected state of many of their churches and monasteries suggests. Scholars have written in full on the evils of the Conquest, the *encomienda* and *repartimento* systems but remarkably little credit has been given to the friars for their achievements. This may be due in part to a legacy of anti-clericalism. In Mexico's troubled subsequent history the struggle between liberals

and conservatives, between Church and state, bedevilled relationships until 1867 when Mexico was finally declared a secular country and church lands expropriated.

It is no doubt also due to anti-colonialism, which frequently goes hand in hand with anti-clericalism and whose views were best expressed in the 1950s and 1960s and as late as the 80s by philosophers like Fanon, Sartre and Paz. The first two were writing in the shadow of the struggle for independence in Algeria where colonialism was dying and most of their opinions were coloured by their attitude to the French colonial masters. Writing in the preface to Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized* Sartre stated: 'Colonialism denies human rights to people it has subjugated by force and whom it keeps in poverty and ignorance, therefore in a state of subhumanity' (1964:3). Yet in Mexico in the sixteenth century, it was the friars' declared intent to save the souls of the natives and to educate and enlighten them rather than to condemn them to barbarity. When Sartre writes in the introduction to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* that the 'colonizer sets out to destroy native culture and wipe out native traditions' there is no way in which this could be applied to the friars' mission in Mexico where they strove to learn the native languages rather than impose Spanish on them and went to heroic lengths to study and record Aztec traditions. Paz, writing later in the 1980s, speaks of the Catholic Church in Mexico as being a '*filosofía hecha y una fe petrificada*' adding that it denied the natives '*toda posibilidad de expresar su singularidad*' (2008:121). But the Catholicism which the friars brought to Mexico was far from being a '*filosofía hecha*'. On the contrary, as will be argued, it was one prepared to adapt and evolve according to local conditions and to be acculturated as much as to acculturate. Neither can it be called '*petrificada*'. To write it off in this way is to totally ignore the brilliant spontaneity of the *autos* where the natives were given free rein to introduce their artistic skills and, in many cases, to provide their own interpretation of the Bible stories<sup>1</sup>. Such originality could never be considered the sign of a '*fe petrificada*'. In the austere dialectic provided by Sartre and Memmi which declared that the colonists ruled by 'divine right of conquest' and that their subjects were 'sub-human' (introduction to *The Question* 1958:32) there is, in the Mexican context, an omission: the friars. They did not consider themselves to have divine right over New Spain, though their mission was 'divine'. The conquest was Spain's not theirs. Neither did they consider the native, to whom many sacrificed their lives, 'sub-human'. This is not to defend colonialism in any way, merely to say that in the solid edifice of Spanish imperialism there is a small chink, a fault line, a gentler side provided by the Franciscans which is often overlooked.

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<sup>1</sup> Paz himself based one of his most famous works *La hija de Rappaccini* (1956) on the *autos sacramentales*.

Secondly, as will be seen from the text, they possessed a liberality of attitude and a generosity of spirit which gave a new meaning to the notion of ‘acculturation’ and resulted in the friars being as changed by the experience of their evangelism as the natives themselves. This generosity of vision expressed itself, for example, in the notion, extraordinary for the early sixteenth century, of providing education for girls. In mainland Europe this did not come about until the nineteenth century.

Thirdly, they had about them a certain mysticism, which can be seen in their devotion to ‘Lady Poverty’ and in a love of drama. Florescano hints at this when he writes of ‘the mystical and apocalyptic discourse of the Franciscans, a historical project that, instead of exploiting Indians and silver mines, anticipated the creation of a monastic community dedicated to the praise of God and the founding of a church similar to that of the primitive Christians’ (1994:185). The friars’ love of drama is manifest in the extraordinary *autos* which were so much a feature of their mission. These will be discussed later in a separate section. Finally, friars like Motolinía, Sahagún and the Dominican Las Casas had a deep respect for and appreciation of Aztec lore and mythology, keeping alive, in their writing, memories of a culture which might otherwise have vanished without trace, recording not only traditions but also details of plants and animals. They also preserved many of the native languages by translating them both into and out of Spanish. As will be seen in later chapters, it was, as Hanke writes, ‘the friars, looking for souls to win, rather than the *conquistadores*, who first began to study Indian customs, history and religion’ (1963: 183) and they strove, within the limits of orthodoxy, to keep that culture alive.

The thesis will begin with a study of the theory of acculturation and how the classical definition has changed in the light of colonial experiences and recent scholarship. It will continue with an examination of the background of the first Franciscans, the symbolic ‘twelve’, sent out as agents of evangelization at the request of Cortés. It will look at the kingdom of Mexico as they found it, in terms of the distribution and history of the native tribes, indigenous gods and associated religious practices. The evangelizing mission of the friars will then be studied, with particular reference to areas where the acculturation process had to be modified or adapted. In this connexion, the role of the sacramental *autos* as a form of resistance will be especially relevant.

Acculturation has been defined in many ways and what has become clear during the course of this study is that no one definition related to a particular set of circumstances can ever be universally applicable. According to Ortiz and Beltrán the classic definition of acculturation is the ‘process of transition from one culture to another and its manifold social repercussions’ (Ortiz 1995: 97). There are four elements in the process: the origin of the ‘dominant culture’, the distance ‘travelled’, the conditions for reception and, finally, the incorporation of the ‘subaltern’ into the existing dominant



culture. To some extent this kind of linear acculturation, known as ‘direct rule’ in the colonial period, was employed by the French. A strict top-down control has resulted, even today, in its former colonies, like Mauritius and Réunion, not only in adopting French as their first language but in basing their whole education system on the French pattern and having their university degrees validated by France. It is worth noting that Fanon, whose work *Peau noire, masques blancs* is such a stern critique of colonialism, was Reunionnais by birth and experienced at first hand the heavy weight of French rule, which possibly accounts for his uncompromising views. The ‘travelling theory’ of Ortiz and Beltrán has been criticised as being too rigid and linear and not allowing for local modifications or resistance. Anthropologists of the colonial and immediate post-colonial period felt that the classical theory of acculturation was too one-directional, based chiefly on an examination of the impact of the dominant upon the colonised rather than considering, as well, the impact of colonised upon coloniser. In response to this charge, Ortiz coined the term ‘transculturation’ (1947: xli) to describe a process where, as a result of a dynamic exchange of cultures, both the ‘acculturator’ and the ‘accultured’ have given ground producing a new cultural reality which he has termed ‘neoculturation’ or ‘transculturation’. This can be seen in particular in the case of the *autos* where a meeting of Catholic European values and native cultural traditions produced an entirely new dramatic form.

Saïd, writing fifty years after Ortiz, extends his theory of ‘transculturation’, coining the musical term ‘contrapuntal’, by which he meant that the dominant-subaltern debate could be seen in terms of the melody and harmony which together go to make up a line of music, both elements having equal weight. This would permit a less ‘binary’, less black and white and more relaxed interpretation of the coloniser/colonised theme. However, ten years later Silvia Spitta entered the lists with a refutation of the ‘counterpoint’ argument, saying that musically speaking the melody and harmony must be equally balanced. This is clearly not the case in Latin America where an inbuilt, historic difference privileges the white population. Her own interpretation of ‘transculturation’ is far more nuanced.

Transculturation can be understood as the complex processes of adjustment and re-creation – cultural, literary, linguistic and personal – that allow for new, vital and viable configurations to arise out of the clash of cultures and the violence of colonial and neo-colonial appropriation (1995: 2).

She adds that many theorists of transculturation, while admitting that the culture contact can be two-way, fail to note how Spain and the Spanish colonisers were themselves changed by the experience of the conquest of America and their contact with the indigenous people. A case in point was Cabeza de Vaca who, after being shipwrecked off the coast of Florida, wandered among the indigenous American tribes for six years and emerged in Mexico, in 1536, to all intents and purposes native. In many ways the same can be said of the first Franciscans who, few in numbers, living in remote and

inaccessible areas where contact with other missionaries was difficult, far from changing the lifestyle and practices of the Aztecs, were themselves frequently influenced by them. In reference to this phenomenon, I suggest the term 'reverse acculturation' where the dominant is replaced or modified by the subaltern, often through external circumstances beyond the control of the parties involved, might be adopted. An excellent example of this would be the Franciscan '*misa seca*' celebrated when no wine was available or the shortening of the baptismal ceremony due to the large number of candidates for baptism and the limited number of priests available.

Another form of cultural evolution occurs when the religion of the dominant merges with a particularly strong local tradition, usually linked to folk myth or magic. This can be seen in the syncretic alternative religion known in Cuba as Santería. Elements of it can also be observed in the later period of religious acculturation in Mexico, after the 'heroic' period of sixteenth century evangelisation was over. A case in point would be the extraordinary association of the pagan god Quetzalcóatl with the Christian St. Thomas in the 1800s. This will be discussed in detail later. Yet another form of acculturation I have termed 'co-acculturation' where two cultures exist side by side within the same context, neither one overruling the other. A good instance of this is the song composed by Pedro de Gante, referred to by Garibay, which contains references to the late Bishop Zumárraga in language heavily overlaid with Aztec cultural metaphors.

Sometimes, as Adolfo Colombres suggests (1986: 59) the process of acculturation goes into reverse, suffering what he calls: 'un rechazo súbito de la cultura invasora'. This happens when the subalterns rise up against the colonial power and stage a rebellion which is often armed but usually of short duration. The mid-twentieth century uprising against the British in East Africa, known as *Mau Mau* is a good illustration. Acculturation can, however, suffer other setbacks besides rebellion. The Franciscans, to their bitter disappointment, failed to establish a training college for native priests – a failure which, according to Ricard, dogged the Mexican church for the rest of its history.

Of course, acculturation does not only have to be religious. Colonial history is littered with attempts by the dominant to force economic change upon the subaltern, usually with the motive of establishing new markets. Edward Saïd in his book '*Traveling Theory*' shows what can happen when a colonial power tries to impose economic acculturation on one of its colonies. In some cases the new idea flourishes and is successful but in others, like the disastrous 'ground-nut' scheme dreamed up by the British colonial government in Africa or the silk experiment of the friars in Mexico, it founders and is never heard of again.

The logical and ultimate conclusion of acculturation is integration when the native becomes totally absorbed into the colonial culture to the extent that he first despises and then, with the passing of generations, forgets his own culture. There is no going back to his earlier life because all traces of it have disappeared. Integration or assimilation which, according to Colombres, are different aspects of the same process, was definitely not the intention of the friars who, as will be seen, took wherever possible within their brief great care to preserve Mexican culture and tradition.

## Sources

Contemporary, primary sources for this thesis are, of necessity, scarce. The most comprehensive account of the conquest and capture of Tenochtitlán is provided by Cortés in his five *cartas* sent to Charles V. These leisurely descriptions contain much detail but, as in the case of Alvarado's own account, Cortés does not hesitate to proclaim his deeds of valour while understating the contribution of his loyal, or 'good', native soldiers and it is often difficult to follow his campaign routes because places have changed their names since the sixteenth century. A straightforward soldier's account of the conquest of Mexico is provided by Bernal Díaz, in his *True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, although even here evidence of a desire to curry favour with his 'great leader' can be noted. This account contains many first-hand details about the architecture, design and scale of cities such as Tenochtitlán and descriptions of Aztec temples.

For the early history of the Franciscan mission the best and most complete contemporary source is fray Motolinía's *Historia de los Indios de la Nueva España* written between 1536 and 1541. This account, described by Balsera as 'a cornerstone in the colonial textual production pertaining to the evangelisation endeavour in the New World' (2008: 111), is of supreme importance because, along with a brief reference by Las Casas, it contains the only contemporary description of the *autos*, performed in the years 1538-9. In fact, Motolinía was the inspiration behind the *autos* and it was his originality and unorthodox approach which enabled them to be staged. Motolinía, a member of the original 'twelve' sent out from Spain, has been accused, however, of an excess of fervour which has sometimes led him to an overstatement of the success of the mission but his genuine love and sympathy for the Mexicans cannot be denied. His appreciation of the '*humildad*' and intelligence of the indigenous people speaks through the text and he is acutely aware of the importance of saving them from the kind of extinction witnessed in the Antilles. Fray Mendieta, who arrived in Mexico in 1554, did not begin writing his history on New Spain until 1571, finishing in 1596, based most of his work on that of Motolinía and Fray Olmós, to whom the auto *El juicio final* is attributed. Strictly

speaking, therefore, his writing cannot be considered contemporary in that by 1596 the ‘heroic’ period of Franciscan mission was over. A large part of his writing deals in great detail with pre-Hispanic festivals, religious practices and the *templo mayor* in Tenochtitlán. Only in Book 3 does he begin his account of the evangelisation of New Spain and it is probable that he was using Motolinía’s figures when, on a wave of missionary zeal, he states, for instance, that two priests managed to baptize 15,000 souls in one day. The only other contemporary writer of the period was Las Casas and his work was largely concerned with defending the natives against the incursions and injustices of the Spanish.

Durán, a Dominican who arrived in 1556 after the ‘heroic period’ was over, shared Motolinía’s desire to preserve the natives from extinction. A duality in his character led him, on the one hand to hold a strictly orthodox belief in the Catholic faith, but on the other to appreciate the culture and traditions of the natives. His *History of New Spain*, begun in 1574, is thus an invaluable account of the origins and expansion of the Azteca. Written with sensitivity and insight, it confers upon them a historical legitimacy which, up to that period, writers had failed to acknowledge. However, it is more useful to anthropologists than to students of Franciscan evangelism.

For secondary sources on the period, the best and most comprehensive general history has to be Ricard’s *Spiritual Conquest of Mexico*. Written, rewritten and amended over a period of forty years, it is now nearly eighty years since the first edition, but it remains the most authoritative and best researched work of its kind with an exhaustive bibliography and reference section. Its chronology is sometimes awry and critics might accuse it of being too utopian in its assessment of the friars; they might also query the appropriateness of the title, but Ricard, for his part, does not hesitate to criticise the Franciscan record in Mexico, particularly in the closing chapters when he examines their legacy in present-day Mexico. Another general survey of the Franciscan period is Phelan’s *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World* (1970). As its title suggests, this takes a utopian view of the Conquest, calling Cortés ‘The Moses of the New World’, chosen to lead the natives into a second Promised Land – the Catholic faith. This is an interesting interpretation but one that is so messianic that it has to be treated with caution. A totally opposite viewpoint is taken by Adolfo Colombres in his work ‘*La colonización cultural de la América indígena*’ which roundly condemns acculturation and colonisation as ‘*un sistema asfixiante de dogmas*’. (2004:18).

The best and most detailed treatment of the *autos* is provided by Horcasitas in his *El teatro náhuatl*. This work, besides dealing in detail with both the pre-Hispanic and the post-Conquest theatre, is the only work I have come across which sets out the text of the *autos* in full on opposite pages, with the Náhuatl on one side and the Spanish on the other. Paso y Troncoso and Marilyn Raviez have done some work along these lines but on a less comprehensive scale. The modern Spanish writer Varón

traces the links between the *autos* and Aztec culture in fairly familiar ways but she has an excellent section on *La conquista de Jerusalén* where she examines various interpretations of the word *cruzada* and discusses scholars' explanations for the curious assignment of rôles to Cortés and Alvarado within the *auto* without coming down firmly on any side. The most original and challenging views come from American writers like Harris, Burkhart and Ybarrah. In a brilliant study, Harris sees in the *autos*, particularly *La conquista de Jerusalén*, an expression of Indian 'hidden resistance' or '*teatro de venganza*'. Burkhart in her book *The Slippery Earth* considers the complex relations between Spanish and Náhuatl and the shifting of meaning when the native language is used in dramatic presentation. Ybarrah concentrates on Tlaxcala, where most of the *autos* were presented, and is concerned with the use which the Tlaxcalans made of their favoured position when it came to 'performing conquest'.

For studies of Náhuatl poetry Garibay and León Portilla have made the most complete surveys, both managing to convey the beauty and complexity of the language and its subtle use of metaphor. León Portilla, in particular, has written eloquently about the relation between 'flower and song' and its ultimate expression in poetry, the highest state of Nahua being.

On what might be called 'the 'black enigma'', the question of the African slaves and how they fitted into the Franciscan mission, most of the texts are silent. While writers like Palmer, Israel, Carroll and Beltrán deal with the presence of the African in Mexico, only Martinez observes that Franciscan 'tender-heartedness did not seem to have extended to the black African' but he offers no explanation. The existence of slave '*cofradías*', mentioned by Ben Vinson III, among others, may be the only clue to solving this puzzle.

A difficulty arises over how to refer to the indigenous people of Mexico. Many scholars call them simply 'Indians' or 'natives'; others, like Trexler, condemn both labels as a 'form of clerical choreographing' or 'marginalizing' (1994:190). I have preferred instead to talk of 'indigenous people', the 'natives' or the Aztecs or Mexica. Where possible, the names of particular tribes, such as the Tlaxeltaca or Choluans have been used.

## Chapter One 'The Highest and Holiest deed' (Cortés: *Cartas 1V*)

The story of the evangelisation of Mexico begins with Cortés whose brave words appear at the head of this chapter. Scholars have long puzzled over this controversial, contradictory and yet iconic character. The Franciscan historian, Pablo de la Púrisima Concepción Beaumont, writing his *Crónica* in the mid eighteenth century, says of him: 'Perhaps of no other conquistador of the New World has such good and such bad been said'(Beaumont 1750 1:337). Ricard adds that he was 'greedy, debauched and a politician with no scruples' (Ricard, 1933:15). This greed was evidenced by the fact that on his arrival in Hispaniola he made it clear, on his own admission, that he had come for one thing – gold. Aged 18, he wasted no time in registering himself as a citizen and grabbing land to farm so that by 1514 he was a wealthy landowner with silver mines and cattle ranches. If not 'debauched' he was certainly free with his favours, judging from the number of women he 'married' (including 'la Malinche',<sup>2</sup> by whom he had a son) and the number of other offspring he fathered. If he had a way with women, he also had a peculiar gift of making enemies of men. Not only did he slip away to Mexico from Cuba, without the permission of the Governor Velázquez, to begin his own quest for gold and slaves but in a *Carta* to Charles V he did his best to see that Velázquez received no honour from Spain (Tr. J.B. Morris 1928:25). His behaviour towards the unfortunate Moctezuma was deceitful and dishonest, treating him first with respect as a king and then with scorn as a prisoner. During the last stages of the siege of Tenochtitlán he displayed hardly a glimmer of conscience for the state of the starving Aztecs. In his third *Carta* he writes:

We already knew that the Indians of the city were much discouraged and two poor creatures, who came out by night to our camp because they were starving, told us that during the night they came to hunt amongst the houses and search for herbs and wood and roots to eat. Since we had already filled up many of the water streets and repaired many of the bad places I determined to enter the city before daybreak and do all the damage I could.... We did much damage amongst them all over the city, wherever we were able to move about, so that between the prisoners and killed they exceeded more than 800. (Fuentes 1963: 112)

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<sup>2</sup> While Malinche has been recognised by some writers as the first genuine *mestizo* through her association with Cortés, others, like Brian Hamnett, remind us that her real name was 'Malintzin' and that 'malinchismo' is the Mexican word for betrayal, since by acting as a go-between between Cortés and Moctezuma she handed over the Indian world to the Spanish conqueror (1999:62). Navarrete, on the other hand, sees Malinche in a more positive light. He assigns her a triple rôle, suggesting that after the conquest she came to be associated firstly with the Virgin of the Ascension, patron of the province of Tlaxcala. Secondly, she was seen as the symbol of the *altepetl* or Tlaxcala city state and in that capacity gave her name to the volcano which dominated the neighbourhood. In pre-conquest times it had been known as Matlalcueye but during the colonial period it was re-christened La Malinche in recognition of her importance both to the Tlaxcaltecs and to the Mexicans at large (Navarrete 2007). Silvia Spitta in her book '*Between Two Waters*' has an excellent chapter on Malinche, discussing her background and rôle in the conquest of Mexico (1995: 177-191).

Similarly, he lost no time in reading out on many occasions the stern words of the *Requerimiento* of 1513 which stated that natives who did not receive the Catholic faith would lose their lands and families and wars would be fought against them.

At the same time, as Hassig points out (1963: ix), many Mexica served loyally under Cortés. When he stormed the market-place in Tenochtitlan, ten thousand Mexica, 'our friends' as he calls them, fought on the Spanish side, receiving the minimum of thanks and recognition. Some of those who served under him could not find praise enough for his leadership qualities. Bernal Díaz, one of his soldiers, writes: '... the very name of Cortés was held in as much esteem in all the Indies as was the name of Alexander in Macedonia and, among the Romans, Julius Caesar, Pompey and Scipio and, among the Carthaginians, Hannibal' (Díaz 1550: 14).

There seems to be no denying that he possessed a fervent, if crude, religious piety. His first act on arrival in Mexico on Maundy Thursday, 1519, was the erection of a cross and the celebration of high mass on Easter Sunday. He took the following instructions of Governor Velázquez very seriously and, as Ricard suggests, they were probably the only instructions of his that he ever obeyed:

Bear in mind from the beginning that the first aim of your expedition is to serve God and spread the Christian faith. You must not, therefore, permit any blasphemy or lewdness of any kind and all who violate this injunction should be publicly admonished and punished. It has been said that crosses have been found in that country<sup>3</sup>. Their significance must be ascertained. The religion of the natives, if they have one, must again be studied and a detailed account of it made. Finally, you must neglect no opportunity to spread the knowledge of the True Faith and the Church of God among those people who dwell in darkness (Ricard 1933: 16).

Almost as soon as he arrived in Mexico he began the more practical work of ordering the destruction of native idols and temples and such was his enthusiasm that he had to be restrained by Fray Bartolomé de Olmedo. At Cempoala, just after landing, in religious ardour he forced four native priests to cut their long hair and remove their sacerdotal clothes. Later, Olmedo, again anxious to limit Cortés' enthusiasm, advised against the raising of a cross in one of the native villages with the words: 'Pareceme, Señor, que en estos pueblos no es tiempo para dejaller la cruz en su poder y esto que se les dijo, hasta que tengan más conocimiento de nuestra santa fe' (Cuevas 1922: 139). In Tlaxcala he enraged the local people so much by demanding that they renounce their idolatry on the spot that again Olmedo had to step in to rescue him. On the other hand, Cortés' zeal did produce a few positive effects in that among his own followers eight entered holy orders: five became

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<sup>3</sup> Adam Versényi in his book *El teatro en América Latina* quotes numerous instances of pre-conquest crosses found in Mexico, some decorating the robes of the god Quetzalcoátl, some in the form of trees and on one the figure of an impaled figure, representing a child (Versényi 1993: 29). This mystery will be examined in greater detail later.

Franciscans, one, Aguilar became a Dominican and Gaspar Diez, whom Bishop Zumárraga had to beg to lead a less austere life (Ricard 1933: 16), became a hermit in Mexico (Thomas 1993: 596).

As early as 1519, even before the arrival of the friars, Cortés engineered a theatrical ‘event’ repeated later in 1524. In 1519 when the Spanish army was camped at Cempoala, about to begin its march against the Aztec empire, Cortés ordered his ambassadors to take to Moctezuma gifts of a crimson cap and a richly-carved armchair so that Moctezuma could place the cap on his head and sit in the chair when he, Cortés, came to meet him. The Aztec king would thus be attired and seated by courtesy of the Conqueror, his superior visitor (Trexler 1994:190). This historical event was one which which Cortés, with his instinct for the theatrical, hoped would be reproduced over and over again in the colonial story.

But it was in the initiation of the evangelization of Mexico that, for the purposes of this thesis, Cortés played his greatest rôle. In October, 1524 in his fourth letter to Charles V he begged the Emperor to send out mendicant missionaries to convert the Indians. Versényi suggests that the friars were specifically selected to undertake the work of evangelization because, until very recently, they had been engaged in the conversion of the Moors in the remote and ‘forgotten’ villages of rural Granada. He continues: ‘Aquella labor, realizada en medio de un pueblo extraño, de diferente lengua y cultura dentro de España misma, preparó perfectamente a los franciscanos para el papel que Cortés había elegido para ellos’ (Versényi 1993:2). There were also more practical reasons. Missionaries would found monasteries which would be self-supporting and would fund themselves by the receipt of tithes. They would therefore cost less than the secular clergy whose bishops and canons might cause scandal by their more lavish lifestyle and whom Cortés instinctively distrusted.

The twelve ‘apostles’ who arrived in Ulúa in 1524 were not the first Franciscans to come to Mexico. A Spanish Franciscan priest by the name of Geronimo de Aguilar, whose ability to speak the local languages of Yucatán, made him invaluable, had accompanied Cortés’ mission in Yucután in February, 1519. Another friar, Bartolomé de Olmedo, as has already been mentioned, had been with Cortés from the beginning of his ventures in Mexico (Díaz 1550: 57 ff.). After the landing at Ulúa on Maundy Thursday, 1519, this fray Bartolomé sang high mass on Easter Sunday because he was ‘a great singer’ (Díaz 1550: 57) and he accompanied Cortés when he moved on to Tlaxcala. In 1523 two Flemings known by their Spanish names as Fray Juan de Aora and Fray Juan de Tecto arrived, along with a lay brother, Fray Pedro de Gante. The two friars Juan died shortly after, during Cortés’ expedition to Honduras, but Pedro de Gante, whom Cuevas called an ‘astro de primera magnitud en la historia eclesiástica y civil de la Nueva España’(Cuevas 1922: 158), lived a long and full life, proving himself a corner-stone of the evangelizing mission. Hugh Thomas writes that he had ‘a



mental perspective broader than anyone else in New Spain at that time' (Thomas, 1993:578). Two other friars followed: Juan Clapión who had been confessor to the Emperor Charles V and Fray Francisco de los Angeles, later known as Quiñones, who was to play a major role in preparing the Twelve for their mission. None of these earlier friars, however, was engaged in a full-scale mission of evangelization.

When Quiñones, who had been elected General of the Franciscan order in Spain, received authorisation for the mission from Charles V, he selected as its head Fray Martín de Valencia with orders that Fray Martín choose a band of suitable Franciscan missionaries. Tantalisingly little is known about how he selected this band, though their names have been recorded. They were: Fray Francisco de Soto, Fray Martín de Jesus (or de la Coruña), Fray Juan Suarez (or Juarez), Fray García de Cisneros, Fray Luis de Fuensalida, Fray Juan de Ribas, Fray Francisco Jiménez, Fray Andrés de Córdoba, Fray Juan de Palos, Fray Antonio de Ciudad Rodrigo and Fray Toribio de Benavente, more commonly known as Motolinía (Ricard 1933: 21). They came, as will be seen, from all parts of Spain – from the north to the extreme south and from the borders of Portugal. They must have been Galician, Catalan and Castilian and Basque speakers but all of them, according to Balsera (2008:113), had received training in the province of San Gabriel in Extremadura. Having been selected, the minister-general of the Franciscan order, Fray Francisco de los Angeles, bade them farewell with a sermon which ended with this rallying cry: 'You are called by the Father of the family to go to the vineyard' (Thomas 586: 1993). Knowledge of the cultural and social background of these friars would be very useful in this examination of their role in acculturation but, apart from the odd glimpse and hint, the records are sadly silent.

When the 'twelve' reached the outskirts of Tenochtitlan in 1524 an amazing and profoundly significant event occurred, an extension of the 'theatrical event, referred to in 1519. Cortés, having heard of their arrival, went out to meet them and knelt before them, kissing their hands and attempting to touch the hem of their robes. Not only was he imitating the crowds in the New Testament who sought cures through contact with Jesus' robes, but by abasing himself at the height of his earthly powers (having just subdued the Aztecs) he was, as Phelan puts it, conquering both himself and also the friars who, from that moment, became his allies (Phelan 1970: 33), although that situation was not to last throughout their mission. This simple act entwined religion, politics and the theatre conferring upon the astonished friars both religious legitimacy, the support of '*el conquistador*' in the execution of their mission in Mexico and dramatic material for the future *autos*, as will be discussed later. At the same time Cortés was reinforcing his own position by securing the backing of the ecclesiastical authority, represented by the friars, and confirming his political power by imitating,

in his welcoming of the Franciscans, the recent reception of the conquistadors by the late Moctezuma. Torquemada goes even further, adding that Cortés took off his cloak and threw it to the ground so that the mendicants could walk over it, thus echoing not only the act of another famous explorer at the court of Queen Elizabeth, but the entry of Christ into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (Torquemada 1723: 111, 21). The implication was that Mexico City had become the new Jerusalem and the ‘twelve’ were the new apostles leading the natives to a Golden Age, the new millennium. It is difficult to imagine the effect which this gesture had upon the *caciques* who had accompanied Cortés. The sight of the conqueror of Tenochtitlán, kneeling on the ground before a group of ragged men, must not only have shaken them but reminded them, in the most theatrical of ways, as Versényi suggests, of their own tradition of eating dust before a person they held in respect, ‘en señal de humildad, saludando a quienes deseaban honrar’ (Versényi 1993: 5). As Versényi adds ‘Cortés era mucho más que un jefe militar con instinto para el teatro. Era un político astuto’ (1993: 3).

## **The mendicant orders**

Since the Franciscans, in their mission to New Spain, were to be constantly coming into contact with their brother mendicants, it might be useful, before progressing, to note the similarities and differences between the Franciscans, the Dominicans and the Augustinians. Of the three orders, the oldest was the Franciscans, founded by the Italian, Francis of Assisi, in 1210 although his new order was not officially recognised by Pope Honorius III until 1223. His followers are traditionally called the Greyfriars because of the colour of their habit. Of the three orders of mendicants the Franciscans are possibly the best-known, perhaps on account of the charismatic personality of St. Francis, immortalised in the writing of his follower, Bonaventura. Legends of the taming of the wolf and communing with animals abound and it was only Francis who received the special distinction, the stigmata. Of the three orders the Franciscans have the reputation of being the gentlest and least severely orthodox. Garibay speaks of them as having an ‘amable ternura’, adding that it was they who always sought ‘el lado consolador y emotivo’ (1954: 139). They were also the order most wedded to total poverty. Disagreement over the interpretation of poverty, and in particular the question of whether Christ had held any personal possessions, led to a split with the Dominicans and in 1386 they had formed in a branch of the Order known as the Observantines which continued to advocate the strictest adherence to evangelical poverty leading its followers to speak in mystical terms of ‘marriage with Lady Poverty’. In this adherence to the notion of poverty, the friars were partly influenced by the thinking of Joachim de Fiore, a Calabrian hermit who between 1190 and 1195 declared that he had discovered in the scriptures a new and hitherto hidden meaning. He saw historical development

as having three ages, each presided over by a member of the Trinity. The first age, presided over by God, corresponded roughly to the period from the fall of Adam to the birth of Christ. It was the age of the prophets and the twelve Patriarchs, relating to the years covered by the Old Testament. The second age, stretching from the birth of Christ to the foundation of the Church, was ruled by the Son and was a period of 'filial submission' (Francescano 1994: 73). The third age, which was the age of the Holy Spirit, when the love of God would be revealed to all men, would bring an end to the existing world and herald a new order, a millennium ushering in the last stage of history. These theories particularly appealed to the Franciscans, although they were rejected by the Dominicans who saw them as a rebuttal of the teaching of Augustine as expressed in his *City of God*. For many friars their founder, St. Francis, was the Messiah about whom de Fiore had spoken and when, as Florescano puts it as, 'three centuries later twelve Franciscans disembarked at Veracruz, the ideas of Fiore were forcefully reborn' (1994:76). This innate sense of the mystical and mysterious connected the friars more closely, perhaps, with the Celtic or Columban form of Catholicism than the Roman form. It found expression in an awareness of the possibility of drama as an evangelical tool, leading both to the introduction of the devotional crib in Italian churches at Christmas and the spectacular *autos* of 1538 and 1539. It also made them stand out as wayside preachers and commended them as suitable evangelizers to Cortés and Charles V in the early years of the conquest of New Spain.

In 1215 the Spaniard Dominic de Guzman approached Pope Innocent III with the object of founding another mendicant order, although, as in the Franciscans' case, it was a later pope, Honorius III, who officially established the Dominican order in 1216. The Dominicans, as they came to be known, were distinguished from the Franciscans by the colour of their habit – white with a black *cappa* worn over the top - which gave them the name, Blackfriars. While the Dominicans also espoused poverty and a rejection of the more comfortable monastic life and while they, too, excelled at preaching, their approach was more intellectual, placing greater emphasis on education and contemplation. Their concern with doctrinal orthodoxy led them to battle against heretical movements flourishing in Europe at the time, such as the Cathars and the Albigensians. It also gave them the reputation for '*una severidad dominica*' (Garibay 1953: 143) which was later to become apparent in their evangelizing mission in Mexico.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Garibay identifies an untitled, anonymous *auto*, dating from the 1530s, as the work of the Dominicans on the grounds of its attention to the rosary and to prayers for the dead. In an uncompromising text, a married couple seek salvation by praying for the deceased, while two callow youths, who go unprepared to confession, are only saved from eternal damnation at the hands of '*un demonio*' by the intercession of angels who beseech the Virgin to pardon them, in the name of the rosary. A dramatic note is provided by the appearance of Death, who roams the earth, as in Chaucer's 'Pardoner's Tale', seeking whom it may destroy and firing arrows at its victims (Garibay 1954: 135).

The third mendicant order, the Augustinians, appeared in 1256. They were called Whitefriars, because of the colour of their habit, or Augustinians, because of their devotion to the teaching of St. Augustine of Hippo whose rule, *De opera monachorum*, known in the ninth century as the Rule of St. Augustine, was the inspiration for the founding, in the eleventh century, of a number of eremitical communities. These hermit groups were eventually blended into one new order during the papacy of Alexander IV in 1256. While adopting a life of asceticism, like their brothers, their founding mission was different in that they had been commissioned by the pope to work among the poor in developing cities, preaching and building educational institutions. This interest carried over into their work in Mexico where of the three orders they were the order most concerned with town planning and urban development, both establishing new *pueblos* and administering them. Ricard states that they were masters of the art of founding and policing native villages, particularly in the state of Michoacán (1933: 138).

These three orders were to change the religious face of Europe and to give a new impetus to the organisation of the Western Church at a time when the spirit of the Crusades was waning and divisive heresies were beginning to cause cracks in its monolithic structure. A founding spirit which denied all property, both private and corporate, astonished and shook the contemporary church and although, over time, this initial idealism faded as the mendicant convents, particularly the Dominicans, became wealthy through rich benefactors, the friars saw the opening up of South America as an opportunity to re-ignite the original asceticism which in Europe had begun to fade.

In general there were few doctrinal differences between the three orders although during the later stages of the evangelizing mission in New Spain sources of tension emerged. The Franciscans, for instance, were the least conventional and most 'unorthodox' of the mendicants, placing less emphasis on formal rites and more on wayside preaching. The Dominicans, in particular, were noted for their devotion to the deceased and to the rosary. Garibay describes their teaching as 'una táctica pedagógica a base de conceptos teológicos y rígidos'. He continues: 'La tendencia dominicana en la evangelización miró siempre a la formación de conceptos, de ideas precisas, encuadradas en el dogma con suma actitud' (Garibay 1954: 143). It is noteworthy that, in contrast to the committed Franciscans, despite their concern with intellectual rigour, the Dominicans do not appear to have founded a single secondary school during their mission in New Spain. Both Garibay (1954: 211) and Ricard (1933: 218) comment on this fact. The Augustinians, while similarly conservative, are credited with the possible foundation of the *Colegio de San Pablo*, although its function remains unclear. They were, however, as will be seen, actively involved in the planning and construction of native *pueblos*

although, like the Dominicans, they found fault with the Franciscans' lack of convention and apparent abandonment of ritual.

The mendicants were unusual in that they accepted into their orders lay brothers, such as the notable Pedro de Gante, who joined the Franciscans in the work of evangelisation in Mexico but who was not fully professed. While the friars were to be commended for welcoming laymen into their communities, in their Mexican mission they have been criticised for not admitting more natives to the orders and not allowing them to be fully professed, thereby denying New Spain the legacy of a native mendicant tradition.

Although both the Dominicans in 1217 and the Franciscans in 1230 established links with the great universities of Europe, it is recognised that there was traditionally a strain of anti-intellectualism within the mendicant orders especially the Franciscans. St. Francis is reputed to have refused to give a young lay brother a breviary when he asked for one, saying: 'If you have a breviary, you will sit on a high chair like a prelate and say to your brother 'Bring me a breviary'. What counted for him was not reading but living a perfect life in '*simplicitas*' (St. Bonaventura, Tr. 1910). This helps to explain why the 'jolly friar' was such a figure of fun in medieval French, Italian and English literature. In the mid fifteenth century, however, luminaries within the Franciscan Order such as Bernadino da Siena, began to realise that the friars needed to be better informed in order to meet the challenge of the Renaissance and the rising tide of humanism in Europe (Roest 2000: 195). Accordingly, in 1425, Bernadino preached a number of sermons declaring that 'proper knowledge' was as important as poverty and obedience in achieving the mendicant aim of 'true perfection'. Ignorance, he claimed, had led to Adam's downfall and was at the root of all social unrest and disorder.

The move for better education for the friars began in Italy, but it had spread to regions of Spain by the middle of the fifteenth century. The Franciscan Observants, for instance, had set up a programme of studies for use in the friaries of Villacreca. It is intriguing to note that in Castile a mendicant reformer, by the name of Cisneros, instituted a school near the University of Alcala de Henares in 1508 for 12 students (Roest 2000: 167-168). One of the original twelve Franciscan 'apostles' bore the same name, Fray García de Cisneros. Could it be the same person?

The friars who came to Mexico in 1524, therefore, were not ill-informed idealists. They had read Thomas More's *Utopia* and the works of Dante where they might have been amazed to see between Dante's description of the twelve circles of the *Inferno* a remarkable similarity with the Nahuatl notion of the afterlife where three kingdoms existed: *infierno*, *paraíso* and *cielo* (Sahagún, 1993:73). They were familiar with the ideas of Erasmus. They could speak and write Latin. Mendieta, the Friar who

belonged to the ‘second wave’ of Franciscans, clearly considered his *Historia of 1571* a *magnum opus* on the classical scale. He begins his second volume with the words ‘Cuenta Fray Olmedo’ in the style of Virgil who begins his second book of the Aeneid ‘Then Father Aeneas began to tell..’ introducing the story of the fall of Troy. Mendieta opens one of his chapters with a quotation from Aristotle (Chapter XX: 111) on the upbringing of children and makes frequent references to the Old and New Testament. The group of ‘twelve’ numbered Fray Toribio de Benavente whose ‘*Historia*’, particularly his descriptions of the Corpus Christi festivals, is essential reading still today for anyone studying the history of the Church in sixteenth century Mexico. Fray Bernadino de Sahagún, who arrived in New Spain in 1529, wrote the monumental *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* which stretched to twelve volumes and is an invaluable source of information. His works will be considered in a later section of this thesis.

If the Spanish friars saw themselves as preachers and purveyors of learning, there was also a visionary side to their mission. According to John Phelan (Phelan 1970: 29 ff.), they believed that Cortés was the new Moses, destined to lead his people, the benighted Aztecs, out of the desert of paganism and into the Promised Land of New Spain where a new world had dawned. Disillusioned with the wars and materialism of the old Europe and alarmed at the stirrings of Protestantism, the friars saw themselves as prophets of a New Age or a second Eden and the natives as the last of the ‘gentiles’ – a pure race uncorrupted by contact with external influences. Mendieta in his *Historia eclesiastica Indiana* goes further, asking whether Cortés was not God’s chosen instrument for the re-conversion of the Christian world:

Debese aquí mucho ponderar como sin alguna duda eligió Dios senaladamente y tomó por instrumento a este valeroso capitán D. Fernando Cortés, para por medio suyo abrir la puerta y hacer camino a los predicadores de su Evangelio en este Nuevo Mundo, donde se restaurase y se recompensase la Iglesia católica con conversion de muchas animas, la perdida y dano grande que el maldito Lutero habia de causar en la misma sazón y tiempo en la antigua cristiandad. De suerte que lo que una parte se perdia, se cobrarse por otra. (Mendieta 1574: 174)

He sees as ‘miraculous’ or ‘providential’ the fact that Luther and Cortés were born in the same year and that Luther began to ‘corrupt’ the Gospel at the very moment when Cortés began preaching the Catholic Faith to the natives of the New World. Indeed Cortés saw himself as the instrument of this ‘providentialism’, believing that having been chosen by God, it was his destiny to build a new church; he could not be defeated since God was on his side (Luis Rivera 1990: 55).

Las Casas assigns a similar role, not to Cortés, but to Columbus, stating that the discovery of the Indies was a major part of God’s scheme for the world, comparable only in importance to the birth of Christ and that God had chosen Columbus to be his *caudillo* in this divine exploit. He writes: ‘I think

Christopher Columbus was the most outstanding sailor in the world, versed like no other in the art of navigation, for which divine Providence chose him to accomplish the most outstanding feat ever accomplished in the world until now' adding: 'Is there anything on earth comparable to opening the tightly shut doors of an ocean that no-one dared enter before?' (Las Casas, tr.1971: 35). He even goes as far in his theory of Providentialism as to suggest that the sufferings which the natives endured at the hands of the Spanish may have been ordered by God in order to set them at His right hand when the Day of Judgment comes. The Dominican, Diego Durán, writing later, in 1581, has an alternative theory in which the founding saviour of the indigenous peoples came not from Europe, but from the Aztecs themselves. According to him, the natives were not Gentiles but Jews and Hebrews, one of the ten lost tribes of Israel, captured and taken to Assyria. After many years in the wilderness a great leader had arisen who, like Moses, led his tribe, the Aztecs, to the sea, divided the water and installed his people on the other side, in the Promised Land (1581 tr. 1994: 4 ff).

In the new world, according to the Franciscans, Spain would unite with the Catholic armies of Charles V in a glorious crusade against the Muslims and Jews of the Old World which would culminate in the liberation of Jerusalem and the conversion of all pagans. This visionary fervour, which was shared by Columbus in his early voyages of discovery, lasted until the middle of the sixteenth century when most of the original 'apostles' had retired or died and a new wave of more practical and realistic friars and a band of Jesuits came to take their place.

In the autumn of 1523 in the convent of Santa María de los Angeles, Quiñones gave his final instructions to the Twelve. He reminded them of their calling to follow in the steps of St. Francis and concluded with this rallying cry which in its reference to 'the dragon infernal' and 'bending the neck' surely bears militant echoes of the popular plays *Los moros y los cristianos* and might be considered out of character with the mild Franciscans:

Entre los continuos trabajos que ocupan mi entendimiento, principalment me solicita y acongoja de como por medio vestro, carisimos hermanos, procure yo librar de la cabeza del dragon infernal las almas redimidas por la preciosima sangre de Nuestro Senor Jesucristo, y hacerlas que militen debajo de la bandera y que abajen el cuello bajo el dulce yugo de Cristo (Mendieta 1574)

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of January, 1524, the Twelve 'apostles' with their leader, Martín de Valencia, set off from San Lucar de Barrameda, arriving in Puerto Rico 27 days later. One cannot conceive of their impressions as they walked barefoot up from the coast near Vera Cruz en route for Tlaxcala, plucked from the safety of their Spanish convents, faced with a strange land, extraordinary temples and possibly hostile inhabitants.

## **An outline of the Indian tribes in 1521 in Mexico**

Before examining the impact of the Azteca religion upon the Franciscans, it would be useful to study briefly the nature and distribution of the tribes which the friars would find in Mexico. The situation was complex and mobile. Around the Valley of Mexico, which was one of the most fertile regions and one where a large part of the friars' mission was centred, in the centuries before the Conquest, a succession of kingdoms had risen and fallen. The Otomí, once believed to have been the earliest and most powerful of the inhabitants of the Valley, had declined by the fifteenth century and throughout the colonial period remained a subordinate people without a defined territory. The Culhuaca, who occupied the tip of the peninsula separating Lake Mexico from Lake Xochimilco, next rose to prominence but by 1470 had lost most of their power, having ceded pre-eminence to Tenochtitlán along with the Mixquica, who held land in the extreme south of the Valley. The Xochimilca, who once rivalled the more powerful Chalca and held an extensive kingdom, were weakened by war with Tlaxcala and finally destroyed by the Chichimecans. The Chalca, whose territory was to the south-west of the valley were frequently at war with their neighbours, among them the Tepaneca, the Tlaxcalans and the Aztecs, finally being brought under Aztec rule in the reign of Moctezuma 11. At the time of the conquest the distribution of tribes in the valley of Mexico was as follows: the Tepaneca to the west of the lake Texcoco, the Acolhua to the north-east, the Xochimilca to the south, the Chalca to the south-east and the Culhua, the Cuitlahuaca and the Mixquica centred around the smaller lake Xochimilco (Gibson 1964: 14).



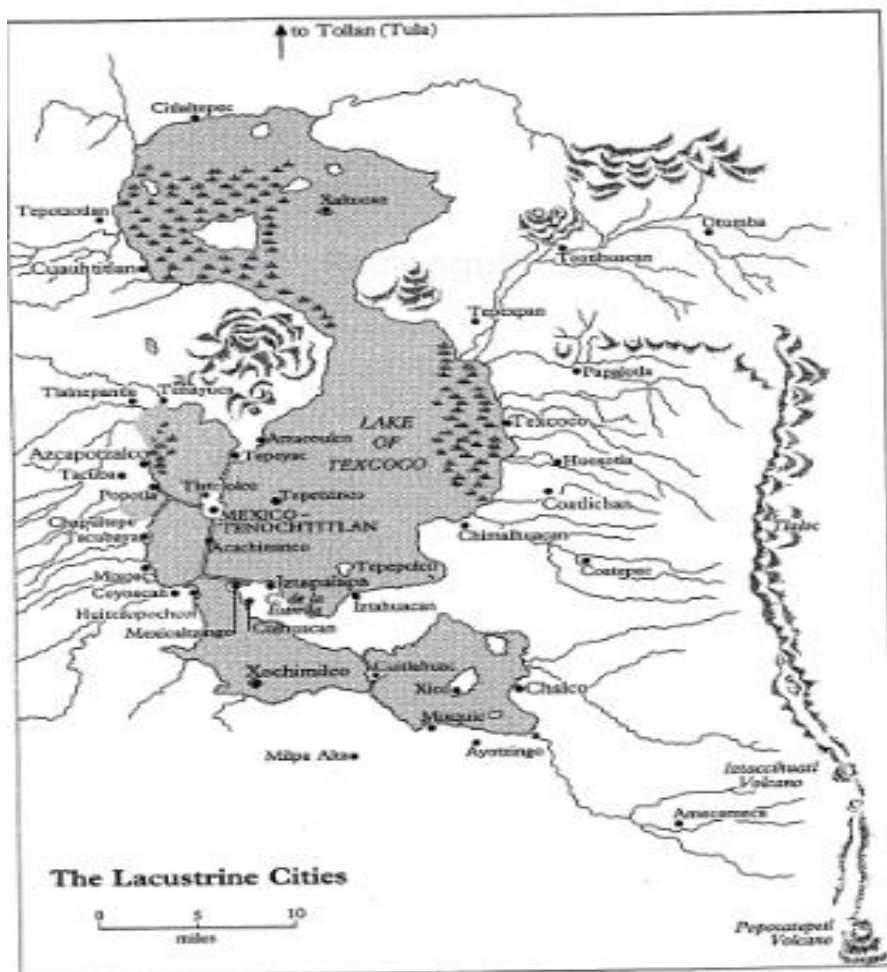


Fig. 1 Hugh Thomas 'The Conquest of Mexico' 1993

By the early 1500s it was the Azteca or Mexica who were in the ascendant in the Valley of Mexico. According to the tradition related by Durán (1586:12) the Mexica, or Aztecs, had been led from their ancestral home in Aztlán by Xólotl, the evening star, to the promised land around Lake Texcoco where, by a series of political alliances and dynastic marriages, they had built up an empire during the period 1428 to 1519. They legitimised their position in two ways. Firstly, they traced aspects of their religion, such as the worship of the jaguar and the serpent, back to their Olmec antecedents and more recently, to the last great people of the valley, the Toltecs, whose capital had been at Tula, or Tollan, north of the Lake. Secondly, they elected a king whose ancestors derived from the Tollan line. As Thomas says, by admiring and praising all things Toltec, they 'captured the Toltec heritage' (Thomas 1993: 23).

However, when the Franciscans arrived in Mexico, Tenochtitlán, the seemingly impregnable lake city of the Azteca, or Mexica, had already fallen and the apparent dominance of the Nahuatl people belied the fact that there were deep cracks in their system even before the advent of Cortés. A rapid increase

in population accompanied by a dramatic fall in agricultural productivity had undermined and weakened the city's economic foundations. The Azteca people were not popular; among their enemies they counted the Tepanecs, the Coyoacan, against whom they had earlier waged war, the Totonacs of Cempoala and the people of Michoacán, all of whom complained of ruthless Aztec behaviour in the seizing and sacrificing of their slaves and children. The safety of Tenochtitlán was underpinned by the Triple Alliance, a loose alliance, which had been in existence since 1428, between two Nahuatl towns on either side of the Lake, Tacuba and Texcoco. Although this alliance 'controlled' fifty-five provinces and 450 city states and brought enormous wealth into Tenochtitlán in terms of tribute, Moctezuma's faith in its ability to defend his realm against the Spaniards was ill-founded. Both Tacuba and Texcoco had strong independent tendencies and both were politically unreliable. Indeed, when Cortés made his triumphal way to Tenochtitlán, it was the Tacubans, who accompanied him, along with natives from Xochimilco and Chalco. An indication of the fluid and unstable state of relations between the tribes in the central valley of Mexico is seen in the fact that even during the toughest days of the siege of Tenochtitlán requests for help in internecine struggles came to Cortés. The Cuernavacans begged for aid against their enemies from Marinalco and no sooner had a Spanish detachment returned from helping the Cuernavacans, than they were importuned by the Otomí seeking help in their quarrel with the Matalcingo (Fuentes 1963: 105-106).

In the Valley of Mexico there were some fifty similar states, semi-autonomous, self-governing and bound together, not by loyalty to Tenochtitlán, but by a flourishing lacustrine economy. They managed to remain intact throughout the Aztec period and survived the Spanish conquest into the colonial period. To the east of the Lake lay the town of Chalco which had succumbed to the Azteca in 1465, as has been mentioned, only to revolt again before being finally subdued in the time of Moctezuma II. To the east of the Lake were the proud and scheming Tlaxcalans who, as will be seen, aided Cortés in his conquest rather than siding with the Azteca.<sup>5</sup> Proof, as Gibson declares, that the native civilisation and the so-called *pax azteca* was by no means uniform (1954: *Historia Mexicana*: 592). Hugh Thomas goes further, suggesting that without the aid of the Tlaxcalans, Cortés' entire adventure might have foundered (Thomas 1993: 601). In the south, in the valley of Oaxaca, the kingdom of the Zapotecs was gaining strength and under its fourth ruler, Cosijoeza (1487-1529),

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<sup>5</sup> Both Gibson and Ybarra accuse the Tlaxcalans of 'playing the system', of knowing how to exploit the Spanish and, on occasions, getting the better of them. Díaz tells us that when the Spanish were approaching Tlaxcala the Tlaxcalans mustered up to 40,000 men against them, on the grounds that they came with 'friends' from Cempoala and Zocotlan who were allies of Montezuma (Moctezuma). However, after having been defeated three times by the Spanish, they swiftly swapped sides, saying they had been deceived by their priests and soothsayers and begging pardon for their aggression (Díaz 1555:136). In later years they let it be known that they had both played a vital part in the Conquest and the fall of Tenochtitlán and claimed rewards for their 'loyalty' to Cortés.

expanded its commercial and political authority into the Isthmus, gaining control over the salt deposits there. Hamnett states that the Aztecs never really controlled Oaxaca and that it was only the cunning of Cortés which destroyed it (1999: 47). Other kingdoms of doubtful loyalty were the Tarascans of Michoacán to the north-west who first allied with Cortés but later fought against the Spaniards and Huejotzingo to the north which joined forces with Cholula. Further north were the virtually ungovernable Chichimecans, Motolinía's *gente barbara*, who sacked Tollan and preyed upon the Franciscans in their evangelising missions. Further north still lay the inhospitable kingdoms of Zacatecas and Durango, where even the friars hesitated to venture. The picture that emerges, therefore, is that it was as much this shifting system of alliances and rivalries as the strong arm of the Spanish, which accounted for the fall of Tenochtitlán and Moctezuma.

## Chapter two      The shock of first contact

### The Azteca religion

It is impossible to imagine the reactions of the first friars as they first arrived in Mexico and saw before them evidence of the Aztec religion. The Argentine anthropologist, Adolfo Colombres, in his book *La colonización de la América Indígena*, suggests that shock is the first stage in the process of acculturation, assuming that it is the colonised who were ‘shocked’ during their first encounters with the ‘*invasora*’ (2004: 61). Certainly there were aspects of the *invasora* which amazed the natives: the humble dress of the friars and the extraordinary animals that the *conquistadores* rode, often called, for want of a better compariter, deer. Muñoz de Camarga tells an amusing story about how the Tlaxcaltecs viewed Cortés horses after his arrival in Cempoala: ‘Entendieron los naturales que el caballo y el que iba encima era todo una cosa, como los centauros ú otra causa monstruosa; y así daban ración á los caballos, como si fuesen hombres, de gallinas y cosas de carne y pan’ (1978: 190).

But the reverse is also the case: there is no doubt that coloniser too received a great shock. The largest, most visible and most shocking aspects of the Aztec religion must have been the temples. Colombres, in the same work, states that the pyramid at Cholula was higher than that of the pharaoh Cheops and that the base of the cathedral in Mexico, one of the largest in the world, only covered a small part of the area covered by the pyramid in Tenochtitlán (1986:30). Mendieta, whose *Historia Eclesiástica Indiana* is based on the earlier work of Motolinía and the accounts of Fr. Andrés de Olmos, describes the temples in great detail. So extraordinary were they that he can find in all Scripture only one compariter – the temples built by the tribes of Ruben and Manasses (Mendieta 1595: 84). The temples or ‘*teucalli*’ were to be found all over New Spain<sup>6</sup> not only in Aztec Mexico, from the smallest *pueblo* to the largest ‘town’. They varied enormously in size. As Mendieta puts it:

En todos los pueblos de los indios se halló en lo mayor del lugar hacían un gran patio cuadrado, que tenía de esquina á esquina de un tiro de ballista en los grandes pueblos y cabeceras de provincias; y en los medianos pueblos obra de un tiro de arco y en los menores, menor patio. (Mendieta 1595: 85).<sup>7</sup>

The outstanding feature of these temples was the vast number of steps, bringing the worshipper, as he climbed them, ever closer to the source of all life – the sun. Mendieta states that in the temple of the city of Mexico there were 100: ‘La cepa del templo de México era tan alta que subían á ella por

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<sup>6</sup> Juan Díaz, who accompanied Grijalva on his second expedition to Yucatan in 1518, noted a large number of ‘towers’ some of which were ‘one hundred and eighty feet around’ and finished in cream-white stucco. Such buildings appear to have been common to many cultures of Meso-America and their number was estimated by Torquemada to be more than forty thousand. They are clearly the precursors or variants of the great Templo Mayor at Tenochtitlan (Fuentes 1963: 209).

<sup>7</sup> Mendieta uses no stress marks on the letter ‘o’ or on the imperfect tense and adds stress marks to the letter ‘a’.

mas de cien gradas, segun lo afirmaron los que la vieron' (Mendieta 1595: 85), while Motolinía admits that the temple of Texcoco had more stairs than St. Francis' chapel in Mexico City (1536: 137).

Writing of the Templo Mayor at Tenochtitlán, Hassig, basing his work on the investigations of the archaeologist, Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, has identified seven stages in the construction of the Great Temple, each one associated with an Aztec king, dating from the foundation of the Aztec capital in 1325. The Great Temple has dual stairways leading, on the left and north side, to the temple of Tlaloc, god of rain and on the right and south side, to the temple of Huitzilopochtli, god of war. It can be seen, according to Hassig, as 'a symbolic depiction of the earthly, underworld and heavenly planes' (Hassig 2001:22), Tlaloc representing agriculture and fertility, Huitzilopochtli standing for war and blood. The sun is northerly in the summer or growing season and in the south during the war season. At the highest point of the temple was a grisly reminder of its purpose – an open space where sacrifices were made and, incongruously, chapels on either side decorated with flowers – roses, marigolds, lilies or branches of trees. This extraordinary contrast between beauty and horror is not as incongruous as it might seem for to the indigenous people the flower was the visual metaphor for the human heart (Solis and Moctezuma 2004: 127), extracted at this place and held up in service of the sun. It illustrated the two sides of the Indian mentality: on the one hand, a love of 'flowers and song' as Ravicz puts it (1970: 237) and on the other, continuous brutal and horrific sacrifice. This contrast will be discussed in greater detail later.

As the friars approached Tlaxcala they must have seen one such temple, dedicated to the god of the air, Quetzalcóatl, and been impressed by its dimensions. But what would have struck them even more was the skull rack or '*tzompantli*' situated outside the temple. Motolinía states: 'Las calaveras ponían en unos palos que tenían levantados a un lado de los templos del demonio' (Motolinía, 1595: 60). He goes on to add a shocking detail: 'y si no fuera porque tenían algunas barbas, nadie juzgara sino que eran rostros de niños de cinco o seis años y así tenían que quinientas en quinientas, y de seiscientas en seiscientas y en algunas partes de mil en mil calaveras.' (Motolinía, 1595: 60).

Díaz bears witness to this grisly practice, noting on his arrival in Tlaxcala: 'I remember that many piles of human skulls were put in a plaza with many *adoratorios* (temples), and that we could count them because of the order with which they were arranged and it seems to me that there were more than one hundred thousand, and I say again over one hundred thousand' (Díaz 1550: 112).



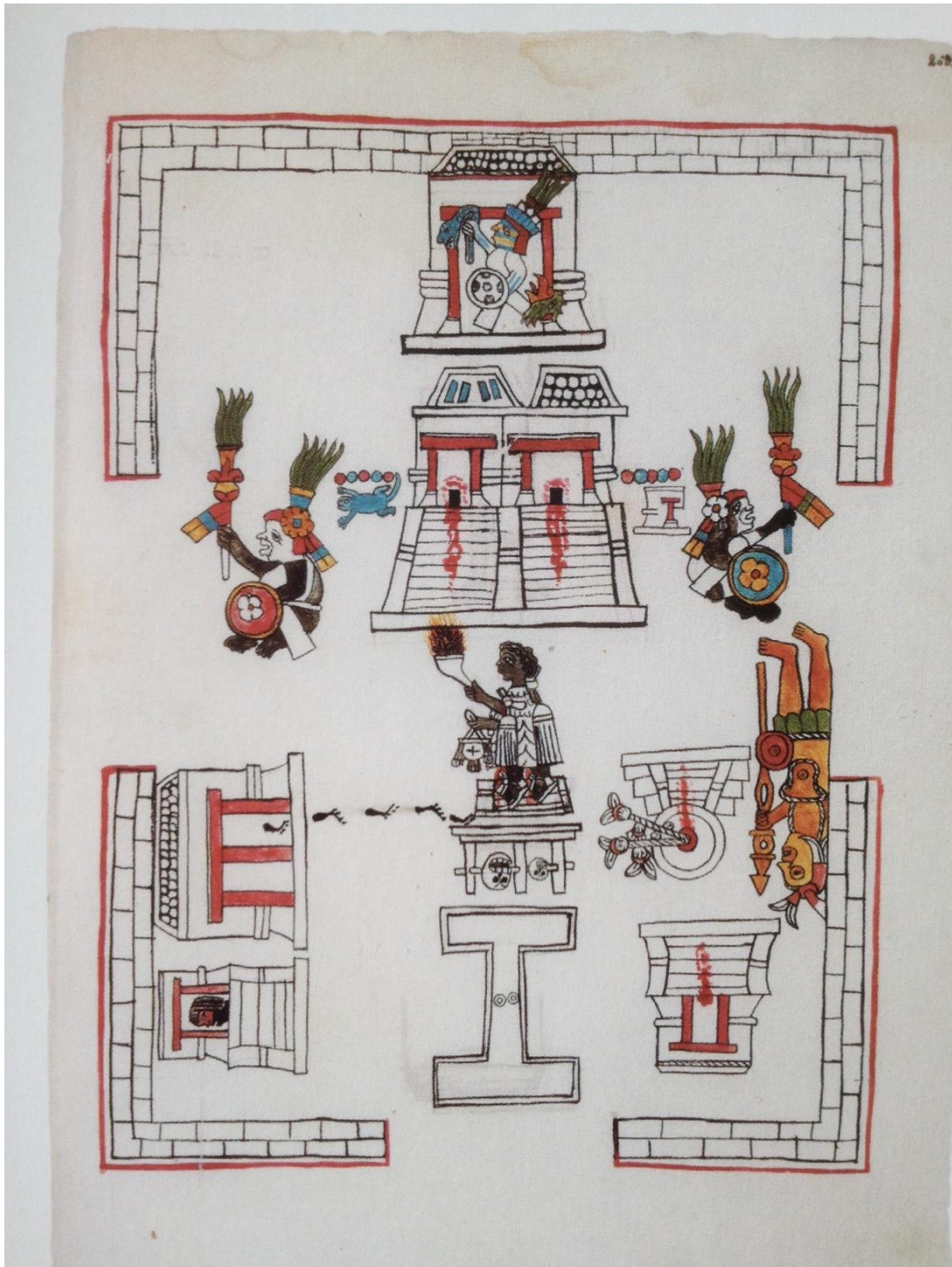


Fig. 2 Early Spanish drawing of the Sacred Precinct of Tenochtitlán (after Sahagún 1905-07:v.6:39).

Gruesome as the sight must have been, the significance of these skulls would not have been lost on the Franciscans. As Marilyn Ravicz (1970: 1) points out, just as the skulls of sacrificial victims served as a reminder that here blood had been shed to save life in the Azteca community, in another place, Golgotha, also 'place of the skull', Christ's blood had been shed for the redemption of mankind. The

chief difference was that the death of Christ was required only once, to be 'a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice', whereas victims in Mexico were slaughtered and went on being slaughtered in their thousands to placate vengeful gods or, in the words of Jacques Soustelle, to respond 'to the instability of a continually threatened world' beyond the Indians' control (quoted in Thomas 1993: xii). It was a desperate attempt to manage this unstable world, in the face of the impending end of the cycle called the Fifth Sun that drove the Aztecs to their daily feeding of the Sun with the sacrificial blood.

While the revulsion of the friars at the extent of human sacrifice and their enthusiasm for stamping out the practice is quite understandable, they may perhaps have failed to consider two important aspects of the ritual. In the first place, they could not fully appreciate the exact significance of the sacrificial victim. By being selected for death, he would be elevated to the role of *ixiptla*, quite literally the 'impersonator of the god' and was the recipient of a great honour. His sacrifice, either in gladiatorial combat or as a victim at the climax of a feast, would ensure him of a place in the highest level of paradise, the home of the Sun in heaven. His death would repeat the sacrifice of the gods, described in the early myths, and repay the debt which humans owed to their deities. He was duly prepared for this solemn and sacred role, a preparation which could last for up to a year and conferred upon him many privileges, including feasts and sexual favours. When he was bathed and dressed and ready for the final ceremony, the *ixiptla* became a god, worshipped and revered by priests and people alike. He went to his death, not screaming and kicking, but with dignity and pride, resembling, though the friars did not acknowledge it, the manner in which Christ, another victim, had gone to Calvary. It has to be remembered, however, that this special treatment was reserved for the sacrificial victims of the highest importance, either by virtue of their social position or because they represented prize 'booty' which conquering tribes could claim. Everyday captives in battle were slaughtered, as Sahagún frequently records, by their hundreds with the minimum of ceremony. Secondly, as Michael Smith has pointed out (1996:227), the human sacrifices served an important political function as a tool of governance. Rival rulers, invited to attend the ceremonies, would be treated to a dose of propaganda. Leaders from other tribes, forced to watch the execution of their own captured soldiers, would be impressed by the might of the Mexica and discouraged from rebellion. The greater the number of sacrificial victims, the more powerful the message.

## **Creation myths**

Strange as the Aztec creation myths were, they contained elements which resonated for the friars and reduced the impact of shock during the first encounters. The earliest recorded myths recount that after the creation of the earth by Ometéotl, the 'dual god', the generator and upholder of all life, the 'Lord of all things that are nigh' he fathered the four gods who corresponded to the four elements, earth,

air, fire and water. These four gods, in their turn, created a man called Oxomoco and a woman called Cipactónal. To these two was given the order, in a remarkable parallel with the story of Adam and Eve, to bring forth *macehuales* or men, whilst the woman received specific instructions to weave and spin and ‘not be idle’ (León-Portilla 1963:106). This must have struck chords with the Mexicans watching the *auto* ‘*La Caída de Nuestros Padres*’ as will be discussed later. Mendieta mentions a different account in which the Sun shot an arrow at Acolman and through the hole which it made the first man emerged, having no body from the armpits downwards. Afterwards a ‘complete woman’ emerged. Garibay in his ‘*Epica Náhuatl*’ has an alternative version by which both the man and the woman were incomplete (Garibay: 7-8). Again this story has a similarity with the passage in the book of Genesis where the unfinished Eve is created from Adam’s rib. These earliest myths were overlaid, however, by later ones closely related to the idea of the gods sacrificing themselves for the sake of mankind which established what Michael Smith calls a ‘debtor relationship’ between god and man (Michael Smith 1996:204). Chief amongst these is an episode which Mendieta likens to the Fall of Lucifer, though it is not totally clear why. A certain Xolotl, or Quetzalcóatl in some versions, was chosen to go to the Underworld or *mictlan* and bring back the ashes and bones of the dead, with which to create man. Pursued by the jealous god of the Inferno, or tricked by the Lord and Lady of the region of the dead, he tripped over a quail and broke the precious bones which shattered. He died but quickly revived and retrieved the pieces which were ground by Cihuacóatl, his consort, into a powder. Quetzalcóatl and the other gods then shed their blood over the vessel and from this sacrifice there arose first a boy and then a girl. From this episode, says Mendieta, came the idea that since the first god had sacrificed himself for man, man must now sacrifice himself, over and over, for the gods (Mendieta 1595: 78). According to another Azteca legend, the god Quetzalcóatl, the serpent god, cut open the chests of his fellow gods and extracted their hearts in order to make the sun move across the sky. Carlos Fuentes makes an interesting point. He suggests that this folk memory of god sacrificing themselves for man had been overlaid and dissipated by the practice of human sacrifices ordered by Aztec authorities. Christianity, with its doctrine of man redeemed by the willing death of Christ, re-awakened ancient, long-buried memories. In his words: ‘Esta nebulosa memoria, fue rescatada por la iglesia cristiana’ (Fuentes 1998: 207). This notion of self –sacrifice on the part of the Aztec gods would also have resonated with the friars, for whom their vows of poverty, chastity and obedience were, in themselves, a form of living sacrifice.

## **Feasting and Fasting**



As in the case of the creation myths, it was possible for the Franciscans to discern in Aztec feasts and festivals elements of their own religious calendar. Both were based on an awareness of the cyclical nature of time and of the passing of the seasons. Weiss (1993: 51) states that this similarity made the passage from the pre-Hispanic religious practices to those of post-conquest Europe less painful. Horcasitas, for instance, describes the Feast of Quetzalcóatl which took place on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, the day after Candlemas in the Christian calendar (1974: 33). Weiss mentions the Church festivals of Corpus Christi and St. John the Baptist which coincide with the summer solstice. Epiphany similarly occurs close to the winter solstice.

The Aztec calendar was based on multiple interlocking sets of escalating cycles, in complexity and sophistication far beyond any found in calendars elsewhere. The Mesoamerican ‘century’ was a period of 52 years, made up of the intersection of two cycles, one composed of 260 days and the other of 365 days. Each of these cycles was made up of smaller cycles, one based on a series of numbers one to thirteen, the other, larger cycle, based on units of 20. Every 52 years the ‘century’ or Calendar Round was celebrated by the solemn festival of the New Fire Ceremony, described in greater detail below. All the great Aztec ceremonies took place in accordance with this calendar and on days dictated by the seasons. The ‘Flaying of Men’, for instance, can be seen as an elaborate fertility rite – the preparing of the soil to receive new seed. In honour of the earth god, Xipe Totec, chosen slaves were killed, their hearts ripped out and their fresh skins worn by men impersonating the gods. Max Harris describes this as ‘donning a new skin representing the living seed bursting forth from within its dead covering’ (Harris 2000: 98).<sup>8</sup> Sickening as the ceremony was, it is possible to see in it echoes of Easter, when Christ, the ‘new seed’ rose from the dead. An even closer resemblance with the Christian Easter can be seen in the Aztec ceremony of the New Fire, conducted on the completion of each 52 year cycle. When the end of the year drew close, it was feared that the conclusion of the cycle meant the end of the world. In order to be ready for this cataclysm, frenzied housecleaning took place: old pots and pans, mats and clothing were thrown out and dumped providing, incidentally, invaluable later material for archaeologists. When darkness fell, priests climbed the mountain called Citaltepec ‘Star Mountain’ (known to this day as *Cerro de la Estrella*) and watched for the appearance of the Pleiades whose constellation signalled the start of the New Year cycle. If it crossed the zenith, the priests knew that the sun would rise again and they would be safe for another 52 years. With trepidation, they lit a new fire on the body of a sacrificial victim and waited for it to gather strength

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<sup>8</sup> In Iruya, a remote village in Argentina on the borders of Bolivia, I observed a similar pre-Columban rite when, in 2004, during a mass for the feast day of San Roque, legs of lamb, as symbols of new life, were placed on the altars in the church and after the mass the priests and male members of the congregation emerged wearing the sides of lamb on their shoulders in the form of a cloak. Girls wearing masks and men blowing long horns then led a procession round the village.

and heat. On the fire 52 bundles of sticks were burned, symbolising the number of years which had just ended. Once they were sure that the flame, like a fire, had ‘drawn’, it was carried to a temple in Tenochtitlán and messengers ran with it to all parts of the kingdom, sharing the ‘New Fire’ with all the people. This ceremony had a clear parallel with the great Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday in Catholic churches when a New Fire, lit by burning palm crosses of the previous year, is carried into a darkened church and shared among the congregation, the spreading of the light marking the end of Lent and the start of the Easter celebrations.

An interesting and often under-emphasised angle on acculturation is provided by Ross Hassig in his book *Time, History and Belief in Aztec and Colonial Mexico*. He argues that one of the ways in which the Spaniards destroyed the Aztec civilisation was by the replacement of the pagan calendar, devoted to the worship of heathen deities, by a calendar tied to Christian saints’ days and festivals. Control of the native calendar, and hence of ‘time’, was the preserve of the priests. Interpretation of the system was taught in the elite schools, the *calmecac*, attended by the sons of the nobility and those destined for the priesthood. It was the priests who interpreted the complex calendars and wrote them down. It was they who sounded the trumpet to announce that the Pleiades had reached the zenith and that the New Fire ceremony could begin. It was even they who blew a trumpet each morning to declare that a new day had begun. So control of the native calendar by the Spanish meant the decline in the role of the priest and the dislocation of native worship patterns. Indeed, after the Conquest, when priests were no longer required to function at baptisms, marriages and funerals their importance fell into decline and their lands were re-assigned. In a very short period no priest remained who could interpret or write down the native calendar. Sahagún records that when the time for the next New Fire ceremony came round in 1559 it was not celebrated. This is not to say, however, that the Aztec calendar disappeared without trace; fear that an ‘underground’ folk version, still clinging to worship of pagan gods which might be used by educated natives as a form of resistance led, as Hassig suggests, to the prohibition of Indians training as priests (Hassig 2001: 140) with long-lasting consequences for the future development of the Mexican Church.

The cultivation of maize played an important part in Aztec religious cycles. In Mayan and Náhuatl texts the human body was said to be composed of maize; indeed, the word for maize in Náhuatl is ‘*tonacayotl*’, a version of ‘*to-nacyo*’ meaning ‘our flesh’ (León-Portilla 1963:x). According to Motolinía: ‘Cuando el maíz estaba a la rodilla, compraban cuatro niños esclavos de edad de cinco o seis años y sacrificabanlos a Tlaloc, dios del agua, poniendolos en una cueva y cerrabanla hasta otro año que hacían lo mismo’ (Motolinía, 15: 50).

This ceremony had its roots in a prolonged period of drought when the rain god had to be placated. After the maize had reached waist-height, the Indians processed to the temple of Hueytozotli bearing gifts of food, drink and bunches of *maguey*. Sahagún, in Book 2 of the Florentine Codex, describes another festival, also associated with maize, when a feast was celebrated in honour of the god, Cinteotl, the god of maize. He tells how reeds were sprinkled with blood from the peoples' ears and calves, after which branches and flowers were set up for the local gods. He continues:

Despues de echo esto, en los barrios yuan al cu, de la diosa, que llamuan chicome coatl: y alli delante della hazian escaramuças a manera de pelea: y todas las muchachas lleuauan a cuestras, maçorcas de mahiz del año pasado: yuan en procession, a presétarlas, a las diosa chicome coatl; y tornauanlas otra vez a su casa como cosa bendita, y de alli tomauan la semijlla, para sembrar el año vendijero: y tambien ponanlo por coraçon, de las troxes, pore estar bendito. (Sahagún 1981:7)

In another passage he informs us that deceased children were buried facing the domestic maize store, emphasizing the importance of maize in native culture. Further on he cites the extraordinary festival of Uey toçoztli in which bloodied sedges were set up in rows and fir branches laid for them. In the middle were maguey thorns, also stained with blood. After a curious ceremony involving the preparation by the women of a dough called *atole*, priests and youths departed to the fields where each one picked a stalk of green maize which they worshipped as gods. Before these gods was placed a 'hard-baked frog', wearing a woman's skirt on its hind-quarters. Food was laid before the maize-gods and a form of mock battle took place in which there was much 'striking and whacking' of each other. Then young girls took to the temple of Chicome coatl the maize which was to be the seed for the next year. To Chicome coatl was offered all the forms of maize known to the Indians: 'white maize, yellow maize, green maize shoots, black maize, black and brown mixed, variously hued; large and wide; round and ball-like; also an array of beans and varieties of amaranth'. On her feast day the goddess Chicome coatl was given human form and a double ear of maize was placed in her either hand (Sahagún 1981: 62-65). If this strange ceremony seemed totally removed from Franciscan ritual, its anthropomorphic worship of vegetable matter later eased the Nahua into acceptance of the idea of the Host as the Body of Christ, as will be discussed later. The friars might also have recognised within it something of the Christian seasons of Rogation, when the young crops are prayed for. Similarly, the ceremony of the 'Sweeping of the Road' took place in late August or early September. For the friars this was Lammastide, when thanks were given for the new harvest. For the Azteca, it marked the end of the agricultural year before the opening of the season of war and the need for new sacrificial victims (Harris 2000: 75).

Before many of the feasts a lengthy period of fasting was held, comparable in many ways to the Christian Lent and recognised as such by the friars. The motives for such fasting were entirely

different, however. Motolinía tells us that fasting and abstinence were only ‘por lo temporal que deseaban sin esperanza de pordon de culpa y con certidumbre de perpetua pena’ (Motolinía 1595: 102). Mendieta adds, not without cynicism, ‘los ayunos eran rigurosísimos, los que el demonio enseñó, no por devocion que tiene á esta virtud, sino para todas vias afligir á aquellos feligreses, sin que alcanzasen por su penitencia algun merecimiento’ (Mendieta 1596: 102).

‘Rigorous’ these periods of abstinence certainly were, particularly for the priests of the temples. The length of the fast could be any time up to 80 days before the start of the festival. On the eve, ‘*diabólicos ministros*’ mutilated the company assembled in the temple, boring holes in their tongues and ears through which stalks of corn and maguey of varying thickness were passed. In Nahuatl thought there was no difference between the material and the physical; the two formed part of a continuous concept of reality. Hence moral sins could have a physical effect on the body. This finds expression, for instance, in the belief that transgression could damage the liver (Burkhart 1989: 100). The straw that passed through the tongue became coated with blood and came to be seen as the sin itself. When the blood had been collected and offered to the gods, this ‘tongue sacrifice’ was burnt and the transgression, now metaphorically identified with the bloody straw, was purged. This process was repeated frequently during the 80 days of fasting so that the wounds never healed and blood offerings were repeated frequently. Once the fast began very little food and drink was consumed – no meat, no fish, no salt, no garlic, only a small tortilla weighing not more than two ounces and little water. Washing and sexual intercourse were banned, sleep was limited to two hours and in Cholula, for instance, the ‘*ministros*’ and ‘*oficiales*’ had to remain seated in front of the temples for the full 80 days, ranged against the walls and allowed to move ‘solo á hacer sus necesidades’. At midnight their vigil was broken by orders to blacken their faces with soot (Mendieta 1595: 105).

It would appear that every province had its own style of fasting and fasts were held for the lesser as well as the greater gods. Sahagún describes, for instance, the ritual attached to the worship of Macuilxochitl (known as the Five Flower) and Xochipilli (the Flower Prince). Before the feast of these ‘flower’ gods could be celebrated a ‘flower fast’ of four days was held. This involved restricting the diet of the fasters to one item only: for some it was just maize for others it was a drink called ‘*atole*’. On the fifth day quails were beheaded, more tongue and ear sacrifice took place and slaves were killed (Sahagún 1970: 32). While the Franciscans were shocked at the excesses of such practices and clearly thought that they were undertaken for the wrong reasons, the idea of subduing the flesh was very much in tune with their own beliefs since they regularly practised self-flagellation. They were therefore in sympathy with the spirit of native fasting to the extent that both Motolinía and Mendieta talk of the periods of indigenous abstinence as ‘*unas cuaresmas*’.

## **Aztec gods**

A third essential element in the religion of the Aztecs and indeed throughout the whole of New Spain was the enormous pantheon of gods and goddesses, worked into an extraordinarily complex system of mythology. These, too, must have astonished and shocked the friars by their sheer range and variety. There were gods of every shape: not only men and women but tigers, lions, dogs and deer. The list extended to owls, eagles, toads, frogs and fish. Mendieta even adds fleas, butterflies and crayfish: 'Finalmente, no dejaban criatura de ningun género ni especie que no tuviesen su figura y la adorasen por Dios, hasta las mariposas y langostas y pulgas (Mendieta 1595: 88). It is difficult to get a clear idea of the full extent of the Aztec gods because they were constantly changing – not only their names but also their functions and associations and, like the Roman gods, while some passed out of fashion, others came to take their place. To further complicate matters, some gods had several names. The goddess Ilamatecutli, for instance, was also known as Tonan or, again, Cozcamiauh (Sahagún 1981:31). At the very top of the hierarchy was Ométeotl, 'the Lord of the Near Vicinity', the 'dual god' who created, sustained and pervaded all. His protean nature and his multiplicity of forms typify the fluid structure of the deities. By his creation of four sons who represented the four quadrants of the earth, he ordained and established the harmony of the four elements. In another form he was known as Tona-tíuh, whose path through the sky created the day and, at the same time he was Ipalnemohuani, the Giver of Life. He was known as 'the mirror which made all things appear' (León-Portilla 1963:97) and 'shine like jade', he was the master of the clouds, the rain god Tlaloc, the Lord of the land of the dead. In his duality, he also had a 'feminine' manifestation, as did every other major god; generation, symbolized by the male aspect of the 'duality', was always balanced by conception, represented by the feminine form. Thus Ometéotl appears, among others, as the 'Lady of the jade skirt', the 'Lady of sea and lake' and, in his maternal rôle, as Coatlicue, the 'Snake Woman'. Finally, he was associated both with the mysteriously attractive and elusive Quetzalcóatl, who himself had many names and functions, and Huitzilopochtli, the god of war. The story of Huitzilopochtli illustrates another feature of the Aztec pantheon. According to Durán, he was originally a local god whose image was carried on the shoulders of the Aztecs as they left their caves and the legendary Aztlan in search of new lands. It was he who guided the Aztecs to choose a swampy site in the lake Tenochtitlán as their new capital. Durán states that he appeared, not only as a pagan image but also as a 'sacred bundle' or an oracle (Durán 1867:20). In later Aztec mythology this humble local image was transformed into one of the most terrible and fearful of all the gods. Judith Weiss (1993: 51) suggests that the existence of local gods, like Huitzilopochtli, helped to make the Christian religion

more acceptable to the Indians, because they saw in the multiplicity of Spanish Catholic saints a parallel with their own regional deities. They appreciated also the fact that each Christian saint had his or her own particular function and feast day. This was paralleled in the native calendar: for the four last days of January and the first day of February, for instance, a series of ‘movable feasts’ were dedicated to different gods and different sections of the community – those who worked with water, in any capacity, had their own god and their own feast day, as did all painters and seamstresses (Sahagún 1981:35).

While Huitzilopochtli’s insistence on the ritual sacrificial drowning in a lake of a small boy and girl was beyond the comprehension of the friars and filled them with disgust there were two powerful gods with whom they felt a certain affinity. One of these was the god of the air, Quetzalcóatl.

## **Quetzalcóatl**

This protean man-god played such an important role in the lives of pre-conquest and post-conquest natives that he deserves a special section to himself. He appeared in many forms: most frequently as a feathered serpent, but also as the morning star, the god of the four winds, a sea-god, both a deer hunter and the victim of the hunter in the form of a slain deer, the progenitor of mankind who sacrificed himself to save his people and the personification of the first and greatest of the Aztec gods, Ometéotl, the ‘god of the near to everything and to whom everything is near’ (Portilla 1963:93). In a less flattering role, he was seen as a fertility god who succumbs to incontinence and drunkenness. It was he who traditionally swept the way to heaven for the departed souls of warriors, as will be mentioned later. In his human form he was both a priest and leader who lived in ‘historical’ time and who, with what the Cholulans described as his white skin, black eyes, broad face and beard, would return from the east to save and rule his people. The fact that Cortés’ physical appearance went some way to answering this description and that he arrived in the year One Reed, the year predicted for the re-appearance of Quetzalcóatl, considerably eased his reception by the Axteca who saw in him the second Quetzalcóatl. If Cortés, for political reasons, was content to be identified with Quetzalcóatl, the Franciscans viewed the serpent god with a mixture of sympathy and suspicion. They were sympathetic, not to say attracted, because the details of his mythical life bore a striking resemblance to the story of the life of Christ. He was, as Paz tells us, ‘un rey-sacerdote que no combate y que se da la muerte para renacer’ (1950:113). In one version of his story, as has already been mentioned, he descended into the underworld, *mictlan*, to recover old bones to make into a new race of humans

which he engendered by the shedding of his blood.<sup>9</sup> In another version, he fled from persecution by constructing a raft of serpents which he boarded and used to sail across the sea, thus giving rise to the notion that he was a sea god. This narrative is continued in yet a further version which describes how Quetzacóatl, having reached the coast, lit a bonfire and threw himself into it. From his ashes his heart rose to the interior of heaven where it was changed into the Morning Star, yet another form of this extraordinary god. In all three versions (and there are others) a common theme is the notion of self-sacrifice for the good of the human race – a theme which resonated favourably with the early Franciscans.



Fig. 3 Hugh Thomas: *The Conquest of Mexico* 1993

Quetzalcóatl commended himself to the friars in another sense, in that he was traditionally less focused on the need for human sacrifices and, as suggested in the story of his visit to the underworld, preferred ‘mortification of the flesh’, penance and abstinence as a form of worship. Lafaye (1974: 139) points out, however, that, according to chapter 24 of Motolinía’s History, the first Franciscans observed that at one of Quetzalcóatl’s temples, which they passed on their first journey from Vera

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<sup>9</sup> This story bears a remarkable similarity to the legend of Xolotl, previously mentioned, who also descended to the underworld in search of bones and was tripped up by the malicious Tecutli before bleeding himself and thus assuring the salvation of his people.

Cruz, ritual human sacrifices were being offered which would suggest that the nature of his worship had been ‘Aztecised’.

The story of Quetzalcóatl the man is even more extraordinary. It is recorded in the only surviving chapter, chapter 10, of Fr. Andrés de Olmos *Histoire du Méchique*,<sup>10</sup> reckoned by Lafaye to be the most authentic of all accounts. At some indeterminate time, Quetzalcóatl was a priest in the ancient city of Tula, capital of the Toltec kingdom. He instructed the Toltecs in the civilising crafts of featherwork, sculpting and drawing but fell into an argument with Huitzilopochtli who tricked him into becoming drunk. Wizards advised him to abandon Tula and to leave behind all the arts and artwork of the city – carving, featherwork and sculpting – and burn them. Quetzalcóatl did as he was bade and departed from Tula – an event taken by some scholars to signify the fall of the great city of Tula and the collapse of the Toltec kingdom. A feature of Olmos’ *Histoire du Méchique* is a description of the stops which Quetzalcóatl made on his way to exile. After staying at Tenayuca and Culhuacan, he crossed the sierra to the region of Huexotinco where he erected a temple and remained for two hundred and ninety years before continuing to Cholula and building another temple, the famous edifice destroyed early on in the Franciscan mission. After spending one hundred and sixty years in Cholula he left for Cempoala for a further two hundred and sixty years before fleeing into the desert and there committing suicide, by which time he would have been as old as Methuselah. Sahagún, using information given him by the native Indians, adds further details, describing how part way through his flight he rested on a stone. His tears fell as hailstones and made holes in the stone and where his hands and buttocks had rested, deep imprints were left behind, such that the place to this day is known as Temalpalco, the ‘place where human hands remain as if planted’ (quoted in León-Portilla 1980: 164).

It is not difficult to imagine the power of suggestion which this man-god, whose attributes chimed so well with many Christian virtues, might have exercised on the minds of the first Franciscans. But the friars of the ‘heroic period’ (1521-1540) displayed the same scepticism as they showed to the Virgin of Guadalupe, namely that any ‘phenomenon’ which cannot be proved was suspect and should be treated as unreliable. However, in the years after 1540 later friars did not show the same degree of restraint and during this period one of the most amazing examples of ‘reverse acculturation’ occurred. Fray Sahagún, who had been in Mexico since 1528, had undertaken the task of collecting and annotating local myths and personal memories and in 1547 began to note them down in what became a lifetime’s work. His declared purpose was to provide Spanish priests with the knowledge of such

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<sup>10</sup> The only remaining edition is in French.



beliefs in order to help them stamp out idolatry but in the process he became absorbed in native lore and was as anxious to preserve Aztec culture as to extirpate paganism. Indeed, so intrigued was he by Quetzalcóatl that instead of dismissing him as an idol he conferred upon him the title ‘wizard’. Building on his work and that of the later Durán, a Dominican who shared Sahagún’s views, a number of theories, centred on the belief that Quetzalcóatl would return, began to gain ground. Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchtli, the *mestizo* historian (1578-1648) gives substance to this theory in his *Historia de la nación chichimeca*. In part 3 of this chronicle Quetzalcóatl appears and preaches to the Ulmecs and the Cholulans. However, discouraged by his failure to convert these people, he leaves, promising to return after a year when he expects a more enthusiastic reception (Florescano 1994:129). The Cholulan tower, a clear reference to the biblical tower of Babel, is meanwhile destroyed by a strong wind.

The discovery of cruciform signs in various temples, first recorded by Díaz in the early days of conquest at Campeche and mentioned by Governor Velázquez in a message to Cortés, sparked the idea in Spanish minds that Mexico had been previously evangelised but with the passage of time had lapsed into paganism.<sup>11</sup> This notion appealed to the creoles who saw in the possibility of an earlier conversion to Christianity a new legitimacy for Mexico and a means of declaring that far from being an isolated outpost of Spain, it was, and always had been, part of mainstream Christendom. But which apostle had been responsible for the conversion of Mexico? The ideal candidate was Quetzalcóatl, hater of sacrifices, believer in one god and often depicted wearing a bonnet resembling a papal tiara and carrying a curved stick shaped like a bishop’s crozier. Durán built on this theory by describing a holy and chaste man who ‘practised much penance’ whom he called ‘Pope Topiltzin’, alias the historical Quetzalcóatl, high priest of Tula. He produced a painting, described dismissively by Cuevas as a ‘dibujo infantil’ (1922:96 vol. 1), showing Quetzalcóatl brandishing a long staff wearing a clerical-looking cloak and high hat which suggested to ‘the pious’ (Cuevas again) that Mexico might have been evangelised before the arrival of the Spanish. Gradually throughout the rest of the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth Quetzalcóatl/alias Topiltzin became associated and then identified with the apostle Thomas whose name, like Quetzalcóatl’s meant ‘twin’ and who, like Quetzalcóatl, carved images in stone. Thus the apostle Thomas and Quetzalcóatl became merged into one, culminating in Servando Teresa de Mier’s famous sermon of 1813 in which he officially affirmed the

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<sup>11</sup> Juan Díaz, on his voyage with Grijalva in 1518, noted ‘a large white marble cross with a gold crown on top’ adding that ‘they say that the one who died on it is more magnificent and resplendent than the sun’. Fuentes states that the cross was a common sight, indicating the four cardinal quarters and among the Maya it was also a sun symbol, representing the sun’s rays (Fuentes 1963: 213).

historical existence of St. Thomas-Quetzalcóatl, pre-Hispanic evangeliser of Mexico – a vital card in the politics leading up to independence and an altogether astonishing journey for a pagan deity.

Another god, or in this case, goddess who struck chords with the Franciscans was the goddess of the skies, Tonantzin, the mother of the sun god, whose temple was cut high in the sierra, richly decorated with flowers. She was greatly venerated because, like Quetzalcóatl, she did not demand human sacrifice, preferring that turtle doves and rabbits be offered before her statue. More important, she acted as an intercessor, pleading with the other gods, in particular her son, for the release of the Indians from their duty of blood for, as Mendieta says: ‘lo tenían por gran tormento y solamente lo hacían por el gran temor que tenían a las amenazas que el demonio les hacía y daños que él recibían’ (Mendieta 1595: 89). She was so famous as an intercessor and mediator that Indians came from all parts of Aztec Mexico with their requests.

It is possible to see in this goddess of the air a parallel with the Virgin Mary and this would not have been lost on the Franciscans. Mendieta adds with a flash of wry humour that the Devil had introduced into his satanic church a figure whom Catholics recognise as ‘La Reina de los Angeles y Madre de Dios, abogada y medianera de todos los necesidades’ (1595: 90). When the conquistadors and the friars between them had cast down the idols and left the people, as Paz says, ‘orphaned’, it is easy to understand the rapture with which they seized on the Virgin of Guadalupe as a ‘mother’ substitute; indeed, the Virgin of Guadalupe, who had appeared to Diego, an Indian, and addressed him, presumably in Náhuatl, assumed far greater relevance for the Indians than the European Virgin.

In this account of the Azteca religion and the friars’ attitude towards it, one is aware that most, if not all, contemporary evidence comes from the pen of the Franciscan, Motolinía, who was inspired by a Utopian sense of mission and a deep love and respect for the Indians and whose enthusiasm led him into probable exaggeration as, for instance, in his figures for the number of baptisms carried out in one day. Mendieta was not writing until after the ‘heroic age’ of between 1525 and 1550, basing much of his work on that of Motolinía, while Durán, the Benedictine, only began his book in 1574. Sahagún, as will be mentioned later, produced the monumental *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* but his work concentrates more on saving the Aztec culture from oblivion than detailing the evangelical mission of the Franciscans. When he does evangelise, his arguments against paganism contain little theological content and seem largely to consist in denouncing the native gods as *demonios* (Sahagún 1970: 63): Thus: ‘Huitzilopochtli is no god; Tlaloc is no god; Quetzalcóatl is no god; the sun is no god; the moon, the stars, none is a god’. Many of his twelve works were either suppressed or lost. There are, unfortunately, very few other primary sources of the so-called early ‘heroic period’ extant. There is another problem in that all the contemporary texts are translations

from the Náhuatl either into Spanish or English. A linguistic screen thus bars the reader from knowing exactly what was meant by the early writers and one is at the mercy of clumsy, insensitive or inaccurate renditions.

## Chapter Three Preparing the ground

From what has been said in the previous section on the religion of the Azteca, two aspects must be clear. The first is that religion was deeply rooted in the innermost being of the Azteca; it took over and absorbed the entire native persona. It was, as Malinowski puts it: ‘The cement of social life’ (quoted in Ortiz, 1947: 185). Secondly, strange as it may seem, there were certain important aspects of the Azteca religion which bore marked resemblances to Christianity. The question was: how far were the Franciscans going to be able to build on these two facts in their mission of acculturation?

One of the tests of successful acculturation might be the degree to which the accultured are able to identify with the acculturator, rather than resenting a culture which they considered was being imposed upon them. When the twelve friars walked barefoot, in their simple Franciscan garbs, up to Tlaxcala from the coast, they were unconsciously employing one of the most effective ‘weapons’ in their missionary armoury. It is hard to overstate the astonishment which the natives must have felt on seeing white men, unarmed, unshod and carrying no bags, walking alone through hostile, marshy terrain. Previously, most of the white Spanish in their experience had been weapon-bearing conquistadors, mounted on horses. Mendieta conveys something of how the first Franciscans must have been perceived:

Veian en ellos una grande mortificacion de sus cuerpos, andar descalzos y desnudos con hábitos de grueso sayal cortos y rotos, dormir sobre una sola estera con up palo ó manajo de yerbas secas por cabecera, cubiertos con solos sus mantillas viejos sin otra ropa y no tendidos sino arrimados, por no dar á su cuerpo tanto descanso (Mendieta 1590: 251).

He compares the friars to the Spanish conquistadors:

Pero en respecto de lo que vian usar y buscar los españoles seculares de abundancia, aderezo y regalo en sus personas, cama y comida y grandes palacios, bien notaban la diferencia de lo que pretendian los unos y los otros. Sobre todo, el menosprecio y humildad; inviolable honestidad, no solo en la obra sino en la vista y palabras; desprecio del oro y de todas las cosas del mundo; paz, amor y caridad entre si y con todos. (Mendieta 1590: 251).

Motolinía, in fact, owes his name to the effect which he had on the local people. When they saw him passing by, his poverty struck them so forcefully that they called him ‘*Motolinía*’, the Náhuatl word for ‘poor’. So great was the respect, indeed love, which the Franciscans had won from them that when Bishop Sebastián Ramirez attempted to send them Dominican reinforcements they repelled him. As Motolinía relates:

...como algunas veces en los pueblos de los Indios quiesen entrar religiosos frailes de otros Ordenes, iban los Indios a rogar al que estaba en lugar de su majestad que regía la tierra, que entonces era el Señor Obispo D. Sebastian Ramirez, diciendole que no diesen otros frailes sino los de San Francisco, porque los conocían y amaban y eran de ellos amados (Motolinía 1540: 189).

And when asked to explain why they preferred Franciscans they added: ‘porque estos andan pobres y descalzos como nosotros, asíentase entre nosotros, conversan entre nosotros mansamente’ (Motolinía, 1541: 189).

When the Spanish complained that the Franciscans were clearly favouring the natives, Motolinía, in a beautiful passage, speaks for them:

Si no fuera por los frailes de San Francisco, la Nueva España fuera como las Islas, que no hay Indio a quien enseñar la ley de Dios, ni quien sirva a los Españoles, pues no costaron menos a Jesucristo las animas de estos Indios como de los Españoles y Romanos y la ley de Dios obligue a favorecer y a animar a éstos que éstos con la leche de la fey en los labios. (Motolinía 1541: 192)

These tender words typify Motolinía’s attitude towards the Nahuatl. Never once does he refer to them as inferior or ‘other’ in a subaltern sense. On the contrary, he seems constantly surprised by their heightened spirituality and intellectual dexterity and by the speed with which they adapted to and absorbed new ideas.

While admiring the way in which the Franciscans embraced the indigenous way of life and acknowledging its success as a form of what he calls ‘assimilation’ (rather than acculturation), Todorov is of the opinion that it was, in reality, an attempt to integrate the native into the European rather than a case of identifying with him. In the last analysis, he adds, the European does not abandon his religion nor his feeling of superiority; indeed the fact that he has the flexibility to assume the characteristics of the Aztec only enhances this sentiment (Todorov 1982:248). It has to be added, furthermore, that Motolinía writes from an exclusively Franciscan point of view, with what is almost an ‘innocent’ optimism about the effectiveness of the friars’ evangelizing mission. He never adds, for instance, that while many natives admired the Franciscans and their simplicity, others, such as the followers of the *caciques* in Michoacán, believed that the missionaries were dead men walking around in their shrouds and that at night they retired to hell.

While it could be said that the friars had won the trust of some of the indigenous people (according to Motolinía and Mendieta) and that an important condition of acculturation had been met, there remained the enormous task of evangelizing – not just winning hearts but introducing an entirely new religious and cultural system. To do this three vital steps had to be taken. The first was the destruction of a huge physical and psychological obstacle which lay in the missionaries’ path – the temples.

These edifices were manifold. According to Cuevas, even the smallest hamlet had three or four ‘*teucuales*’ (Cuevas 1922: 199), of varying sizes; they were to be found on the roadsides, in the maize fields, by fountains and in the hills. All held idols of different materials – wood, straw, stone, clay,

maize and even seeds. Some resembled bishops with mitres on their heads, some were in the form of men, of beasts, of snakes bearing ‘un rostro de mujer como pintan la que tentó a nuestra madre Eva’ (Mendieta 1530 Bk 2, chapter 9). These were houses of horror, bearing bloody witness to a culture of slaughter. Diego Durán expressed the sense of revulsion felt by the Franciscans when he wrote: ‘O the strange brutality of these people, in many things they have good discipline, government, understanding, capacity and polish but, in others, strange brutality and blindness’ (Durán 1579:60). Cuevas describes the temples as ‘tapizadas de una gruesa costra de sangre humana, hediondas, abominables que debían ser destruidas aunque solo fuese para manifestar el horror que causaban aquellos matadores de humanos’ (Cuevas 1922: 206)

And Díaz, after a visit to some of the largest temples, remarks on how the walls and floors were stained with blood and how the buildings stank of past slaughter so that even his soldier’s stomach was turned. On the other hand, as Balsera has pointed out, Motolinía, in his desire to avoid treating the native ‘other’ in ‘subalterizing mode’ and with genuine appreciation of their culture, describes the temples as kept clean and white and full of flowers (1536:137). In his words an attitude of awe rather than loathing can be discerned although it is likely that he did not appreciate the more sinister interpretation of flowers, as previously described (see page 18).

The dismantling and burning of the temples started, according to Cuevas, on the first day of January, 1525 and continued, at a slower pace, until the middle of the century. It remains a mystery as to how the friars were able, when they were so few and could not count labourers or builders among their numbers, to dismantle such vast edifices but the process had already been begun during the siege of Tenochtitlán when the temples of Otomí were destroyed by Cortes’ soldiers (Sahagún 1975: 78). Destruction by the friars proceeded steadily. It began in the Texcoco region, where the temples and towers were most beautiful and spread to México, Tlaxcala, Huetjotzingo and Michoacán. There is no doubt, as Ricard admits, that a large number of these antiquities disappeared (Ricard 1924: 37). Pedro de Gante stated that in 1529, under his direction, many temples and idols had been levelled. Zumárraga, the first Bishop of Mexico, claimed that he had destroyed 500 temples and 20,000 idols. So thorough was the campaign that Cortés, the originator of the plan, found himself begging the friars to preserve a few as national monuments. That request the friars rejected outright, saying that it would set a dangerous precedent.

The removal of the Indian temples has been widely criticised by historians past and present and by archaeologists. Bishop Zumárraga, in particular, has been the target of condemnation for his more than zealous iconoclasm. But, as Ricard says, backed up by Cuevas, the missionaries were not antiquarians (1924: 37). ‘They were few in a land of innumerable gentiles’ and just so long as an

Indian temple remained standing, it was a reminder of a pagan past and an invitation to open rebellion and recidivism.

In addition, the temples were of a very distinctive shape and could not be adapted, unlike ‘mezquitas arabes o templos de protestantismo’ (Cuevas 1922: 205) for use by the new Catholic faith. Stones from the dismantled monuments were used again in the building of convents and in the construction of Mexico City itself, but while many Franciscans recoiled from the thought of building a Christian church upon pagan foundations, there were occasions when friars made use of such edifices. When Cortés, for instance, ordered the construction of a monastery in Tlaxcala, in 1524, part of the palace of the pre-conquest *cabecera* Maxixcatzin’s housed the first friars. In 1527 that same palace became the residence of the first bishop of Tlaxcala, Julián Garcés (Gibson 1967: 54).

In defence of the programme of destruction, it can further be argued that the natives before the appearance of the missionaries, after victorious campaigns frequently burnt the temples of their vanquished enemies. An example of this can be seen in the picture below, where in the top right corner a building is being toppled.

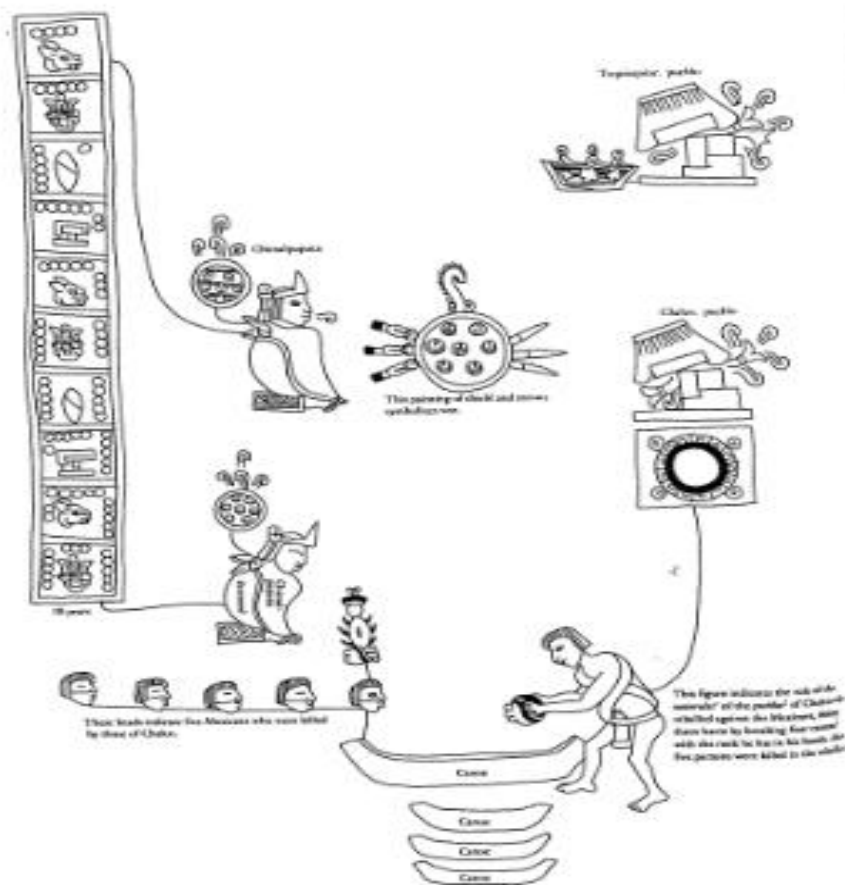


Figure 1.6 A page from the pictorial history section of the Codex Mendoza (1992:4:14; folio 4v) showing events during the reign of Chimalpopoca of Tenochtitlan

Fig. 4 Michael Smith *The Aztecs of Mesoamerica* p.16.

During the reign of the Aztec king, Itzcoatl, for instance, the Aztecs ravaged the lands of the Azcapotzalco, burning and violating houses and temples (Durán 1581: 83) and later, the Tlaxcalans attacked the Aztec's *teocalli* when they came to the aid of Cortés soon after his arrival. Although the destruction was widespread and many monuments were laid waste, many remained. In 1538, twelve years after the beginning of the campaign, the Mexican episcopate wrote to Charles V stating that not all the temples had been destroyed and asking for permission to demolish the remainder, to which Charles replied:

Por ende, yo vos mando que luego que ésta recibaís, hagaís, derrocar y quitar todos los cues, templos de idolos y adoratorios que hay o hoviere en esa dicha Nueva España, lo cual haced con aquella prudencia que convenga de manera que derribarlos no resulte escándolo entre los naturales y derribados proveáis que de piedra de ellos se tome para hacer iglesias y monasterios (Cuevas 1922: 205).

Despite the widespread demolition of the temples, in the most remote areas of Mexico some remained and became the focus for resistance. Humboldt, writing 300 years later, described how the Spaniards accidentally discovered the pyramid of Papantla, north-west of Jalapa, in the Vera Cruz region, in the heart of a dense forest, where the Totonacs had hidden their idols and continued worshipping for centuries (Ricard 1933: 274). A sufficient number of temples remained for Cuevas, writing in 1922, to complain that the Mexican government had given permission for the export abroad of priceless antiquities. Similarly, visitors to the recent Aztec exhibition in London and to Mexico itself can see ample evidence of the continued survival of Aztec monuments. There is no denying that, along with the destruction of the temples, went the destruction and burning of manuscripts, as the drawing by Muñoz de Camarga below illustrates.





Fig. 5 Muñoz de Camargo. Department of Special Collections, Glasgow University Library. By kind permission of the University of Glasgow

Zumárraga, in the dock for his over-enthusiastic razing of *teocallis*, is accused of the same crime in relation to ancient Aztec documents. He is said, for instance, to have made a huge bonfire of the archives of Texcoco but Ricard leaps to his defence, saying that such documents had already been destroyed during the siege of Tenochtitlán (1933: 38). He adds that many archives had disappeared before the advent of the Spanish while others were either hidden or lost for ever. However, the burning of even one ancient document is a crime and a stain on the reputation of the friars who had so much respect for learning.

While it can be argued that the destruction of temples is not a sensitive method of acculturation, the friars made their campaign more acceptable to the natives by two measures. In the first place, they enlisted the help of young boys, sons of chiefs. These children so enjoyed the exercise that when the walls of the edifices fell, they gave great whoops of joy. Cuevas writes: ‘Y así cayeron los muros de Jerichó con voces de alabanza y alaridos de alegría de los niños fieles’ (1922: 201). More important, they ran off home to tell their parents how the houses of the infidels had collapsed, thus encouraging

the adults to accept the new faith (Cuevas 1922: 101). Mendieta adds that often the children, having discovered secret ‘caches’ of idols, would go home and tell their relatives what they had found. These ‘caches’ would often consist of: ‘Idolos de los demonios y tambien imágenes de Cristo nuestro Redentor y de Nuestra Señora, que les españoles les habian dado, pensando que con aquellos solo se contentarian’. He adds ruefully: ‘Mas ellos si tenian cien dioses, querian tener ciento y uno, y mas si mas les diesen’ (Mendieta 1590: 233).

Making use of children was one method of ‘acculturation’ employed by the Franciscans. Another was the engaging of poor native converts in the destruction of the temples. In the absence of the Spanish colonials, who were too busy making fortunes for themselves in the mines (Cuevas 1922: 201), these men were only too happy to assist in the destruction of temples which they saw as the preserve of their wealthy, upper-class oppressors.

Despite the widespread demolition not only of temples but also of idols, it is probable that the indigenous people continued worshipping in secret for many years particularly in the areas which, for reasons of climate or geographical obstacles, were scarcely touched by the early evangelisation missions. Cuevas describes how difficult the Aztecs found it to tear themselves away from their roots: ‘les era muy duro la costumbre en que se habían envejecido’ (Cuevas 1922: 18). The very depth of the foundations of these massive buildings became a kind of metaphor for the deep-seated religion of the Nahuatl. It was as hard to uproot the base of the temples as to eradicate the pre-Hispanic religious practices. In evidence of this, the natives kept a foot in both camps, frequently hiding their idols at the feet of newly-erected crosses, announcing the fact that they both worshipped the cross and adored the devil: ‘para allí hacer ver que adoraban la cruz y adorer al demonio y querían allí guarecer la vida de su idolatría (Mendieta 1595: 188).

Sahagún admits that when they were no longer allowed to use human hearts for sacrifices, the Aztecs made use of animal hearts instead. Thus, it can be argued that this aspect of ‘acculturation’ enjoyed only partial success. While a large number of temples disappeared, the worship of idols, rather than vanishing with the temples, simply went underground. This was a battle which the friars had the sense and the humility to know they would never definitively win.

A second essential step in preparing Mexico for evangelisation was the organisation of the new territory. New Spain was a vast area with extremes of terrain and climate – from the unhealthy, humid atmosphere of Vera Cruz to the rugged, underpopulated north of New Galicia. The early friars were few in number and weakened by poor diet and an ascetic lifestyle. It was therefore necessary that their missionary work was rationalised as far as possible and that convents and churches should be

grouped together rather than scattered at random which would have involved extra and inefficient travelling. Ricard (1933: 64) has pointed out that it is extremely difficult to establish the chronology of the setting up of these mission centres as dates are either ignored or approximate and place names change. However the basic details would suggest that the friars initially founded two convents in two territories which would become the centre of their apostolic activity. The first was the Valley of Mexico and the second the region of Puebla. In each they set up two houses, chosen for their religious and political importance. Tlaxcala and Huejotzingo were selected for the Puebla region and Texcoco and Churubusco for the Valley of Mexico, along with Toluca, Michoacán and Tula. Texcoco had jurisdiction over Otumba, Tepeapulco, Tulancingo as well as country to the north as far as the coast, while Tlaxcala held authority over Zacatlán, Jalapa and Vera Cruz. Over Huejotzingo there seems to be a disagreement between Ricard and Mendieta (Mendieta 1590: 247) unless it is simply a change of nomenclature: Mendieta attributes Cholula, Tepeaca, Tecamachalco and the Mixteca to Guaxocingo but Ricard (1933: 64) states that these territories were in the control of Huejotzingo. From these centres the Franciscans launched their mission campaigns, penetrating Michoacán and New Galicia in 1531. After that date there was a drive towards the region of what Motolinía called the '*gente barbara*' of Chichimeca '*que vivían como salvajes*' (Motolinía 1540: 5) and the mines of Durango in the north of Mexico.

The success of this kind of 'acculturation through administration' was mixed. Ricard states that it was 'an entirely provisional organization of short duration, for the very multiplicity of the Franciscan foundations and the arrival and expansion of the other Orders made it ephemeral' (Ricard 1933: 64). Military expeditions in the north-west of Mexico resulted in the setting up of religious houses but their organisations were shaky and precarious. The most successful foundations were those in or around the state of Mexico, in particular the convent and church of San Francisco de México.

However, it was not only the friars who conducted experiments in setting up communities. The Spanish authorities were involved, not so much in the creation of new settlements as in the break-up of the old, pre-conquest institutions and their replacement by smaller administrative units known as *republicas de indios*. From these units Spaniards, blacks and *mestizos* were excluded and from 1530 onwards they were gradually absorbed into a system of government based on rights to own land and the obligation to pay tribute to the conquering authorities. Florescano (1994: 110) sees this move as one of the most destructive changes endured by the indigenous people. He notes that it abolished the former independent kingdoms, breaking the political framework which held them together and which provided a basis for a continuous community and cultural memory. Instead the natives now found themselves torn from their roots and their gods and thrust into alien surroundings where their

subservient position in society was only too obvious. Isolated and bereft they lost their sense of cultural unity and common purpose. This was the beginning of what Florescano calls ‘a continuous and inexorable break with the past’ (1994: 114). Lewis Hanke supports this view, adding ‘to urbanize the Indian population was to dislocate and destroy the patterns of indigenous culture’ (182).

The third, and possibly the most important step in the preparation of Mexico for acculturation, was the acquisition of the local languages. From the outset the friars were determined that their mission should not be seen as one of Hispanicisation. They appreciated the fact that any attempt at long-lasting acculturation could not be successful without an ability to communicate with the natives on their own terms. As Spitta has pointed out, the colonisers realised, early on, that ‘they could not detect, much less destroy, idols unless they learned the indigenous languages’ (1995: 57). They therefore set themselves, soon after arrival, the huge task of learning, not only Náhuatl, the principal language of the Aztecs, but a number of secondary languages as well. Cuevas (1922: 36) reckons that there were as many as twenty of these, of which eleven were languages in their own right and nine dialects. Náhuatl or *el mexicano*, which was adopted as the principal language of instruction, was spoken in the plateau of Anahuac, in Tlaxcala and in the modern states of Jalisco, Zacatecas and Sinaloa (Ricard 1933: 25). Tarascan (spoken in Michoacán) was also flourishing and was the language in which Maturino Gilberti wrote his ill-fated *Diálogos de doctrina Cristiana* which occasioned an eighteen year trial on the grounds of ‘evil-sounding and scandalous propositions’ (Ricard 1933: 59). In Tecoantepec, port of La Mar del Sur, the object of a missionary journey by Martín de Valencia, Zapotec was the principal language. Others were Maya, Otomí, Totonaco, Ztendal and Zozil.

The fact that the Franciscans were prepared to learn the language of the Aztecs, surely a rare if not unique example of the coloniser adopting the language of the colonised, is in itself an example of ‘reverse acculturation’. As Louise Burkhart puts it: ‘The Europeans did not simply pass through and describe what they saw: they sat down with the natives and, over a period of decades, listened to them speak in their own voices while they themselves learned to answer in kind’ (Burkhart, 1989:3). Communicating fully with the Aztecs meant not only mastering the grammar of their languages but also the task of imitating the complex rhetorical forms of expression, in particular the extended use of the metaphor, which formed the basis of Náhuatl. To the native rhetorical speech was sacred; it represented the words of their elders and ancestors handed down over generations. If the Franciscans were going to make any impact on native culture they would have to work within the conventions of formal speech and when it came to preaching and teaching Christianity permit a degree of ‘nahuanisation’ of the language of the liturgy in order to make themselves understood. This issue will be discussed more fully later.

Astonishingly, the friars did not simply master Náhuatl but were able to preach in as many as six native languages, proving themselves excellent linguists. Mendieta states, while describing a friar's typical day, 'Algunos hubo (y yo lo conocí) que predicaban tres sermones, uno tras otro, en diversas lenguas... Fraile hubo que sacó en mas de diez distintas lenguas la doctrina cristiana, y en ellas predicaba la santa fe católica, discurriendo y enseñando por diversas partes' (Mendieta 1590: 249).

This extraordinary privileging of the language of the 'other' turns on its head the opinions of the twentieth century sociologist and anti-colonialist Fanon who declared in his work *Peau noire, masques blancs*:

Il y a dans la possession du langage une extraordinaire puissance. Le colonisé ne sera d'autant plus échappé de sa brousse (sic) qu'il aura fait siennes les valeurs culturelles de la métropole. Il sera d'autant plus blanc qu'il aura rejeté sa brousse (1952: 14).

In sixteenth century Mexico, as against twentieth century France, it was the coloniser who, for the first years after the Conquest at least, accepted the language of the colonised and who had himself become '*d'autant plus nègre*'. Fanon goes on to argue that the coloniser, because his subjects had only a weak grasp of the imposed language, was accustomed to speak to the subaltern in childish language, using what he calls '*petit nègre*'. In the case of the Franciscans, because it was they who had mastered the language of the colonised, such condescension was not necessary.

In their approach to the language issue the Franciscans might have been more astute than they themselves realised, for in assimilating the language of the natives while protecting Spanish and preserving it for their own use, they were not only becoming empowered, as Fanon states, but they also shielded the Aztec languages from creeping Hispanicisation. As will be seen in later years the shift away from Aztec and the growing influence of Spanish did, indeed, result in an adulteration of the purity of the native tongues.

When learning the local languages the friars made use of a technique which had served them well in the destruction of the temples – they approached the children. Cuevas describes how faced with the huge problem of mastering the languages 'desconsolados y afligidos en aquellos principios y no sabían que hacerse' (Cuevas 1922: 182) the friars resolved to become like little children. He relates: 'Y así fué que dejando a ratos la gravedad y austeridad de sus personas, se ponían a jugar con los niños con pajuelas y pedrezuelas'. The same children would then pose questions to the Friars in their own languages and expect the friars to reply in the same language. Mendieta records that in another instance the friars became friendly with a Spanish woman who had two small boys who could speak Náhuatl. They asked Cortés for permission to 'borrow' one of the boys so that he could teach them the language. Cortés agreed and the boy, Alonso, became one of the friars' first converts to

Christianity, taking the name Alonso de Molina, and becoming author of a famous *Vocabulario Náhuatl*. In later life he gained permission to wear the Franciscan habit and laboured until old age, evangelizing and preaching the Catholic doctrine.

According to Mendieta, so committed were the friars that within six months many felt competent enough to go out on preaching missions. Most notable among these were Fray Luis de Fuensalida, who is credited with the composition of at least one *auto* and Fray Francisco Jiménez, who composed what Mendieta calls *artes* (grammars) and translated aspects of Christian doctrine into Náhuatl. A large number of manuals of instruction were written during the early years – Ricard lists 109, of which 80 were produced by the Franciscans, eight by the Augustinians and 16 by the Dominicans. Of these the majority were composed in Náhuatl but works in Tarascan, Otomí, Zapotec and Totonac are also represented (Ricard 1933: 49). As early as 1529 Pedro de Gante had composed a *Doctrina cristiana en lengua Mexicana* which was circulated in Mexico before the introduction of printing presses and reprinted in 1553. By 1539, however, Mexico City had its own printing press and in 1539 the first book was produced in the colony – a religious tract written in Náhuatl and Spanish by Bishop Zumárraga. Meyer, Sherman and Deeds (OUP 1999), state that during the sixteenth century some 15,000 books were printed in Mexico in at least nine different native languages. There is no doubt that many more existed but the majority were either lost or deliberately destroyed by command of the papacy.

Almost as soon as the Franciscans had mastered the complexities of the native languages, another problem arose: What vocabulary to use when explaining Catholic dogma? One school of thought favoured using only as many Spanish words as were necessary for conveying a particular doctrine. Another considered that total translation was the most effective method. Both had their weaknesses. Insertion of Spanish words into a native text risked making Spanish appear the language of conquest, of religious superiority, but translating into Náhuatl exposed the dogma to misrepresentation. What word, for instance, should be used for God? The Franciscans could not use the native word '*teotl*' because that was associated with the worship of idols, so in the end the Spanish '*dios*' was adopted along with a sprinkling of other Spanish and Latin words. In Sahagún's writings '*santome*', '*angelome*', '*apostolome*' and '*virtudes*' amongst many others can be found (Ricard 1933: 57). Louise Burkhart in her work *The Slippery Earth* quotes a situation in reverse. The natives had no word for 'sin' and no concept of it in the Western, Christian sense in which a man is personally responsible for his own evil deeds. The Aztecs saw not the sin but the consequence of sin - in other words, its effects, not on the individual but on the whole community. Thus a plague, a drought, a violent storm was the result of some collective misdeed or shortcoming and was being punished by the gods. If the friars

were to have a meaningful dialogue with the natives another way of describing sin had to be found. They hit upon the Náhuatl word '*tlatacolli*' meaning 'something damaged'. This term could be used in a range of situations: it could be used for a weaver who tangled her weaving or, picturesquely, for a garment gnawed by a mouse. Employed in this sense it conveyed more exactly the native understanding of sin as being the consequence of an unfortunate act rather than the inherent cause of it (Burkhart 1989: 29). Closely connected with the idea of sin was the concept of the devil. The devil to an indigenous people took many forms. He could appear as a rider with eyes like red-hot coals, dressed in a riding coat; he could be a monster with red skin and long tail or a dragon called *Canicula* who caused vomiting in children (Ingham 1986: 105). The friars finally settled on the Nahua word for 'human owl' – *tlacatecolotl* – the word '*tecolo*' contained within it representing the hoot of the owl. In Mesoamerica the owl is the bird of the underworld or *mictlan* and also a representation of the devil. It is interesting to note that Sahagún disapproved of this choice on the grounds that too many non-Christian words were being introduced into the liturgy and encouragement was thus being given to paganism – a 'crime' of which he himself was accused. Another amusing illustration of the problems of translation is provided by Mayer and Beezley (OUP 2000: 158). The Náhuatl word for 'good' was '*cualli*' which was the passive form of the word 'to eat'. The missionaries, wishing to describe the quality of good-heartedness, made use of the word '*cualli*' but actually the phrase meant 'hearts are good to eat' which had overtones of earlier heart sacrifices and cannibalism.

It is a sad comment on the history of religious acculturation in Mexico that despite the best efforts of the friars to ensure that Náhuatl became the principal language of the Church, their labours were in vain. For, unwittingly, after about 1555, the Franciscans ran headlong into religious controversy. It has been seen that the early friars, believing that New Spain was not part of Spain itself, did not want to impose Spanish upon the Mexicans, a policy supported by Cortés who had encouraged them in their adoption of the boy Alonso. In fact, they were trying to implement the principal of 'reverse acculturation', encouraging the subaltern culture at the expense of the dominant, a rare phenomenon in the history of colonialism. By the middle of the century, however, attitudes had changed. A suspicion of idolatry and paganism, fired, perhaps, by the dawning realisation that the native religions had not been suppressed but had gone underground, led to a change of opinion. Preaching in the native languages came to be regarded as encouraging paganism and both the Pope and the Crown began to adopt a more active policy of Hispanicisation. Sahagún, who described native customs in his *Historia general de las Cosas de Nueva España*, had his work banned on the grounds that it was 'dangerous' and the greater part of his writing disappeared for two hundred years, only being re-discovered at the end of the eighteenth century and now deposited in the Laurentienne of Florence

and the Royal Academy of History in Madrid. In 1555 the first Mexican synod ordered the seizure of all collections of sermons in native languages and in 1565 the synod declared that no translations of the Bible should fall into the hands of natives although Fray Alonso de Molina begged to be allowed to retain them. In 1577 Philip<sup>11</sup> proscribed any writing concerning native customs. Gilberti, whose work has already been mentioned, found himself the object of a trial which lasted eighteen years because his *'Diálogos de doctrina cristiana'* had been written in Tarascon. In addition, and this is possibly a more serious explanation of the change of attitude, by 1570 the original band of twelve Friars, with the exception of Pedro de Gante, had died out. The new arrivals were less idealistic and less committed to the policy of preaching and teaching in the native languages. There was also, increasingly, a feeling that the Spanish language acted as a kind of barrier, a *cordon sanitaire*, between the Friars and the native, that it was the language of conquest and should remain so as a mark of white superiority. As Ricard puts it: 'So long as the linguistic barrier remained standing, they (the friars) were the indispensable intermediaries between the Indians and the civil officers. They were the lords and masters of their parishioners' (Ricard 1922: 52). It might also be possible to argue that too close an association with Náhuatl, the principal vehicle for the transmission of native preconquest culture, might contaminate the less sophisticated of the friars. There seems to have been a genuine fear of *'el demonio'* as woodcuts and prints of the period illustrate. Horcasitas mentions a native Indian, writing in the middle of the century, who held that the friars used the tool of drama in their evangelizing mission *'para que no asechara, para que no jugara el demonio con los cristianos'* (Horcasitas 1974: 73). As both Pope and Crown and missionaries began to pursue a more pronounced policy of Hispanicisation, the use of Náhuatl and other languages faded. It seems, therefore, that the early attempts at 'reverse acculturation' on the part of the Franciscans failed in the long run, through no fault of their own but rather through pressure from outside influences.

Having prepared the ground for their mission, the friars now began the serious work of evangelizing. Of all the areas in which they were active, their work in Tlaxcala seems to have been the most successful and to have had the most lasting effects. Gibson records that at least seven of the original 'twelve' – Martín de Valencia, García de Cisneros, Motolinía, Mendieta, Olmos, Fuensalida and Córdoba – were resident in the province and devoted themselves almost exclusively to provincial affairs (Gibson 1951: 40), travelling widely and establishing close relations with the local nobles.



## Chapter Four    The Mission

### Baptism

It has already been stated that there were many areas of the native religion which bore marked resemblances to the Christian faith. As Balsera puts it: ‘Many aspects in the Nahuatl worship of pre-Hispanic gods were highly desirable and recoverable for Christianity (2003: 119). This is clearly evident in baptism, the first and most important of the sacraments, in that it marked the entrance of the native into the Christian Church. Here, as in previous cases, the missionaries observed that the indigenous people had their own version of baptism which was not so very different from their own. Ricard notes that when a newborn was brought to the priest, the midwife chanted: ‘Whoever thou art, thou art a harmful thing, leave him and go thy way; get thee far from him, for at this moment he begins a new life; he is reborn; he is purified again; our mother the water gives him form and engenders him anew’ (Ricard 1933: 32). The midwife often added the less cheerful commendation: ‘Perhaps thou wilt receive the gift of the flowered death by the obsidian knife’ – a reminder of the future possibility of being a sacrificial victim (Thomas 1993: 9). Water was then poured over the child’s head, in a symbolic act reminiscent of the Christian notion of the washing away of original sin in the baptismal waters and of calling the ‘old Adam’ to come out of the child. Mendieta adds:

[...] después de bañado el niño, al varon poníanle una rodela pequeña en la mano izquierda una saeta en la mano derecha, dando á entender que como varon habia de ser valiente y pelear varonilmente contra sus enemigos. A la niña le daban una escoba pequeña significando que su oficio habia de ser barrer la casa y tenerla limpia (Mendieta 1595: 267).

Mendieta admits that these ‘*insignias*’ are valid and acceptable within the Christian church, as long as they are applied ‘con harto propiedad’ since all new children at baptism are commanded to ‘fight valiantly against the devil’ and the girls, when they are old enough, are expected not only to assume housewifely responsibilities but also to sweep the Church and the home clean of all immorality and impropriety.

The notion of ‘sweeping’ was a basic part of pre-conquest Nahuatl culture, featuring, as will be seen later, in one of the earliest ‘*autos*’: ‘*The conversion of St. Paul*’. It was a characteristic Mesoamerican method of removing *tlazolli* – household dust and dirt. Burkhart notes that in the domestic situation women and girls rose at dawn to sweep the family courtyard, while it was considered one of the principal functions of boys and girls in the temple and in the *calmeac* schools (Burkhart 1989: 117). The broom was both a symbol of female fertility and the equivalent of the sword for boys – a weapon for defence and, in the case of girls, a means of defending the order of the home against danger and chaos. It was an act of purification; it removed both household dust and also, in the Nahuatl culture

where the physical and the spiritual were not separate domains, as they were to Christians, moral and sexual impurity. The fact that the friars were prepared to acknowledge this important cultural symbol in the sacrament of baptism is an indication both of a flexible attitude and of their willingness to allow themselves, along with their converts, to be acculturated. In an early Náhuatl play God asks St. Paul, who has recently died and been received into heaven, why he killed St. Sebastian (alias Esteban or Stephen).<sup>12</sup> In a new mythology, overlaid with Christianity, Sebastian had become responsible for ‘sweeping’ the roads to heaven so that, in God’s words, people could come straight to his house (Harris 1992: 13). He had been substituted for the god Quetzalcóatl, who traditionally swept clean the roads and gates of Dawn over which Aztec warriors travelled on their way to the Sun. In a fusion of Christian and pre-Hispanic cultural references, Quetzalcóatl has assumed a parallel not only with the martyred Stephen or Sebastian but, by extension, with Christ, the protomartyr. As will be seen later, this is an excellent example of the use to which the friars put existing cultural traditions in their development of Náhuatl theatre as an evangelizing tool.

‘Sweeping’ also features in Náhuatl literature. Garibay quotes an *‘exhortación de un padre a su hijo al dejarlo en la escuela superior’* in which a father instructs his son on how to behave in class: ‘Aquí tendras que barrer, que recoger el barrido por amor a Quetzalcóatl’ (Garibay 1953: 128).

As soon as it became known that the friars had begun baptising the natives (first the sick, then the children and lastly the adults), crowds, their faith in the old religion shaken by the destruction of their temples and idols, came forward in great numbers to receive the ‘substitute’ religion. Ricard records that there were so many of them that the friars had no time for adequate preparation. They had frequently to carry out baptisms after the minimum of instruction, in the knowledge that Mexico was so vast and the numbers of the missionaries so small that they might never pass that way again. Mendieta notes that applicants for baptism came from villages and *‘provincias’* and *‘todas las comarcas’*, and followed the friars along the roads (1595: 266). Baptized husbands fetched their wives and baptized wives their husbands. So many came that by the end of the day *‘los ministros que baptizaban muchas veces les acontecia no poder alzar los brazos ambos’*. Mendieta states that as many as four, five or six thousand were baptized by one missionary alone and adds that in Suchimilco in one day two priests baptized more than fifteen thousand! (Mendieta 1595: 266). He goes further still, asserting that by 1537 9,000,000 Indians had received baptism (Meyer, Sherman and Deeds 1999: 176). This may sound like excess of evangelical zeal but both Bishop Zumárraga and Pedro de Gante attest to its accuracy, Pedro de Gante stating that as early as 1529 14,000 baptisms daily were

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<sup>12</sup> This play will be discussed later in detail in the chapter of the *autos*.

administered.<sup>13</sup> Las Casas, however, took a more critical view of such numbers. As a possible convert from the Jewish faith himself, he objected to what he called ‘forced conversions’, stating that religion was a private matter and that no-one should force a native to leave the religion ‘sucked in the cradle and authorised by his elders’. He recommended, rather, that reason alone could bring him to the Faith, after years of communicating and living with Christians. (Las Casas intro. Andréé Collard 1971: xxi). His book *On the only true way to Attract People to the Faith* written between 1538 and 1540 expanded this view, incurring the indignation of Motolinía. Weight of numbers and the huge distances to be covered meant that the friars carried out these baptisms rapidly and without the normal recognised sacramental symbols, such as chrism, oil and candles. Limited by time and the need to be constantly moving on, the friars assembled all the child candidates for baptism first and performed the essential preliminaries – the sign of the Cross, breathing on the candidates, the administering of salt and the giving of a white robe – to only a few of them (Ricard 1932: 93). The adults then received a second instruction and were baptised with water but not by immersion. This ‘*ad hoc*’ form of the sacrament seems to be an excellent illustration of acculturation where both the dominant and the subaltern cultures arrive at a form of compromise due to force of circumstance. The friars did not sweep away the Nahua custom of giving children an arrow or little broom as symbol of their new life but accepted it as long as it was done with propriety. Similarly, they did not insist on the non-essentials of candles and chrism in their ceremonies and they baptised every day instead of the liturgically correct three times a year. It was only the arrival of the more conservative Dominicans in 1526 and their outrage at finding the Franciscans taking short-cuts that forced the friars to return to a more conventional form of the sacrament and it was not until a papal bull of 1537 that the use of chrism was enforced. When Pope Paul III forbade the baptizing of adults except in the Easter season, the friars, annoyed at this interference, respected Rome’s wishes for a few months, but soon returned to their previous practice, by which time, according to Ricard (1933: 94), those presenting themselves had built up to a ‘numberless crowd’. The Franciscans’ understanding of the Azteca and the genuine love which they bore them, declaring their meekness the ‘true treasure of the Indies’ and the ‘material from which a pure Apostolic Church might be formed again on earth’ encouraged them to ignore the authority of Rome and of the secular clergy and to adapt the Church’s institutions to present need as they saw fit.

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<sup>13</sup> Beltrán disputes this figure stating that such numbers ‘sólo existieron en la imaginación del buen fraile Motolinía’ (1946: 201) though he does not suggest a more ‘realistic’ figure.



A Nahua man, in the clutches of a devil, confesses to a Franciscan priest. Sixteenth-century woodcut in fray Alonso de Molina's *Confessionario mayor*, 1565 edition, f. 71r. (Courtesy of The John Carter Brown Library at Brown University.)

Fig. 6 Example of confession.

The huge numbers of those seeking baptism and the speed with which the sacrament was administered has led many observers, both contemporary and modern, to question the validity of the process. How genuine were the Indians in their demand to become members of the Catholic Church and how universal was this demand? A woodcut from 1556 (see previous page) from Motolinía's *Confessionario mayor*, would suggest that even during the ceremony of baptism there was a battle between the old paganism, in the form of the devil, and the new Faith. In the woodcut, a Nahua is depicted kneeling before a Franciscan priest while the devil pulls his hair and grabs him round the waist. An angel is hovering anxiously behind the friar, fingers raised in blessing. Some Indians did hold out against baptism. In Tarasca, for instance, sorcerers convinced the natives that the water of baptism was, in fact, blood and that at baptism the friars split open the children's heads. For this reason, the Tarascans withheld their children from the sacrament. Carlos Fuentes (1998: 205) maintains that 'la sensación de orfandad' resulting from 'la fuga de los dioses, la destrucción de los templos, las ciudades arrasadas y la destrucción implacable de las culturas' drove the natives to seek the consolation of a surrogate religion. Cuevas acknowledges the arguments of the 'cynics' but says that those who say the Aztecs accepted baptism as a way of avoiding 'maltreatment by the whites' underrate and insult native intelligence (1922: 193). He adds that the real explanation is the good example of the Franciscans and of those already converted. He argues that the comparison between 'su cruel y nefanda religión antigua con la Cristiana, toda dulzura y suavidad' was powerful but that the decisive factor was 'el impulso y gracia del Espíritu Santo'. Motolinía, too, admits to doubt but declares that the indigenous people were of a simple and innocent nature, 'ni codiciosos de intereses

tienen gran cuidado de aprender lo que los frayles les enseñan' (1541: 11, 9, 266) and that one of the good results was that after conversion the natives ceased selling each other into slavery. What is in no doubt is the Franciscans' genuine love for the natives and a heartfelt desire to redeem them from paganism, while respecting the strength of their pre-Christian culture. In Ricard's words: 'In this one sees that character of moderation and common sense, that defiance of systematic and absolute theology, that eclecticism, which seems to me to be the dominant trait of the Mexican mission' (Ricard 1933: 95).

## **Matrimony**

Before the sacrament of marriage could be performed, the Friars had to tackle the thorny problem of polygamy. This custom was deeply rooted throughout all indigenous society and pre-dated the Conquest. Acxotécatl, one of the chief lords of the province of Tlaxcala, and son-on-law of the *cabecera* Maxixcatzin, had sixty wives while the father of Xicotécatl, Tlaxcalan leader in 1519, was reputed to have had more than ninety (Gibson 1967:25). As Motolinía says: 'matrimonia planteó problemas muy graves, dada la difusion de la poligamia sobre todo entre los señores principales que a veces tenían 200 mujeres' (11, 5, 229). He adds: 'Muchos de ellos traían un hato de mujeres como de ovejas'. When the Franciscans advised them that Church doctrine permitted only one wife, the Aztecs responded that the Spaniards themselves had many 'wives', using them as servants as they did. The situation was complicated by the fact that two kinds of marriage seemed to exist in native society – 'natural marriage' which was performed without rites and was more a matter of habit or custom, and 'religious marriage' conducted according to pagan religious rites. As Ricard suggests, the first was simply concubinage and the second could pass for genuine marriage (Ricard 1933: 113). In general, the Church was inclined to be lenient in passing judgement on polygamists and Bishop Zumárraga was recommended by Rome to take a tolerant line for fear of turning away new recruits. In the end the Franciscans devised a scheme which involved the husband bringing all his 'wives' before a 'council' of natives who knew the individuals well. Each of the 'wives' would plead her cause before the assembly which would then decide who had the best case. If the matter was decided amicably, the sacrament of marriage could then be administered. More complicated or contested cases were referred to the bishop. Ricard relates that many natives who were given church weddings had not, in fact, been baptised even though they had taken Christian names. The missionaries did not condemn them but baptised them in secret. Similarly, they were well aware that polygamy continued and that many married men had mistresses or concubines hidden at home. They had come to accept

that polygamy, like the worship of idols, could not be rooted out in a generation, if at all.<sup>14</sup> This is yet another example of acculturation through circumstance, and of the dominant coming to a *modus vivendi* with the subaltern. Beltrán points out, however, that this interference in the traditional lifestyle of the indigenous society could have profound psychological effects. In Aztec culture a woman who had recently given birth was expected to breastfeed that child for four years during which time sexual contact with the husband was forbidden. The man, therefore, turned to concubines for consolation. With concubinage forbidden, or discouraged, by both the church and the *encomenderos*, the native male found the rhythm of his sexual life disrupted and the woman, losing her desire to have children, often resorted to abortion or infanticide; the net outcome being a decline in the birthrate (Beltrán 1945: 248). It should be pointed out, however, that not all Aztecs in pre-conquest Mexico lived polygamous lives. Amongst the upper classes, the *caciques* and children of the nobles were strictly instructed to live monogamously. The *Huehuetlatolli*, the Book of the Ancient Word, collected and rescued from oblivion by Fray Andrés de Olmos and Fray Bernardino de Sahagún and translated by León-Portilla, contains the memorable advice of a noble woman to her daughter:

My little daughter, my little dove, if you live here on the earth, do not allow two men to know you. And heed this warning, keep it in mind all your life. And when you are a married woman, do not think secret thoughts, but govern yourself, and do not allow your heart to stray foolishly to other men. Do not run risks with your husband. Do not foolishly deceive him, that is, do not be an adultress. (León-Portilla 1980: 70).

Such words must have been favourably received by the Franciscans and would explain why the friars rescued and even published several sections of the *Huehuetlatolli*.

## Confession

The sacrament of confession or penitence was to prove equally problematic. The Aztecs, as has already been mentioned, had a notion of sin that was at odds with that of the Franciscans, admitting only to sins of drunkenness or sexual irregularities. The idea that thoughts and intentions could also be sinful appeared to them totally foreign. They also seemed to have had the notion that they were not directly responsible for any misdeeds, attributing them to outside influences or innate weakness. Todorov offers an explanation for this, suggesting that the native did not see himself as an individual, like the Christian, in danger of mortal sin and in need of absolution, but as part of a community whose

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<sup>14</sup> In a recent interview with a Franciscan friar from Zambia, (February, 2014) Fr. Kayula admitted that polygamy was still a problem for the church but that the accepted line was that if a polygamous man came forward for baptism, he could be baptised provided he didn't subsequently take another wife. It is interesting to observe that the same level of tolerance that existed among the evangelisers of sixteenth century Mexico can still be found today.

importance overrides all personal loyalties and responsibilities (Todorov, 1982:68). Paz expands this, stating: ‘el Cristiano intenta salvar el alma individual, desprendida del grupo y del cuerpo. El indio solo concibe la salvación personal como parte de la cosmos y de la sociedad’ (Octavio Paz, 2008: 123). Beltrán, however, argues on the contrary that Azteca society had an awareness of ‘sin’ but not in the sense of offending friends or relatives but of offending the gods (1963:43). Such acts as forgetting one’s religious duty or having sexual relations in periods of abstinence provoked what he calls ‘la ira incontrolable’ of unpredictable gods, whose benevolence could swiftly turn to spite. The rain god, Tlaloc, for instance, usually held to be ‘good’, punished those who abused *pulque*. The standard punishment for disobedience to the gods was sickness of various kinds, hence the role of the native *medico* assumed primordial importance in native society. In an extraordinary passage entitled *Suma Indiana* which is a résumé of some of his principal writing, Sahagún quotes an interview between a *satrap* and a *penitente* (Sahagún, 1566: 117). Having heard the confession of the penitent, the *satrap* acts as a kind of intermediary, presenting the case of the sinner to the god Tezcatlipoca. He beseeches the god to turn aside his anger, addressing him directly:

.. en presencia de Vuestra Majestad hablo, que sabéis todas las cosas y sabéis que este pobre no pecó con libertad entera del libre albedrío, porque fue ayudado en inclinado en la condición natural del signo en que nació. Y pues que así es ¡oh señor humanísimo, amparador y favorecedor de todas! puesto caso que gravamente os haya ofendido este pobre hombre, por ventura ¿no apartasteis vuestra ira y vuestra indignación de él?

In another passage Sahagún describes a confession made before the goddess Tlaelquani. This goddess had a mediator or ‘soothsayer’ who acted as her representative. The penitent would go to the soothsayer saying he wanted to confess his sins and the soothsayer, called ‘the wise one, who possessed the knowledge, the tradition, the wisdom’ would choose the day for the confession. He would buy a new reed mat, incense and wood before lighting a fire and incensing the flames. He would then beseech the god, the ‘lord of the near’ to hear the confession of the penitent. The sinner would then kiss the earth and abase himself before enumerating his sins. When he had finished, he was ordered by the soothsayer to remove his clothes and remain naked as a sign of his remorse. He was then to return to his home and ordered never to sin again since there was no possibility of absolution on a second occasion. The soothsayer, for his part, swore never to reveal what he had heard to anyone. (Sahagún 1970: 27). What is interesting about this form of confession – and this cannot have been lost on the friars – was the fact that the sins were confessed before the soothsayer, rather than before god, and it was the soothsayer who granted pardon, on behalf of god. This is strikingly similar to the role of the priest in the confessional in the Catholic Church and must have been reassuringly familiar to the Franciscans.

There is no suggestion of punishment because there is no sense of deliberate sin. It is rather the miserable condition – ‘*la condición natural*’ – into which the penitent was born that is responsible. Similarly, the Indian appears to have the notion that pardon did not enter into the question because he was condemned from the outset to perpetual agony. Mendieta, describing the sacrifices which the natives indulged in during night orgies, states that the rituals were gone through ‘solamente por lo temporal que deseaban, sin esperanza de perdon de culpa y con certidumbre de perpetua pena’ (Mendieta 1541: 99). Elsewhere he adds that the Aztec confessed his sin:

No porque pensasen alcanzar perdon ni gloria despues de muertos (porque todos ellos tenian por muy cierto el infierno) pero hacian este género de penitencia ante sus ídolos porque no estuviesen enojados ni en este mundo los maltratasen ó privasen de lo temporal y porque no les descubriesen sus pecados, por donde cayesen en infamis con los hombres. (Mendieta 1541: 108)

Confession seems, thus, to be rather a form of insurance policy against the fury of the gods and the ill-favour of one’s fellow men. Consequently, when the Franciscans introduced confession as a necessary precursor to marriage and communion, they realised that from the beginning they were up against a culture barrier. That did not prevent them from embarking on the policy of offering the sacrament in 1526, in the first instance, in Texcoco. Ricard records that the Franciscans went about their task in a very methodical way, assembling all the natives who intended to confess in the following week, examining them in the Christian doctrine and instructing them in the value of penitence (1922: 116) before they could receive absolution. During the season of Lent this activity was intensified.

The Aztecs, despite a total difference of understanding, espoused the notion of confession with enthusiasm. Motolinía states that so many of them came to the sacrament that ‘todo el año es una Cuaresma’ (Motolinía 1536, vol. II, 5: 229). He continues: ‘decían los frailes que se veían “comidos” por los fieles cerveros. Y si en en alguna parte hallan confesores, luego hacen senda como hormigas’. It has been seen earlier that the pagan religion demanded both fasting and the letting of blood and that the natives entered into these practices with whole-hearted enthusiasm. Therefore, when the friars, having confessed them, imposed a penance, they fulfilled it to the letter, asking why they had not received a sterner punishment. Motolinía again:

Los indios, acostombrados a sangrarse y a grandes ayunos penitenciales, cumplen muy bien lo que les es mandado en penitencia, y ellos mismos dicen al confessor “y por qué no me mandas disciplinar?” porque lo tienen por gran mérito’ (II, 5, 22).

The natives, having been ‘abandoned’ by their former gods, were seeking to cling to their new, Christian ones by hoping to use the same placatory methods they had formerly employed – self-



flagellation and self-injury – to buy off tempests, plagues and other divine forms of punishment. It is clear that most of the Franciscans, and this is attested to by the great chroniclers of the period, Motolinía and Mendieta, were aware of the attitude with which the Aztecs approached confession and were prepared to accept this deviation from the norm rather than deny them the sacrament. This is yet another example of acculturation by compromise – an admission by the friars that while the sanctity of their mission would not allow them to condemn the native to a permanently subaltern condition, he was never likely to be fully assimilated into identity with the coloniser.

## **Communion**

By all accounts the Franciscans were sparing in the administration of the Eucharist. This may have been because the Aztecs possessed a primitive form of communion which the friars did not wish to be confused with the Christian rite. According to Mendieta, one form consisted of making a mixture of seeds of corn and ashes, which the Indians considered the body of their gods and which they consumed. Motolinía also records that the flat cake known as a *tamale* was, on certain feast days, considered to have been transformed into the god Tezcatlipoca (97) and eaten, thereby echoing the transubstantiation of the bread and wine in the Catholic sacrament of Holy Communion. Mendieta also quotes another form of ‘communion’ among the Totonagues who, every three years sacrificed three boys and three girls, taking out their hearts:

Y de cierta goma que llamaban ullí, que sale de un árbol en gotas blancas y se vuelve negra como pez, y de ciertas semillas, las primeras que salían en una huerta que en sus templos habían, hacían una confesión y una masa. Esta tenían por comunión y cosa santísima con orden y precepto que de seis en seis meses los hombres de veinticinco años habían de comulgar, y las mujeres de diez en seis (Mendieta 1590: 108).

Beltrán, in his book *Medicina y Magia*, mentions another native form of primitive ‘communion’. The indigenous doctor made use of ‘yerbas milagrosas’ some of which were endowed with mysterious healing powers, themselves embodiments of the gods. If the doctor ate these plants, he became possessed of the power of those particular gods. Beltrán writes: ‘Su ingestión es un acto de canibalismo ritual en que el médico agorero, al comerse al dios, se convierte, transitoriamente, en el dios mismo’ (1963: 48).

In the light of this, it may have been understandable that the friars felt a certain reticence about the widespread institution of a sacrament which involved eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ among a people who until recently had been consuming the bodies of their sacrificial victims. It may have been also that the Franciscans did not feel that most of the neophytes were ready to participate

in such a serious and sacred Feast. Whatever the explanation, the fact remains that of all the sacraments the Eucharist was the last to be introduced in New Spain. Mendieta tells the touching story of a certain Indian who had taken the name of Don Juan and, in his old age ‘alcanzó gracia particular con nuestro benignísimo Dios’. Since there was no monastery or resident friar living in his village he came regularly to the monastery of Guaxozingo and, one year, having confessed his sins, expressed the fervent desire to receive communion. His confessor, seeing his sincerity of faith, ‘no se atrevió á negárselo, aunque hasta entonces no se habia dado el santísimo sacramento de la Eucarista á otros indios’ and Don Juan thus, according to Mendieta, became the first Indian to receive the sacrament of Communion in New Spain ( 1590: 285). Unfortunately, Mendieta does not give a date for this event but Ricard states that a certain Fray Jacobo Daciano was the first to admit the Tarascans to communion in 1539 ( 1933: 122) so this event must have occurred around 1539.

While it is clear is that the friars only administered the sacrament to those who recognised the solemnity of the Eucharist and the special sacred nature of the Host, it is also clear that they recognised the predisposition of the natives to accept the idea of ‘eating’ a human body. Thus communion was delivered on an ad hoc basis to those whom they considered ‘suitable’. A similar flexibility was shown on the occasions when, as in baptism, a priest was in short supply. In these instances the friars celebrated a ‘*misa seca*’ when, as Motolinía says, ‘faltando el sacerdote, se reunion los fieles, sin consagración ni communion, y celebraban las oraciones y lecturas de la eucarista (Motolinía 1541: 111 Ch.11: 391). This willingness to proceed with the institution of Holy Communion notwithstanding the possibility of misinterpretation is an excellent example of a flexibility which allows a dominant culture to adapt to the needs and *mores* of the subaltern.

## Chapter Five Education

It will have been seen that the progress of evangelisation through the introduction of the sacraments had proceeded at a pace that was far from uniform, frequently having to be adapted and compromised due to local conditions or the natives' unshakeable and visceral attachment to their ancient religion. There was, however, another form of acculturation which was generally accepted as more effective – education. This process had two arms: preaching and teaching.

The Franciscans were '*predicadores*' par excellence. Throughout the Middle Ages preaching was the centre point of the Franciscan mission and formed part of the highest calling of a priest. In the early part of the thirteenth century it was not considered necessary for a friar to have a university training to be able to preach effectively. As Bert Roest puts it: 'a friar's own evangelical virtue would enable him to preach without being overburdened with the artificialities of scholastic learning' (Roest 2000: 277). However, from 1220 onwards an oral examination of candidates at provincial chapters was instituted and by 1285 the last lay preacher would have disappeared and only trained clerics were to engage in 'proper' preaching (Roest 2000: 279). The Franciscans in Mexico, as has been seen, were extremely competent in this field, able to preach not only in Náhuatl but in as many as ten other Indian languages in the course of one day, travelling around the country, from one region of Mexico to another. Their preaching and their love for the indigenous people and the desire to assimilate themselves into their way of life brought many to the Faith.

However, preaching alone was not sufficient if a body of professional administrators, civil servants and technicians, what Ricard calls 'a lay elite' (Ricard 1922: 217) which would ensure the continuity and future development of Christianity, was to be trained up and if the Church was, in the future, to grow in maturity and self-confidence. For that, regular educational institutions had to be established and once again the Friars saw the importance of targeting the children in their programme of acculturation. In the field of formal education two friars stand out: Pedro de Gante and Martín de Valencia.

Martín de Valencia, the leader of the original 'twelve' was over fifty when he arrived in Mexico. Knowing no native language, he mastered Náhuatl and taught many young children in many parts of Mexico the basic educational skills and in particular music and the art of hymn-singing.

However, it has long been recognised that of all the friars, Pedro de Gante was pre-eminent in the field of education. Born Pedro van der Moere and related to the Emperor Charles V, he was an inheritor, through his birth in Ghent, of the flourishing Flemish intellectual tradition, probably the most brilliant culture of the period. He arrived in Mexico in 1523, with two other religious, a year

before the ‘Twelve’, and was the only one of the three to survive into old age, not dying until 1572. Ricard recognises the significance of his arrival, stating:

The beginning of the Franciscan evangelisation may be properly dated from 1523 when the famous Pedro de Gante, with two other religious, who died almost immediately, established himself in New Spain. The year 1523, therefore, marks the beginning of the period in the history of the Mexican Church traditionally known as ‘primitive’ which ended in 1572 with the arrival of the first religious of the Company of Jesus (the Jesuits). It rarely happens in history that one finds a chronological sequence so clearly and naturally delimited (Ricard 1922: 2).

It has already been noted with what speed and enthusiasm Pedro de Gante embraced the learning of Náhuatl and other Indian languages. In recognition of the natural intelligence of the Aztecs, as Motolinía describes it: ‘el entendimiento vivo, recogido y sosegado, no orgulloso y derramado, como otras naciones’ (Motolinía, 1541: Ch.12 239), Gante soon embarked on the policy of setting up schools. In fact, it has been suggested that he founded the first institutions in Texcoco even before the arrival of the ‘Twelve’ (Iraburu quoted in (Ricard, 1922: 208).

The first schools were aimed at the basic level of teaching the catechism. The Friars taught the children in two classes: the *gente baja*, the children of the lower classes, and the ‘aristocracy’, the sons of the *caciques*. The lower classes came to lessons in the morning and the ‘aristocracy’ in the afternoon. Lessons were in a schoolroom which was attached to and formed part of the monastery. The sons of the *caciques* were expected to be boarders but the sons of the *gente baja* returned home each day. The subject matter was the same for both groups: reading, writing, elementary arithmetic and singing – all taught in the native languages, usually Náhuatl - Spanish being strictly forbidden. The Latin alphabet was taught through a series of symbols; for instance the letter A was depicted as a compass, B as a guitar, D as the half head of a bull and I as a column (Jerome Williams 1992:8). Other ingenious devices were used by the friars. For helping the students to recite the Lord’s Prayer, small pebbles or grains of maize were used. When the student had correctly recited a section of the prayer, a grain or a pebble was dropped on the ground. If he made a mistake the pebble or grain was picked up and the process begun again until the prayer was perfect (Williams 1992: 9). The Mexicans very quickly grasped the principles of Latin grammar and became, in certain cases, as adept as the friars themselves. Motolinía tells an amusing and revealing story of a religious, recently arrived from Spain, who could not believe that his pupils knew and could repeat the Pater Noster and the Credo in Latin. A native student from Tehuacan decided, perhaps unkindly, to test the new arrival’s knowledge of Latin and asked him: ‘Reverende Pater, cujus casa est?’ Motolinía goes on: ‘Entonces, cómo el clerigo no supiera gramática, quedó confuso y atajado’ (Motolinía 1595: 242).

The education of girls was not neglected though this was undertaken not so much to produce scholars as to instruct girls in their future roles as wives and mothers and to keep them in school as long as possible to avoid being forced by their fathers into early marriage. By 1534 there were eight schools for girls in New Spain, staffed by a mixture of nuns brought from Spain, *beata* (unprofessed religious) and lay women. This experiment proved ultimately to be a failure, despite the bright idealism of the friars. The native parents were suspicious of the apparent liberties accorded their daughters at school and frequently held them back from attending classes or did not pay, hoping that they would then be sent home and they continued, secretly, to send their daughters to the chiefs where they were kept as concubines. In addition, the teachers proved unreliable, leaving when they felt like it, and often going into private employment in the homes of wealthy *caciques*. Although the education of girls had been very close to Bishop Zumárraga's heart he had to admit that his means for accomplishing such a delicate task were inadequate and that, as Ricard puts it 'it would have required a whole army of cultivated and cloistered nuns' (Ricard 1922: 212) to make his mission a success. This reluctance on the part of parents to have their children educated repeated itself, as will be seen, in the case of the senior colleges destined for the 'élite'. In this respect, the friars' attempts at acculturation through education can be judged only partially successful. The Aztecs received a basic education and were quick to learn but it was more of a veneer than a profound change of culture. This does not, however, gainsay or undervalue Pedro de Gante's huge influence and his lasting contribution to Mexican culture, rather that he was up against deep-seated traditional practices which required more than a generation of Spanish friars to uproot. An engraving reproduced in Cuevas' *Historia de la iglesia en Mexico* illustrates this point. A friar sits inside a makeshift classroom with a group of pupils (presumably native, though it is not clear from the print) around him. Outside, a wolf on one side and a devil on the other are stalking, surrounding the little school. The devil, in fact, has put his claws into the building and is touching one of the pupils. In another area of the engraving a winged devil hovers threateningly over a handful of fearful natives. The print is entitled *Primera labor de los Franciscanos en Michoacán* and one can see in it the fragility and frailty of the Franciscan education mission and the powerful forces that were ranged against it.

From the beginning, as has been seen, the Franciscans were aiming at the building up of an élite, both within the church and within government, so that the native would one day have the chance to stand equal with his Spanish master. For this purpose they began the construction of senior colleges. The most famous of these was the College of Santiago, Tlatelolco, near Mexico City. This was the flagship of the Franciscan education mission and for some time the brightest jewel in their armoury of acculturation. It was founded in 1536 and opened with great ceremony by the first viceroy, Antonio

de Mendoza, with the backing of Bishop Zumárraga and the approval of Charles V. Intended for the sons of wealthy Indians and aimed at producing the first native priests, it counted among its staff some of the most intellectual and gifted friars, including the great writer Sahagún, prior of the college, and friars Olmos and Bustamante. Subjects taught included reading, writing, music, Latin, rhetoric, logic and philosophy. The organisation of the college was on quasi monastic lines. Pedro de Gante wrote to Charles V:

Se juntaron luego, poco más o menos, mil muchachos, los cuales teníamos encerrados en nuestra casa de día y de noche y no les permitíamos ninguna conversación y esto se hizo para que se olvidasen de sus sangrientes idolatrías y excesivos sacrificios. (Carta a Felipe II 1558: 23-6, quoted in Iraburu)

The students wore a kind of cassock, they arose at sunrise and before starting their lessons they heard mass in the chapel. They ate in a refectory, slept on wooden trestles in dormitories and all the furniture they possessed was a single wooden box. This rigorous discipline produced results – a succession of native Indians, skilled in their own languages, Spanish and in Latin, able to act as competent translators. Ricard notes that students of Tlatelolco helped the great Sahagún in the composing and editing of his works, including the *Pláticas* (Ricard 1922: 224). A chapter in this mighty book concentrated on native medicine and Sahagún spent many hours surrounded by native doctors, patiently listening to their tribal lore and copying it in their own language. This process is a remarkable example of practical acculturation. While Sahagún learnt to appreciate the wisdom of Aztec use of herbs and plants in the art of medicine, the natives came under the influence of western thinking, in particular the ancient Greek theories of the elements and the humours, propounded by Galen. It was not only Sahagún whose ideas were changed through contact with native doctors. Three of his collaborators, Nicolás Monardes, Francisco Hernández and Juan Badiano were so impressed by ethnic *medicina-folk* that they produced their own books on the subject, activities which aroused the suspicion of the Inquisition (Beltrán 1963: 263). Sahagún's followers also acted as copiers and typesetters for the printing of books. In fact, the college produced students whose ability in Latin, in many instances, far surpassed that of their Spanish instructors; a certain Antonio Valeriano, was said to speak Latin like a veritable Cicero. The college of Santiago Tlatelolco thus became in the 1530s and 1540s a centre of Mexican intellectual and academic brilliance which was not to be equalled for many years.

However, the college, for all its success, was, like the schools for girls, doomed to ultimate failure. There were several reasons for this: lack of funding, opposition from the Dominicans and the secular clergy and the natives themselves. Shortage of money was, from the outset, a problem. The initial building had been modest – a small, rough construction of stone, limited in its design from lack of

funds, although later enlarged in 1538 through the generosity of Charles V who, at first, showed great enthusiasm for the project. Teaching remained in the hands of the Franciscans but as early as 1536 the building was handed back to Charles V on the grounds that the friars could not pay for its upkeep. Ricard states that by 1550 the house was falling down and ten years later the students could no longer sleep in because of its state of dilapidation (Ricard 1922: 220). They therefore became day pupils which slowed their rate of academic progress. The college fell into a gradual decline until the 1570s when an attempt was made to reconstitute it but the student numbers were dramatically reduced by an epidemic in 1576 and the institution never recovered. By the seventeenth century it was a total ruin.

A second reason for the failure of the college as an instrument of acculturation was the united opposition of the Dominicans and the secular clergy. The Dominicans were opposed to secondary education, having founded not a single secondary school in all New Spain. They viewed Santiago de Tlatelolco with suspicion, considering it a hotbed of heresy, and stressed the danger of putting the gospels into the hands of unlettered natives, leaving them free to interpret them for themselves. It is interesting to note that this was exactly the kind of argument that was raging in Europe where the development of the printing press and the ideas of Luther were making the scriptures, previously in Latin and the preserve of the priests, now available to the layman in the vernacular. In 1544 two Dominicans, Fray Domingo de la Cruz and Fray Domingo de Betanzos wrote to Charles V, previously promoter of the college, to complain of the curriculum being followed at the college, stating that a native would not be sufficiently well-educated to be capable of following the dogma of the Christian religion and that a little learning was a dangerous thing. He was, therefore, unfitted for ordination. The secular clergy and the general public supported this view, though for different reasons. Both feared the notion of a native being elevated to the priesthood; the clergy because they suspected that a pupil with a classical education from the college of Santiago de Tlatelolco would show up the ignorance of the average parish priest; the public because it would upset the social pyramid. Mendieta and Sahagún defended the value of the college as a training ground and a way of discovering and fostering native skills, even if it did not lead to ordination, but once Zumarrága, its inspiration and initiator, went cool on the project and his successor, Montúfar, followed suit, the college was doomed. In 1555 the doors of the priesthood were closed to the natives, along with *mestizos* and blacks. Thus a great chance for liberalisation and progress of the church as an independent institution was lost for centuries.

However, the natives themselves must bear some portion of blame for the collapse of the ordination experiment. In the first place, they were not whole-hearted in their support. The *caciques* were often

reluctant to send their sons to the college on a regular basis, harbouring fears that the new learning would undermine and threaten the ancient traditional ways. Motolinía states that they often kept their sons back, sending *plebeyos* in their stead: ‘Al comienzo, recelosos, guardaban sus hijos y enviaban plebeyos’ (Motolinía 1536: 17). He goes on to add that when the fathers realised that education was the door to positions of responsibility such as mayors and governors they relented but the very fact that they kept their sons back at all indicates the level of their suspicion. Grijalva enlarges on this, stating that sometimes parents sent young slaves in place of their children dressed in fine clothes to pass them off as children of the wealthy (Grijalva 1624: 49). Secondly, the Indian predilection for alcohol and the excesses of fornication which they committed while under the influence made them all too often appear unsuitable candidates for the priesthood.

Finally, it must be admitted that the idea of restricting education in the college of Santiago to the sons of the élite was a fatal error and one which it is hard to understand. This exclusive attitude seems to run counter to the whole Franciscan philosophy, where poverty, simplicity and above all, humility were fundamental tenets and where all men are equal in the sight of God. It could be argued that the *gente baja*, who had received a basic thorough education at the hands of the Franciscans, should also have had the opportunity of becoming priests open to them. Why were they not included among the number of aspirant priests?

The failure to ordain a single native priest was a devastating blow to the Franciscans and a defeat for the process of acculturation, from which the Church’s reputation in Mexico never fully recovered. Ricard suggests that the friars were naïve both in losing heart in the project so quickly and by thinking that in one generation it would be possible to raise up a native priesthood among a people so recently emerged from paganism. As he states: ‘Such a thing cannot happen except in a Christian community already partially organised and stabilised’ (Ricard 1933: 232). The Franciscans also committed a fatal error in not allowing devout and serious-minded natives to join the order, allowing them only the right to wear the habit and live with the religious as *donados* but never to take vows. There were many converts to the Faith who would have made excellent friars. Mendieta tells of a young boy, called Cristóbal, who in a short time mastered all the Christian doctrine and taught the servants and vassals in his family, endeavouring also to persuade his father to abandon the worship of idols. His father’s reply was to beat and then burn him to death (Mendieta 1596: 238). Ricard describes a certain Juan de Turécato of Michoacán who freed his slaves, sold all his possessions and lived in poverty but yet was refused, many times, the right to become a Friar (Ricard 1933: 234). By not accepting Indians into the Order, the Franciscans displayed a surprising rigidity which they had not shown in the teaching of the sacraments. Such lack of sympathy gave the impression that they were keeping



themselves apart and gave rise to the suspicion that the Catholic Church was, at heart, a foreign institution. This point is highlighted by Octavio Paz who writes of the church that it was a '*religión impuesta*', adding:

El catolicismo ofrece un refugio a los descendientes que habían visto la exterminación de sus clases dirigentes, la destrucción de sus templos pero, por razón misma de su decadencia europea, les niega toda posibilidad de expresar su singularidad' (Paz 2008: 121).

Besides the college of Santiago at Tlatelolco, Pedro de Gante is renowned for his founding of the famous school of San Francisco in Mexico City, where he was director for more than forty years and had up to a thousand pupils.

However, it is in the creation of technical schools that the friars' policy of acculturation achieved greater success and this area was, once again, the inspiration of Pedro de Gante. The attempt to establish a priestly élite may have failed but the building up of an élite of native craftsmen was one of his lasting legacies. In the school beside the chapel of San José de los Naturales, he gathered a host of craftsmen – blacksmiths, carpenters, masons, tailors, cobblers, painters, sculptors, jewellers and silversmiths. Here the Aztecs displayed the same application and enthusiasm that they had shown for academic subjects and they soon learned to master all manner of trades. Ricard states that that they became potters, dyers, spinners and blacksmiths (Ricard 1933:214) while Motolinía expands on their skills of engravers, goldsmiths and bookbinders. As Balsera has pointed out, the artistry which had once been employed to adorn the pre-hispanic, pagan temples were now being given full expression in a Christian context (2003: 118). These were skills which could be employed in everyday life, giving the natives a self-respect and a freedom from dependence on the Franciscans and on the Spanish in general. It is a form of acculturation where the subaltern learns from the dominant and then breaks away from it. This will be seen in a later section which describes the propaganda use to which the Tlaxcalans put their new-found skills in drawing and perspective.

This vast variety of talent reached its finest flowering in the Mexican baroque architecture which is an extraordinary mixture of the European and the quite distinctive Latin American, the famous *Churrigueresque* style. Here, if anywhere, one can talk of 'syncretis'. Carlos Fuentes quotes the chapel of Tonantzintla, begun in the mid sixteenth century, as the finest example of this phenomenon, calling it: 'una de las más llamativas confirmaciones del sincretismo como elemento dinámico de la cultura de la contraconquista' (Fuentes, 1998: 209). It is possible to see in the elaborate interior decoration of the chapel a form of hidden resistance along the lines of the masked rebellion traceable in some of the Franciscan *autos*. The Nahuatl craftsmen were asked by their Spanish masters to decorate the chapel with reproductions of European saints, but the native artisans, possessed of new

skills, wanted more than just to copy old themes. They wanted to take the opportunity to assert their own culture. The interior of the *capilla* abounds in Aztec images. Here is what Fuentes calls: ‘una recreación indígena del paraíso indígena’ (Fuentes, 1998: 209). Native flowers and fruits, the kind seen in the décor of most of the Indian *autos*, climb up to the cupola. Angels boast, not blond curls, but short dark Indian hair and crowns of feathers. A Christ child has what looks like a crown of feathers, and is certainly not a halo, round his head. The ribs of the vault are decorated with non-European faces and strings of what seem to be bones and skulls. The whole inside gleams white and gold – a dazzling cornucopia and a tribute to the ingenuity of the native craftsman, in many ways exceeding and surpassing the skills of their teachers. Fuentes ends his description of Tonantzintla on a jubilant note: ‘El sincretismo religioso triunfó y, con él, de alguna manera los conquistadores fueron conquistados’ (Carlos Fuente 1998: 209). In the church at Tlaxcala Ricard notes the same syncretism as European animals are turned into familiar Aztec beasts: lions have become Mexican squirrels, castles Indian huts, eagles and vultures (Ricard 1933: 215).

### **Acculturation through Music**

Probably Pedro de Gante’s greatest success and most thorough-going attempt at acculturation was in the field of music. Brought up in Ghent, he had early exposure to the music of Flanders, considered at the time to be the most important source of inspiration to musicians. As a young Franciscan, he experienced the traditions of his own convent and later, when travelling to Seville with Charles V, he encountered the Spanish style. The Emperor always carried with him his own personal choir so Gante would have been very familiar with church music before his arrival in Mexico. As early as 1523 he founded his first church for natives, the Church of San José de Belem, later chosen as the site of great church ceremonials and to this church he attached a school. Here, amongst other subjects, music was taught, with the endorsement of Bishop Zumárraga. Zumárraga, in fact, appreciated the value of music as a means of converting the indigenous people and was also looking for a residential choir and orchestra for his cathedral which would, in the future, be largely composed of natives. Pedro de Gante’s school flourished and, according to Motolinía, after three years the students were singing in Latin with the confidence of those who had been used to it from birth. Motolinía, in a delightful episode, tells us that if, by accident, they dropped their choirbooks during a service, they did not bother to pick them up but continued singing by heart. He adds: ‘y si ponen el libro en una mesa tan bien cantan los que están al revés y a los lados como los que están delante’ (Motolinía 1541: 241). Zumarraga’s enthusiasm for choirs bore fruit in the huge numbers of natives who enlisted to sing, not just in the cathedral and main churches, but also in the small parishes scattered throughout Mexico.

By 1530 a choir, trained by one of de Gante's schools, was singing every Sunday in the newly established Mexican cathedral. No doubt the indigenous people were encouraged to participate by the fact that choir members enjoyed prestige amongst their peers and, more important, were granted exemption from tax. In fact, so numerous and big did choirs become that efforts had to be made to reduce them, on the grounds that they were beginning to make too much noise in the services and the state was suffering from loss of tax revenue.

Not only did the Indians learn to sing but also to play instruments, many of which they had made themselves in the workshops set up by de Gante. Stevenson mentions flutes, oboes, viols, bassoons, cornets and even organs (Stevenson 1952: 67). By 1556 Bishop Montúfar considered that the combination of instruments and choirs was beginning to dominate the church services and a Council limited the use of the trumpet and banned the flute except for festival days, declaring that the organ was the 'correct instrument' for use in church. However, Stevenson adds dryly that since Montúfar was a Dominican, the Franciscans and Augustinians did not take his orders too seriously and the size of choirs probably remained the same as before (Stevenson 1952: 65). It was left to Philip II to issue, in 1561, a formal *cedula* requiring a reduction in the size of all choirs.

Using their skills acquired in the colleges founded by Pedro de Gante, the Aztecs brought to perfection the art of copying musical scores, thus contributing to the building up of splendid libraries of church music, some of which are still in existence today. The introduction of the printing press in Mexico speeded up this process and Stevenson notes that approximately 220 books are known to have been printed in Mexico during the sixteenth century and of these 11 were liturgical books containing music, the first book devoted solely to music appearing in 1556. In Spain, by contrast, during the period 1550 – 1600 only 14 liturgical books were printed and of all the publication centres in mainland Spain, only one, Toledo, produced as many books as were published in Mexico City during the period 1556 – 1589. Indeed, amongst all the Hispanic colonies Mexico was the only one to print books of this type; Peru did not produce anything until 45 years later. Stevenson concludes by saying: 'Perhaps never at any time in any colony has so quickly and so thoroughly been applied a bright polish of European musical culture as in sixteenth century Mexico' (Stevenson 1952: 80). This was in large part due to the friars, and particularly Pedro de Gante, in their setting up of schools and choirs and generally inculcating a love of music and the art of copying musical scores. This is an example, in the early years, of highly successful acculturation.

It is noteworthy that as the century wore on, indigenous music began to make its presence felt, particularly in the appearance of the *villancico*. From the mid 1550s there are fascinating examples of 'transculturation' – music often composed by Spanish composers like Fernandes and Padilla, but

overlaid with native rhythms and set to Indian dialect words. Fernandes' beautiful lullaby *Xicochi, xicochi conetzintle* written in the Tlaxcalan language is the first known example of this genre and his *Tleycantimo choquiliye* is a striking illustration of a combination of *mestizo* and native styles. A century later Sor Juana composed a poem for the Assumption set to the music of a *tocotín* – a dance performed in two facing lines and the only one allowed inside a Catholic church.

## Chapter Six      The pueblo-hospital

A more practical example of ‘acculturation’ can be seen in the shape of the ‘pueblo hospital’. It has already been seen that in the very early days the Franciscans endeavoured to make their evangelizing less arduous by grouping the towns and villages of Mexico into ‘provinces’ which they ‘shared out’ between them so that each Friar was responsible for a slightly more manageable area. By the mid - 1530s, after rebellions in Michoacán and later in New Galicia, it was felt that the natives should be gathered into more substantial units, both for their own safety and for purposes of the propagation of the Faith. These units were known as ‘*pueblos*’ and attached to them was frequently a ‘hospital’, intended for the care of the sick and dying natives but also for hospitality and shelter, on the lines of medieval monasteries. It was an idea adopted throughout Mexico, but the most famous of these ‘*pueblos*’ was created by Vasco de Quiroga. Quiroga, unlike the Franciscans, was a secular priest who was ordained Bishop of Michoacán only after having held the political position of *oidor* of the Second Audiencia. On the one hand, he shared the Franciscan view that the indigenous people represented man in his first state of innocence, a true descendant of the first apostles – possessing the rare and untainted qualities of simplicity and humility. On the other, as a secular, and in his previous role as an arm of the Spanish Government, he saw him as a subaltern, an inferior being likely, because of his simple state, to slip into back into barbarous ways unless strictly controlled and disciplined. It was his aim therefore, in the creation of the ‘*pueblos*’, to form a pattern of colonisation to order the native, to guide him and to give him good rules and ordinances in order that he could be led to lead a good Catholic life and, at the same time, to keep him separate from the ‘decadent’ Spanish settler. Two villages, both called Santa Fe were created— one just outside the city of Mexico and the other in Michoacán, on the shore of Lake Pátzcuaro, where Quiroga later translated his seat. These villages, like others in the north of Mexico, were sealed off by legislation. No European, black, *mestizo* or *mulatto* could stay there longer than three days (Ricard 1923: 153).<sup>15</sup>

In the creation of such ‘*pueblos*’ Quiroga was deeply influenced by the *Utopia* of Thomas More which he read in 1533. At the distance of five centuries it is perhaps difficult to see why this slim book (only 132 pages) should have had such a profound and lasting effect. Modern scholars seem to be divided about the purpose of ‘*Utopia*’. Is it a Catholic tract or a political manifesto? Or a satire on

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<sup>15</sup> These two hospitals appear to have been the only two founded by Quiroga, whereas the Franciscans created ‘villages’ in Hidalgo, in Guerrero, in Guanajuato and in the regions of Chilapa, to name only a few. However, it is often Quiroga’s name which is most associated with the founding of village-hospitals. Rivalry was later to break out between Quiroga and the Franciscans over land boundary disputes. In the eighteenth century, at a time when the Crown was seeking to secularize parishes still administered by mendicants and to demonstrate that secular clergy were the true founders of the Mexican church, Quiroga was ‘rescued’ from obscurity and ‘reinvented’ as a legend and folk myth and given the posthumous name of ‘Tata Vasco’ although locals at the time never used it.

European Western lifestyles in the later manner of Defoe? Is it meant to be taken seriously? The name itself means 'not place' in Greek; the parliament is called Lietalk and foreign diplomats go by the name of Flatulentines. There is furthermore, a fine irony in using Cardinal Morton, notorious for his Fork and his method of extracting taxes from the poor, as one of More's protagonists. Whatever More's intent, however, it has to be seen, for its time, as a profound and probably shocking attack on the established hierarchy and system of Western European systems of government.

Many aspects of *Utopia* rang bells for the Franciscans. Chief among these was the advocacy of an ordered, communal way of living. In *Utopia* there are 54 'splendid big towns' (More, 1965: 69) all exactly alike and exactly a day's walk (24 miles) from the next town. Within these towns the people live in families, spending two years in a large country establishment, learning the craft of farming, raising livestock, foresting and felling, making bread and making cider. After two years, twenty people go back to their town houses and are replaced by twenty more who, in their turn, learn the art of farming. Within the town the population is divided into 30 households and they elect their Stywards (District Controllers) who elect the Mayor who remains in office for life. There are no private houses; they are allocated by lot and changed round every ten years (More 1965: 73). Each house possesses a garden, carefully tended and producing grapes and fruit. In Quiroga's two villages and his seat at Pátzcuaro the basic social unit was the family, headed by a '*padre de familia*', which corresponded to More's '*paterfamilias*'. Every 30 families would be overseen by a '*jurado*' and above every ten '*jurados*' was the '*regidor*' the counterpart of More's '*philarch*'. The life of the Indians within the villages was almost monastic, with the day being strictly regulated. All had to work six hours a day with artisanal labour, if desired, being carried out at home after the day's work. The profits of this labour were to be divided equally and no personal gain was involved. In the hospitals of Santa Fe, which were attached to the villages, a similarly monastic order prevailed. They were occupied not only by the sick but also by *familias* organised on Utopian lines. The children within the hospitals were educated along the pattern of the lay schools while the adults did the bulk of the caring, thus learning the basics of medicine as well as the discipline of service. In *Utopia* More tells us that the hospitals were so successful and so well-run that 'practically everyone would rather be ill in hospital than at home' (More, Tr. 1965: 81). The same seems to have been true of the friars' foundations. In fact, Ricard describes the Mexican hospitals as 'among the most original creations of the Mendicant Orders, and one of the most ingenious devices for making Christian ideas a part of daily life' (Ricard 1922: 161). Attached to the hospitals and to the houses of the villages were small kitchen gardens and orchards, where, like the inhabitants of *Utopia*, the natives grew their own crops. This is one of the more successful aspects of acculturation, not only in Quiroga's villages but in Tlaxcala, Cuernavaca

and Alcoman and wherever the scheme was put into practice. Under the guidance of the friars, particularly the Augustinians, Indians learned how to rear cattle, to grow wheat, fruit and cochineal. Quiroga, himself, introduced banana seedlings into his see of Michoacán. One of the most surprising facts about this co-operative experiment was the introduction of the silk industry, which had the backing of Bishop Zumárraga. So productive did it become that, according to Ricard, 9,000 pounds of silk were produced in 1542 in the province of Oaxaca alone (Ricard 1922: 144). Unfortunately, this commercial brilliance was short-lived, spanning only fifty years, later succumbing to competition from China and the Philippines.

While the hospitals and the farms were successful means of acculturation, since they taught the basics of health care and self-sufficiency, the *pueblo* cannot be said to have been so effective. In the first place it was, as Colombres calls it, a form of ‘*acculturación forzada*’ (1986: 94) and to many Mexicans it was foreign and unnatural. Some, particularly those of the north, were nomadic and resented being tied down in one particular area. When they were tired of the discipline imposed on them, they left the villages and resumed their traditional life-style. Secondly, by sealing off the *pueblos* from outside contact the Franciscans may have been protecting them from the ‘decadence’ of the Europeans, but they were preventing the indigenous people from learning how to become self-governing and responsible for their own destinies. It perpetuated the Franciscan view that they were, and always would be, ‘children’ as eloquently expressed by Escobar: ‘All these Indians are like nestlings whose wings have not yet grown enough to allow them to fly by themselves’ (Cuevas 1922: 311). Such isolation only reinforced the idea of ‘the other’- the notion that the natives were not part of mainstream Mexican society. Thirdly, the friars, in taking on the administration of the *pueblos*, allowed themselves to be absorbed in administrative duties and distracted from their missionary role.

On the other hand, the design of these *pueblos* is the product of a happy marriage between Spanish and pre-Columban traditions and can be said to be an excellent example of ‘transculturation’ – in many ways more successful than the villages themselves. When the friars arrived in Mexico in the early years of the sixteenth century, they were heirs to the architectural styles of both the Spanish Renaissance and the Moorish tradition. Many of them had originated from the great cultural centres of Spain: Fray Martín from Valencia, Fray Andrés from Córdoba with its Christian cathedral embedded inside the *mesquita*, Pedro de Gante from the high art of Flanders. Thus they were familiar with the Classical and Renaissance lay-out of cities and when it came to designing their *pueblos* it was a surprise to them to discover that the Indian pre-Columban style was remarkably similar to their own. Tenochtitlán, Moctezuma’s great capital, was built on a grid pattern, fashionable in European cities of the time and in accordance with ancient Roman precedent. The city which was built over

Moctezuma's capital and re-named Mexico City, was therefore laid out on a grid pattern of rectangular streets and rectangular blocks which would have been recognisable anywhere in continental Europe.

During the last stages of the siege of Tenochtitlán, Cortés decided to build a catapult and to install it in, as he describes it:

A sort of square theatre which stands in the middle, built of stone and mortar and is about fourteen feet in height and thirty paces long. When the Indians celebrate their plays and festivals, the performers place themselves on this stage where all the people can see them (Fuentes 1963: 115)

Spaces like this, where the earlier temple had once been, were reinvented as the *plaza mayor* and served as a meeting place and open forum for festivals and religious *autos*. This square was the heart, not only of the great cities but also of the small *pueblos* in every part of Mexico. Around it all the activity of the settlement was organised. In the centre was the fountain, an import from Spain where the Moorish tradition had laid great emphasis on water and, rather ominously, the gibbet or *horca*. On the other sides of the *zócalo* were grouped the public buildings, the church with convent adjoined, school and the *cabilde* or local government buildings. This pattern never varied and has been observed in even the remotest villages in the Andes.

A further example of pre-Columban design can be seen at Cholula, one of Mexico's most ancient towns and home to the country's widest pyramid, though sadly now in a neglected state. Here, the grid pattern was laid out by Cholulan draughtsmen, trained in the school of Pedro de Gante, using chequerboard blocks. As in Mexico City, the *plaza mayor* is at the heart of the town, surrounded by official buildings and the Franciscan establishment. Tlaxcala and Puebla are further text-book illustrations of this same grid pattern, visible all over Mexico and South America.

Church design also underwent a process of evolution, a further example of acculturation by adaptation. The numbers of the newly-converted seeking baptism or attending mass became so great in the early years after the Franciscans' arrival that the conventional church could no longer house them. A specially designed *patio* or *atrio*, connected to the main church, had to be built. This was a cross between an ancient Roman *temenos* and a typical Aztec sacred complex and consisted of a large rectangle with four pavilion open shrines, called *posas*, in each corner. The side or sides of the *atrio* were left open so that the maximum number of worshippers could witness the consecration of the Host at mass, listen to the friars' sermons or, as will be seen, watch the sacred plays or *autos*. This design of church came to be known as '*capilla abierta*' and it was here, in around the year 1530, in the cathedral of Mexico City, that the earliest known *auto*, '*The Conversion of St. Paul*', was



performed. Horcasitas states that this ‘capilla abierta’ provided the perfect locus for dramatic performances. He writes:

Casi todas estas capillas parecen ser el espacio ideal para las representaciones dramáticas. La capilla abierta posee todas las cualidades necesarias requeridas para una magnífica acústica. Tiene un piso sólido; la persona que habla está de espaldas a una pared de piedra, la cual refleja su voz, la voz puede ser proyectada sin temor de eco o resonancia. (Horcasitas 1974: 120)

The design of these early churches was at first basic. Kubler notes that that they were heavily built and their massive bare walls were suggestive of military architecture (Kubler 1959: 71). This was partly because the Mexicans who supplied all the labour, were as yet untrained and partly because the friars felt the need to defend themselves in the event of attack by, for instance, the hostile Chichimecs from the north. As the century advanced, however, native craftsmen became more sophisticated. The kind of amateurish rib-vaulting seen in the 1539 church in Tlaxcala, was replaced by more professional vaulting so that by 1550 the friars could progress to vaulted naves and cloister walks. Church decoration was another example of ‘transculturation’. Provided until the 1550s almost exclusively by the indigenous people, it demonstrated a fascinating mixture of European and pre-Columban Aztec motifs – a triumph of ‘transculturation’. An excellent example of this fusion can be seen in the unfinished open chapel at Tlamanalco. Here door jambs have a mixture of the Christian and pre-Christian cultures. While seraphs and angels feature on one panel, on another Aztec glyphs, skulls, masks, dolphins, dogs and monkeys abound. Kubler describes this as a ‘living synthesis of European and indigenous art’ (Kubler 1959: 166). When it came to Christian decoration, the Aztec’s favourite topic for carving or sculpture was the bloodstained and suffering figure of Christ, perhaps because they could see in it their own torture at the hands of the conquistadors, but they made it their own by giving the image names in the vernacular. Later, under the tutelage of Pedro de Gante and his technical schools established from 1527, they became more skilled in the more sophisticated art of making altars and screens, using Gothic, Plateresque and Renaissance designs of Peninsular inspiration. However, by the 1570s, sadly, this period of inventive and innovative art was over and as the Franciscans, the early pioneers, died out, they were replaced by the less imaginative and less adventurous secular clergy.

## Chapter Seven 'You taught me language ...' (*The Tempest* Act 1 Sc. 2)

### **Pictorial and poetic persuasion: the acculturator acculturated?**

Caliban's complaint was that Prospero had taught him how to speak but that he could not make the best use of his new skill. This was not because he used his language badly. On the contrary, his vocabulary and syntax was as rich as Prospero's.<sup>16</sup> Consider his famous speech beginning: 'Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises' (Act III, Sc. 1). He never had the chance to use his skill because Prospero (coloniser, *encomendero*, *hacendado* in 1960s post-colonial writing)<sup>17</sup> considered him an inferior mortal only fit to carry out the orders which he barked at him: 'Hag-seed hence! Fetch us in fuel; and be quick' in the kind of language which Fanon had called *petit nègre*.<sup>18</sup> The Mexicans, on the other hand, having been taught the arts of writing, painting and music by the friars, learned to profit from them very quickly, using them to their own advantage. The Tlaxcaltecs, in particular, building on the part they played in the defeat of Tenochtitlán, used their knowledge of art and perspective to impress the Spanish and bolster their claim to preferential treatment.

Before the conquest the Nahuatl, unlike the Maya, had no form of writing. They used instead pictures and 'glyphs' – symbols which were widely recognised and understood, like map symbols or shorthand. Thus, the glyph for Tenochtitlán was, in accordance with the foundation legend, an eagle eating a serpent, standing on a nopal cactus with nochtli or prickly pear fruit, in the middle of a lake. The sign for an altepetl or Nahuatl dwelling complex was a high mound or hill, as seen in the pages of Durán's history. This form of recording indigenous history had a long tradition, dating back to centuries before the Conquest and continued in use well into the middle of the sixteenth century, even after the friars had introduced the Roman alphabet and writing was being taught in their schools. Indeed, as Ricard has pointed out, friars such as Sahagún and de Gante continued to instruct by means of *pinturas* (Ricard 1933: 104).

One of the most forceful examples of pictorial acculturation is provided by what are known as 'The Tlaxcalan pictorials'. Three examples of these are extant though it is probable that many others have been lost. The first of these includes manuscript fragments of four scenes written on native bark paper now stored in the library of the University of Texas. The second and third documents are the work of

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<sup>16</sup> In fact a case could be made out for saying that Prospero was frightened of Caliban's power of language, having already used it to attempt to seduce Miranda. He therefore wanted to silence him before he could do further damage.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, the article by Rob Nixon entitled: 'Caribbean and African Appropriations of *The Tempest*' in 'Critical Inquiry', University of Chicago, Spring 1987.

the *mestizo* Muñoz de Camargo. A native of Tlaxcala, son of a Spanish *hidalgo* who held land from Cortés, his famous drawings are copies of those which once decorated the walls of the cabildo in Tlaxcala, produced on cloth panels, hence their name lienzos. Made in 1552 they illustrate the first years of the Conquest, from the arrival of Cortés to the fall of Tenochtitlán. Alongside the lienzos, Camargo also produced, in 1580, a history of Tlaxcala, known as the Descripción which earned him the title, according to Kranz, as ‘more or less the official historian of Tlaxcala’ (Kranz 2010: 53). This Descripción also contains illustrations in the form of pen and ink drawings. Together they represent some of the most interesting examples of Mexican art in the process of evolution. Some historians, according to Federico Navarrete (2007) argue that they can be seen as ‘el resultado del proceso de aculturación y occidentalización iniciado por la conquista’, others see in their frequent representation of Malinche a form of native resistance which used Marina as a symbol of indigenous identity. Either way, these pictorials illustrate in the most striking manner the blending of Aztec and European art resulting in, like the dramatic form, the *autos*, something new and distinctly Mexican. A particularly interesting drawing by Muñoz de Camargo serves as an excellent example of this blending. The drawing is an early one, depicting the burning of ‘books and clothes of idolatrous priests’.



Fig. 7 Muñoz de Camargo. Department of Special Collections, Glasgow University Library. By kind permission of the University of Glasgow

While the friars are drawn realistically in European style, the Aztec effects are presented, in carefully native detail. They are not a jumble of broken bits thrown on a bonfire but the shattered parts of an Aztec solar calendar as found on temples and monuments. The two cultures, side by side in the single picture suggest a form of acculturation and a readiness on the part of the friars to respect the Aztec art even while destroying it.

These drawings, beside serving art historians also provide an excellent example of Tlaxcalan propaganda, show how the Tlaxcalans, having learnt the art of drawing from the Europeans, put their skills to good use in arguing for better conditions from the Spanish, playing the acculturation game in reverse or, as Ybarra puts it, manipulating ‘the system’. The Tlaxcalans considered that they had played a vital part in the Conquest, particularly in the capture of Tenochtitlán and in the campaigns against the Chichimeca in the north, conveniently forgetting that they had opposed Cortés in 1519. On the strength of this they claimed privileges such as the right to bear arms, ride horses and pay less

tax. What is interesting from the point of view of artistic acculturation is the use which they made of these pictorials and the political way in which they were adapted, bringing more persuasive and more sophisticated arguments to bear. Thus the earlier drawings which showed the Tlaxcaltecs offering gifts of groups of women and food to Cortés, as though to a tribal chieftain, in pre-conquest days, were replaced by pictorials showing only two female offerings more as a mark of respect for an important dignitary. Other tactics consisted of attempts to persuade the Crown of their early conversion to Christianity as seen in Muñoz Camargo's depiction of the twelve friars raising a cross and the pagan devils fleeing in panic. Another lienzo, number 8, shows four Taxcalan nobles kneeling to receive what the Tlaxcalans claimed was one of the earliest Christian baptisms. This picture shows the interior of Cortés' house, with Cortés himself seated, holding a crucifix. The *presbítero*, Díaz, who Muñoz asserts accompanied Cortés on his first campaign, is seen baptising the four Tlaxcaltecan Señores, features of Tlaxcaltecan dramatic legend (Trexler 1984: 202). Behind Cortés can be seen Marina (Malinche) and a Spanish soldier. Opposite them, on the other side of the picture, stand three Spanish lords. The implication is clear: Muñoz is using his art as propaganda, to assert that Tlaxcala was being Christianised, under the auspices not of the friars but of Cortés, with the backing of the Spanish Crown and the army. This claim to early Christianisation of Tlaxcala before the rest of Mexico is one which Gibson refutes (1952:30).

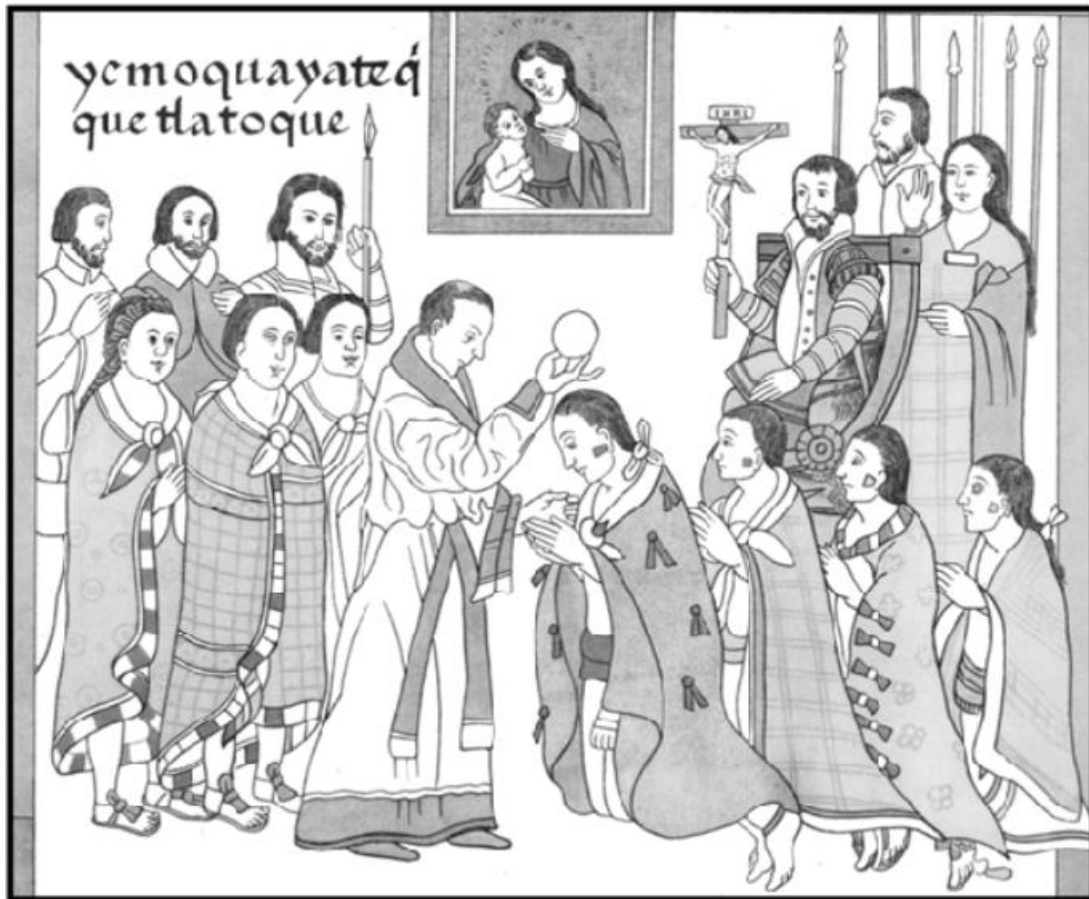


FIGURA 03 - Lámina 8, Lienzo de Tlaxcala

Fig. 8 Travis Barton Kranz: Diego Muñoz Camargo (MS Hunter 242) drawing 20 Lienzo de Tlaxcala, scene 8. Department of Special Collections, Glasgow University Library.

An increasing awareness of European techniques of perspective, shading and realism, using the knowledge imparted to them in Pedro de Gante's technical schools at Texcoco and San José de los Naturales, can be seen in other paintings from the *lienzos*. Two pictorials, both by Muñoz Camargo, illustrate this. In the first (see below, quality of picture is poor), two mounted Spaniards are shown receiving gifts of food from a Tlaxcaltecan chief, reminding them that the willingness of the natives to supply food had been an essential feature of Cortés successful conquest. The types of food are shown on the bottom left-hand side of the picture. They represent baskets of bread and birds, possibly hens or quails, always prominent in Aztec sacrificial practices. Besides reminding the Spaniards of Tlaxcaltecan help, the *Descripción* is interesting because whereas an early painting of the same scene shows horses' hoof prints represented in a flat manner, like a map, in the later drawing the path on which the horse is standing is in perspective and contains lifelike images of hoofprints. In addition, rocks and flowing water have been depicted in a naturalistic, European fashion.



Fig. 9 Travis Barton Kranz: Diego Muñoz Camargo, Descripción de la ciudad y provincia de Tlaxcala (MS Hunter 242) drawing 31. Department of Special Collections, Glasgow University Library.

The second picture is clearly an attempt to win favour with the Spaniards by depicting the mighty Cortés and all his triumphs and glories. His name is shown in a gloss above his head: Don Fernando Cortés. He is mounted on a horse, in full armour, like a Roman Emperor. In one hand he bears a lance and in the other a crucifix, signs of his authority and his devotion to the Church militant. Beside him stands Moctezuma II, his legs in fetters, his banner fallen and his crown broken, condemned to wield, not the badges of office, but a humble rake. On the ground, at his feet, is a broken mask of a pagan deity. Most interesting of all, to the left is a figure of a woman, but she is clearly not the Malinche who has featured so prominently in earlier pictorials. This woman has a rapt expression on her face and is staring at Cortés, hands joined in an attitude of prayer. On her gown, which is neither Aztec nor Spanish but a combination of both, is written, not her name but the words *La Nueva España*. However, just in case one might imagine that this pictorial represents total submission to Spain, the woman carries in her hand a standard on which appears the glyph of the *nochtli*, or prickly pear cactus,



the symbol of Tenochtitlán, a reminder that Mexico may have been militarily defeated but the Aztec culture has not gone under.



Fig. 10 Travis Barton Kranz: Diego Muñoz de Camargo, *Descripción de la ciudad y provincia de Tlaxcala* (MS Hunter 242) drawing 31. Department of Special Collections, Glasgow University Library.

This illustration from the *Descripción* represents an excellent example of transculturation; described by Kranz as a ‘pictorial expression that bridges both cultures’ (Kranz 2010:58).<sup>19</sup>It also tells us something about the *mestizo* artist Muñoz Camargo. In depicting Malinche as a daughter of New Spain he has moved away from his part *mestizo* roots and is proclaiming his new Spanish identity as an ally of Spain.

<sup>19</sup> It is interesting to note how far these artistic manoeuvres on the part of the Tlaxcalans were successful. Kranz states that as a reward for military assistance, the Tlaxcalans were granted the right to remain under the direct administration of the Spanish government, rather than being assigned to the Spaniards in *encomienda*. In addition, in 1535, their city was renamed ‘La Leal Ciudad de Tlaxcala’ in recognition of its military assistance during the conquest and accorded a coat of arms (Kranz 2010: 55). Gibson, on the other hand, states that although the list of so-called privileges given to the Tlaxcalans was long, ‘su significación para la vida social parece haber sido escasa’. He illustrates this by adding: ‘El privilegio de no pagar tributo no se llevó a efecto y, a partir de 1521 los Tlaxcaltecos pagaban sus tributos año tras año’ (Gibson, 1954: 294).



## Oh sing unto the Lord a new song (Psalm 95)

If the Tlaxcaltecs exploited their new-found, Western art styles to gain political advantages, the same can also be said of the use they made of the musical forms imparted to them by the school of Pedro de Gante. When the first phase of the conquest was over, the friars realised that there was a cultural void in the life of the Indians. Their gods had fled, their temples were being flattened and Tenochtitlán had fallen. How could this gap be filled in order to give the evangelizing mission a positive rather than a negative aspect? One of the most effective ways was to lock into the existing cultural heritage of the Aztecs and to re-shape it in a Christian direction. Two aspects of Indian daily life suggested themselves. One was drama, which will be considered in the next section, and the other was song. To sing was a natural instinct, built into the native character. As Garibay writes: ‘Tan natural como las lágrimas es para el hombre el canto’; he adds: ‘Un pueblo que cantaba siempre, que cantaba a sus dioses, lo mismo que a sus héroes, ¿iba a quedar callado?’ (Garibay 1954: 89).

The most complete collection of songs is to be found in the *Cantares Mexicanos* housed in the *Biblioteca Nacional de México*. This collection contains a range both from the pre-conquest period and from the years following it. Some have been gathered by Sahagún, some reputedly written by Pedro de Gante but the majority are anonymous. Sahagún’s contributions are presented in his *Psalmodia Christiana*, sadly the only one of his many works to see the light of day during his lifetime owing to opposition from the clergy and fear of the Inquisition. The church authorities were deeply suspicious of the indigenous songs and Sahagún’s interest in them, anxious that they should not appear to glorify a pagan past. An Ordinance from Vice-Roy Mendoza in 1543 stated: ‘Que los naturales de esta Nueva España no canten lo que solían y acostumbraban en sus tiempos, sino los que les son o fueren enseñados por los religiosos’ (Garibay 1954: 97).

Nevertheless, the collection of *cantares* is remarkable for its fusion of pre-Hispanic and Christian motifs, a phenomenon which will be later observed in the discussion on the *autos sacramentales*. This is yet another example of transculturation – an acknowledgement by the friars that it would be practically impossible to destroy at one stroke the ancient Aztec culture and that accommodation could be reached. For instance, a song appointed to be sung on Septuagesima Sunday appears under its Náhuatl name – ‘*Tlaocolenicatl*’. A song for Easter is listed as *Xochicuicatl*. A canticle destined for Christmas, 1553, entitled *Caozacuicatl* provides an excellent example of the blending of the pre-Hispanic and the Christian, using Aztec imagery to worship the new-born Child: ‘Todos nosotros admiremos, oh hermanos, en Belén está deshecho el plumaje de quetzal, cual collar de finos jades, deshechos los niños’ (quoted in Garibay 1954:105). *Quetzal* and *jade* are two of the most powerful images in Indian culture, appearing again and again in verse and in drama. The same juxtaposition of

the old mythology and the *nueva fe* can be found in a song said to have been written by Pedro de Gante for the pupils at the college of St. Francis to be sung of his feast day in October. The first verse has a wonderful pagan lushness about it, drawing on rich Aztec imagery, of the kind that is used in the first part of the *auto* '*La caída de nuestros padres*':

Daremos placer al Dios único, sobre el verdecente prado,  
Muy placentero está rumorando perfumadas floras, deleitosas flores  
Hemos de cortar allí nosotros los niños.

The second verse returns to Christian mythology, telling the story of St. Christopher crossing the river, but ends with an Aztec flourish when it describes the saint as having made a web of 'coloured butterflies' to help the Christ child across the water (Garibay 1954: 116). If this Náhuatl poem was truly written by Pedro de Gante, it represents both an astonishing mastery in a relatively short time, of a very complex language and a remarkable degree of religious tolerance in allowing pagan mythology to mingle with Christian doctrine. Pedro de Gante could with justification, be held up as a prime example of what might be called 'co-culturation'.

Another example of transculturation can be found in an amusing poem/song called *El canto de peces*. Here, in a long *canto* of 175 lines, the writer makes full use of one of a favourite devices, that of disguise. Under the guise of fish, the protagonists discuss recent events and make reference to local characters. For instance, the late Archbishop Zumárraga, first archbishop of Mexico, features several times: 'Oh tú, cangrejo rojo, En medio de las aguas de color de quetzal, Te has ido y has dejado y abandonado todo, Te fuiste dentro el cielo, oh, Don Juan'. Whether Zumárraga would have appreciated being likened to a 'red crab' and an operatic villain is debatable. In fact, a case might be made out for the idea that the whole poem is a satire and a form of artistic revenge on the Spanish. This theory is strengthened by some lines in the fourth verse between some Mexicans (disguised as frogs) and another group, possibly the *conquistadores*, which begin with typical colourful Indian imagery and end on a bitter note making reference to the payment of tribute:

Que junto a verdeazulados y rosacea junco acuático  
Cantemos muy tristes cantos  
Nosotros, las verdes ranitas de Tapia,  
Aquí esperamos el mandato de Dios,  
De nuestro único Señor, nosotros los blancos peces  
Que serán dados en tribute el sábado

Other sections of the *canto* refer to toads, mosquitos, lake animals and insects which suggest that the composer was familiar, not just with the lacustrine life around Tenochtitlan but also with the Franciscan love of nature. This remarkable blend of the pre-Hispanic and the Christian represents what Garibay calls ‘una bella complexión de temas cristianos y paganos’ (Garibay 1954: 119); a striking expression in song of *la nueva forma* using the antique vessels of Aztec poetic art.

## Chapter Eight The play's the thing (*Hamlet*, Act 2, Scene 2)

### The roots

One of the most effective methods of evangelization, and certainly one of the most intriguing, was the use of the *auto*. In this dramatic art form it is possible to see perhaps the best example of 'transculturation' as Ortiz describes it: the fusion of two cultures to produce a totally different form of cultural expression, whose component parts remained, however, always identifiable.

The *auto sacramental* was a form of dramatized story-telling whose roots go back in Spain to antiphonal dialogues used in the mass on Festival Days such as Good Friday and Easter Sunday as early as the eleventh century. In Mexico, where they were transported by the friars, they reached their highest flourishing in the years 1533 to 1540 and then declined as the friars' missionary zeal faded before the face of increased secularism. The last known *autos* were produced in 1768 (Horcasitas, 1974: 80) but, like the *villancicos*, which were often incorporated into the *autos*, by that time they had lost much of their brilliance.

In order to understand the evolution of the *auto* and the role it played in the friars' mission in Mexico, it will be necessary to examine first the Spanish theatre as it existed in the sixteenth century, to see what kind of dramatic heritage the friars brought with them and then to consider the Aztec dramatic traditions which they found in existence on arrival in New Spain.

### Drama in Spain, 1150-1521

The Spanish theatrical tradition seems to have developed from two separate strands: the liturgical as found in the mass and the tourney or tournament. Horcasitas maintains that until the eleventh century Spain remained under Muslim dominion and, while a rudimentary theatre was beginning to emerge in other parts of Europe, Spanish theatrical evolution was paralyzed (Horcasitas, 1974: 59). Only after Spain began to claim back its territories in the *Reconquista* of the twelfth and subsequent centuries did the country feel confident enough to begin its own form of theatre.

The earliest liturgical drama sprang out of antiphonal responses within the mass. Horcasitas describes a dialogue for Easter Sunday between the angel seated in Christ's tomb and the three Marys who came to anoint his body early on the first Easter Sunday:

Los angeles: ¿Quem quaeritis in sepulcrum, o Christicolae?

Tres Marias: Jesum Christum crucifixum, o caelicolae.

Los angeles: Non est hic, surrexit sicut predixit. (Horcasitas 1974: 60).

This dialogue evolved during later centuries, slowly gathering momentum, adding more characters such as the apostles who received the news of the resurrection, but remaining incorporated into the body of the mass and essentially static. It is interesting to note that this method of imparting information in question and answer form remained popular in Spain until well into the sixteenth century. Martha Tenorio quotes a Christmas *villancico* in which two shepherds discuss the nature of the Christ Child: ‘¿Es el niño de Belén hombre o Dios?’ asks one and the other replies: ‘Dize Gil qu’ es hombre humano/ y Pasqual dize que es Dios.’

Or in another *villancico*, called by Tenorio ‘*la exhortación*’, a shepherd arrives with news of the Nativity, shouting ‘¡Vengan, vengan! Oid, oid!’ His friend, unaware of the situation, asks ‘¿Quién oyo? ¿Quién oyo?’ (Tenorio 1999: 19).

Between the years 1130 and 1150 two important developments took place: firstly, the appearance of plays in the vernacular and secondly, the slow movement away from the static question and answer form towards more naturalistic drama forms. The earliest extant play in the vernacular, which is documented, is an anonymous drama written in Catalan, entitled ‘*Auto de los Reyes Magos*’. This play is notable for its conversational quality. The three magi discuss the significance of the newly appeared star and decide to bring gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. If the child accepts the gold, he will be king of the world, if he accepts the myrrh, he is mortal and if he prefers the incense, he is king of heaven.<sup>20</sup> In all probability, this early drama is a translation from the French and reached Spain via Gascony.<sup>21</sup>

The development of the dramatic form received a vital impetus from the declaration of 1264 when Pope Urban IV extended the celebration of Corpus Christi, the day on which Christ’s spiritual victory over sin and death is symbolized by the carrying of the Host in triumphal procession, to all churches. This feast was to be held on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday and fast became one of the most important days in the year all over Western Europe. More *villancicos* for instance, were composed in Spain for Corpus Christi than for other festivals in the church’s calendar. At about the same time as Pope Urban’s declaration, however, other *autos* and dramatic forms began spontaneously to appear

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<sup>20</sup> Surprisingly, a version of this story was told to Marco Polo in a Persian village. The three magi were given a box containing gold, incense and myrrh by the Holy Child. When they opened the box they found only a stone, symbolising the strength of faith which they had to profess. (Horcasitas 1974, 284).

<sup>21</sup> There seems to be some uncertainty about the date of this play. Horcasitas places it in the twelfth century without specifying a date, while Wickham, as quoted, dates it to between 1130 and 1150 and Delgado (2012, 20) states that it can be dated to the end of the twelfth century on account of existing records attesting to payment for scenery and costumes.

in Spain. Modern research has begun to unearth more and more previously unknown or unrecorded documents, extending from Murcia to Lisbon and from Granada to Oviedo. There is, for instance, a document dated 1279 recording details of a Palm Sunday procession in Castile and León and later, from the same area, references to Corpus Christi spectacles from the beginning of the fourteenth century. Musicians, angels, saints, apostles appear in a document from Salamanca, dated 1499, and by the turn of the century this had evolved into highly elaborate performances, featuring costume accessories such as beards and wings and stage machinery including planks, pulleys and carriages. In Valencia, Corpus Christi processions included paid performers who dressed in the suits of animals and a document of 1408 attests to a salary given to those who walked inside St George's dragon (*la cucha de sent Jordi*) (Delgado 2001: 26-30).

These elaborate performances became too great to be contained within the mass and inside the body of the church, so gradually they moved outside first into the churchyard and then into the *plaza mayor*. Here they were performed on platforms made by joining three carts together to form an acting area with a tower at either end and an upper level. The tower was a regular feature of dramatic productions and when later translated to Mexico, became a defining characteristic of many Náhuatl *autos*, sometimes reinvented as a hill or a mountain or Aztec *altepetl* representing a goal to be reached, an aspiration or a source of enlightenment.

The themes of these plays were always related to stories from the Bible: scenes from the Old Testament which foreshadowed the salvation of the world by Christ in the New Testament. Thus the story of Adam and Eve and man's fall from grace necessitated the coming of Christ as Redeemer; the sacrifice of Isaac prefigured the sacrifice of Christ, the willing victim and the death of Abel is a parallel for Christ's own passion. From the New Testament, the birth of John the Baptist, the Nativity of Jesus, the Crucifixion and Resurrection and the Last Judgement were judged the most suitable. These Corpus Christi dramatic representations were regularly staged by the *cofradías*, guilds of actors each representing their own professional interest and frequently financing the productions.

There was, however, another strand in Spanish dramatic tradition: the tourney. Tournaments were well known and documented in Romance literature of the period. The foundation of chivalric orders such as the Knights Templars, the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre and the Teutonic Orders in Hungary gave the theme respectability and inspiration. King Arthur was revived as the flower of English chivalry, Chaucer's Knight's Tale deals with the rivalry in the lists between Palamon and Arcite for a fair lady's hand, the *Chanson de Roland* was retold in France and as late as the sixteenth century Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* stands as a monument to noble knightly self-sacrifice.

In Spain the tournament took on a different character. Instead of the tournament or tourney, we find the mock battle. Battles between St. George and the Dragon or the Turk were common enough in England where they featured in the mummers' plays and in Portugal, where Gil Vicente (1456-1536), was writing dramas on chivalric lines, but the mock battle of Spain was different, in that it was fought on a much larger scale, generally between groups rather than between individuals. This phenomenon, and its huge popularity, may in part be due to the presence of the Moors and the process of the '*reconquista*' as Spain gradually wrested control from the Muslim dominion. Max Harris suggests that the tradition of the mock battle may have begun in Spain as early as 1150 (2000: 18). Evidence of it can also be found in Portugal, Southern France and Italy but the tradition in Spain has continued up to the present day where festivals such as that in Alcoy draw up to 12,000 participants. It is probable that the mock battle 'latched onto' older seasonal rituals such as the clashing of swords and sticks, as in the English Morris (or Moorish) dance, designed to dispel winter and its evils. Other mock battles took the form of fruit battles (Zaragoza 1286) and annual tomato battles in Valencia.<sup>22</sup> During the reign of Jaume II, king of Valencia (1291-1327), a mock battle took place which is extraordinarily similar to those later to be staged in Mexico. Actors playing Moors and actors representing Spanish soldiers fought each other for the possession of a 'castle', which can often be seen as a metaphor for the human soul. In the middle of the battle a horseman, dressed in white and playing the role of Santiago, appeared and led the attack until the Moors surrendered and exchanged their crescent for the Red Cross. Great celebrations were then held. But 'wondrous appearances' do not seem to have been confined to the dramatic mock battle. Stories of them lingered on into the mid sixteenth century in Mexico. The Franciscan historian, Beaumont, relates in his *Crónica* that during a battle in 1530 for what became Querétaro it was said that an image of the Holy Cross and Santiago appeared in the sky and turned the conflict in favour of the Spaniards. Later, in the 1540s, in the region of Zacatecas, in northern Mexico, a knight on a white horse was seen in the sky, urging Spain on to victory. It is fascinating to speculate whether rumours of such 'appearances' were widespread enough to be the origin of the miraculous interventions in *autos* like *La conquista de Jerusalén* (Beaumont 1750: 32).

Other examples of mock battles between 'Moors' and Christians in the years leading up to the *reconquista*, include the 'Martyrdom of San Sebastian' (Barcelona 1424) where Sebastian is 'martyred' by Numidian archers, portrayed as being 'Turkish' or Moorish. The slain Sebastian is buried but woken from death by an angel and transported to heaven where he receives a crown of

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<sup>22</sup> Remnants of the mock battles can still be seen today in the Basque country and in Provence where 'flower' battles, substituting confetti for flowers, continue to be held.

glory, thus defeating, in his rising again, the Turkish infidel. Harris (2000: 59) quotes another ritual battle, the *juego de cañas* of 1462 where teams of competitors playing Moors charged a team of Spaniards, armed with canes, having agreed that if the Moors were defeated, they would accept Christian baptism.<sup>23</sup> After three hours the ‘king’ of Morocco surrendered and was led with all his followers to a church which had been built over a mosque. There he was baptised in the place previously used for ritual washing and paid homage to the Christian governor. The symbolic significance of this could not be missed. A previously sacred Moorish space had been dramatically reconquered by Christian soldiers. It was a foreshadowing of the final expulsion of the Moors thirty years later.

These mock battles have, however, to be seen in the context of the medieval tourney from which they sprang. They were not political statements on the part of the Spanish, rather material for traditional, combative drama with a good story. In the chivalric spirit of the lists, the defeated opposition (the Moor) was not killed but converted. Only at the end of the fifteenth century did the notion of ‘*convivencia*’ give way to expulsion by force.

Associated with the mock battle and an essential part of it was what Trexler has called ‘the theatre of military triumph’ (1994: 192). Originating in Spain and later translated to Mexico was the custom of affording a triumphal entry to figures of national importance when they entered a city. Charles V’s treaty with France was the occasion for such celebration, both in Spain and in Tlaxcala and Oaxaca, where, as Motolinía records, triumphal arches, decked with flowers were set up. The arrival, in Mexico, of a new vice-roy would be similarly marked and a century later Sor Juana makes reference to the festive preparations made for the appearance of Vice-roy Mendoza. Important clerical figures, such as bishops and papal envoys, were similarly the occasion both in Spain and in Mexico for ‘triumphalist theatre’. Battles in the form of either open-field warfare or sieges, but ritualised into dances or *mêlées*, would ensue.

This was the position which dramatic development had reached in Spain by the end of the fifteenth century and the arrival of the Friars early in the sixteenth: a story of two strands, one liturgical, devoted to tales from the Bible and performed in town squares and market places and the other concentrating on mock battles and chivalric tales of heroism, drawn from the tradition of medieval tourneys and tournaments.

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<sup>23</sup>A version of the *juego de cañas* was translated to Mexico a century later when Padilla, maestro of Puebla Cathedral (c.1590-1664), wrote the music for a Christmas *villancico* entitled *juego de cañas* where men, armed with canes and dressed in dashing uniforms with fine plumage, fought each other in honour of the new-born Christ child.



The next question to be asked is how did the friars fit into all this? How much of this heritage did they bring with them from Spain to Mexico? There is no doubt that many, if not most, of the Friars would have been familiar with the liturgical dramas and the tourneys, having witnessed the Corpus Christi processions in their own towns. Varón states that as early as 1419 there is a reference to Murcia celebrating a Corpus Christi feast with a procession (1999: 138). In Toledo in 1456 theatrical representations on the subject of Christmas, the Ascension and Corpus Christi were recorded, marked also by a procession. To this list, Varón adds Gaudalajara, Salamanca, Sevilla and Extremadura. Regular contact with other parts of Spain and Europe was established by the frequent pilgrim routes which crossed Spain en route for Compostela, via Galicia in the north and Catalonia in the south. Many of these pilgrims would have sought hospitality with the friars, encouraging free exchange of ideas and forging links with the outside world. Of the original 'Twelve', Fray Martín came from Coruña, Fray Andrés from Córdoba, Fray Martín from Valencia and Fray Antonio from Ciudad Rodrigo – all areas which would have been influenced by the network of pilgrim routes. In 1516 the Crown of Spain was offered to Charles of Ghent and in 1519 he was elected Holy Roman Emperor bringing into the orbit of Spain the high culture of Flanders, along with some German states and thereby introducing further new influences on dramatic presentation.

The friars themselves had had a long established dramatic tradition. Ever since they received permission in the thirteenth century to undertake missionary crusades, they had been preaching at the wayside, frequently punctuating their narratives with monologues and making satirical attacks on figures of the establishment, such as doctors, lawyers and merchants. There would seem to be a strange dichotomy in the personality of the friars: on the one hand they embraced asceticism and self-denial, to the extent, according to Mendieta, of making the gift of one chicken last all their meals for a week and for much of the year avoiding meat altogether. It was the friars who stressed the pity and agony of the Crucifixion rather than dwelling on the remoter doctrines of the Trinity, while St. Francis rejoiced in the glorious wounds of the stigmata. On the other hand, they had a great sense of fun, revelling in any opportunity for acting and jollification. They were noted for their dancing, not only in Spain but also in France, where they danced in the cathedral of Sens and in England, too, until the Reformation. Stevens and Libby (2001: 802) remark that in England the Church permitted the friars to dance, provided they kept one foot on the ground. So concerned was the Synod of 1545, in fact, by unseemly frivolity, that it ordered the friars not to sing rude songs nor dance in the new masses (Delgado 2012: 28). As late as 1659, an astonished Frenchman going to midnight mass at Christmas saw: 'A friar, who was wearing his surplice, and who, having done what he had to do at the altar, took off his surplice and went to the sacristy to reveal a masking costume that he was wearing

underneath.’ He continues: ‘a great many friars entered with costumes as ridiculous as those of carnival in Paris: huge noses, false beards, grotesque costumes, dancing and leaping to Basque drums and violins that played with the organ’ (Knighton & Torrente 2007: 21).

It has been recognised that some of the friars were highly cultivated scholars who enjoyed writing and acting. Pedro de Gante taught acting and drama in his two newly-established schools, Motolinía and Sahagún wrote extensively on their evangelizing experiences in Mexico and Mendieta considered his *Historia* a definitive document on the period. Any one of these and others, including Fuensalida, might have composed their own plays and *autos*; indeed, there are scholars who consider that they did, as will be seen. It seems reasonable, therefore, to argue from the above that when the friars first arrived in Mexico they brought with them a well-established cultural and dramatic heritage which they were ready to impart to the indigenous people.

## **Theatre in Mexico, 1321-1521**

In order to understand the fusion between Spanish and Mexican theatre which led to the evolution of the *auto*, it is necessary next to examine the nature of pre-conquest, Aztec drama where all the elements of theatricality, later to be built on by the Franciscans, were already present. Even the briefest and most superficial of comparisons will reveal, as with the previous study of religious practices, startling similarities. The most remarkable of these is the emphasis on ‘mock battles’ held at regular intervals throughout the Mexican calendar.

The ‘mock battle’ seems to have been of two kinds: raids on rival peoples to encourage military fitness and, more sinisterly, campaigns to capture sacrificial victims for the temples or so-called ‘battles’ fought by the condemned victims. In Book II of the Florentine Codex Sahagún quotes one such ‘battle’ held in honour of the god Totec where the masters of the condemned captives fought mock battles with each other before flaying their victims. The Spanish text reads:

En esta fiesta, hazian como un juego de cañas: de manera que el un vando, era de la parte deste dios, o ymagen del dios totec: y estos todos, yuan vestidos de pellejos de hombres que aujan muerto, y desollado en aquella fiesta ... (Sahagún 1970: 39)

The stone on which this unequal contest took place was called a *temalácatl*. Probably the best-known is the Sacrifice Stone of Tízoc, found in 1791 in the ruins of Mexico-Tenochtitlán, used as a model by Sahagún in his *Florentine Codex*. It is circular with a solar disc carved on the face and a channel cut from the centre to the outer rim to which the rope for tying the victim the (*aztamécatl*) was attached (Solís and Moctezuma 2004:105).

In the same passage Sahagún describes the miserable fate of other victims:

Y estando ellos atados por medio del cuerpo, con vna sogá por el ojo de vna muela, como de molino, y era tan larga, que podia a andar por toda la circúferencia de la piedra, y dañle sus armas, con que peleasse: y venian contra el quarto, con espadas, y rodela, y vno a vno se acuchillauan con el, hasta que le vencian (Sahagún, 1981:4).



Fig. 11 Re-creation of the gladiatorial sacrifice on *temalácatl*. Illustration in *Florentine Code* (Matos and Felipe 2004)



Fig. 12 Scene that creates ritual combat on *temalácatl*. Illustration in *Magliabechi Codex* (Matos and Felipe 2004)

Similar battles took place during festivities at Tenochtitlán. Two warriors, one dressed in tiger skin and the other ‘disguised’ as an eagle, performed a dance before the line of victims, ‘con suma teatralidad’. After the ritual sacrifice of a quail, a condemned captive, tied at the ankles, with nothing more than a bare stick, was forced to engage in battle with a warrior whose weapons included a sword

with rows of obsidian blades.<sup>24</sup> After this ‘combate desigual’ the victim met his fate (Sahagún 3, quoted in Garibay 1953: 334). Sometimes ‘mock battles’ formed part of the ceremony preceding the sacrifice, as during the festival of the god of war, Uitzilopochtli (or Huitzilopochtli). According to Sahagún a participant, ‘attired in the ornaments of the god Paynal’, slew four slaves in the ball court at Teotlachtli’ and then led two factions of captors in pretend combat. It was not, however, just high spirits and good fun; Sahagún adds: ‘murian algunos en la escaramuça’ (Sahagún 1981: 27) Durán, in his *Historia*, includes another version of the ‘mock battle’ where defeated Huastecs were brought to the sacrifice stone before the temple armed with wooden balls and a sword with a blade of feathers. They were ordered to engage in battle with their executioner but their chances of survival were so remote that some of the victims abandoned their feather swords and threw themselves upon the sacrifice stone preferring a quick death (1581: 172). He quotes another very interesting example of a ‘mock battle’ being used as a political manoeuvre. When the fifth king of Mexico, Huehue Motecuhzoma (sic) was elected in 1440, the king of Tezcoco went to congratulate him on his succession. However, fearful that accepting these congratulations would look like an admission of Aztec inferiority, he asked that a mock battle be held in which the men of Texcoco would appear to be defeated and their temple burned (Durán 1581: 126). According to Harris (2000: 70) evidence can be found for at least three of these ‘battles’ which go by the confusing name of ‘Flowery Wars’. A ‘Flowery War’ took place in 1321 between the Chalca and the Tlacoachcalca which ended in the Chalca putting chili peppers in the water jars of the Tlacoachcalca children. More deadly was the ‘war’ which occurred during the reign of Motecuzoma (1440-1469) when victims were sought for supplying the new Great Temple of Tenochtitlán. Later, Moctezuma, himself, invited the rulers of Huexotzinco to a challenge to test military skill which began in a spirit of goodwill and ended in great slaughter. The Ball Game was another dramatic spectacle in which the loser paid with his life. It was one of the oldest of the pre-Hispanic sports, dating possibly as far back as 800 B.C (Solis and Moctezuma 2004: 139). Played in a T shaped court, a sacred place called *tlachtli*, two players striking a rubber ball with hip or forearm had to hit the ball through a ring attached to the side of the court. The movement of the ball during the game imitated the passage of the sun across the sky. So important to the Azteca was the presence of the sun that the player who moved away from the sun or stood in its path would be judged defeated and beheaded. The game was not only a thrilling spectator sport; it was also seen as a form of divining astral catastrophes and the sacrifice of the loser was a way of averting future troubles.

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<sup>24</sup> An illustration from Sahagún’s *Florentine Codex* shows Aztec warriors wearing tiger skins and eagle feathers and armed with swords with obsidian blades.

The Festival of the Sweeping of the Roads was on a grander scale. Held ostensibly to celebrate the harvest and rejoice in the fertility of the earth, it was also a demonstration of the power of the priests over the people and a public act of intimidation. A female slave was chosen to play the role of the god Toci. She was washed and caged for twenty days after which, with her face painted half black and half white, she was led through the city of Tenochtitlan to receive eight days of homage in the form of dancers waving marigolds. It is worth mentioning the marigolds here because, unimportant as it may seem, these flowers featured regularly in pre-conquest rituals and were incorporated into many of the post-conquest religious festivals, such as those of 1538-9, described by Motolinía. After eight days of dancing, mock battles began, two teams of opposing women pelting each other with moss, leaves and reeds, on the lines of the *juegos de cañas* already described. The unfortunate slave was then killed at night and flayed and a naked priest struggled into her skin and clothes. When the bloodied impersonator of Toci ran down the temple steps, warriors, who had gathered to meet him, were chased by priests, armed with straw brooms. The significance of the brooms has already been explained in earlier references to the Aztec version of ‘baptism’ and they appear again in one of the earliest *autos*, ‘*La conversión de San Pablo*’. Here, the chase turned into a rout, a further version of a ‘mock battle’. However, the event had not yet ended. The skin-wearer saluted the god Cinteotl and ran with his image as far as the peaks of Popocatepetl where he placed the image on a wooden frame on the mountain, thus avenging the historic defeat of the Mexica by the Culhua in 1343. In this ritual one can see a foreshadowing of the Spanish ‘*moros y cristianos*’ where a pattern of initial defeat by the Moors, then retreat and finally Christian victory was a recurrent theme.

Similar characteristics can be observed in the Festival of the Raising of the Banners which occurred immediately after the Festival of the Sweeping of the Roads. This festival was held in honour of the chief god, Huitzilopochtli, whose appetite for sacrificial victims had prompted the ‘Flowery Wars’. Merchants brought into the city captured slaves, with painted faces, who were led up and down the steps of the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan to practise their deaths. The following day the slaves were slaughtered for real on the sacrificial stone and their corpses rolled down the hill to be eaten by the merchants who had captured them. Once again, the proceedings culminated in a ‘mock battle’ with the priests fighting the warriors. Harris makes the interesting suggestion that in fighting the priests, the warriors were marking their resistance to the priestly cult of the sun god who sent warriors so relentlessly to war and slaves so mercilessly to their deaths. This may be, according to Harris, an early example of the ‘hidden resistance’ which he and other scholars have seen in the post-conquest *autos* (Harris 2000: 92). Horcasitas tells us that in this religious spectacle all the elements of the theatre were already present: actors (the priests, merchants and warriors), spectators (the people of

Tenochtitlán), the scene (the temple and the streets), the theme (the human destiny) or as he puts it: 'la ruta del hombre que va de la vida placentera hacía la muerte' (1974: 38).

A third element in Aztec theatre was the ritual dance. Many of these were of a martial nature; dancers, wearing animal skins, feathers and plumes and carrying weapons, re-enacted former battles with neighbouring tribes. Harris states that as many as 4,000 men participated at any one time. (2000: 111). Other dances involved children. Horcasitas describes a pre-Hispanic dance in honour of Xochiquetzal, goddess of flowers. In a scene of quite remarkable strangeness and exotic beauty, boys dressed as birds and butterflies with green, red and yellow feathers climbed trees and pretended to suck the dew from the flowers in which the trees were covered.<sup>25</sup> Men and women, standing below, fired 'blowguns' at these 'birds' and after being hit, the boys climbed down from the trees and a great '*mitote*' or dance was held. Sahagún suggests that this is a dramatized version of the belief that those who died gloriously in war or gladiatorial sacrifice were later changed into birds with precious feathers or butterflies which sucked honey from the flowers in the lands where they lived. From time to time these birds and butterflies returned to earth and sucked nectar from earthly flowers (León-Portilla 1980: 179).<sup>26</sup> In his book 'Mary, Michael and Lucifer' (1986: 115) John Ingham notes that in Mayan demonology the bird that sucked nectar from the flowers was the hummingbird, symbol of sun, light and fire. It competed for the honey with the bat which represented the underworld, night and darkness. The god Quetzalcóatl wore a hummingbird on his headdress seen, in this case, as a sign of fertility. Thus the hummingbird, while sucking nectar from the flowers, might also be seen as an agent of fertilisation or propagation.

Other forms of the *mitote* appear in the writings of Las Casas, Cortés and Díaz del Castillo. Las Casas writes of the Mexicans:

Hacían en las tardes por todos los barrios y plazas de la ciudad los bailes que acostumbraban y que llamaban *mitotes* es la principal manera de regocijo y fiestas y los más nobles caballeros y de sangre real, según sus grados, hacían sus bailes y fiestas más carcanas a las casas donde estaba su poderoso señor (Brevisima: 60).

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<sup>25</sup> The butterfly plays an important role in the creation myths. According to Aztec mythology, in the early world there were four ages or 'suns'. During the time of the third sun, the world was destroyed by a fiery rain and the humans turned into dogs and butterflies.

<sup>26</sup> The butterfly also features frequently in the *autos* and in ritual sacrifices. It would be interesting to note whether the butterfly holds such a special place in Aztec mythology because it was a creature of great beauty yet, like life itself, transient or whether, more specifically, it was associated with the Monarch butterfly, whose extraordinary migratory pattern leads it to leave North America in August and to travel thousands of miles to overwinter in Mexico. Today the Monarch spends the winter in the warmth of Trans-Mexican Volcanic belt before beginning its return journey to the north in early spring. This astonishing butterfly has recently been the subject of a new novel by Barbara Kingsolver in which aberrant Monarchs, the last of the species, end up not in Mexico but in the Appalachian mountains – a symbol (and victim) of the consequences of climate change.

Díaz and Cervantes de Salazar both describe the elaborate *mitotes* of Moctezuma's court which, along with clowns, singers, jugglers, jokers, acrobats, masks, disguises and processions made what Williams calls rich ground for the sowing of future drama by the Franciscans (1992: 33).

Another similarly intriguing dance, of pre-conquest origin but which survived into the Spanish era, was '*la danza de los voladores*'. Four *voladores* climbed a bare tree trunk, seventy foot tall, by means of a knotted rope. They then tied themselves by the waist to a wooden spool nestled on the top of the tree and flung themselves backwards. The rope, linked to the spool, slowly unwound and the flyers were catapulted to earth. Various interpretations have been offered for this terrifying spectacle. Harris states that those Spaniards who witnessed it simply took it as an acrobatic display of skill and courage but he suggests that it had concealed a code recognised only by the natives. The spinning flyer represented the spinning of the years and that, just as time revolves in a cycle, so the Mexican empire would come to power again.

Certain recurrent themes are recognisable in the pre-conquest theatrical tradition. Chief among these is the emphasis on flowers. Flowers feature in all aspects of Aztec life – women waved marigolds at sacrificial victims; the temples themselves, places of death and slaughter, had side chapels filled with flowers as if to soften the suffering. Motolinía's famous description of the 1538-9 Corpus Christi plays dwells in detail on the flower- decorated processional arches (1536: 89). Ravicz suggests that to an Indian 'flower and song' represented the best offering that one could give to a god, expressing, at the same time, the transitoriness of human life and, in contrast, the unchanging beauty of nature (Ravicz 1970: 237). A beautiful Nahua song translated by León-Portilla (1963: 77) runs:

The flowers sprout, they are fresh, they grow;

They open their blossoms,

And from within emerge the flowers of song.

For the Nahua the *difrasismo*<sup>27</sup> 'flower and song' was, however, more than a way of praising nature; the words were a metaphor for poetry, the only means of attaining truth and communicating with the Divine. According to León-Portilla, for the Nahuatl philosopher, poetry was 'the only truth on earth' (1963: 79).

Another feature was the use of the mask worn by warriors in 'mock battles' and in ritual dances. Ybarra suggests that in the early post-colonial period these masks continued in use as a kind of

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<sup>27</sup> The *difrasismo* was a favourite literary technique of the Nahua. It involved seeking to achieve maximum clarity and precision when expressing an idea by using two of the concept's most distinctive qualities and linking them together. Thus *in atl, in tépetl* (Nahua for water and hill) when used together equalled a town whose essential features were always water and a prominence (León-Portilla 1963:102).

disguise, a form of hidden resistance to Spanish domination and that only those who could 'read the masks' could understand the message. She quotes a visit of President and Mrs. Clinton in 1997 to Tlaxcala when they were given ceremonial masks to wear. To the Americans this gift symbolised a rapprochement and an understanding between two nations who had not always been on good terms but to the Mexican the mask was a form of mockery, laughing at pretentious *hacienda* owners and, by implication, the Americans (Ybarra 2009: 8).

The friars, newly arrived in Mexico, would have felt surprisingly at home with many of these aspects of Aztec theatre. As has been seen, they appreciated and enjoyed dance and music and the use of masks and disguises found echos in Spanish *villancicos* of the period, where performers dressed as lions, camels, tigers and unicorns (Bègue 2007: 279) The 'mock battles', the love of colour, costume and ritual were all features which they had observed in their own Corpus Christi celebrations.



## Chapter Nine    The Flowering

### Los autos sacramentales

The *auto* can, with justice, be considered the most perfect and most successful form of fusion between Spanish and Aztec dramatic tradition. Jerome Williams calls it ‘*una de las joyas que más brilla del rico legado de las tempranas letras coloniales*’ (1992: 2). It is not so much ‘acculturation’ as ‘transculturation’, because through this cross-fertilisation a new art form emerged. The Spanish liturgical play and the tourney merged with the colour, drama and ritual of the Náhuatl to produce something totally original. As Horcasitas observes ‘Asombroso sería que no hubiera nacido un teatro con la llegada de los misioneros’ (1974: 75). It was as if the two traditions had been lying dormant, waiting for germination, for a spark to ignite and unite them and cause them to explode into what Louise Burkhart describes as ‘the first true American theatre’ (1958: 6). Orthón Arróniz remarks on the precocity of this art form, adding that the early appearance of theatre in New Spain is astonishing at a time when the drama of the *Siglo de oro* in Spain had hardly begun (Orthón Arróniz 1979: 15). Alongside its originality, two additional elements can be observed in the *auto sacramental*. In the first place, as has been suggested, an indigenous audience might have noted a double meaning, called by Harris ‘a hidden transcript’, in many of the events of the Christian story: a story that was capable of an alternative, Aztec interpretation. Secondly, as will be seen, the *auto* was richly imbued with references to pre-Hispanic mythology and history. It is questionable whether the friars themselves grasped the full significance of these references since Sahagún, who was largely responsible for bringing to light and into public awareness ancient native culture and myth, did not begin his great work until after 1547, by which time the first flush of *autos* was over. Nevertheless, it is a tribute to the Franciscans that they were prepared to take the risk of giving such a free rein to the Indians.

The *auto* served a multitude of purposes. For the friars first and foremost it was a way of strengthening their evangelical mission by means of the ‘edifying play’ (Ricard 1933: 194) through an inherent appreciation of the theatrical which both cultures shared. Since many of the natives could not read, presenting Biblical stories visually on stage was one of the most effective methods of conversion and the Franciscans set about this with a constructive vigour which was in marked contrast to the destructive way in which Aztec temples and forms of government had earlier been destroyed (Versényi 1993: 36). In some respects the *auto* can be seen as an early form of the Inquisition: it was highly theatrical, performed on a raised stage or platform, like the Inquisition and in full view of the

public. One of the four Corpus Christi plays, entitled *La Predicación de San Francisco*, features St. Francis preaching to the birds. His sermon is interrupted by the appearance of an inebriated man and a woman who performs illegal abortions. They are dragged off to hell by demons in a scene of high drama, featuring real flames and loud screaming of the damned (the actors escaping the fire through a trap door). This punishment can be seen both as a warning by the friars but also, in its emphasis on doom and judgement, as a foreshadowing of the kind of retribution to be meted out by the Inquisition.

Trexler, in his article entitled: *We think. They act. Clerical Readings of Missionary Theatre in Sixteenth Century Spain* takes a totally different position from that of Ricard. He writes: ‘The theatre of New Spain was a crafted ethnography of manners, clothes and other customs intended by its clerical stage managers to recall past native humiliations, to create memories of present failures, both native and Iberian and to project future images of these colonised peoples’ (1994:190). He adds that all missionary theatre ends with the natives on their knees, in abject positions, humiliating themselves.

This seems to me totally unacceptable on two counts. In the first place, to reduce the *auto* to a mere piece of crude evangelical propaganda is to ignore both the profound spiritual message contained within it, the beauty of its Náhuatl prose and the richness of its native references. Furthermore, it leaves out of account the fact that the *auto* represents one of the best examples of co-acculturation: friars and natives learning from each other and co-operating together. If the friars simply wanted to use the bible stories to ‘humiliate the natives’ why did they give them the freedom to design the sets and include their own Aztec narrative? Secondly, it is manifestly wrong. By no means all the *autos* end with the natives ‘on their knees’. Of all the ones I have studied, only two can be said to come anywhere near ending in that fashion. The rest, like *El sacrificio*, *La comedia*, *La destrucción de Jerusalén*, *La conversión* end in the well-known way, true to the traditional story.

The *auto* with a beginning, a middle and an end, unlike the more formless Náhuatl drama, which was always silent, offered a vision of a well-ordered, structured and coherent world under the rule of the church which was available to all who accepted its teaching and became its faithful servants. The redemption of mankind, as seen in the stories of Abraham and Isaac or the Nativity of Christ could be an Aztec’s own personal salvation, an antidote to the instability and uncertainty of life in sixteenth century Mexico. It was also, as Arróniz suggests (1979: 66), a way of seducing the natives by their sheer magic so that the bitter pill of being a conquered people was sweetened by being participators, by being included in and not excluded from, the story of the *Conquista*. As will be seen, the Aztecs made full use of this participation by creating their own form of *Reconquista* .

The friars, as has been noted earlier, were not about the total destruction of all Aztec culture and customs. They saw in the *auto* a fruitful way of preserving and stimulating native technical skills and developing those promoted by Pedro de Gante in his schools. Thus, the natives were encouraged to design the sets and the scenery and let their imaginations range as widely as possible in creative fields. As Garibay puts it: ‘Los frailes dirigen, proyectan, ordenen y escriben las palabras que han de decirse, pero los encargados de disponer el cuadro en que el teatro ha de ejecutarse son los indios que siguen gustosos sus propios procedimientos (1953: 125). They excelled in the construction of ‘mountains’, based on the Aztec symbol of the city state or *alteptl* (one was so high that it took the Three Kings two hours to descend it), of palaces, of ‘heavens’, using ladders which angels could climb down and up which saved souls could ascend. Hand-made ropes suspended the huge star which hung across the stage in ‘*La adoración de los Reyes*’. Spanish Christian stories provided models for costumes of characters of the pre-Hispanic world, Náhuatl music, used by the friars as a vehicle for evangelisation (Warman 1972: 85), blended with Latin chants and *villancicos* complemented rather than replaced Aztec songs.

For the natives the *auto* went some way towards filling the gaping hole which had been left in their lives by the destruction of their gods and temples. By constructing the scenery for the plays they were able to perpetuate their traditional habits of decorating their sacred spaces and to keep alive ancient pre-conquest references. The hill, for instance, down which the three magi descended during ‘*La comedia de los Reyes*’ can also be read as the height on which the Aztec temple was constructed, or the Nahua symbol for the *altepetl* found in the Tlaxcaltecan pictorials. When the Indians filled the stage with flowers they were making reference to their ancient respect for fertility; when they constructed angels’ wings they were harking back to their love of birds – the Aztec manifestation of solar energy. When they played the role of Jesus they were linking Him to the sun, rather than the Son of God, seeing in Him the world’s animating force and the source of heat and light. Similarly, Mary was Jesus’ mother, but, to the Aztecs, she was also associated with dawn, light, flowers and the earth. John the Baptist, whose feast day (24<sup>th</sup> June) coincided with the start of the Mexican rainy season, assumed, in Aztec thinking, something of the nature of the rain god. When, in the *auto* known as ‘*La adoración de los Reyes*’ the magus, Melchior, describes how he and his companions climbed a mountain to see ‘*el milagro de la gloriosa estrella*’ as promised by *Tloque Nahuaque*, he is, in an extraordinary mixture of Christian and Aztec culture, making a direct reference to the Aztec ceremony of the New Fire, when priests ascended a mountain outside Tenochtitlán to watch the star reaching its zenith and receive assurance that the world would enter a new age. Whether the friars appreciated this ‘second voice’ and whether they grasped the native references in the scenery is not known. It

might be possible to argue that they tacitly understood and accepted resistance on the part of the indigenous people. Their tradition of wayside preaching and extra conventual living and their long experience in deserted and remote areas, in conditions of extreme poverty, both during the *Reconquista* and later in Mexico, had led to them being, to some extent, outside the mainstream of Catholic orthodoxy. It might not be too fanciful to describe them, in their appreciation of a more solitary form of life, as representing the Celtic wing of the Faith. At all events, it is to their credit that they provided the space for the 'second' voices to be heard. Indeed, one might argue that here is evidence that in seeking to acculturate through the medium of the *auto* they were themselves being acculturated.

The earliest known *auto*, a version of '*El juicio final*', written in Náhuatl, was first performed in Tlatelolco in between 1531 and 1535 and the last, according to Horcasitas (1974: 80) in 1768 in Tlalmanalco, by which time they had long since lost their initial brilliance and the Náhuatl language had been adulterated by frequent borrowing of Spanish vocabulary. Yet despite this long reign and their immense popularity, very little is known about the history of the *auto*. Ricard states, for instance, that no sixteenth century text has survived (1933: 194) and that the earliest text which we have dates from the seventeenth or even eighteenth century. The first translations into Spanish from the original Náhuatl only appeared in 1900 with the work of Paso y Troncoso. Louise Burkhart states that 22 complete Náhuatl plays survive (1958: 14) but many more have disappeared for ever, due to the expropriation of church property in Mexico in the nineteenth century and the fact that many texts were never written down or that actors tended to learn only their own parts and never to have possessed a full copy of the play. Tantalising fragments of old texts continue to emerge but it is difficult to date them and to know of which *autos* they formed part. Documents of the period occasionally refer to early instances of missionary drama, for instance the '*Dialogos en lengua Mexicana entre la Virgen Maria y el Arcángel, San Gabriel*', reputedly composed by Luis de Fuensalida, sometime before 1545. Similarly, writers such as Torquemada make reference to plays or '*comedias*' performed on Sunday evenings in the *capilla de San Joseph* in the year 1590 (Torquemada 1723: 581 – 582) but we do not know which ones.

The authorship of the *autos* is another vexed question. The received view is that they were mainly written by the friars, but always in Náhuatl, in accordance with their principles that the native language should be dominant. Ricard, for instance, maintains that *El juicio final* was written by Andrés de Olmos (Ricard 1933: 195), a view contested by Garibay on the grounds that the punishment handed out to the sinners is in tune with the intellectual severity of the Dominicans, rather than the Franciscans (1953:143) and Manuel Pazos is convinced that Motolinía is the author of *La Conquista*

*de Jerusalén* (1951: 57). Other scholars disagree. Louise Burkhart states that ‘few priests who did not grow up as bilingual speakers of Spanish and Náhuatl were fluent enough to write, on their own, the polished Náhuatl found in the dramas’ (1958: 13) and close examination of some of the texts would appear to support this view as will be seen later. It might be argued, in fact, that some *autos* were written entirely by the friars, others by the natives alone and that in some cases collaboration took place. It is possible that many of the Christian themes were handed over to the Mexica to translate into Náhuatl but that the friars, suspicious of the native forms of Christianity and fearful of heresy, demanded to see the scripts and both kept and, on occasions, modified them.

As has already been stated, the first recorded *auto*, *El juicio final*, appeared between 1531 and 1535, although there had been references to an earlier drama, *La conversión de San Pablo*, as early as 1529. This *auto*, which differs from the others for a variety of reasons, will be discussed later. In the years 1538-1539 the *auto* seemed to reach its peak of artistic flowering. Of the many plays performed in these two years, some of them for political reasons to celebrate the signing of peace between the king of France and the Emperor Charles V, and others in honour of religious festivals, seven will be discussed here: *La caída de Adán y Eva*, *La predicación a las aves*, *El sacrificio de Isaac*, *La Conquista de Jerusalén* and *La comedia de los Reyes*, *La destrucción de Jerusalén* and *La conversión de San Pablo*.

### ***La caída de Adán y Eva (de nuestros padres)***

In some ways this *auto* represents the most perfect example of the marriage of Spanish and native dramatic cultures. The theme is Christian, brought by the friars from Spain, but the language, the décor, the ambience, the hidden references to pre-conquest culture and the presentation are all decidedly Aztec. It was first performed in Tlaxcala, in 1539, on the Wednesday in Holy Week, financed by the *cofradía de Nuestra Señora de la Encarnación*. The fact that in the years 1538-1539 all the *autos*, with the exception of one, *La Conquista de Rhodes*, were performed in Tlaxcala is proof, as has already been stated, of the pre-eminence of Tlaxcala in the evangelising mission. The story of the fall of Adam and Eve is so well –known that it does not need repeating, except for the fact that Eve was unusually ‘beguiling’, persuading her husband to eat the forbidden fruit as proof that he really loved her. This seems an odd variation. Were the friars here warning Indian men in the audience to beware of the wiles of women and advising them to keep strict control over their wives? Apart from this departure from the traditional, several facts stand out about the *auto*. In the first place, the garden of Eden held, both for the friars and for the Indians, a special significance. For the Indians the

*sitio* in which Adam and Eve were placed, can be seen as a true representation of an earthly and at the same time an Aztec paradise, such as that constructed in pre-Hispanic days for the festival of Xochiquetzal (Horcasitas 1974: 178), where, as has been described, small boys, dressed as butterflies, sipped dew from flowers in the trees. In the pre-conquest tradition, the garden was also a place where poets met to discuss the meaning of life. The poet Tecayehuatzin, for instance, who lived during the last days of Aztec splendour and is recognised as one of the greatest of Náhuatl poets and sages, held in the years around 1490, a gathering where all the poets of the period were invited to discuss the significance of the two great elements of Aztec life – flower and song – which taken together represented the symbolic key to man’s existence. The story of Adam and Eve can truly be taken as a metaphor for the evils to which human life is heir and for the meaning of life itself.

For the friars, the garden was the place where the three critical episodes in the story of man’s redemption occurred – the garden of Eden, the garden of Gethsemane and the garden which saw Christ’s resurrection. Phelan (1970: 77) has another interpretation, seeing the garden not simply a native paradise but a metaphor for the friars’ vision of the New World, the new perfection which they were initiating. Columbus himself had been fascinated by the wealth of exotic flora and fauna which he discovered on his voyages to the New World and had taken back with him to Spain samples and stories, inspiring and astonishing those who heard him. The four rivers which ‘flowed’ were both the rivers which, according to the Biblical story, flowed out of Eden but also the four great rivers of South America: the Orinoco, the Amazon, the Magdalena and La Plata. Flowers dazzled the senses, real birds sang from the branches of ‘trees’, making such a noise with their singing that, according to Motolinía ‘era tanto el hablar y gritar que, a veces, estorbaban la representación’ (1536: 94), a small Mexican boy was perched up high, disguised as a lion, in the company of a real jaguar, restrained by ropes.<sup>28</sup> For the Franciscans, it might have appeared odd that he was also seen to be eating a slain deer but the deer was part of an ancient pre-Hispanic culture, according to which Quetzalcóatl was associated, in his role as victim, with the hunted and slaughtered prey (Ingham 1986: 183-185). In ancient pre-Columban myth the hunting ritual was also a symbol for sexual intercourse. The inclusion of the reference to hunting in the *auto* can be seen, according to Warman (1972:85), as an attempt to preserve as far as possible those pre-Hispanic elements which did not offend Catholic teaching.

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<sup>28</sup> The use of skins, both flayed human skins and animal skins, seems to have been widespread among the Aztecs. They served the purpose of frightening the enemy, as when the Aztecs went into battle wearing jaguar and lion skins. They also served as trophies. Cazonci, the Michoacán, was accused by Guzmán at his trial for subversion in 1530, of possessing the skins of flayed Christians. Cazonci’s admission of this, under torture, was one of the reasons for his execution (Martinez 1962: 29). Here, in the *auto La Caída*, they served to add colour and drama to the celebrations of Holy Week.

Weiss has another theory: she suggests that these animals may have had a totemic relevance; whereas now they were tied up and, in some cases, stuffed, in pre-Hispanic days they had had a mythological importance in local culture (1993: 51).<sup>29</sup> In addition, they may have been a reference to the animals in Moctezuma's zoo. In its sheer lavishness the scene was, in short, a feast for the eyes. As Pazos sums it up: 'Todo esto hace pensar al teatro precortesiano y al elementos paganos' (1951: 153).

Another of these '*elementos paganos*' present in the *auto* though perhaps not immediately apparent to the Franciscans, was the significance of Adam and Eve themselves. The many-faceted god Quetzalcóatl seems to have been associated, in pre-Hispanic times, not only with deer hunting but also, by his relation with Cihuacoatl, with the procreation of the human race. Later in the sixteenth century, after the 'heroic period' immediately following the *conquista*, the role of these two gods was reinterpreted as the story of Adam and Eve, the new progenitors of man, Adam taking his place, along with Quetzalcóatl, as one of the stars of the western sky. In a similar transformation, in the story of the redemption, Christ became the second Adam, a paradox reiterated by an extraordinary coincidence, in the words of Newman's beautiful hymn '*Praise to the Holiest in the Height*':

Oh, loving wisdom of our God

When all was sin and shame,

A second Adam to the fight

And to the rescue came.

Eve, too, has undergone a transformation. In Aztec mythology she was associated with Tonantzin, god of fertility and one of the deities favoured after the Conquest for having gentler attributes and demanding fewer blood sacrifices. In the years just after the *conquista* she became also connected with La Malinche, Cortés' mistress and courtesan, and from there she progressed to representing the Eve of the Fall – both her own fall, after the tempting of the serpent, and the fall of the Aztec people. There is a further strand in this complex relationship. Cortés and Malinche came, in the popular mind, to be seen as a new Adam and Eve, for just as the biblical Adam and Eve gave birth to the first man, Cortés and Malinche were the progenitors of the first members of the *mestizo* race. Furthermore, it was Mary, Mother of Christ, who revealed herself as the Virgin of Guadalupe, who became the second Eve and redeemed man from his degenerate state. In Tlayacapan, in the state of Morelos, she is depicted as standing, significantly, on a serpent as a symbol of her conquest of the tempter. The Adam and Eve of the Fall have thus been reinterpreted as Christ and the Virgin of man's redemption. The

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<sup>29</sup> The jaguar, because of his bravery in rescuing Nanahuatzin, a weak, scab - covered god , from the flames in the days of the creation of the world, was made, along with the eagle, patron of the Aztec military orders.

serpent, too, can be seen as one of Horcasita's '*elementos paganos*'. In pre-Hispanic mythology the snake took many forms and was frequently associated with Quetzalcóatl, himself known as 'the feathered snake'. In Nahuatl literature one can find references to the water snake which lured people and animals into water and drowned them, the deer snake (with which Quetzalcoatl was also associated) and the evil-looking horned snake which wore a mask with a snout similar to depictions of masks worn by Quetzalcóatl himself (Ingham 1986: 112).

When the angel with the flaming sword drove Adam and Eve out of paradise, the choir sang verses from Psalm 17: 'circumderunt me gemitus mortis', foretelling the hardship which awaited the exiled husband and wife. In contrast to the Latin, the next chorus, a *villancico*, is the only known example of a song in castellano introduced into a Náhuatl work. This fusion of two traditions is an excellent example of transculturation.

As the Indians watched the performance of '*La Caída*' they might have been struck by a similarity between the story of the creation of Adam and Eve, condemned to dig and weave, and their own version, the story of Oxomoco and Cipactónal, the first man and woman who were ordered to do similar work. For the friars it was a reminder that Adam was the first Gentile, not Jew or Moor, and that the Aztecs were his heirs and thus part of God's divine plan for salvation. Their natural '*humildad y paciencia*' meant that they were in a pre-Christian state even before the arrival of the missionaries. In other words, they should be considered equal to the Europeans and worthy of being integrated into the course of universal history. As such, the Franciscans can be seen as propounding a truly revolutionary view and one which was at odds with the imperial view which continued to see the natives as 'vassals'.

Harris maintains another equally surprising position, namely that the play contains a 'second' voice' or 'hidden transcript' which was not immediately obvious to the friars of the time. To the Aztecs, the play reproduced their own expulsion from paradise, driven out of a state of innocence by the arrival of the conquistadors. The angel armed with a flaming sword represented both the armed might of the Spanish conqueror and the stern teaching of the Catholic church, girded with the 'sword of righteousness', as St. Paul puts it. The land of thistles and snakes which the angel showed them was a metaphor for their own barren lives under Spanish occupation and the future of spinning, weaving and digging to which they were henceforth condemned, represented a future of servitude to the Spanish master. A further insight into the *auto* is provided by Louise Burkhart who has pointed out, that the natives had no notion of individual sin, but only of collective failure, the consequences of which they called 'damage' or *tlatlacolli* (Burkhart 1989: 29). The punishment of Adam and Eve, their expulsion from paradise, could have been seen as an example of this 'damage', paralleled by the



‘damage’ of the *conquista* for the indigenous people. *La Caída* is, therefore, a complex work which can be read at several levels: it is not simply a re-telling of an old legend explaining how evil came into the world, it is a rich blend of pre-conquest mythology and Catholic Christian culture and, at the same time, a code, a form of theatrical vengeance, in which the Indians were complicit and from which most Spanish members of the audience and probably the friars themselves would have been excluded. As Louise Burkhart says, theatre was a risky business. The friars might have been able to control the script but they could not control the emotions and intentions of the actors (1958: 19) or the audience.

### **The feast of Corpus Christi**

In 1539, on the feast of Corpus Christi, in Tlaxcala, an astonishing day of non-stop drama took place. Four *autos* were performed, having been composed at fever speed in the three previous days. Motolinía’s famous account graphically describes the scene:

Todo el camino estaba cubierta de juncia y de españadas y flores y de nuevo había quien siempre iba echando rosas y clavelinas [...] era cosa maravillosa de ver, porque había muchos arboles, unos silvestres y otros de flores, y las setas y hongos y vello que nace en los arboles de montañas y las peñas. (1536: 90)

The four *autos* performed for the feast of Corpus Christi were *La Conquista de Jerusalén*, *La Tentación del Señor*, *La predicación a las Aves* and *El Sacrificio de Isaac*. Of these *La Predicación* is perhaps the least typical of what one normally expects from an *auto*. It is short, having only four scenes and there is no exchange of dialogue, only St. Francis speaks at length. It is notable, above all, for the fact that three clearly pre-Hispanic elements exist side by side with the Christian, Franciscan content – the Aztec hill, the boys disguised as birds and the pre-Hispanic *pulque* song. As Horcasitas states: Estas piezas no constituyen una obra teatral típica pero combinan más efectivamente los elementos típicos del apogeo del teatro franciscano primitivo’ (1974: 558). The first scene or *cuadro* presents St. Francis standing on an artificial hill especially constructed for the performance. Such hills figure prominently in several of the *autos*, in particular *El Sacrificio de Isaac* and *La Comedia de los Reyes* where the ‘mountain’ was so high that it took two hours for the kings to descend. In fact, according to Ravicz, not one but three were built for the Corpus Christi celebrations. It is probable that they reflected for the natives, who were solely responsible for the construction of the scenery, an atavistic reference to the hills on which the Aztec temples were built and the glyph for the pre-conquest *alteptl*. Here St. Francis is seen preaching to the birds, reminding them of their duty to thank

God morning and evening for having provided them with all their needs while they needed neither to reap nor sow.

In the second *cuadro* the saint is coming down from the 'mountain' when he meets a wild beast, described as being so ugly that all who saw it trembled with fear. St. Francis, displaying the understanding of animals for which he was so well-known and loved, recognises the animal as the one which has been terrorising the neighbourhood and destroying the peasants' flocks. He reproaches it '*benignamente*' and leads the repentant beast down into the village, where it shows its sorrow and promises, by shaking paws with St. Francis, that it will never again frighten the neighbourhood or attack their animals.

In the third and fourth *cuadros* the Franciscan playwright attacks two of the most prevalent local vices: drunkenness and witchcraft and sorcery. In the third scene St. Francis has just begun his sermon to the people when he is interrupted by a drunk singing loudly. The saint summons some devils who enter noisily and to great theatrical effect drag the intoxicated man off to 'hell'. In the final scene he again begins his sermon which this time is broken by the appearance of '*hechiceras*', old hags and witches, some of whom have performed illegal abortions. They, too, are dispatched to the underworld.

This *auto* brief as it is, is rich in both pre-Hispanic practices and references to the close relationship which the Franciscans had with nature and as found in Francis' well-known Song of the Sun when he refers to Brother Sun and Sister Moon. The opening scene is very similar to that of the Garden of Eden in *La Caída*. The birds, to whom St. Francis was preaching, could well have been played by small boys, dressed in disguises of rich feathers, perched in artificial trees. This is reminiscent of one of the pre-conquest dances of Moctezuma, the festival of Xochiquetzal, goddess of flowers, already referred to. It is not known whether St. Francis in his sermon to the birds was using the famous words of the Bible: 'Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather in barns; yet your heavenly father feedeth them (St. Matthew chapter 6, verses 26-29) or whether he was using a form of an ancient song suggested by Garibay (1964 ii: 100).

Aureo pájaro cascabel es vuestro bello canto

el bello que eleváis aquí:

en un ruedo de flores, en ramos florecientes

estáis y dais vuestros trinos.

Ah, acaso tú ere save roja del dios,

tal vez un rey de él puesto

Vosotros los primeros mirasteis la aurora

y ahora estáis cantando.

In the second scene the wild beast could have been a jaguar which had been destroying local flocks. Jaguars, often called tigers, or big cats in general, were the popular disguises of the Tlaxcalans when they went to war and the two detachments known as the Eagles and the Tigers were considered the crack troops in the army. Jaguars featured in other *autos*: in *La Caída*, for instance, a chained jaguar was guarded by a small boy. Alternatively, when the beast offers its paw to St. Francis as a token of its good behaviour, we are reminded of the wolf of Gobbio and of St. Francis' legendary power over animals. There is perhaps a piece of Franciscan propaganda contained here, the message being that peaceful negotiation is a better way of overcoming evil (represented by the wolf) than warfare.

The third scene is interesting because the drunken man who bursts in on the sermon is singing an ancient song in praise of *pulque*. Horcasitas notes that the Franciscans never missed an opportunity to draw on pre-conquest references if they thought they could make a point more forcefully. This is exactly the kind of song which might have been heard in the pre-Cortés period and again Garibay provides, from a collection of *Canticares mexicanos*, a translation into Spanish of some typical drinking verses (Garibay 1957: 310):

Bebamos ya en la Tierra de Flores

En nuestra casa, sobre las flores, oh,

La sabrosa florecida fuente

Que está salpicando rocío, vida deleitosa para los corazones

Flores cuajadas de rocío en nuestra casa de Chiapa.

Even Náhuatl drinking songs had an elegant beauty about them – a rare phenomenon.

In the final scene the disreputable women who interrupt St. Francis may again be references to pre-Hispanic pagan practices such as witchery and abortion which the missionaries, despite their evangelising, had not managed to extirpate. In Mexican mythology, according to Ingham (1986: 116) the witch featured and continues to feature in a big way. The word *hechicera*, which occurs in the text, means 'doer', the person who knew how to do *cochinadas* or nasty things. A *hechicera* could make people sick, could destroy a relationship and suck blood from the necks of infants. In other words, she is a thoroughly unpleasant character and her presence in the *auto* may suggest that despite the preaching of the friars she had lost none of her pagan influence and continued to exercise power over the local people. The 'hell' to which drunkards and sorcerers were condemned at the end represents some of the best technical skills of the natives. The inferno had a secret door by which those who had been dragged off could escape and it was only after they had all left by this concealed

exit that the underground ‘hell’ was set on fire. The audience, unaware of this contrivance, according to Motolinía, screamed with terror and the ‘condemned’ souls and devils groaned in pain to add to the dramatic effect (Motolinía Vol.1: 95). The *Predicación* thus contains a fascinating combination of the pagan and the Christian, an excellent example of co-acculturation – two cultures sitting side by side, each informing and using the other. They serve as a reminder as Horcasitas puts it of ‘una era en que la cultura antigua no había muerto del todo’ (1974: 558).

The last of the four *autos* to be performed was *El sacrificio de Isaac*. As with *La caída*, little is known of its provenance. After the mention by Motolinía nothing is heard of the *auto* until the appearance of a manuscript dated 1678 and it is not known whether this refers to the *auto* performed in 1538. The version to be discussed in this dissertation was translated into a Spanish described by Horcasitas as ‘excesivamente literal’ by Paco y Troncoso in 1899.

### ***El sacrificio de Isaac***

*El sacrificio de Isaac* is exceptional for two reasons: the elegance and dignity of its Náhuatl language and the ‘second voice’, or hidden resistance which comes across very clearly in the action. Even in translation this can be perceived. Like the *villancicos*, whose art form came from Spain but whose words were changed once they came to Mexico, *El sacrificio de Isaac* is a basic Christian theme but fleshed out and given an Aztec flavour.

A study of the *auto* will be in two parts; first, an account of the story and second, an examination of the language used and possible authorship. The narrative has two sections: the first section deals with Abraham’s domestic life and the second with the traditional sacrifice scenes from the Old Testament. The first section contains some noteworthy departures from the familiar story. Abraham, for instance, is no longer a herder living in a tent in the desert, but the ruler of a house large enough to entertain a number of guests, indeed there is the possibility that this extensive dwelling can be seen as a *tecalli*, the home of a Tlaxcaltecan lord. The cunning Tlaxcalans, as has been seen, would stop at nothing to stress the economic and political importance of Tlaxcala and made good propaganda out of the fact that most of the *autos* were held in their home city. Alternatively, the home of Abraham may be based on the enormous houses of chiefs which could accommodate up to six hundred people remarked on by Cortés during the siege of Tenochtitlan (Fuentes 1963: 94). Abraham orders a feast for his son, Isaac, and preparations for musicians, trumpets and flowers are reminiscent of the last days of Moctezuma’s empire. He commands his servant, Hagar, and her son, Ishmael to prepare the banquet and when Abraham’s wife, Sarah, considers that the youth, Ishmael, is a bad influence on Isaac, he

and his mother are sent away from the house. The second half has a different character; it deals directly with the well-known story of the sacrifice and the angel's intervention.

A number of aspects make the narrative of this *auto* interesting. In the first half, the inclusion of Hagar and Ishmael is unusual. In the Bible story (Genesis 16) Sarah, who is childless, persuades Abraham to sleep with his servant, Hagar (or Agar) in order that they might have children and so continue his bloodline. Abraham agrees and a son, Ishmael, is born of the union. Ricard has suggested that there is no reference in the *auto* to the fact that Hagar was Abraham's concubine or that Ishmael was his illegitimate son and that this is deliberate so as not to appear to encourage polygamy among the Indians (Ricard 1933: 203). But if that were the case, why include Hagar and Ishmael at all? They do not feature, for instance, in the English version in the Chester cycle. In the second part of the *auto*, the section relating to the sacrifice, there is another departure from the traditional story. After the appearance of the angel, there is no reference to a ram caught in a thicket. There is only a brief mention of a '*cordito*' but no suggestion that it might be sacrificed. Instead, the lamb (not a ram) in the text is a foreshadowing of that other great sacrifice, the Lamb of God. The clear message here is that blood sacrifices on the part of the Indians are to be discouraged. There is another interesting feature: according to the stage instructions, this is the only part of the play to take place in the open air (*el cielo abierto*) although it is well known that all the autos were held outside in the large *plazas* surrounding the church. The text adds that Abraham and Isaac climb a hill to get to the place of sacrifice, a hill which, no doubt, the natives built and which was an echo of the high hills on which their former temples stood and where multiple sacrifices were carried out. Two questions arise: were the friars using this scene to suggest that on this hill a different sacrifice was about to be enacted? A bloodless one, marking love of God rather than fear of divine vengeance and one whose conclusion was like the Sacrifice of the mass, an end to bloodletting once and for all? And a more practical one: was this section of the *auto*, therefore, performed in a separate place?

As with *La caída* it is possible to argue that *El sacrificio* contains a 'hidden transcript' and that it is a vehicle for resistance to the conquest. One can see Hagar and Ishmael as Aztecs, representatives of the Old Order, the pre-Hispanic world. They are outcasts, foreigners, unwanted because they are not part of the new Hispanic empire, reduced to the role of servants. Isaac, usually seen as the submissive and willing victim, acknowledges as much when he speaks rudely and arrogantly to Ishmael: '¿Qué haceis aquí? ¿Acaso que está preparado para lo que se necesita? Que se ponga la mesa para el banquete' (Canto V). The words of Ishmael give an added poignancy to this sense of exclusion: 'Ha sido humillado mi rostro y mi corazón. Padesco por el niño Isaac. Nunca ha querido ser mi amigo ni jugar conmigo. ¿Cómo haré para hablar con él?' Ishmael here can be seen to be speaking for all the

members of the audience who felt similar exclusion from the land of their birth. As Lucy Burkhart puts it: ‘Spaniards and Nahuas lived side by side for 300 years but in their different worlds (1958: 17)

The language of the *auto* is very significant and may give some clues as to its authorship. The Aztecs took speech very seriously. In pre-Hispanic documents they call themselves ‘*Nahuatlaca*’ - ‘people who explain themselves and speak very clearly’. Todorov tells us that they had special schools for studying the art of rhetoric and interpretation and that power lay with those who could command respect through their language (Todorov 1982: 79). An Aztec ruler was called ‘*tlatoni*’ meaning ‘he masters speech’ and for him the most important speech was the ritual speech associated with ceremonial or religious occasions or court functions. It was archaic in form, learned by heart rather than written down and inherited from the ancestors. One catches a glimpse of this, for instance, in the formal and lengthy exchanges which, according to Díaz, took place during the first meetings between Moctezuma and Cortés (1550: 194ff). This is the kind of language frequently used also in the first part of *El sacrificio de Isaac*. When, at the beginning, Abraham calls his son, he uses typical formal Náhuatl metaphors: ‘¡Tú que eres mi collar de oro amarillo, mi pulsera de jade, mi collar de plata, mi amado hijo, ven!’ When he speaks to God, he employs a vocabulary which would have been understandable by Aztec members of the audience and in words which priests might have used when addressing their own gods: ‘¡O Dios padre, eterno y todopoderoso que hiciste el cielo, la tierra, la luna, las estrellas y todo lo visible e invisible en el universo!’ Similarly, when Abraham’s rejected son, Ishmael, bewails his expulsion, he uses a ritual Aztec invocation: ‘¡O sol, tú que estas tan lejos, tan alto! ¡Calientánlos con la gran luz con que alumbras el universo, con la que das bienestar a los hombres del mundo!’ Durán bears witness to the splendour and sophistication of the Náhuatl language when he writes: ‘Those who speak this language will agree with me on the profundity and excellence that it carries within it. I dare to affirm, after many years of studying it, that I still find new things, new words, and most elegant metaphors to learn’ (Durán 1581: 70).

However, the second part of the *auto* - the scenes which deal with the traditional sacrifice story, seem quite different. The language is plain and basic, conveying the orthodox message of obedience to parental authority and the commandments of God and the rejection of the practice of blood sacrifice. It might seem plausible to argue, therefore (although I have not read anything which supports this theory) that the first half of *El sacrificio* was written by natives in an attempt to draw attention to their subjugation at the hands of the Spanish in a way which would not necessarily have been recognised by the friars. It might be argued that only those intimately familiar with the subtleties of the Náhuatl language could have produced lines of such eloquent beauty. The second half of the *auto*, by contrast,

is more straightforward and direct and suited to the work of evangelizing. It can, therefore, with reason be attributed to the friars.

### ***La conquista de Jerusalén***

The *Conquista de Jerusalén* of all the *autos* can be considered the best example of dramatic transculturation – a combination of the Aztec mock battle, the Spanish ‘*moros y cristianos*’ and the European tourney. It will be studied in two parts; first the story it tells and then an examination of why it is so fascinating, intriguing and above all, impressive.

In the summer of 1539 feverish activity was taking place. The previous year a peace had been signed between France and Spain and Charles V, now rid of the threat of French invasion, let it be known that he proposed to launch a *cruzada* for the defence of Christendom against the infidel. Whether he seriously intended to recapture Jerusalem from the Turks is doubtful. It is more probable that he planned to concentrate on defending strategic ports like Tunis and Constantinople and the Mediterranean area from Turkish attack. The friars, however, were fired with millenarian enthusiasm for a real *reconquista de Jerusalén*, seeing in it the justification for the conquest of Mexico, and spurred on by the fact that Mexico City had earlier presented its own crusade *auto*, *la Conquista de Rodas*, determined to rival it. The politically ambitious Tlaxcalans were pleased to host this second *auto*, hoping in the process to gain privileges from the Spanish in the form of exemption from tax and the right to ride horses. Pazo states that so keen was Motolinía to outdo the Mexican convent that he went secretly to Mexico and spied on the rehearsals (1951: 159). The result of this piece of monastic espionage was the Tlaxcalan alternative, *La conquista de Jerusalén*, the first of the plays performed for Corpus Christi, in Tlaxcala in 1539. In essence, it was a battle between the Moors and the Christians for possession of the holy city of Jerusalem – a more complex version of the Spanish *juego de cañas* already discussed. After being repulsed three times, St. James and the archangel Michael appear to help the Christians, but it is, significantly, St. Hippolyte, adopted as the patron saint of the Aztecs, who finally leads the Christians (the Indians) to victory in the recapture of Jerusalem. The defeated Moors (led by Indians impersonating Cortés and his army) then seek Christian baptism. The play ends with real baptisms of native adults and processions in honour of Corpus Christi.

The *auto* is remarkable in the first place for the sheer scale of its production.<sup>30</sup> It took place in the main *plaza* of Tlaxcala, an area the size of four football pitches. There were at least 1500 actors

involved. In constructing the scenery the Indians had excelled themselves: six towers were built, each one representing a city or an army. Jerusalem was a five-towered scenic city, covered in flowers, the ‘Emperor Charles V lived’ in one tower, the armies of Spain and New Spain in two more, a fifth unit was the city of Santa Fe, named after the city built by Ferdinand and Isabella to mark, significantly, their victory over the Moors at Granada. The sixth tower was a decorated platform, on which the consecrated Host was placed, centrally positioned so that all the action of the *auto* took place before it. Towers had featured in Mexico long before the Conquest and the use of them in the *auto* may be a deliberate reference to a pre-Columbian past.<sup>31</sup> The impression which this spectacle must have made upon natives and Europeans alike is not hard to imagine. Judith Weiss writes: ‘Nothing on record to this day indicates that this marvellous construction, a paradigm of virtual drama that merges historical periods, has ever been attempted again or performed’ (1993: 52).

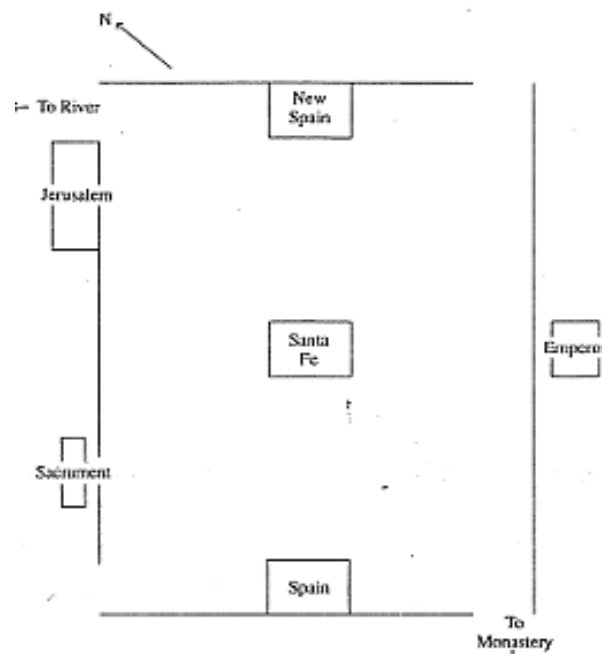


FIGURE 6.1 Possible ground-plan for The Conquest of Jerusalem

Fig. 13 Max Harris: *Dialogical Theatre* p.83

Secondly, the consignment of roles is most interesting. Aztecs, for instance, represented the army of Spain, composed of troops from Castile, León and other parts of Spain, along with soldiers from Germany and Italy – all subjects of the Holy Roman Empire. How Motolinía, from whom we receive the bulk of information, knew this since the play is silent (apart from the formal speeches assigned to

<sup>30</sup> Juan Díaz, travelling with Grijalva in 1518, remarked on the large number of ‘white towers’ to be seen on the coast of Yucatan while Cortés, in his account of the siege of Tenochtitlán, refers to the ‘towers’ where unfortunate captured Spaniards were sacrificed. He also mentions towers which he climbed to make public announcements (Fuentes 1963: 103-104).



St. James and St. Hippolyte) is not clear and it may be that, in giving us the origin of the soldiers, he is seeking rather to gain the goodwill of Charles V by stressing the extent of his empire. The soldiers, regardless of their origin, were all dressed in Spanish uniform, whereas the armies of New Spain, which followed, were resplendent in native feathers, cloaks and full battle regalia. Durán gives an illustration of this battle finery when he describes the ranks of Indians who massed against Cortés in Tecoaac, en route for Tenochtitlan on the occasion of Cortés second visit to Mexico. 'He saw that in the front lines there were many gallant men, splendidly arrayed, covered from head to foot with their military ornaments inlaid with gold, as were their shields. On their heads and over their backs they wore rich feathers and insignia that indicated that they were spirited and courageous warriors' (Durán 1581: 519). Motolinía explains this by saying that the Aztecs did not know the differences in military costume and therefore dressed their actors all the same (1536: 97), but Harris suggests that it was to point up the drabness of the Spanish uniform compared with the brilliance of the native (2000: 136). The Aztecs were further favoured in that their armies were called 'Christian' but the Spanish merely 'Spanish'. Behind them came squadrons purporting to be from Peru, New Spain and the Caribbean. Alone among these, the soldiers of the Antilles were quickly defeated and fell into the hands of the enemy, suggesting that they were weak and lacking in resistance or, being still heathen, did not know how to call for help from God. Harris sees this as a metaphor for the extinction of the natives in the Caribbean at the hands of the Spaniards (2000: 142). He suggests that the message is that only those who have the strength and determination to resist conquest will triumph. It might also be an example of 'hidden resistance' on the part of the natives: pointing out to the audience the cruelty which had been practised upon their brothers. There might be, however, an alternative explanation which will be discussed in a later section.

Meanwhile, the infidel army of Moors and Jews had taken possession of Jerusalem and were ensconced in the holy city. In a brilliant stroke of dramatic irony, their leader was represented by an Indian playing the role of Hernando Cortés, another Indian represented General Pedro de Alvarado, while Mendoza, the vice-roy and rival of Cortés and, in the eyes of the friars, the 'good guy', was the leader of the Indians of New Spain. What is the explanation for this curious reversal of roles? Why has Cortés become a Turkish sultan and his army chief, Alvarado, captain of a Moslem army? Scholars have argued long and hard over this. Some, like Versenyi, see it as a political move by the friars. Realising that Cortés was no longer governor and wielder of political power, they felt the need to disassociate themselves from him and cast their lot instead with the existing secular authorities (225). Alfonso Reyes supports this view, suggesting that the assignment of roles was a deliberate attempt to discredit Cortés and his henchman, both of whom had lost political power. Varón is in

agreement but for different reasons. She argues that the attribution of the role of the infidel to Cortés was a reference to the bitter rivalry between Cortés and Mendoza which was going on at that time, over the right to explore the rich territory of El Mar de Sur (2008: 223). However, she does not pursue this intriguing theory. We might assume, from what she says, that the ‘writer’ (if there was one) of the *auto*, or the inspiration behind it, was opposed to Cortés and wanted to insult him yet on her next page she asserts that the friars had a lasting admiration for Cortés. This is just one of the confusing messages to come out of the *Conquista*.

Others, and they are the majority, see in the *auto* an expression of what they call ‘native rancour’ against the *conquistadores* and the Conquest. Warman calls it ‘*una satira esplendida*’ (1972: 89) and Jerome Williams agrees, adding that the wearing of disguises was an ancient way of making fun of one’s so-called heroes and of dressing to engage in battle. Sahagún, in Book 12 of the Codex Florentinus, quotes an Aztec warrior, Tzilacatzin, in the siege of Tenochtitlán, disguising himself for battle with ‘a feather headdress with a wig and two eagle feather pendants tied at the back of the head’. He adds ‘As one who cast men into the fire did he go acting; he went imitating one who cast men into the fire’ (1975: 93). Harris, in elaborating his theory of ‘hidden transcripts’, challenges the entire theory of the justifying of the *cruzada* as a means of spreading the Christian faith. He sees the *Conquista* as posing the fundamental question: If the Moors had no right to hold Jerusalem, by what right do the Spaniards rule Mexico?

In purely theatrical terms, *La Conquista de Jerusalén* is a brilliantly witty example of ‘*teatro en el teatro*’ with natives playing what Arroníz calls a ‘*doble juego*’ (1979: 66). Not only were they re-enacting the eleventh century conquest of Jerusalem, they were locals dressed as Spaniards performing what was, in effect, a reversal of their own conquest. Not a ‘*doble*’ but a ‘*triple juego*’. A final *coup de théâtre* occurs at the end of the play, when Cortés, the conqueror of New Spain, but here a defeated Moor, kneels before a Tlaxcalan noble, the ‘Emperor’, and humbly requests baptism. In a deliciously daring moment he declares himself to be a ‘natural vassal’ of the Tlaxcalan Emperor, thus turning on its head the argument used by the Spaniards to justify their enslavement of the natives, namely that that some men were natural born slaves.

The placing of the sacrament of baptism at the very heart of the *auto*, its triumphant conclusion, was a bold stroke on the part of the friars. While the Church authorities might have declared it a sacrilegious act, it was, as Versényi and Horcasitas suggest, recognition that religion and drama in the Aztec world were inseparably bound together. By embedding a Catholic rite in the drama of the *Conquista*, the mendicants were seeking to impress on the natives the fact that it was not necessary to abandon their cultural links with the drama of their own heritage when accepting the new faith.

This baptism can be read in a number of other ways. The fact that the Emperor and chiefs were baptised first before the lesser natives suggests a politicisation of the sacrament, an admission that even in religious ceremonies the social order of Mexican society must be observed. Secondly, mass baptism was a reflection of a common practice amongst the Franciscans. Mendieta had noted that the friars had each baptised up to 300,000 souls (Mendieta 3.38: 275). Arroniz, in fact, makes use of these figures to suggest that the *auto* was employed by the friars as an answer to the criticisms of the other orders. By indicating the extent of conversions they were drawing attention to their evangelizing success. Thirdly, it was a reminder of what had been normal in Spain during the last days of the *Reconquista*, namely the forced baptism of Jews, Moors and Saracens.

The *Conquista* is so intriguing because it is full of other enigmas. What, for instance was its purpose? It might not be too fanciful to suggest that it was a piece of political propaganda by the friars themselves. It is possible that they had heard of, if not actually witnessed, the fall of Granada in 1492 and in the *Conquista* they were re-enacting in drama the surrender of a ‘real’ sultan, Muhammad XII or Boabdil, to a ‘real’ Emperor, Ferdinand of Castille.<sup>32</sup> Varón goes further, suggesting that it was intended as an extension of the Spanish *crusada* against the Moors and served both as a justification for conquest and to inculcate obedience to the Spanish Crown as the new defender of Christianity. She adds that it is worth noting that the peace signed between France and Spain was used by Carlos V to initiate a new crusade against the Turks (1999: 454). Ybarra supports this theory, stating that civic and church authorities were using it to perform conquest’, to make defeat more acceptable to the Aztecs. If such is the case, this deliberate reversal of the roles turns it into a spectacular failure. By assigning to Cortés and Alvarado the leadership of an army soon to be conquered, the natives were enacting, not their historic defeat, but a form of what Harris calls ‘theatrical vengeance’. Their staged victory over the Moors was a prediction of what they hoped, ultimately, to achieve in real life – the *Reconquista*. How far the friars were aware of this ‘hidden transcript’ or ‘second voice’ is impossible to tell at this distance. Certainly, by this date, it could be argued that they had no love for Cortés and would have been pleased to see him thus humiliated,<sup>33</sup> conversely they were supporters of the vice-roy who comes out victor in the conquest. Furthermore, as official protectors of the Holy Places in the Holy Land, they would have rejoiced to see Jerusalem safely in Christian hands at the end of the *auto* and might have drawn unfavourable comparisons with the conquistadors’ rape of the sacred Aztec sites of Mexico. Whatever their views, they would have been satisfied and relieved that

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<sup>32</sup> This event is the subject of a brilliant biography by the Lebanese writer, Amin Maalouf, entitled *Léon l’Africain*, in which he tells of the final days of the Moorish kingdom of Granada and the subsequent wanderings of its last sultan, Boabdil.

<sup>33</sup> Varón disputes this view asserting that the Franciscans remained strong supporters of Cortés, Mendieta calling him a new Moses (2008: 227).

the *auto* ended on a satisfactory note with the conversion and baptism of the ‘infidel’ and the Corpus Christi procession.

The *Conquista* is full of other enigmas. Was Cortés in the audience? If so, was he content to be portrayed as an infidel and to be ‘converted’ at the conclusion of the play? Did he understand that he was apparently being mocked? Arroniz suggests that it is unlikely that either he or Alvarado were present but that the vice-roy, Mendoza, who gets a good press, was (1979: 68). How much of the *teatro en el teatro* was appreciated by the Spanish audience and how far were the friars complicit in this ‘theatre of vengeance’? Finally, there is the question of the authorship of the *auto*. Opinions abound. Pazo maintains that Motolinía wrote it because he dedicates his *Historia de los Indios* to a certain Count Pimentel, a friend, whom an Indian impersonates in the play, taking the role of Captain General of the Spanish Army. But why should he assign the role of a defeated General to a friend and compatriot? Harris has other views. He maintains that the *Conquista* contains so many examples of ‘hidden resistance’ that it might have had any number of authors, some of them indigenous.

There is yet another puzzle. In 1529, for instance, the Mexican bishops ordered that all adult baptisms be administered only between Easter and Pentecost. The ‘real’ baptisms which were held at the end of the *auto*, ten days at least after Pentecost, were thus a direct defiance of episcopal authority. Would Motolinía have entered into such an act of rebellion? Harris concludes that, as with *El sacrificio de Isaac*, the composition of the play was a joint effort between Aztecs and friars, inspired by the rival production of *La Conquista de Rodas* (2000: 146). It might be argued that it evolved spontaneously in the intensity of the dramatic moment. The absence of a written text means we shall probably never know. Thus the *auto* remains a lasting and tantalising mystery.

### ***La Comedia de los Reyes***

The *auto* known as *La comedia de los reyes* did not form part of the Corpus Christi celebrations of 1538-9 but it was possibly, with the exception of *El juicio final* and *La conversión de San Pablo*, one of the oldest. The story of its discovery is exciting. In 1900 Francisco del Paso y Troncoso, the greatest expert on Náhuatl texts at the time, received a message to say that there had been found in La Biblioteca Pública de Chicago a text entitled ‘*La comedia de los reyes*’, written in Náhuatl and composed by one Fray Ioan Vauhtista, in 1707. On examination, Paso y Troncoso concluded that both the date of the manuscript and its author were debatable. He challenged the date on the grounds that the *auto* contained many pre-Hispanic references making it far earlier than 1707. There is mention, for instance, of the Aztec month Tititl, usually associated with the feast of the goddess Tona.

The appearance of the star chimed in with the much-repeated native prediction that the destruction of the empire of Moctezuma would be heralded by comets and strange astral phenomena. The offering of quails which the magi made to the infant Jesus was an echo of the Aztec custom of sacrificing animals and birds, quails featuring in several of the Tlaxcalan *lienzos* of the period. As for the authorship, Paso y Troncoso assumed that this story was only one of many circulating at the time about three wise men making a long journey.<sup>34</sup> He was doubtful whether it could be attributed with certainty to any friar.

*La comedia de los reyes* relates the well-known story of the journey of the magi and how they followed the star until they reached the birthplace of the Christ child, beginning with the sighting of the star and the decision to travel to Herod's palace to ask the whereabouts of this infant, born in his kingdom, and ending with the massacre of the Innocents.

It is significant for a number of reasons. First, it demonstrates, yet again, a remarkable native facility for constructing scenery. The guiding star was huge, suspended on hand-made ropes from the hillside across the town to a church tower; rope-making being a speciality of the Aztecs. The hill which they constructed for the magi's journey was so high and so full of oak trees that it took two hours to descend and is, incidentally, yet another echo of the hills on which the Aztec temples were built. Ricard notes that while the audience was waiting for the magi to appear, they were entertained with songs and dances by angels and shepherds (1922: 199). Second, and more important, it seems clear that, as with *El sacrificio de Isaac*, this *auto* was written in two halves by two different authors. We have here another illustration of possible collaboration between the natives and the friars. The first part deals with the journey of the magi and Herod's agitation when they arrive at his palace. The action has all the characteristic question and answer form of the early 'Quem quaretis?' Easter plays previously described. Herod, enraged, in short frenetic bursts, asks of the magi: '¿Quién buscáis? ¿Adónde se le espera? Yo digo que yo soy el único Señor del Mundo. ¿Adónde ha de nacer? ¿Qué decis, ¿Qué veis, qué sabéis? And of his servants: '¿Qué quiren? ¿Qué buscan? ¿Qué pasa? ¿Quién ha nacido? He continues: 'Am I not the king? Descendant of Jupiter? Who is this child who has come to rival me?' In his frenetic rage and unpredictable behaviour he bears all the hallmarks of Moctezuma's psychotic nervousness during the last months of his reign, when he summoned the aid of soothsayers and magicians, executing or imprisoning all those who brought him the bad news of

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<sup>34</sup> According to Horcasitas, Marco Polo had heard a story of three magi while travelling in Persia. It was related to him that they had set out from the city of Saba, bearing gifts, to worship a newly-born prophet. When they left, the Virgin Mary gave them a box to take with them. On opening it, on their return, they discovered nothing but a stone inside, which they took to signify that they must be rock firm in their faith. They threw the stone into a well and fire descended from heaven. After death, the bodies of the three magi were discovered uncorrupted in their tombs (Horcasitas 1974:284).

the Spaniards' impending arrival (Durán 1581: 460, 486, 492).<sup>35</sup> It is interesting to wonder whether rumours of Moctezuma's behaviour had persisted long enough in the Indian memory to be incorporated in the *auto* of the magi and Herod.

In the second half of the *auto*, when the magi arrive at the stable, the language changes from the staccato question style to a beautiful lambent, elegant Náhuatl. Gaspar says to the child: '¡Amado niño, jade que brilla más que todas las cosas, has padecido y sufrido trabajar aquí en el llano. Eres un collar, una pluma de quetzal!' This address, must have been written by a Nahua; no friar would ever have likened the Christ Child to the feather of a pagan bird. Balthasar continues in the same vein: '¡Tú eres una piedra de jade, tú eres una pulsera, tú eres una obsidian emplumada!' Such elegant invocations are rich in pre-conquest references. They suggest that the writer was familiar with Aztec metaphors: jade representing life, necklaces of precious stones standing for lineage or descent, the quetzal feather code for beauty (León-Portilla 1980:41). The manner in which the kings address the Christ Child are reminiscent of admonitions given by parents to their children in the *Huehuetlatolli* or Ancient Word, rescued from oblivion by the work of Fray Sahagún and Fray Olmos. Besides the metaphor of the jewellery and the quetzal feather, one can note a repeated phrase, typical of the formal Náhuatl greetings described by Todorov. The repetition of the word 'adonde' gives Melchior's words the impression of being a kind of chant: 'Niño Jesus amado, has venido aquí a nacer en medio de la llanura, adonde se levanta el frío, adonde se alza el viento, adonde no hay donde refugiarse' (Horcasitas 1974: 317). This chorus is taken up by the second vassal who addresses the Virgin Mary with the same poetic apostrophes: 'Te parió, tu buena madre, aquí donde se levanta el frío, donde pacen los venados, donde no hay albergue, donde se alza el viento'. Mary replies in the same refrain: 'Nació aquí en una chocita aquí donde se levanta el frío, donde se alza el viento, donde no hay refugiarse ..' It would seem probable that such contrast in language between the first and second parts of the *auto* can only be explained by the fact of it having two different authors. There is another reference to pre-hispanic Náhuatl culture in the manner in which the three magi address the Christ child which could be further evidence in the case for attributing the second half of the *auto* to a native writer. Balthazar, Melchior and Gaspar at the crib all invoke the blessing of a god who is 'nigh and near to all things' asking from him the gift of long life and happiness for the Infant. The words 'he who is near to all things' or, as León-Portilla puts it 'the God of the Close Vicinity' (1963: 121) can be seen as a direct reference to Ometéotl, the first and principal in the pantheon of Náhuatl gods. He is the begetter and bequeather of all life, the cosmic energy upon which everything else depends – the world, the sun and the stars. He is the god from whom everything receives its existence and the father

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<sup>35</sup> Moctezuma's name, most appropriate for the last months of his life, means 'The Lord who is Angry'.

of the four sons who represented the four quadrants of the earth, one of them being the ubiquitous Quetzalcóatl, the god of the south. That the three magi should use a ‘pagan’ invocation when addressing God Incarnate, within the confines of a Christian *auto*, is an excellent example not so much of acculturation as of co-acculturation – two cultures existing side by side within the same framework.<sup>36</sup>

Another interesting aspect of *La comedia de los reyes* is its latent anti-semitism. When the magi arrive at the palace of Herod, the Jewish guard asks them why they have come. Gaspar replies scornfully: ‘No te lo podemos decir a ti, jovencito. Sólo a él (Herod) podemos contar por qué hemos venido con tanta ansiedad.’ The term ‘jovencito’ to a grown man is deliberately designed to insult. Similarly, in the *auto* it is the Jews and not Herod who carry out the murder of the young children. This anti-semitism has been observed before, in *La conquista*, where Jews and Moors find themselves on the same side, as the common enemy locked up in the city of Jerusalem which they have stolen from the Christians. Whether the Aztecs were aware of these anti-semitic implications is not known; they were certainly not alien to the friars in an age when the Jew was condemned universally as the murderer of Christ.

A third element of *La comedia* is its reference to a little known miracle connected with the Epiphany. When Herod’s soldiers were chasing the fleeing Mary and Joseph they met a peasant working in his fields. They asked him if he had seen the refugees and he replied that they had passed that way and had gone on towards the river Jordan. He was, at that moment, sowing his seeds and when he returned to his labour he found that the fields through which the Holy Family had passed were already ripe and ready to harvest.<sup>37</sup>

It may have occurred to those watching the *auto*, and this was certainly the intention of the friars, that they, too, like the magi, were the gentiles to whom the knowledge of Christ had been manifested. Although, like the magi, they were the inhabitants of a far-off land, their intrinsic goodness meant that the moment was right for them, like the magi, to receive the enlightenment of the Epiphany.

There are two further *autos* to be considered. Both are outside the mainstream of those so far discussed: the one because it is both a departure from the normal Biblical theme and highly

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<sup>36</sup> Ometéteotl was known as known as a ‘dual god’. His duality expressed itself in a masculine and a feminine manifestation. The feminine side of his nature was known as ‘she of the starry skirt’, and this aspect of his persona was associated with the night sky and the stars. It is not impossible that the friars saw in this feminine representation a parallel with the Virgin Mary who is traditionally always dressed in blue and is frequently depicted as standing on a ring of stars. The similarity is so striking that the ‘lady of the starry skirt’ may have been reworked and transformed into a version of the Virgin.

<sup>37</sup> Surprisingly enough, this miracle appears in a modern nativity play entitled ‘*The business of good government*’ by the playwright John Arden.

anachronistic and the other because it is so erroneous. They are, respectively, *La destrucción de Jerusalén* and *La conversión de San Pablo*.

### ***La Conversión de San Pablo***

The *auto* known as *La Conversión de San Pablo* must be seen as separate from the main group, both because of its early date and because of its strange narrative. The story of the conversion of St. Paul was one of the most popular themes in medieval liturgical theatre; examples can be found in medieval France, Italy and England, dating as far back as the eleventh century. The first reference we have to the existence of such an *auto* in Mexico can be found in the writings of Cornyn and McAfee (mentioned in Horcasitas 1974: 450) and in the work of Marilyn Ravicz (1970: 49). Both refer to an *auto* known as *La Conversión de San Pablo* performed in 1530 in the atrium of the spot where the great cathedral of Mexico now stands and written in Náhuatl. Garibay adds his support to this statement, suggesting: ‘De mano franciscano puede ser el *auto* de *La Conversión de San Pablo*, representado en el atrio de la Iglesia Mayor de México en 1530 (Garibay 1953 vol.II: 128). However, controversy surrounds this theory from the start. Horcasitas declares that despite searching for many years he has been unable to find any mention in ‘*las crónicas*’ of any such work, in either Spanish or Náhuatl (1974: 450).

In 1950, however, a ‘*bibliógrafo*’, Federico Gómez de Orozco, discovered among his collection the manuscript of an ancient version of *La Conversión*, written on *maguey* paper, decorated with pictures of animals, in the Anáhuac tradition. This document, in Náhuatl and undated, had been freely translated into Spanish by a scholar named Galicia Chimalpopoca. It is this version of the Conversion of St. Paul which will be discussed here.

The *auto* is different from those of the later 1530s, composed either for Corpus Christi and other major festivals or to celebrate the peace treaty of 1538, in that it appears to have been written much earlier – possibly only nine years after the Conquest. It is also noteworthy because it contains so many errors due, according to Horcasitas, to the fact that its author was possibly a neophyte who either misunderstood the Biblical story or was anxious to give it a vernacular slant.

The text is in two parts; the first concerns the events on the road to Damascus and the second is an exchange between St. Sebastian and a group of pagans. From the beginning there are departures from the Biblical account. When Saul falls from his horse on the way to Damascus, he is not blinded by the light of God, he is left ‘*desmenuzado*’ on the road. In fact, there is no mention at all of Saul losing his sight. When the pieces of his body have been picked up and reassembled, the voice of God calls



to him, asking him why he has persecuted not Stephen but Sebastian, whom God calls: ‘custodio de mi morada y purificador de la senda que conduce cuantos se allegan en aquesta celestial mansión’. This is a direct reference to Quetzalcóatl, the ‘sweeper of the road to the gates of Dawn, down which dead warriors passed on their way to the Sun’. Such inclusion of Aztec cultural referencing may be explained by the fact that after the Conquest many shrines were built to the popular St. Sebastian on the sites of temples dedicated to Quetzalcóatl or alternatively, as Ravicz suggests, it may be an example of ‘native resistance’ observed in later *autos* (Ravicz 1970: 49). For reasons which are not entirely clear God then orders angels to lead Saul to hell, possibly because he has not shown compassion on the poor and needy or perhaps because he has murdered Sebastian, though there is no direct reference to this in the text. There Saul remains, weeping and bewailing his lot and appalled at the sight of devils casting wicked souls into the flames, until he repents of his sins and is resuscitated. Here is another departure from the Bible story: in this *auto* Saul is converted, not by the light of Damascus but by his experiences in hell and the advice of angels.

He then orders his friends, who have been amazed at his resurrection from the dead, to search for the body of the murdered Sebastian. Guided by a mysterious light emanating from the body, the companions find Sebastian and lead him to Saul who is as delighted to find him alive as his friends have been at his own resurrection. Saul then asks Sebastian to baptise him but Sebastian says that this should be administered by St. Peter, to whom he leads him. This is yet another inaccuracy: in the Biblical account it is Ananias who baptises Saul and helps him to recover his sight. The appearance of St. Peter is an unexpected and unexplained variation.

The second part of the *auto* is devoted to the preaching, not of St. Paul but of St Sebastian who ‘con su inspirada voz’ instructs the natives in the teachings of God and admonishes them for their sins. He preaches, as the friars had done, against polygamy, serfdom and excessive wealth. The natives listen to St. Sebastian but say, politely, that they hear what he says but that they cannot obey it: ‘Pues bien, no queremos que eso sea, creemos tu palabra pero una vez deprovistos de lo que poseemos, ¿adonde iremos a dar?’ They then go on to defend their ‘*dioses queridos*’, citing, in defence, their pre-colonial history: ‘Sí, aun ante ellos continuaremos sacrificando seres humanos, volviendo a nuestras practicas anteriores a vuestro arribo en aquesta estancia’. This inclusion in the story is very interesting because it parallels exactly what took place in 1524 when some Náhuatl wise men, known collectively as the *tlamatinime*, debated with the friars on the validity and veracity of their own religion. The elders, having listened to the missionaries, invoked, in defence of their pagan practices, the memory of their ancestors:

From them have we inherited  
our pattern of life  
which in truth did they hold;  
in reverence they held,  
they honoured our gods.  
They taught us  
all their rules of worship.  
all their ways of honouring the gods.

Then they politely refused to accept the new teaching of the friars:

And now, are we  
To destroy  
The ancient order of life?  
Of the Chichimecs,  
Of the Toltecs,  
Of the Acolhuas.  
Of the Tepanecs? (Sahagún 1981: 100-106).

In the *Conversión*, however, the Indians, having held out for some time, are finally won over by St. Sebastian's arguments and agree to abandon the worship of their pagan gods. This episode can be seen as either an illustration of 'native resistance', not always evident to the friars, or as the inclusion of pre-hispanic cultural references used to inculcate Christian ideas. In either case, it is a curious inaccuracy. At this point the *auto* ends.

Clumsy and ill-informed the confusion between the martyrdom of Stephen and Sebastian may be, but the language of the *auto*, as far as can be judged from the translation into Spanish, is far from naïve. St. Paul's experiences in hell and his vision of '*los demonios*' are vividly described. After St. Peter has baptised Saul, now renamed Paul, he sets about instructing him in the scriptures. The author of the *auto* talks of his rapid mastery of the Christian doctrine, comparing it to the passage of the sun through the sky: 'Bautizada ya, dedicóse Pedro a que conociese las escrituras, que en menos tiempo que el sol se pone del este al cenit, quedó completamente instruido'. Such a literary metaphor would suggest that the writer had attained more than a basic level of education.

What is to be made of this eclectic mixture of Biblical story, Christian myth and Aztec mythology? Many tales of the martyrdom of St. Sebastian circulated in the medieval Christian world, in fact he

was one of the most popular saints, celebrated in Barcelona as early as 1424 and forming an element in the Corpus Christi celebrations in Barcelona in 1439, 1446 and 1467 (Harris 2000: 43). Part of his appeal lay in the similarity between Christ's martyrdom on a cross and his own, wounded and suspended from a tree. But how did the Mexicans become sufficiently familiar with the story as to incorporate it into their own drama and what explains the strange inaccuracies in their version? A possible explanation might run as follows: After the conquest, as has already been mentioned, Christian churches dedicated to St. Sebastian were constructed on the site of temples to Quetzalcóatl. The fact that they were built in large numbers and on the site of one of the natives' most revered gods is a comment not only on the popularity of St. Sebastian but also on the friars' fears of the resurgence of paganism. To the Aztecs, however, it could be seen as yet another example of attempted acculturation – the supplanting and usurping of their culture. As a gesture of defiance they created their own version of *La conversión de San Pablo*. St. Paul was seen as rich, arrogant and haughty, coming from a wealthy family of tent-makers and mounted on a horse like the typical Spanish *encomendero*. Falling from his mount was a punishment, not just for him but for all the *conquistadores* for having ridden roughshod over the culture and religion of the Mexicans. When God asks St. Paul why he has killed St. Sebastian (mistaken for St. Esteban), who swept clean the paths leading to the gates of dawn, He is not only referring to the god Quetzalcóatl but also issuing a direct challenge to the Spanish for having held in contempt one of the most important gods in the native calendar.

What was the contribution of the friars to the *auto*? Why did they permit this curiously corrupt version of the true story to circulate? Were they even aware of its existence? Horcasitas believes that the text was simply a '*borrador*', written by a recently converted and ill-informed Indian to be transformed later into a Franciscan sermon (1974: 459) after, surely, correction and re-writing. He is, furthermore, of the opinion that it was never intended, unlike the later *autos*, for the stage. Whatever the explanation for this strange hybrid, it is evidence of an astonishing co-acculturation, an existence of Aztec and Christian beliefs sitting side by side, neither diminished by the other.

### ***La Destrucción de Jerusalén***

The auto entitled 'La destrucción de Jerusalén' is in many respects the strangest of all the autos. Instead of recounting familiar Biblical stories, it is set in a historical period – the reign of the Roman Emperor Vespasian who converted to Christianity three hundred years before Constantine. Its date and place of composition remain matters of dispute and its author is controversial. Argument reigns

over its origins. The basic story derives from an eighth century Latin text called ‘Vindicta Salvatoris’ or ‘Vengeance of the Saviour’, an early Christian apocryphal composite about revenge on Pontius Pilate and the Jews for the murder of Christ. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries versions of the story were circulating in France, eventually reaching Spain at the end of the fifteenth century, at the time of the Conquest, where it appears that two versions were in existence. One version was printed in Toledo around 1492, under the title ‘Ystoria del noble Vespasiano’ and another text was called ‘Gamaliel’ after a Hebrew scribe which had been translated into Spanish from Catalan by Juan de Molina, post 1517, with the spelling ‘La Destruycion De Jerusalem’. There is even dispute over the correct form of the spelling. After an exhaustive comparison of the two versions, David Hook (1974:336) comes down on the side of Molina’s version as being the progenitor of the Mexican auto and this view is supported by Louise Burkhart (2011: 75). Molina’s version was published five times between 1522 and 1536 and copies found their way across the Atlantic and entered New Spain, where one came into the possession of Cortés soldier, Bernal Díaz. Sometime soon after the Conquest the play was translated into Náhuatl and it remained in Nahua hands until it was redacted, although Horcasitas casts doubt on such an early date for its translation, saying that the language ‘se trata de un incipiente mestizaje’ (1975:462). Whether this was because the translator had an inadequate knowledge of the Mexican language or because early Hispanicisation had set in (which did not happen until towards the end of the early Franciscan period, say after 1536) is not known. Burkhart, indeed, puts the date for the translation into Náhuatl as late as post 1538. Where the ‘Destrucción’ was kept and performed is not known though Horcasitas mentions a half rubbed-out inscription on the last page of a copy bearing the name Tlaxcala (1975: 461). Since most of the autos were performed, largely for political reasons, in the city of Tlaxcala, it is likely that the ‘Destrucción’ was also put on there.

Paso y Troncoso adds another strand to this complex story. He claims to have found yet another version of the play, this time in Latin, called ‘Destruccio de Hierusalem’ which entered Mexico through a religious order – either the Padres of Montserrat or the Order of St. Mary. This version was placed in the charge of the Colegio de Belen, whose titular head, a certain Pedro Pascual, was the author or editor of another version of ‘La Destrucción’ which Paso y Troncoso had seen in Spain (Ravicz 1970: 181). As David Hook (1974: 335) concludes: ‘The problem of the origin and authorship of La Destrucción still awaits further investigation.’

Assuming that the Molina text is most likely to have been the one performed in Tlaxcala and the one which Horcasitas has translated into Spanish, what makes this auto so particularly intriguing is that we have two texts of the same play existing side by side, the Molina version in Spanish and the other in Náhuatl, thus allowing a rare opportunity to gain insights into two different interpretations. It is

also complex because it contains within the body of the text three different agendas: a Spanish/Franciscan agenda, an Aztec one and a Tlaxcalan one. For the Spanish and the millenarian Franciscans the auto represents a second *Reconquista*, a capturing of the Holy City, Jerusalem, and its return to the fold of the Holy Roman Empire after years of being in the hands of the Moors (alias the Jews). Vespasian, therefore, represents the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, a second Charlemagne. For the Franciscans the emphasis on the holy relics – the face of Christ imprinted on Veronica’s cloth and the cloak which was stripped from Christ at the Crucifixion – would have had a special relevance since they were traditionally regarded as the guardians of the Holy Places and relics. For the Mexica the destruction of Jerusalem is a retelling of the sad last days of Tenochtitlán, under siege from the Spanish. To the Tlaxcalans, who had joined the side of Cortés and thus become loyal, tribute-paying subjects of the Crown (although they asked to be excused on the grounds of their military support for the conquistadors) and who never missed an opportunity of promoting their own cause, the play was a warning to other communities who defaulted on their payment of tax.

The bare bones of the story, common to both versions, are as follows: In the year AD70 Clement, a disciple of Jesus, comes to Rome from Jerusalem to visit the Emperor Vespasian, who is sick with leprosy. Cain, one of Vespasian’s seneschals, has heard of a great Prophet who had cured lepers in Jerusalem, had been sold for 30 denarii, put to death and rose again after three days. Cain believes that if he could bring back a sacred relic from Jerusalem which had touched the Prophet’s body, the Emperor’s leprosy would be cured. Accordingly he is dispatched to Jerusalem, with a letter telling Pilate, the ruler in Jerusalem, that he is seriously behind with his payment of tribute. On arrival, Cain is lodged with a Jew called Jacob who tells him about Veronica, herself a leper, who was miraculously cured when she wiped her face with a cloth on which was imprinted the face of Christ. Cain then goes to see Pilate and presents him with the letter from Vespasian, demanding the tribute which is owed. Pilate consults King Archelaus and other advisers on how he should respond to the letter. Archelaus recommends that Pilate refuse to pay, adding that even if it came to war, Vespasian would not be able to capture Jerusalem because his army would die from lack of water (a clear reference to the fate of the Mexica during the last days of Tenochtitlán). Cain returns to Rome, without the tribute but with Veronica who applies the imprinted cloth to Vespasian’s face and cures his leprosy. The Emperor, delighted with his recovery, swears to accept Christian baptism as soon as his campaign against the recalcitrant Jerusalem is concluded. The Romans set sail with an army for Acre, calling in on Haifa on the way, where they are helped in their campaign by a defector called Jafel, who, after believing defeat to be inevitable, goes over to Rome’s side, as the Tlaxcalans did in the early days of the Conquest, before the battle of Tenochtitlán. A fierce conflict between Jerusalem and Rome ensues

during which both sides sustain heavy losses but the Emperor's troops continue to receive fresh water thanks to an ingenious scheme of Jafel, which involves lining the Valley of Jehosophat with animal skins and filling them with water to serve as reserves in the event of drought. When it is clear that Jerusalem has lost the war, Pilate sends King Archelaus to negotiate terms but Vespasian insists upon unconditional surrender, whereupon Archelaus falls upon his sword and commits suicide. Pilate, refusing to allow Vespasian access to the city's wealth, orders all the silver, gold and jewels to be ground up and swallowed by the people. Pilate is then taken into custody to an unidentified place called Vienne and tied up with chains. When there is no-one left alive in Jerusalem, the Roman Emperor orders that the city be systematically dismantled and those Jews remaining outside the city walls be dismembered to retrieve the gold and treasure which they have swallowed. A rather touching episode ensues where the captive Pilate hears a dog howling outside the prison walls. On enquiring whose dog it is and why it is barking all day long, he is told that the dog is his and that it has followed him from his palace. Pilate is unable to endure the dog's distress and asks first that it might be allowed to join him in prison and, when that request is refused, that it might be taken out of earshot so that he can no longer hear its distress. Despite the privations which he has endured in prison, Pilate does not die and only meets his end when a slave informs the rulers of Vienne that the mantle which Pilate is wearing was part of the clothing stripped from Jesus at the Crucifixion and is conferring inviolability on him. His captors remove the protective mantle and Pilate, with a cry, falls down dead.

The form of this auto appears to be very different from the shape of all the others. There are very few stage instructions, changes of scene are rarely indicated and the entrance and exit of characters in the play are not marked. Horcasitas, quoting Paso y Troncoso, states that there is no structure, that the scenes appear 'como fragmentos juxtapuestos y mal hilvanados entre sí' which he concludes makes reading the text 'así pesada' (Horcasitas 1974: 462). Certainly it seems to lack some of the beautiful lyrical passages found in parts of *La Comedia de los Reyes* or *El sacrificio de Isaac*. Ravicz asserts that the author of *La Destrucción* was an Indian, possibly a mestizo with a good knowledge of Náhuatl, but that judging by his use of anachronisms and archaic expressions, he was writing in a language which was already passing out of common currency (Ravicz 1970: 183).

The following observations on different elements in the auto may serve to illustrate how three 'agendas' are contained within the one text. When the play opens, the Emperor Vespasian is threatening Pilate, governor of Jerusalem for having paid no tax for the last three out of nine years. Pilate reacts in a panicky, hysterical manner, reminiscent of Moctezuma at the news of the impending arrival of Cortés. He summons his councillor, Archelaus, just as Moctezuma had called on his seers and soothsayers. When Archelaus assures him that there is no danger from Vespasian, Pilate, like

Herod in *La Comedia de los Reyes* assumes a boastful tone: ‘Yo soy el único que protejo a mi ciudad. Yo soy el rey de Jerusalén’.

Clement (who never was a disciple of Christ; that is a pious anachronism) heals the Emperor of his leprosy but there is little mention of this in the Nahua version, presumably because it was considered disrespectful for a ruler to be seen to be sick. Vespasian offers Clement the wealth of Tenochtitlán as a reward: ‘Oro, piedras, cosas preciosas’. Clement, alias the Franciscans, in a speech which was clearly aimed at those natives who had not yet converted to Christianity and which sets out the friars’ devotion to poverty, replies: ‘No queremos oro, ni cosas preciosas, ni reinos, pues se sabe que se pierden, que son solo polvo ... Lo que nos preocupa es que deseas el bautizo y que creas en la fe de Jesucristo’. When Vespasian hears that Pilate has once again refused to pay his tribute to Rome, he sends him a message which emphasizes both his Imperial role: ‘Aquí está mi corona de emperador y en mi mano la espada imperial’ (which appeals to the Spanish) and his position as a powerful ruler which would be appreciated by the Aztecs. Vespasian then sets out for Jerusalem with a double mission – to enforce the payment and to punish Pilate and the Jews for the murder of Jesus. En route he stops at Haifa where the ruler, Jafel, seeing that resistance is useless, defects and offers to serve the Emperor, thus playing a vital role in the conquest of Jerusalem, as did the Tlaxcalans at Tenochtitlán and of which they are always anxious to remind the Spanish. Jafel’s scheme for providing water by flaying large numbers of animals and using their skins for storage is a clear reference to the pre-conquest spring festival known as ‘The Flaying of Skins’ of which mention has already been made. This ‘wall’ or ‘hill’ which has figured in all the autos discussed is a representation of the Aztec *altepetl* or city state, whose symbol was a hill.

For the battle of Jerusalem, although there are no stage instructions, it seems likely that a five-towered city, similar to that constructed for ‘*La Conquista de Jerusalén*’, was used. After an indefinite period of fighting, it becomes clear that Pilate cannot win and his troops, like the doomed eagle warriors of the Aztec Empire, are destined for extinction. The Jews are dying of hunger and thirst, just as the Indians of Tenochtitlán had been starved when the Spanish cut their canals and turned their water brackish, while the devastating raids of brigantines prevented any reinforcements getting through. Sahagún, in volume 12 of the *Codex Florentine*, describes the effects of this deprivation: ‘Never had there been such suffering. No more did they drink good water, pure water. Only nitrous water did they drink’ (1975: 104). Archelaus recommends surrender but not before Pilate decrees that all the jewels of Tenochtitlán be swallowed by the Jews so that they should not fall into the hands of Vespasian: ‘Si hemos de caer en manos de nuestros enemigos, que no gozen mucho ni se hagan ricos con nuestros bienes’. This parallels the behaviour of the Spanish after the fall of Tenochtitlán when

Cortés' first act was to demand more gold, while his soldiers searched the survivors for hidden jewels and chose which women they would rape or enslave.

The Jews turning on Pilate, much as the Tenochtitlans turned on Moctezuma, cry out: '¡Oh Pilatos! ¿Qué nos has hecho?' Pilate, humbled and humiliated, goes to Vespasian to surrender, declaring himself the Emperor's vassal: 'Truly I, the undeserving Pilate, your vassal, have come into your presence. Truly I, miserable one, declare my guilt; I, ruinous one, rose up against you; I, unworthy one, aggrandized myself at your expense. I deserve the stone and the cudgel (Nahuatl words for public punishment). The power of government belongs to the Emperor, whereas I only guarded and ruled by favour of another'. These words are remarkably similar to the ones used by Moctezuma when he surrendered to Cortés, confessing himself to be merely a vassal, occupying a throne which was by rights, not his but Spain's. When Vespasian refuses to grant mercy, Pilate echoes the agonized cry of the natives of Tenochtitlán at the destruction of their capital and the enslavement of their people: '¡Hermanos míos: ya veis cómo nos han abandonado nuestros dioses!'

The Emperor then commands that Jerusalem, like Tenochtitlán, be destroyed so that, in the words of Jesus in St. Mark's gospel 'not one stone will be left upon another' (Mark 13: 2). At the request of the 'Viennese' Pilate is then taken to Vienne where he is bound and imprisoned, his treatment mirroring that handed out both to Moctezuma and his successor, Cauhtemoc. The incident of the howling dog is curious. It is perhaps a reference to a gentler side of Pilate or it could be a metaphor for the weeping of the Indians for the fall of Tenochtitlán as seen in the beautiful words of the lament recorded in *The Historical Annals of the Mexican Nation*:

Weep, my people:

Know that with these disasters  
we have lost the Mexican nation.

The water has turned bitter,  
our food is bitter!

These are the acts of the Giver of Life ...

Ah, it is true: the kings are prisoners now!

(Collection of Mexican Songs, fol. 54 r. Quoted in Miguel-Léon Portilla 1980: 227).

There is one other conundrum to be answered. If the Romans (alias the Spanish) were so anxious for the capture and restoration of Jerusalem, why were they content to see it reduced to rubble? There are several possible answers to this, depending on which 'agenda' is being applied. For the Tlaxcalans,



Jerusalem deserved to be destroyed because it had not paid its tribute, thus defying the might of Imperial Spain and the Emperor Charles V. For the Spanish and the Franciscans, Jerusalem, alias Tenochtitlán, merited punishment first, and this is the greatest crime of all, for having put to death Jesus Christ. Secondly, it had been a pagan city and had practised human sacrifices. It was necessary, therefore, that it should be ‘purified’ through fire before being reclaimed for Christ, as the Inquisition burned the evil out of the guilty; indeed, the destruction of Jerusalem could be seen as a version of the punishment handed out to heretics by the Inquisition. For the indigenous people there was no satisfaction at the fate of Tenochtitlán but only a lasting sadness which passed into folklore and poetry.

‘*La Conquista de Jerusalén*’ is an extraordinary document. It contains within it three separate narratives of the Conquista: A Spanish/Franciscan, an Indian and a Tlaxcalan . Yet these versions do not impinge on each other; no one version dominates to the detriment of the other two and the *auto* may quite satisfactorily be read as a whole. As with the song quoted earlier, from *Cantares mexicanos*, it is an excellent example of co-acculturation, the sitting side by side of three cultures, each one allowed its voice in the text.

In summary, the *autos* represent the highest point, not of ‘acculturation’ but of ‘transculturation’, between the friars and the Aztecs. They give rise to a new cultural genre in which the conquerors and the conquered were, for once, equally matched and where the silenced found a new voice. Never again did the two cultures work together to reach such a level of harmony. Never again was the Náhuatl language given such a platform for demonstrating its beauty and elegance and never again were the natives Mexicans afforded such a chance to show off their artistic, linguistic and creative skills.

## Conclusion

One of the problems of assessing an event in the past is that one tends to judge it through the prism of one's own time or, as Beltrán puts it: 'Es una tendencia natural, casi inevitable, tratar de medir las épocas idas con la métrica moderna' (Beltrán 1946: 199) So while Durán writing in his own time, towards the end of the 'heroic' period of Franciscan evangelisation, could describe the indigenous Indian as one of the 'ten tribes of Israel', twentieth century secularists like Carlos Fuentes dismiss Christianity in Mexico as 'un sincretismo flagrante' and a 'mezcla religiosa de la fe Cristiana y la fe indigena' (1998: 207). And anti-colonialists like Charles Gibson accuse the friars of being part of 'the largest corporate landowner in the colony' (1964: 125-6). The secularist, Martínez, denies the notion of the 'spiritual conquest of Mexico', challenging the trustworthiness of the eighteenth century Dominican chronicler Beaumont and criticising the long-respected Vasco de Quiroga (1962: 160). Such critics would probably, therefore, judge the evangelizing of the natives in Mexico to have been at best a partial success and at worst an outright failure. They would argue that the evangelization was never complete and that large parts of New Spain remained practically untouched, that the Indian idols were never destroyed only hidden, that the 'conversion' of the natives was hasty and superficial, that no Indian priests or bishops were ever ordained and that the early friars had run out of missionary steam by the middle of the sixteenth century.

All these criticisms are justified. It is a fact that the north of Mexico, for instance, received only scanty evangelization. Few Franciscans ventured as far as New Galicia, home of the fierce Chichimecans, *gente belicosa*, who alarmed the Spaniards by their skill with the bow and arrow. It is noteworthy that Motolinía goes out of his way to record an exceptional visit there in 1539 by Fray Martín de Valencia (Motolinía 1536: 196). Similarly, the area around Vera Cruz was neglected because of its swampy geography and unhealthy climate. A glance at Ricard's map of mendicant establishments in 1570 will confirm a lack of convents in these areas. Furthermore, the friars themselves were aware that the pagan idols had never been totally destroyed. Both Sahagún and Mendieta acknowledge that images were hidden under the floors of the Aztecs and brought out to worship after dark. In the same way, while human sacrifices may have been ended, the sacrifice of animals, such as quails and rabbits, and even butterflies, continued. Motolinía acknowledges that gifts of cockerels and doves were made to the friars at Easter (1536 chapter 14: 84) and there is tacit recognition of their sacrificial function in some of the *autos*, particularly *El sacrificio de Isaac*. It may well be that the 'conversion' of the natives was hasty and superficial and that when Motolinía claims to have converted more than fifteen

hundred in one day and when Mendieta asserts that after baptising six thousand adults and children, the friars could no longer hold up their arms (Mendieta 1595 chapter 35: 266), their remarks may owe more to an excess of missionary zeal than to veracity. It is true that the College of Santiago Tlatelolco never ordained a single Indian priest, due to lack of enthusiasm on the part of the Indians, shortage of funds and hostility on the part of the secular clergy.<sup>38</sup> This failure to establish a native clergy is still reflected in Mexican society today where although Indians have been gradually admitted to Holy Orders they occupy only rural parishes and play only minor roles in the life of the Church.<sup>39</sup> It is also true that even before the first wave of Franciscans was replaced, conflict with the other orders occurred. The Dominicans objected to the Franciscan habit of baptising without the use of oil and chrism, in emergencies when supplies were short, and pressure of number of candidates was mounting and when the Franciscans knew it would probably be a long time before they returned to that same place. This issue was only finally resolved by an appeal to Pope Paul III. The Augustinians accused the Franciscans of trying to monopolise three quarters of the territory of New Spain and both orders accused the Franciscans of not allowing them to establish themselves in places where there was no priest. Relations eventually became so bad that in 1556 the Spanish Crown had to repeat an order to the Vice-Roy, Luis de Velasco, to settle the disputes.<sup>40</sup>

But such criticisms cannot lead one to dismiss outright the acculturation mission of the friars, described by Hugh Thomas as ‘one of the most remarkable triumphs of Christianity’ (Thomas 1993: 579). To downplay the Franciscan mission is to ignore too many important factors. In the first place the native population did not reject Christianity. The Franciscans arrived at a critical moment when both their own religious history and that of the natives were at a low ebb: Catholicism was under threat from Lutheranism in Europe and the Aztec religion had been destroyed by Spanish invaders.

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<sup>38</sup> Ricard adopts an ambivalent attitude to this failure to establish a college for the training of priests. On the one hand he laments its abandonment saying that the task of Christianisation would only be achieved when a truly Mexican clergy was available. On the other hand he declares that the white Spanish and creole population would never have accepted an Indian bishop or archbishop (Ricard 1922: 292).

<sup>39</sup> As Ricard states: ‘A poor Indian clergy for the Indians and a white clergy, to which great dignitaries belong, for the whites’ (1922: 294)

<sup>40</sup> Historians writing after Ricard suggest that his classic work ‘*The spiritual conquest of Mexico*’ is both a misnomer and inaccurate since no ‘conquest’ occurred. Native resistance, cultural autonomy and Indian redefinition of Christian doctrine give the lie to any substantial and lasting religious ‘conquest’ in Mexico. Martinez goes further, dismissing Ricard as being too utopian and suggesting that the ‘death knell’ for his work was sounded by the opinions of later historians, like Gibson and Lockhart (1962: 148). However, I feel that this is to misinterpret Ricard and not to recognise him for the realist and pragmatist that he was. A study of his work reveals that he acknowledged the fact that the friars’ evangelizing mission was fragile and that after the first ‘heroic’ years of missionary activity, religious fervour was to some extent blunted by dissent within the mendicant orders and growing apathy on the part of the Indians. In fact, later in his book Martinez would appear to revise his opinion of Ricard and to consider him important enough to quote him when he uses Ricard’s own words: ‘a Mexican church was not founded at all’ but what was founded was ‘... a Spanish Church.. in which native Christians played the minor part of second-class Christians’ (Martinez 1962: 185 , the quotation is from Ricard: 303).

The meeting of the two cultures provided the spark for a regeneration and revival which found expression in the utopian work of the missionaries and the enthusiastic conversion of the natives. As Paz puts it: ‘La decadencia del catolicismo coincide con su apogee hispanoamericano y se extiende en tierras nuevas en el momento en qu ha dejado de ser creador (2008: 121). Even today, they remain some of the most devout followers of the Catholic faith, not only in Mexico but in all parts of South America. In that sense, therefore, the acculturation mission cannot be said to have been a failure.

Secondly, in seeking to acculturate the natives of New Spain, the friars themselves became acculturated. This fact is almost totally ignored by scholars, with the exception of Spitta who writes: ‘In the continual give and take of culture contact, individuals are changed and change themselves as well as the surrounding world’ (1995: 24). Missionaries, by virtue of their calling, live ‘closer to the ground’ than other colonisers and administrators. They come to know the indigenous people in a way that officialdom never does. They eat the local food, speak the local languages, tend to abandon their own clothes and adopt local customs. Mendieta describes how they slept like the natives on the ground, bought their clothes in the market or begged old worn-out clothing from the locals. Between the Franciscans and their ‘people’ there seems to have existed a genuine love which was mutual and not based upon the dominant/subordinate discourse. To the Franciscans the Mexica were a new-found race, innocent and untainted; to the native the friar was an exemplar of ‘*paciencia y humildad*’. This humility extended to a genuine appreciation of Nahua culture. The friars appreciated the well-ordered families and the relationship between fathers and children. They admired the beauty of the Náhuatl language with its use of extended metaphors, even to the extent of writing *autos* in it. They acknowledged the long-suffering and endurance of the Aztec personality, at the same time noting the speed with which they learnt new skills and techniques. Motolinía writes:

Los Indios tienen el entendimiento vivo, recogido y sosegado, no orgulloso y derramado, como otras naciones. Desprendieron a leer brevemente así en romance como en latín y de tirada y letra de mano.... Hay muchos de ellos buenos gramáticos (en Latín) y que componen oraciones largas y bien autorizadas y versos exámetros y pentámetros (Motolinía 1536: 241).

Las Casas makes a list of their accomplishments and skills which includes agricultural methods, gold and silver work, feather work, the making of musical instruments of (quoted in Hanke 1963: 184). To this might be added carving, painting, stone work and carpentry. The monumental *Historias* which Motolinía, Mendieta and Sahagún wrote contain not simply accounts of the horrors of the human sacrifices practised by the natives but also detailed descriptions of the geography, history and etymology of New Spain which reveal a true love for the country. Motolinía, for instance, devotes chapter 19 of his *Historia* to the mythical and mystical *maguey* tree whose values, according to

Ybarra, he intuited before he had any knowledge of its properties (Ybarra 2009: 66). His discussion of this astonishingly versatile and useful plant is an indication of a broad-mindedness and degree of acculturation already noted in his treatment of the Aztec temples. Instead of denouncing the *maguēy* as a source of intoxication and paganism, he speaks fulsomely of it: ‘Se hace un licor como de allí se coga es como agua miel; cocido y hervido al fuego, hacerse un vino dulce, limpia lo cual beben los Españoles y dicen que es muy bueno y de mucha sustancia y saludable’ (1941:284).

He then goes on to list a further eleven uses of the plant. Sahagún, writing of the travels of merchants, describes how they sought, amongst other treasures, the feathers of the exotic birds of Mexico to use in the worship of their god, Yiacatecutli. He mentions the ‘resplendent trogon’, the ‘roseate spoonbill’, known in Spanish as the *ajaja ajaja*, the ‘lovely cotinga’ (*cotinga amabilis*), the ‘yellow-headed parrot’ (*Amazona ochrocephala*), the ‘troupial’ (*gymnostinopa montezuma*) and the ‘eagle’ (*Aquila chrysaëtus*) (Sahagún 1970: 42). Such details not only serve as an illustration of the friars’ respect for the indigenous population but as invaluable insights into vanishing Aztec culture for future anthropologists, botanists and zoologists.

The mutual respect which existed between friars and natives spilled over into the evangelizing process. It has already been seen how many of the pre-Hispanic customs of the natives were curiously similar to Christian beliefs – the practice of fasting, the holding of baptismal services, the ‘new fire’; even some of the stories of the ‘pagan’ gods, held echoes of Christianity. As Balsera writes: ‘Many of the non-clashing yet ‘heathen’ pre-Hispanic cultural practices produce the conditions for the emergence of a hybrid Christianity in Mexico’ (2003: 112). This, plus the extenuating circumstances of the time, meant that the friars had a less dogmatic attitude to the administering of the sacraments as in the use of the *misa seca* when there was no wine and the omission of salt and the white robe in the baptismal service.

Such generally good relations did not go unnoticed by the Spanish authorities. Hanke writes: ‘For the first time in history one people – Spaniards – paid serious attention to the nature and culture of the peoples they met and, most striking of all, controversies over the just method of treating the Indians led to a fundamental consideration of the nature of man himself’ (Hanke 1963: 183). While it may be premature on Hanke’s part to talk of Spain being a nation as early as the sixteenth century, it is true that both Church and Crown, from Montesino through *Las Nuevas Leyes* to Las Casas and Valladolid, agonised over the question of the native soul and the justification for slavery. If the Franciscan mission awoke the Spanish imperial conscience, it cannot be judged to have failed.

There is a third reason why the acculturation mission cannot be said to have been a total failure. In his book *El laberinto de la soledad* Octavio Paz, who must be reckoned as one of the cynics and secularist, speaks of the friars' Christianity as being 'a filosofía hecha y una fe petrificada' (2008: 121). It has to be remembered, however, that Paz's view was coloured, like Jean-Paul Sartre's by the period in which he was writing. Sartre wrote under the shadow of the Algerian War and Paz produced *El laberinto* in Paris in 1945 in one of the darkest periods of modern French history when France was only recently delivered from German 'colonisation' and national nihilism prevailed in literary existentialist circles. It is against this background that he speaks of '*la infecundidad del catolicismo colonial*'. He goes on to talk of a religion '*impuesta de arriba*' but admits that the Conquest would never have succeeded if the Azteca had not felt within themselves '*un sentido de desfallecimiento*', a notion that their world was on the point of change. Paz concludes his attack by accusing the Catholic faith of being '*petrificada*' and '*infertil*' (2008: 124). But how can a religion be described as '*petrificada*' and '*infertil*' and '*impuesta*' when it produced such wonderful and spontaneous outbursts of creativity as the *autos*? Here is an example of Indian ingenuity at its most superb and an expression of the creative spirit which, according to Paz, was lacking in Western Catholicism. The Indians have taken the Bible stories as they received them from Spain, have assimilated them into their own culture and by a process of transculturation given them their own life-force. Like the 'mexicanisation' of the *villancicos* half a century later, the *autos* have acquired a baroque energy of their own and become a totally different form of worship. A religion which is capable of such evolution of expression cannot be described as 'infertile'.

The same creative enthusiasm can be noticed in the interest which the Aztecs expressed in music. It has been seen how under the tutelage of Pedro de Gante, plainsong was quickly mastered and sung, along with Náhuatl music, with great beauty by the Mexicans whose choirs were said to rival those of Spain. Instruments both Western and Indian, frequently made by the Mexicans themselves, accompanied the music, performed in the *capilla abierta*, the fusion of native and European ecclesiastical styles. Such lively examples of transculturation can hardly be described as symptoms of a religion 'imposed' from above.

There is no doubt that the Catholicism practised by the natives was a form of the alternative. Aztec culture contained a rich vein of myths, many of which found parallels in Christianity. Aztec gods and goddesses like Quetzalcoatl took on Christian forms and names and myths were re-written in the Christian idiom, while the Virgen de Guadalupe, who appeared and spoke (presumably in Náhuatl)

to the Indian Diego, assumed far greater importance than the European Madonna.<sup>41</sup> The native myths and legends lingered on. Sahagún, writing thirty and more years after the Conquest, found old men ready to relate the tales of the founding of the Aztec people and to record in minute, day-to-day detail the story of the fall of Tenochtitlán.

Muñoz Camargo, relating a meeting between Cortés and the probably mythical ‘Señores of Tlaxcala’, describes how the *caciques*, unpersuaded by Cortés’ attempts to convert them to Christianity, suggested a compromise by which they would build temples for the worship of the Christian God, while at the same time keeping and frequenting their own; a compromise which Cortés naturally rejected (1978: 202). Nevertheless, this system was the one which over time and through usage the Mexicans finally came to adopt. The pyramids may serve as a metaphor for such a compromise. Though the bodies of these mighty pagan structures had been brought down, their roots still lay deep beneath the earth. The Franciscans, to their credit and in the spirit of acculturation, knew this and were resigned to it. But this does not in any way gainsay the fact that their mission brought to Mexico a faith which had a profound and transforming effect upon the country and people and one which in its own distinctly indigenous form is very much alive today.

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<sup>41</sup> At a recent exhibition of Mexican ‘Ex voto’ messages and pictures held at the Wellcome Centre in London, almost the entire exhibition was composed, not of words of thanks to the Virgin Mary but of thanks to the Virgen de Guadalupe.

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