From Señor Natural to Siervo de Dios: The Transition of Nahua Nobility Under Spanish Rule, 1540-1600

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College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

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From Señor Natural to Siervo de Dios: the Transition of Nahua Nobility Under Spanish Rule, 1540-1600

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B.A., The Catholic University of America, 2008

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Department of History

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Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

After the arrival of the Spanish, the role of indigenous Nahua leadership shifted in emphasis and manifested in different ways. The primary physical altercations ended in 1521, and after twenty years of establishment, Franciscan writers and educators began to disseminate information about their Nahua constituents. Using the concept of the 'Noble House' to imagine the role of indigenous leaders, I assess the diminishing and changing roles to which the nobility adapted. New skills acquired by the second generation of Nahua allowed them to continue to have agency in the Spanish-controlled colony. They managed to retain their indigenous identity by holding on to their language and creating a separate class outside of their colonial world. These new leaders sometimes became advocates for their people, sometimes seized opportunities presented by their noble status to ascend socially and amass wealth and participate in the governing Spanish political system. Acquiring Spanish language, adopting Christianity, and recognizing new social constructs allowed for agency in the new colony, but perpetuation of Nahua language, celebration of ceremonies and traditions, and preservation of a traditionally oral history by Franciscan-trained indigenous scholars preserved an adapted version of the pre-conquest identity.
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To J.E.R.: my patient, loving husband. Thank you for your endless encouragement.
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Upon settling in the Americas, Spaniards directed their communication efforts toward indigenous nobility and leadership. As the Spanish-led society developed, indigenous leaders changed their physical presence and cultural actions in response to the chaotic environment of the colonial period in the valley of Mexico. Several written works by Spanish authors reflect the change in the identification and roles which Indian nobles played in the emerging colonial environment. During this period of development, authors used Indian informants to create accounts of pre-conquest life, and recorded how indigenous leaders adapted to Spanish presence through resistance, collaboration and cooperation. These writings from Spanish authors reveal that between 1540 and 1600, indigenous nobles evolved and adopted several different roles, pushed by generational and social change and physical reorganization which helped to shape their place in colonial society.

Many historians have addressed the function of indigenous nobility in colonial society. Charles Gibson assessed the role of Nahua nobility in detail in his 1960 article “The Aztec Aristocracy in Colonial Mexico”, and further in his 1964 book The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule, in which he made his assumptions based on both indigenous and Spanish sources. His perspective is clouded by contemporary views of race in the United States, but his work was a departure from that of previous historians. His knowledge of Nahuatl allowed him to work with texts beyond Spanish documents, and by incorporating Nahuatl documents into his studies, he overturned two assumptions. First, Gibson

\footnote{Most notably William Prescott and Robert Riccard. Prescott’s chronicle was the first effort at synthesis of Mexico’s history, and Riccard was the first to use historical analysis and method to review relevant sources.}
realized that earlier historians had assumed a linear progression in assimilation and
proselytization, whereas he recognized phases of resistance throughout the colonial
period, especially in peripheral communities. He also challenged claims by Spanish
authors that their conversion efforts were wildly successful; historians had not questioned
the motives and assertions by the authors of their sources. Concerning nobility
specifically, Gibson focused on physical identifiers of both indigenous life and nobility
and their rapid change after the conquest. He also explored the changing meaning of the
titles of Cacique and Principal, and how the meanings of these terms were used and
altered by the Spanish colonial authorities. Gibson showed that colonial indigenous
leaders were required to adapt to new societal roles for colonial Indians beyond those
held by their pre-conquest ancestors².

Later, James Lockhart provided a significant update from Gibson and his
predecessors. In his observation of the noble classes, he noted similarities between
Spanish and Nahua social organizations that allowed for a mutual understanding and
interaction between the two, and because of this, Spaniards produced documents detailing
Nahua lives with great understanding³. He also held that despite an overwhelming
Spanish influence, the Nahua people continued to understand their society in their own
terms. He found that that this was reflected in their language choices; they continued to
use pre-conquest terms to refer to offices of leadership, and attempted to retain their

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understanding of authority (though colonial society made this difficult). He noted that over time, social classes and offices of leadership began to change and break down, which changed the definitions of the indigenous terms used to refer to noble offices. This began with the lesser nobility and common classes, complicating matters of land ownership and dependent labor requirements; to resolve these contentions, indigenous contenders looked to Spanish institutions (the Church, courts) to resolve their grievances. Assuming that the Nahua continued to understand society in indigenous terms per Lockhart’s thesis, the titles of nobility and their changing meanings provide a foundation for an exploration of changes to indigenous leadership roles in the colonial period.

More recently, various authors have explored leadership roles as part of wider studies, often mentioning the topic in the study of other subjects, but few have focused on the transitioning roles of nobility throughout the colonial period. Anthropologist John K. Chance has discussed pre-conquest Nahua power structures at length, building upon observations of early historians to form a succinct outline of the socio-political and hereditary noble offices. Chance assessed the Nahua social hierarchy using Claude Levi-Strauss’s concept of the noble house, extremely helpful because of the inconsistent patterns of Nahua inheritance and succession which were further complicated by Spanish conquest. He concisely described Levi-Strauss’s concept “not as a kinship group per se, but rather as a named, corporate body with an estate that it seeks to preserve intact through various, often contradictory, means.” The Nahua noble house is the Teccalli, which is understood here as “a landholding lineage headed by a teuctli (pl. teteuctin), or

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5 More recent study of Nahua social hierarchy has taken an anthropological thrust; historians seem to have chosen to focus on the actual politics rather than the political actors.
6 Chance, 486.
noble lord, with a number of his descendants, or pipiltin (sing. pilli), as lesser nobles, and a much larger number of commoners, the macehualtin, who worked the lands of the house (commoners were referred to in Spanish texts as macehuales or terrazgueros). This historical framework and structure was first introduced and discussed at length by Spanish historian Pedro Carrasco in his article entitled “Los linajes nobles del Mexico antiguo”, and summarized by Chance. In general, the terms referring to Nahua leadership are vague and used in multiple ways in both primary and secondary sources; for a comprehensive look at terms referring to indigenous social classes and leadership roles, see Table 1.

Mexico’s rapid development and the roles played by indigenous leaders under Spanish rule were captured by several authors in the early modern period, many of whom familiarized themselves with Nahua language and culture, and the noble class. I have reviewed the works of Bernardino de Sahagún, Fray Toribio de Motolinía and Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl and found that their writings capture the development and change of the role and identification of indigenous nobility between 1540 and 1600. Their writings are focused on the lives of the two generations of indigenous persons left after the main conflicts of the conquest. These two generations experienced the greatest amount of change, for the most part encompassed within this sixty-year period. Although in many ways Sahagún, Motolinía, Fernando de Alva and others attempted to evaluate the indigenous population as a whole, their writings often highlight the social and political role of the noble classes. In an effort to better understand Nahua power structures, these authors took an interest in indicators of wealth, those both in common with Spanish

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7 Chance, 488.
8 See also Pedro Carrasco, et al., eds. “Los linajes nobles del Mexico antiguo”. In Estratificación social en la Mesoamerica prehispanica. (Mexico City: INAH, 1976): 19-36.
cultures and specific to colonial Mexico. In their written works, each author includes specific detail about people in leadership roles.

**Table 1—Terms in Reference to Indigenous Nobility in the Valley of Mexico**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Use</th>
<th>Appearance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rey y Emperador</td>
<td>King and Emperor; Moteczouma</td>
<td>Bernardino de Sahagún</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Señor</td>
<td>Lord; Autocratic leader</td>
<td>Bernardino de Sahagún, Toribio de Motolinía, Charles Gibson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Señor Principal</td>
<td>Lord, leader</td>
<td>Motolinía, Charles Gibson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Señor natural</td>
<td>Natural lord; indigenous leader</td>
<td>Charles Gibson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gobernador</td>
<td>Governor; represents the same rank as señor, but under a different title and role upon the arrival of the Spaniards</td>
<td>Bernardino de Sahagún</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Community official; prominent indigenous person; lower-ranked member of the Pipiltin</td>
<td>Charles Gibson, James Lockhart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quauhpilli</td>
<td>“Eagle Noble”; one made noble by heroic acts in war or personal merit, not by inheritance</td>
<td>James Lockhart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cacique</td>
<td>Community official; prominent indigenous person; adapted from Arawakan; higher-ranked member of the Pipiltin</td>
<td>Charles Gibson, James Lockhart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teuctli [pl. Teteuctin]</td>
<td>Noble Lord; rulers of a tecalli</td>
<td>John Chance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilli [pl. Pipiltin]</td>
<td>Descendants of a Noble lord; surviving members of military orders and their successors</td>
<td>John Chance; Charles Gibson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tlatoque</td>
<td>Familial leaders supporting an autocratic leader; Lord</td>
<td>Toribio de Motolinía</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tlatoani</td>
<td>Lords</td>
<td>Francisco Morales</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Constituency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constituency</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Macehual</td>
<td>Commoner; “those made worthy [of existing] by divine sacrifice”</td>
<td>John Chance, Francisco Morales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>calpixque</td>
<td>Mayordomo; official designated to collect taxes</td>
<td>Bernardino de Sahagún</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>terrazgueros</td>
<td>Commoners</td>
<td>John Chance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temitli</td>
<td>“one who prepares someone’s fields”; dependent farmworker</td>
<td>James Lockhart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tlacotli</td>
<td>“Slave”</td>
<td>James Lockhart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vasallos</td>
<td>Vassals</td>
<td>Toribio de Motolinia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Franciscan scholar Bernardino de Sahagún (1499-1590) wrote the *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España* between 1558 and 1575, and contributed twelve volumes of information from both his observations and testimonials from indigenous informers. He came to the New World in 1529 as a missionary, educator and observer of indigenous heritage. Comments regarding indigenous leaders pervade his work. Many of his personal observations provide a physical description of noble classes, which he shares in order to foster identification and awareness of indigenous ceremony and religious practice for other Spaniards; he wished to educate other Franciscans in efforts to prevent backsliding into indigenous religious practice⁹. Unlike many Spaniards, Sahagún was

⁹ In his preface, Sahagún equates this problem to a doctor knowing how to treat an ailment by studying the problems of the human body: “The preachers and confessors are physicians of the soul and heal spiritual illnesses; a preacher for the vices of the republic, to correct their [understanding of] doctrine; and the confessor, asks what will suit them best in order to know [what to do], to know what is necessary to perform their duties (los predicadores y confesores médicos son de las ánimas, para curar las enfermedades espirituales ; el predicador de los vicios de la república, para enderezar contra ellos su doctrina; y el confesor, para saber preguntar lo que conviene mucho que sepan lo necesario para ejercitar sus oficios)”
interested in preserving a record of the ways and practices of indigenous life, including roles and identification of leadership\textsuperscript{10}. While his primary intention was to educate those converting Indians to Christianity, he also left behind a prolific record of pre-conquest indigenous activity.

Toribio de Motolinía (born Toribio de Benavente) was one of the first twelve Franciscans to reach the New World in 1523. His writings were completed sometime before his death in 1568, first published as \textit{Historia de los Indios de la Nueva España} in 1858 and \textit{Primeros Memoriales} in 1903. He focused on the conversion and Christian indoctrination of indigenous people as a whole, and appealed to Indian leadership for help in this process, hoping to capitalize on their existing authority. Motolinía learned Nahua and disseminated Christian ideals to the Indian leaders, who then reinforced their new practices with their constituents. Motolinía documented his process and the methods he used to communicate with the leadership class, and featured his progress, best practices, and the changes which affected the leadership and role of indigenous nobles during this period. He emphasized the benefits of Christianity for the Indians' goodwill and preached a message of salvation. He also emphasized the benefits and opportunities which conversion provided within the Spanish social hierarchy; Christianity was commonly a prerequisite for access to membership of the upper social class and its economic and political benefits. As a Franciscan, his writings express no of political or economic agendas and his expressed objective was to convert the Indian populations to Christianity, at which he was fairly successful in comparison to some of his colleagues.

\textsuperscript{10} Sahagún, vol.1, Prologue.
At the very least, he was able to open a dialogue about Christianity and engage an indigenous audience in what he perceived as an education process.

Unlike the first two authors, Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl (1568-1648) was of Indian heritage (he was a castizo, or one-eighth blood Indian on his mother’s side) and not a member of a religious order. He was of Texcoco ancestry\(^{11}\), and descended from the line of Cuitláhuac, monarch after the dethroning of Moctezuma II during the conquest, and an alumnus\(^{12}\) of the Indian Colegio de Santa Cruz en Tlatelolco\(^{13}\). The history of his ancestors was certified by the Gobernador and notary appointed by Viceroy Don Luis de Velasco as a sanctioned history the Chichimec people\(^{14}\), and his writings serve to legitimize his social role in early seventeenth century colonial Mexico.

Throughout the colonial period, the claim to noble indigenous heritage legitimized land

\(^{11}\) John Frederick Schwaller noted that Fernando de Alva’s affiliation with Texcoco royalty was certified by royal decree, which documented his lineage and relationship to Nezahualpilli. See Bartolomé de Alva, *A Guide to Confession Large and Small in the Mexican Language, 1634*. Barry D. Sell and John Frederick Schwaller with Lu Ann Homza, Eds. (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).

\(^{12}\) Schwaller debated that it is unlikely that Fernando de Alva actually attended because of his mixed-race ancestry. However, he seems familiar with the curriculum and practices of the institution. See Bartolomé de Alva, 5.

\(^{13}\) Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, *Obras históricas: incluyen el texto completo de las llamadas Relaciones e Historia de la nación chichimeca en una nueva versión establecida con el cotejo de los manuscritos más antiguos que se conocen*. ed. Edmundo O’Gorman. (México, D.F.: UNAM Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, 1975), 6.

\(^{14}\) Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, *Obras históricas de don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl* Volume 1. ed. Alfredo Chavero. (México, D.F.: Oficina tip. de la Secretaría de fomento, 1891), 467: “We, the Gobernador and Alcaldes Regidores, elders from the village of San Salvador Quatilacino, declare that we have seen and read the history which D. Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxuchil has written, which is fact and truthful and consistent with our ancient history which we have currently, and it is also consistent with what we have heard our parents and grandparents say, for whose sake we approve it and confirmed in the same way as has the cabecera, and [we all] say the same thing, that in this writing our approval is contained; and for more certainty we place our signatures here. And likewise I give faith to the notary appointed by His Excellency Lord Viceroy, on this date in the Cabildo of San Salvador Quatilacino of this province of Otumba, today Tuesday, November 18, 1608. (Decimos Nos el Gobernador y Alcaldes Regidores Ancianos del pueblo de San Salvador Quatilacino, que hemos visto y leído la Historia que tiene escrita D. Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxuchil, la cual es muy cierta y verdadera y conforme con nuestras antiguas historias, las que el día de hoy tenemos, y así mismo es conforme se lo oímos decir a nuestros padres y abuelos, por cuya causa nosotros la aprobamos y confirmamos de la misma manera que la tienen los de la cabecera, y decimos lo mismo que en esta Escritura de aprobación se contiene; y para más certidumbre ponemos aquí nuestras firmas. Y así mismo doy fe yo el Escribano nombrado por el Exmo. Señor Virrey, que es hecho en el Cabildo de San Salvador Quatilacino de esta provincia de Otumba, hoy Martes á 18 de Noviembre de 1608 años.)”
ownership, social status and political authority, but the overshadowing stigma of indigeneity from the Spanish prevented anyone of full or partial Indian heritage from realizing equality with a Spaniard. The advantages of noble heritage motivated Nahua of mixed ancestry to refer to the leadership positions of their ancestors; they also simultaneously differentiated themselves from the pre-conquest indigenous populations through education, language and adherence to Christian doctrine. Fernando de Alva also gathered testimony from the generation of elders, who served as leaders between the pre-conquest and colonial period. He distinguished himself from Spanish writers, citing his ability to understand and interpret indigenous language and ways better than the non-native scholars to whom he compares himself:

I have read many histories by Spaniards who have written of this land and all of them are very different from the original story, and among all of the falsifications, the only one which conformed is that of Francisco Gomara... the others do not understand the language well, and the elders have told me [the history] many times; I was born and bred among them, and I am familiar with all of the [histories of the] Caciques of New Spain.15

By defending his familiarity with indigenous culture, Fernando de Alva legitimizes his work as the most authentic, especially in comparison to non-Nahua writers. In his quest to legitimize his heritage and social standing, he revealed a half-century of changes in the role and identification of the ruling class.

Through scholarship, engagement and exposure, Spanish writers gained more knowledge about the indigenous populations surrounding them. The most obvious indicator of nobility was material wealth; while it manifested itself in different resources

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15 Fernando de Alva Ixtlixóchitl, Obras históricas de don Fernando, 62: “Muchas historias he leído de españoles que han escrito de esta tierra y todas ellas son muy distintas de la original historia y entre las falsas la que en alguna cosa se conforma es la de Francisco Gomara... otras no entendiendo bien la lengua y lo que los viejos les dicen como á mí me ha sucedido muchas veces con los naturales siendo nacido y criado entre ellos y tan conocido de todos los principales caciques de la Nueva España”. 
and was shared in different ways, Spaniards were able to differentiate social class based on land and resource possession from quite early on. As Spanish conquerors acquired knowledge of the native language, their understanding of social and political aspects of Nahua life grew. In many cases, noble leaders were stripped of their powers, but in peripheral communities, they sometimes remained untouched. Sources by Spanish authors reveal an understanding of noble influence, and the ability to determine the social perspective and proceedings of their constituent communities. Spanish sources provided a record of how these communities and their leadership were understood as they existed prior to the conquest, and how they adapted to new governance, and economic and religious systems under Spanish rule.

As Spanish settlers established a presence in Mexico, the indigenous ruling class adapted to and resisted new authorities, and found opportunities to define themselves in the new social environment. Nahua leaders became advocates for the entire indigenous populations within and outlying Spanish colonial society, and were held responsible for their wellbeing, distribution of wealth and religious conformity. Within the Nahua communities, members of the noble class elevated themselves socially from the constituent populations, nominally by calling the rest of the population macehualtin (or macehuales), a term which was also adopted into Spanish vocabulary to designate any non-noble persons of Nahua decent. The original meaning of macehualtin was “those made worthy [of existing] by divine sacrifice”\textsuperscript{16}, and been used for all Nahua people prior to the conquest. The term was then adapted to refer to indigenous persons with no noble title.

In most instances, indigenous leaders were the first point of contact for Spanish persons in Mexico and they served as a representative and advocate for the rest of their constituency. The Spanish writers were particularly interested in the physical differences by which the nobility were recognized. They were most fascinated by the proliferation of fine clothing and jewelry. Sahagún distinguished the nobility by their physical representation, and dedicated his eighth book to the dress and customs of the noble classes. Among other descriptions of attire, Sahagún’s descriptions of mantles worn by nobility indicated that he was easily able to identify social classes by different forms of dress\textsuperscript{17}. Additionally, he designated certain attire as representative of noble office, noting that, “in the past, to demonstrate their majesty and importance, they lined their clothes with the tanned leather hides of fierce animals, such as tigers and lions and lynx and wolves, and bears and also deer”\textsuperscript{18}. Likewise, Sahagún noted that luxury resources, including rare and expensive foods, were consumed exclusively by the leadership classes, and were used in sacrifices and ceremonies\textsuperscript{19}.

Sahagún also assessed the nobles based on their social interactions with others. Their constituent populations were a reflection of their leadership, and their authority was emphasized especially by their relationship with their mayordomos, the calpixque. The calpixque maintained and distributed the material resources of the señores, representing them by displaying their wealth to others. Among other duties, the calpixque distributed

\textsuperscript{17} Sahagún vol. 2, 293-295.
\textsuperscript{18} Sahagún, vol. 2, 299: “[E]n el tiempo pasado para demostración de su majestad y gravedad, aforrabanlos con pellejos de animales fíeros, como como son tigres y leones y onzas y gatos cervales, y osos y también de ciervos adobado el cuero”.
\textsuperscript{19} Sahagún vol. 1, 115.
food\textsuperscript{20}, weapons\textsuperscript{21} and captives for religious sacrifice\textsuperscript{22} to constituents for various uses.

Interactions between noble classes and macehuales also indicated their level of authority. He mentions an interaction which demonstrates the social position of señores, principales and macehuales:

When the señores left their home and went to recreate, they carried a straw in the hand and moved it to the beat that was mentioned previously, with the principales. The principales went from one side to the other of the señor, he was leading them in the middle and some of them went ahead parting the people, so that nobody should pass in front of him, or near him; and anybody who passed by the way who dared look him in the face would then lower his head and cast themselves away.\textsuperscript{23}

This overt expression of dominance and submission was exemplary of the Nahua social hierarchy and this passage indicates that Sahagún was aware of the authority held by the señores, the supporting roles played by the principales and the reaction of deference by the macehuales (or the principales' expectation of this reaction).

\textsuperscript{20} Sahagún vol. 2, 306: "And the calpixque were in charge of all things the señores needed; they always brought many different things to eat at their houses many kinds of food, almost one hundred kinds of food (Y los calpixque tenian cargo de las cosas necesarias para los señores; traian para comer siempre a casa de los señores muchas maneras de comida, hasta número de cien comidas)."

\textsuperscript{21} Sahagún, vol. 2, 315: "Having distributed to all the weapons, he then sent to the calpixques, who gave arms to all the principales of the provinces who had to go to war, for themselves and their soldiers, and then they notified their people and gave them weapons (Habiendo distribuido las armas a todos, mandaba luego a los calpixques, que llavasen armas a todos los principales de las provincias que habian de ir a la guerra, para si y para sus soldados, y entonces lo notificaba a sus gentes y las daban armas)."

\textsuperscript{22} Sahagún vol. 1, 34: "In this feast, all of the principales and calpixque [mayordomo] of the comarca of Mexico, which borders the warring towns, brought the captives they had... [and] guarded them until the time when they were to be sacrificed in front of the idols; and if any of the slaves [captives] escape before the time comes for their sacrifice, the calpixqui is obligated to buy another (En este misma fiesta todos los principales y calpixque de la comarca de México, que lindaban con los pueblos de guerra, traian a los cautivos que tenian...[y] los guardasen para el tiempo en que fuese menester ser sacrificios delante de los ídolos; y si algunos de los esclavos se huia entretanto que llegaba el tiempo de su sacrificio, el mismo calpixqui que lo tenia a cargo era obligado a comprar otro)."

\textsuperscript{23} Sahagún, vol. 2, 297: "Cuando los señores salían de su casa y se iban a recrear, llevaban una cañita en la mano y movíanla al compás de lo que iban hablando con los principales. los principales iban de una parte y otra del señor, llevaban en medio e iban algunos delante apartando la gente, que nadie pasase delante de él, ni cerca de él; y nadie de los que pasaban por el camino osaba mirarle en la cara, sino luego bajaban la cabeza y echaban por otra parte".
Upon the arrival of the Spanish, Nahua nobility were distinct from Spaniards as a whole through location, dress and language. Spanish authors first identified the ruling classes of indigenous peoples through these physical indications. After the conquest, indigenous leaders began to present themselves physically as both part of the Spanish and indigenous worlds. Their physical appearance often mirrored their relationships with both cultures. Some Spanish forms of dress and custom were adopted, and some indigenous were retained, to varying degrees. Gibson notes that “Caciques and principales in the sixteenth century adopted Spanish forms of dress, carried arms, and rode through the cities and towns with equipages and retinues of Indian servants”\(^{24}\), emulating the standard set by Spanish authorities. These descriptions include telling social indicators marking the integration of indigenous leaders into Spanish society. The right to carry a sword, for example, was granted by the viceroy. Motolinía carefully records each instance which he observed or heard about, often mentioning their credentials for receiving the privilege. For most these included loyalty, excellence of character, and military service, as was the case with Don Francisco de Talmanalco, about which he says “He is honorable, a friend of the Spaniards, and served in person in the war and pacification of Nueva Galicia”\(^{25}\).

Qualifications by which the Nahua nobility were judged were not a radical departure from the attributes used to distinguish capable leaders before the conquest.

Chapter 18 of Sahagún’s Book Eight is dedicated to the qualifications and election

\(^{24}\) Gibson, “Aztec Aristocracy”, 181.
\(^{25}\) Joaquín García Icazbalteca, ed., *Colección de documentos para la historia de México*, Two vols. (México, D.F: Librería de J. M. Andrade, 1858, 1866), vol. 2, 87-88: “es persona honorada, amigo de españoles, y que en la Guerra y pacificación de Nueva Galicia sirvió en persona...si saben que D. Juan gobernador de Teguantepequé á quien el dicho visorey dió licencia para traer espada, es buen indio y amigo de españoles y á los que pasan por su tierra les hecho y hace buen acogimiento digan &c”.
process of a new señor. Candidates were chosen by a select group of nobles in secret\textsuperscript{26}, and desirable candidates were selected:

They chose one of the noblest of the line of the ancestral señores, one who was a brave man, trained in the art of war, daring, and bold, and one who knew not to drink wine; one who was prudent and wise, who was raised in the Calmecac, who knew how to speak well, be prudent and modest, and courageous and loving.\textsuperscript{27}

In spirit, the qualifications of good character remained fairly universal; leaders were expected to be courageous, wise and stewardly. No mention was made about the level of religious devotion of candidates, and dedication to faith appears not to have been a prerequisite for leadership. After the conquest, the criteria shifted to accommodate Spanish interests, and reflected possibly a Spanish influence or involvement in the selection process. Pre-conquest leaders were expected to be smart and fierce on the battlefield; a bellicose nature could have been considered undesirable for a Nahua leader under Spanish rule. Their ability to speak well was also emphasized, as señores were expected to engage in frequent public speaking. This emphasis denotes that it was desirable for the señores to be heard; after the conquest, emphasis was given to being well-read instead. This indicates that it was expected for Nahua leadership to listen to the voices of others (both through written works and through the spoken word), rather than express their own ideas.

Leaders were responsible for the economic and spiritual wellbeing of their constituents. Their duties included managing resources, physical safety, protection from

\textsuperscript{26} According to Sahagún, the group formed to choose candidates for the next señor consisted of senators (tecutlatoque), town elders (achcacauhtin), seasoned military captains (yaotequiaque), other select military captains, and “satraps” (ilnamacazque, papauaque). See Sahagún, vol. 2, 321.

\textsuperscript{27} Sahagún vol. 2, 321: “Escogían uno de los más nobles de la línea de los señores antepasados, que fuese hombre valiente, ejercitado en las cosas de la guerra, osado y animoso, y que no supiese beber vino; que fuese prudente y sabio, que fuese criado en el Calmecac, que supiese bien hablar, fuese entendido y recatado, y animoso y amoroso”.
disease, and maintaining the favor of the gods. Sahagún notes that Tlatoque were responsible for providing feasts and rituals for the entire populations: “In the [month] that was called ec mi quitl, the great lords and principales gave a feast in the main house for Tezcatlipoca, who was the great god”28. Nobles also served as moral authorities prior to the conquest. In his summary of Chapter 14 of Book 2, Sahagún states that the Señor de la puebla, addressing the people for the first time after election addresses a crowd gathered to listen to him with authority, demanding that his constituents refrain from drinking and adultery: “This is a long talk in which the Lord spoke to the whole town for the first time that I was talking about; he urges anyone not to become intoxicated, nor injure, nor commit adultery; he urges them to [partake of] the culture of the gods through the exercise of arms and agriculture”29. From this passage, the Señor viewed his office as paternal and as responsible for the moral guidance of those in his care. In another speech reproduced by Sahagún, a principal urged lesser nobles to refrain from drinking and carnal vices and join him in the nobility of war; while this advice may not have been solicited, this principal felt that it was within his authority to morally advise members of his own class as well as the constituent macehuales under his care30.

The complicated series of alliances created through intermarriage was one of the greatest complexities that most likely slowed the Spanish understanding of power interactions between noble members of Nahua communities. Speaking of pre-conquest

28 Sahagún vol. 1, 113-114: “En el signo que se llamaba ce mi quitl, en la primera casa hacían gran fiesta los señores y principales a Tezcatlipoca, que era el gran dios”.
29 Sahagún vol. 2, 97-109: “en que se pone una larga plática con que el señor hablaba a todo el pueblo la primera vez que les hablaba; exhóralos a que nadie se emborrache, ni huerte, ni cometa adulterio; exhóralos a la cultura de los dioses al ejercicio de las armas, y la agricultura”.
30 Sahagún vol. 2, 105: “Do not come together to drink octli and partake in carnal vices...desire a military existence; follow the brave men who died in the war (No conviene que por razón de beber octli y de estar en vicios carnales...desead las cosas de la milicia; seguid a los valientes hombres que murieron en la guerra)”.
times, Thomas Ward notes that "[t]hrough these horizontal connections, the Mexica began to improve their social fortunes. As their blood lines were diluted, paradoxically their power increased"\textsuperscript{31}. Intermarriage among the indigenous elite fostered communication, trade and alliance among different indigenous regional groups. These patterns complicated the Spanish understanding of Nahua-speaking people as a network of multi-ethnic polities, and indicated that indigenous nobles governed a complex, interdependent system of politics and economics. While the constructs of intermarriage for political gain was familiar to the Spanish, the interactions between hostile groups ambiguatted their relationships as perceived by Spanish observers when assessing alliances, and social interactions; moments of truce complicated the identification of friend and foe.

Prior to the conquest, Nahua politics were ordered around one autocratic leader, the señor, and supported by familial leaders called Tlatoque. The Tlatoque controlled military actions and economic enterprises, including trade and tribute production and dissemination, forming a thriving and competing network throughout the valley of Mexico. Under Spanish rule, the ruling class of Tlatoque was referred to in Spanish as caciques. These caciques were allowed to retain control of their lands with the approval of the bishops and governors, and acted under their jurisdiction\textsuperscript{32}. Gibson notes that for


\textsuperscript{32} Icazbalteca vol. 2, 88-89: "Los oficios y cargos que el dicho visorey a provedo á Luis de Castilla, ha sido porque es muy honorado caballero y caben en él, porque ha dado dellos muy buena cuenta, y porque es persona que trata muy bien los indios y les favorece y tiene amor y porque S.M. lo tiene así mandado por sus cédulas y cartas, que le provea de los mejores oficios de la tierra no embargante que tenga indios. (The offices and positions that the viceroy provided to Luis de Castilla, have been granted because he is honorable, brave and fit [for the position], because he has given them very good account, and because he has a good relationship with the Indians and favors them and loves them, and because as Your Majesty so decreed, commanded by your documents and letters, which provisions that the highest officials may not seize the land of the Indians)".
the central Aztec leadership, "the effect of the Spanish conquest was practically to
eliminate the central Indian authority and the military and priestly ranks"; however, in
many areas, indigenous leaders maintained strong lineages into the colonial period
(mostly those leaders who had allied with the Spanish during the conquest). In general,
indigenous populations were presumed to be poor compared to the Spanish residents of
Mexico, who did not always acknowledge the indigenous nobility and the Nahua who
had managed to persevere financially as their social peers. This notion of absolute
poverty also denies the existence of upwardly mobile dependent class, who often gained
ownership of land they had worked for generations through litigation, inheritance or
illegal means.

As the sixteenth century progressed, Spanish authors represented pre-conquest
Nahua leaders as autonomous; distanced from the actual conquest, the interdependencies
were no longer regarded and the term nación was used to represent other constituencies.

Ward examined the use of nación by Spanish writers, noting that:

The term "nación" became more common as the sixteenth century
matured. When Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1492-1584) comments on his
experience, he refers to Tlaxcalan or Cholulan political/social structures as
towns (112a, 116a), cities (152a, 156a), provinces (113a) or "comarcas"
(138a). He calls those places by their proper names, Cempoal, Tlaxcala or
Cholula. The people from such entities could be "los de Cempoal" (126a),
"los de Tlaxcala" (119a), or "los de Cholula" (155a). The different
districts were ruled over by "reyezuelos," little kings (286a). In the earlier
Guatemala manuscript Díaz had written that "kings" ruled over provinces,
not nations (285b). In general Díaz avoids the term "nation." A review of
Cortes's letters reveals a lexicon which parallels Díaz's Verdadera
historia. He comments on towns, cities and provinces, but not nations.

In contrast authors who arrived or were born after the conquest frequently
use the term nation. Father Durán (1537-1588) accepts both the Mexica
and other groups as "naciones" (2:55). Toribio de Motolinía (1490-1568?),
another churchman, recognizes different native groups as nations (92a).

33 Gibson, "Aztec Aristocracy", 171.
Along these lines the mestizo chroniclers proudly use the term "nación" when they refer to their heritage. Hence Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl (1579-1650) refers to the "nación tolteca" and to the "nación chichimeca" (76; my italics). This distinction illustrates the way Spanish writers differed in their treatment of Nahua. Motolinia, Sahagún and others either perceived indigenous leaders as rulers who controlled a separate entity or a province within a larger area, allowing for señores to have peers and share authority. Authors born after the conquest, like Ixtlilxóchitl, were distanced in time from pre-conquest leaders, and under their perceptions their ancestors were portrayed as peerless and autonomous. The scope (i.e. amount of authority and expanse) of Nahua leadership is perceived differently by each author, and changed generally with time.

Early Spanish authors sought to make sense of what roles they felt indigenous nobility should play and translated them into their written representations of the Spanish system. The first post-conquest generation of indigenous leaders developed under Spanish rule, but was also influenced by a rich heritage and long-established tradition. They often distinguished themselves as leaders with uniquely Nahua expressions of wealth and power. Both their indigenous heritage and the influence of the Spanish culture shaped their definitions and understandings of themselves as indigenous nobles. Spanish scholars of Nahuatl developed new vocabulary to describe these conceptions, adapting the vocabulary of Nahua life into the Spanish lexicon. Early on, these definitions filtered in to the Spanish language, and Charles Gibson notes the previous experiences with natives elsewhere inform Spanish choices in terminology:

Tlatoque emerged in Spanish understanding as caciques, an Arawakian word (with Spanish plural) borrowed and introduced by the Spaniards

34 Ward, 421.
from the West Indies. The much larger group of the Pipiltin, the surviving members of the military orders or their successors, and certain of the community officials were classified in an undifferentiated way as principales.35

It became increasingly difficult for Indian nobles to define themselves as leaders based on economic and military power under Spanish rule. Generalizations about Nahua people as an ethnic group kept indigenous nobles from being distinguished among their constituents. After the initial military action of the conquest, there was a sense of expectation by Spaniards that all Indians would become dependent and subordinate, despite any former social standing. In describing the living quarters of the nobility, Motolinia noted that:

Their homes are very small, some are covered by single very low roof of straw like the cell of the holy abbot Hilarion36, but they seem more grave than house. The riches which they keep in their houses bear witness to their treasures. They are Indians, and stay in their huts, parents, children and grandchildren, eat and drink without much noise or voices. Without quarrels or feuds they spend their time and life and leave for the sustenance necessary for human life and no more.37

Here he expresses a general sense that as a people, indigenous populations were poor. As a people, Motolinia refers to the Indian population holistically because the identity did not lie with individuals, despite a clear social stratification. They are also portrayed as docile and simplistic. These conceptualizations of the Nahua made it difficult for hereditary leaders to consistently distinguish themselves as members of a leadership class. Despite these perceptions (and perhaps because of them), nobles took action to distinguish themselves as socially elevated within Nahua culture.

35 Gibson, “Aztec Aristocracy”, 175.
36 A fourth-century ascetic Christian hermit.
37 Icazbalteca vol. 1, 76: “Sus casas son muy pequeñas algunas cubiertas de un solo terrado muy bajo algunas de paja otras como la celda de aquel santo abad Hilarion que más parecen sepultura que no casa. Las riquezas que en tales casas pueden caber dan testimonio de sus tesoros. Están estos Indios y moran en sus casillas padres hijos y nietos comen y beben sin mucho ruido ni voces. Sin rencillas ni enemistades pasan su tiempo y vida y salen a buscar el mantenimiento a la vida humana necesario y no más”.
Knowledge of the Spanish language, acquired through education in a Spanish setting, came to distinguish indigenous nobility from the non-noble macehuales. Speaking Spanish gave nobles a chance to participate in a reformed government, economy and social hierarchy, understand rules, written documents pertaining to politics and culture, and express their thoughts and needs. Beyond the practical aspects of communicating in Spanish, speaking Spanish was a societal indicator of status. Fernando de Alva exemplifies this, and distinguishes others with his same talents, including Jacobo de Mendoza Tlaltentzin, the Principal of Tepupulco whom he recognizes as a "widely read man and very good grammarian, a servant of God according to the religious [men] who know him, who also knows the history and has [familial] relations as far away as the city of Texcuco". By distinguishing him as educated and devout, he assessed Mendoza’s desirability using Spanish qualities. Jacobo de Mendoza is also an elder and scholar on Nahua histories, and his command of the Spanish language serves to strengthen his reputation as a Nahua scholar by virtue of his extended education beyond his native language.

The term principal was used to describe the lower-ranking members of the pipiltin, the second generation of Nahua leadership under Spanish influence. Their parents had been in power upon the arrival of the Spanish, and the pipiltin were born either shortly before the conquest or directly after; they were therefore Spanish subjects for all or most of their lives. This generation of indigenous leaders had been exposed to ideas of Spanish leadership for most of their lives. Many received training in special Indian schools, improving their ability to communicate with both indigenous and Spanish

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38 Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, *Obras históricas*, 60: “es hombre muy leído y buen gramático y muy siervo de Dios según dicen los religiosos que lo conocen que también tiene historias y relaciones que alcanzó ver la ciudad de Texcuco".
populations. Children learned to speak and write in Spanish and Latin, working in examples from scripture. This education helped to separate the ruling class from the non-literate or Spanish speaking and further separate them from the ways of the previous generation.

Specialized schools were developed throughout the valley of Mexico to educate the next generation of Indian leaders and to promote literacy and Christianity. Touting their success, Motolinía wrote about the selection of one of the first locations and groups of students, noting that:

The town where the friars first came to teach was to Cuautitlan, four leagues from México, and Tepotzotlan, because Mexico was very noisy, and they taught among the children of the señores in the house of God. [The students] were the wealthy children of these two peoples, nephews or grandchildren of Moteuczoma and these were the principales, who in their houses had out of respect of these began to teach and to baptize children and always continued to be doctrine and were always first and foremost good Christians, as were their subjects and their neighbors.

Motolinía is referring to education at the Indian school at Tlatelolco around 1540; there, Franciscans concentrated their efforts on the education of the children of nobles, creating the first Spanish-educated generation of Indian leaders. The noble indigenous children took to the tradition and Morales notes that “these buildings replaced the native calmecatl, a Mesoamerican educational institution of long tradition. It was located in the old ceremonial centers. There the pipiltin, children of nobility, received religious,

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39 See Gibson, “Aztec Aristocracy”, 174: “In the early post-conquest years the most instrumental and effective supporters of these doctrines were the Mendicant clergy, whose standard technique was to sequester the sons of the Indian nobles and to convert them to Christianity free from the influence of their non-Christian elders”.

40 Icazbalceta Vol. 1, 101: “El pueblo al que primero salieron los frailes a enseñar fue a Cuautitlán, cuatro leguas de México, y a Tepotzotlán, porque como en México había mucho ruido, y entre los hijos de los señores que en la casa de Dios se enseñaban estaban los señoritos de estos dos pueblos, sobrinos ó nietos de Moteuczoma y estos eran de los principales que en casa había, por respeto de estos comenzaron a enseñar allí y a bautizar los niños y siempre se prosiguió la doctrina y siempre fueron de los primeros y delanteros en toda buena cristianidad y lo mismo los pueblos á ellos sujetas y sus vecinos ”.
military, and civic education\textsuperscript{41}; these new facilities altered the social traditions of 
education in the population centers, reinforced religious conversion and enabled greater 
participation in Spanish institutions.

The effects of this education were long-lasting and allowed a second generation of 
indigenous leaders to develop despite the presence of the Spanish political structure 
imposed after the conquest. In many regions, Spanish leaders overtook the roles played 
by the pre-conquest generations of indigenous nobles, but indigenous nobles who did 
retain a political role were often Spanish-educated. Language acquisition was the most 
helpful skill engendered by Spanish education, giving the pipiltin a voice which could at 
least be understood (even if often not heeded) in their new political culture. The 
specialized education for the pipiltin lasted only for a single generation, and without an 
environment specifically to instruct Nahua persons in a Spanish curriculum, the 
generation after was limited to learning in mutually exclusive Nahua or Spanish 
environments. However, the subsequent generations of nobles retained the ability to 
speak Spanish, and, even without the formal instruction at Indian schools, could speak 
(and understand) the primary language of the developing, multi-lingual society.

By participating in the Spanish language, Nahua principales were able to integrate 
and become more visible to the Spanish population, even in Spain. For this generation of 
Spanish-educated Nahua leaders, “[l]iteracy and Hispanization in general meant that 
caciques and principales, like Spanish colonists, could express their complaints in writing 
to the monarch, as they did frequently in Spanish and occasionally in Latin”\textsuperscript{42}. The ability 
to communicate in the primary language gave indigenous populations some agency in

\textsuperscript{41} Morales, 145.
\textsuperscript{42} Gibson, “Aztec Aristocracy”, 181.
voicing concerns, and while Spanish monarchs had minimal contact with indigenous leaders, this ability is much more relevant to interactions with other Spanish authorities. Their concerns were not necessarily addressed, but they were expressed in a language that Spanish authorities understood. Acquisition of Spanish language helped to further remove this second generation from their cultural past and shifted the focus of their communications in part to the Spanish-speaking population. This also gave them equal agency as Spanish colonists, who voiced their complaints in letters. Essentially, they were participating in a similar method of reporting grievances shared equally by both Spanish and Nahua residents of New Spain.

Spanish attitudes toward indigenous leadership varied, but Nahua rulers maintained an existence within the emerging colonial framework. “Spanish apologists agreed that the res publica of the Indians was to be maintained in all ways compatible with Christianity and civilization: Indian properties were to be preserved; Indians were not to be reduced to slavery; existing Indian rulers were to be respected as "natural lords" (señores naturales)". Sahagún notes a transition in the titles used to describe nobles, ‘gobernador’ replacing the previous term ‘señor’. In his brief chronology of the leadership of Tenochtitlán, Sahagún uses ‘señor’ to refer to all pre-conquest rulers, abruptly changing the title to ‘gobernador’ after the eleventh ruler mentioned, Quauhtemoc, during whose reign the Spanish conquerors took control; he does not begin to number these rulers anew, but rather retains the chronology and changes the title (i.e. Quauhtemoc is the eleventh señor, but don Andrés Motelchiuh is the twelfth gobernador). Despite limited power and resources, indigenous gobernadores were

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43 Gibson, “Aztec Aristocracy”, 174.
44 Sahagún vol. 2, 282.
responsible for the wellbeing of the indigenous population; Sahagún provides the example of Don Diego Teuetzquiti, who was held responsible by both Spanish and indigenous populations when famine and disease decimated his charges and he was unable to provide a solution or relief.\(^{45}\)

Hereditary honors remained relevant during the formation of the colonial period, but were challenged by changes to indigenous social classes. Nahua rulers justified their privilege based on their heritage and ability to prove lines of nobility. This resulted in economic and social benefits granted or sanctified by Spanish colonial authorities. For example, Gibson notes that “even when caciques did not hold the gubernatorial offices they frequently appeared on the municipal payrolls for reasons of hereditary status alone, receiving stated amounts of maize or other tribute and specified services from the community.\(^ {46}\)” While clearly limited to what Spanish authorities would allow them to control, Nahua leaders retained their ability to govern their constituent populations to some degree, receiving goods and services as tribute as mentioned by Gibson previously. However, Lockhart notes that social distinction among the commoners resulted in a lessened attachment to the nobility and a greater sense of independence and reliance on authority as defined by Spanish social conventions. In response to noble claims to land parcels, the collective lower class, who worked these hereditarily-owned lands, challenged this system in Spanish courts, based on their generations-long history of working the land.\(^ {47}\)

Demographic change was one of the most visually recognizable developments in the formation of the colonial period. Persons of mixed Spanish and indigenous heritage

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\(^{45}\) Ibid.
\(^{46}\) Gibson, “Aztec Aristocracy”, 178
\(^{47}\) Lockhart, The Nahuas After the Conquest, 113-114.
(mestizos) were often considered part of the indigenous noble class as early as the first post-conquest born generation of Pipiltin. Despite strict racial consciousness and an expressed desire for separation (in many cases, on the Spanish side; surely there were exceptions to this notion), intermarriage and sexual relations occurred regularly in population centers, introducing a large mixed-race element to the population, while Spanish documents created an imagined reality which was, for the most part, segregated. With deviation from prescribed sexual norms so prevalent, Gibson notes that “Audiencias after the sixteenth century do not appear to have taken very seriously the matter either of mestizaje or of illegitimacy,” indicating that the frequent interaction of races quickly became typical. This both complicated and raised the status of indigenous rulers, who in great part were subject to the mestizaje process due to their more frequent contact with Spanish settlers. Despite inheriting Spanish blood, mestizo Indians could still recognize an Indian and noble heritage, and also play a role in Spanish social and political worlds as members of the Spanish community. This dual heritage gave much greater flexibility to self-identification.

Indigenous populations underwent rapid reorganization in the post-conquest years, both through formal efforts by Spanish authorities (encomienda, congregaciones), and the effects of these efforts (war, disease). Stephen Perkins argues that the consolidation of Nahua communities actually strengthened authority and preserved Nahua society, noting that

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48 Linda A. Curcio-Nagy has elegantly summed up this phenomenon in her study of the formation of the city of Puebla, writing that “The Poblano leadership articulated a sense of city and self in a manner that purposely excluded the actual ethnic diversity of Puebla, especially the presence of large numbers of Native Americans.” Despite widespread miscegenation and large Indian populations, Puebla, like many towns in the central valley, were centers of Spanish control. See Linda A. Curcio-Nagy, “Introduction: Spectacle in Colonial Mexico”, The Americas 52, no. 3 (Jan., 1996): 275-281, 277.

49 Gibson, “Aztec Aristocracy”, 192.
Congregaciones brought together different and sometimes hostile groups, but preserved and strengthened commonalities in the shared parts of Nahua-speaking culture. Teccalli also found themselves strengthened in their roles as Spanish authorities looked to a few as conduits of communication. It is likely that language skills played a significant part in the success and power of transitioning Teccalli rulers.

The consolidation of communities led to a consolidation of power as well. By acting as the line of communication for entire populations, which may not have necessarily been historically their own, the noble Teccalli were able to elevate themselves out of necessity, and maintain their power over Nahua society and find a place of importance in Spanish society as well.

Nahua leaders from multiple polytheistic communities were the first to be introduced to Christianity. In the pre-conquest period, ruling classes enforced religious practice; when Spanish authorities insisted upon conversion for Nahua leadership, constituents were required by their leaders to follow suit. Thus, Tlatoque determined which religion was practiced by the entire population. While they did not conduct religious ceremonies or events, Nahua leaders wielded the authority to direct their constituency to take part. Their responsibilities often required them to appropriate luxury resources to sacrifices and ceremonies, which determined the ability of the shamans to conduct the proceedings. They often produced resources to the shaman in person, as Sahagún recounts in this quintessential account of human sacrifice: “The señores brought the captives to their slaves at the temple where they were to kill them, dragging them by the hair…and then came the priest that was to kill them…and he ripped out the heart, and

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then offered it to the sun”51. Upon the political realignment under the Spanish, Patricia Lopes Don notes that “The political and financial power of the Indian chiefs and nobles who supported the all-male priesthoods was eroding. With these rapid and wrenching changes to the superstructure of Aztec society, the whole discipline of the high priesthoods crumbled”52. The conquest left a fragmented polytheistic system devoid of the resources necessary to perform ritual actions. This transitional period created a prime opportunity for the religious orders to introduce Christianity.

Before the conquest, the shaman priests formed a different class, living quite apart from the rest of the population. Their primary role was conducting ceremonies and religious acts with financial resources received from the nobility. While their function in pre-conquest society was to perform the necessary actions to keep their populations in favor with their deities, they acted only under the authority of the señores and reported to them. Sahagún notes that priests served both a subservient and advisory role, and that they faced an uncertain future if they did not fulfill their duty to the desired standard. In his account relayed to him by a former shaman:

When [the former principal] dies, because then, when newly elected, he takes power over everyone and has the freedom to kill anyone he wishes, because he is highest, and because of this, when newly elected, we told him everything that he needed to do his job well, and did this with great reverence and humility; for this speaker speaks with great delicacy, sighing and crying.53

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51 Sahagún vol. 1, 86: “Cuando llevaban a los señores de los cautivos a sus esclavos al templo donde los habían de matar, llevabanlos por los cabellos...y venía luego el sacerdote que le había de matar...y arrancábale el corazón, y luego ofrecía al sol”.
53 Sahagún, vol. 2, 90: “cuando muere, porque entonces, cuando recién electo, toma el poder sobre todos, tiene libertad de matar a quien quisiere, porque ya es superior, y por esta causa cuando recién electo decímosle todo lo que ha menester para hacer bien su oficio, y esto con mucha reverencia y humildad; por esta causa el orador habla con gran tiento, llorando y suspirando”.
In this speech from a Nahua priest regarding a newly elected official, formal and flattering language is used in order to stay in favor and remain in his position, also to avoid being put to death. This illustrates the relationship between the religious and political leaders. Priests served as council and provide advice, in this case to a newly elected official, but feared their considerable power. In this instance, the principal establishes the shaman’s relationship to him as submissive and threatened them with harsh punishment for poor performance. Their subservient role and association with actual acts of Nahua religion supported why the shamans were not approached to lead the Nahua people into Christianity. Instead the ruling classes were pursued and took a direct, public role in religious practice. While shamans were the official executors in acts of ceremony and sacrifice, indigenous nobility also distinguished themselves as religious leaders.

Thus, Christianization efforts were directed toward the ruling classes instead, choosing to stamp out the shaman class and suppress their presence. Fernando de Alva notes that once his ancestors converted to Christianity, they demonized the shamans and accused them of taking advantage of young women: “The female principales went on a pilgrimage as is common and custom; they were attacked and had carnal knowledge with the temple priests, breaking their chastity that they professed in their false religions”54. According to this testimony by Texcocan elders, female principales were victim of sexual abuse by members of the shaman class. Because of their habitation in all-male religious communities, temple priests were also accused of other acts of carnality by Spanish conquerors: “At the highest end of the priesthood were the temple priests of powerful

54 Fernando de Alva Ixtlixóchitl, *Obras históricas*, 32: “las mujeres principales habían de ir en romería como es uso y costumbre y habían de accesos carnales con los sacerdotes de los templos, quebrando ellos la castidad que allí profesaban en sus falsas religiones”.
political gods, such as Tezcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli. The high priests did not marry and lived in separate all-male compounds; the conquerors' accounts routinely accused them of homosexuality. The power of these high priests was eliminated upon the defeat of their war-oriented gods, and the agrarian-local enclaves of practice which persisted were rapidly the focus of Spanish proselytization. Members of religious orders inserted themselves in their place, organizing parishes, administering sacraments, and incorporating proper religious instruction (including prayer, liturgical hours, how to say Holy Mass) alongside other subjects of education. Shamans did not find a sanctioned place in colonial life. Their pre-conquest role was taken over by a complicated relationship between indigenous noble leadership and missionary instruction and guidance.

The children of nobles worked directly with their Spanish teachers, who prepared them to become religious leaders of their communities. The non-noble populations were given basic oral instruction, heard Holy Mass and absorbed Christianity as a community, and also helped their parents in church involvement. The macehuales were instructed well enough to identify as a part of a Nahua Christian community, led by the nobles who received more detailed instruction. Motolinia boasted of his success in reaching all social classes of the Nahua:

Those who are being taught apart the halls of the houses are the children of principales; there are many others who are the children of common

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55 Lopes Don, 40.
56 Lopes Don, 41.
57 Morales, 146.
58 Lopes Don, 41: “Small local cults and individual priests survived, and there was evidence that they continued to ply their trade on an individual basis. With political defeat, the cult of the war gods was set aside, and paganism returned to older, more agriculturally based religious observances, predicated on the monthly and seasonal festivals, which the individual priests could regulate. But, in the proselytizing campaigns of the early 1530s, the bishop and the friars made an all-out assault on these smaller enclaves and truly drove paganism underground.”
people and lower class, that are who are taught in the patios because they customarily have work then in the morning; every day they hear mass and then teach them a while, and with this they go to serve and help their parents and many of them come to serve the churches and after, they are married and help Christian people in all places.59

This account may be slightly biased and does not take into account the many difficulties faced in converting an entire population. The special instruction given to the nobility greatly aided this process; however, noble endorsement of the adoption of Christianity was imperative to the conversion of the rest of the population. Likewise, general instruction gave the general population enough basis to accept the tenets of Christianity and participate with the direction of the nobles; without this basis, the lower classes would have been left behind and excluded from the growing Christian tradition. And, without macehuales, the nobles would have no constituency and thus no authority.

Post-conquest Indian nobles continued the practice of adopting religious beliefs of their victors. Indigenous leaders conceptually accepted the Christian God upon instruction, but actual practice of Christianity came later or not at all, or in modified form. As with general education, indigenous nobles received religious instruction from Spanish friars. Francisco Morales elevated the role of indigenous leaders to equality with their teachers, noting that their previous authority over their constituents continued to give them agency, that

The fundamental architects of Mesoamerican Christianity are not only the Franciscans who provided the new events and characters for the new celebrations, but also the Nahua community with their lords, the tlatoani,

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59 Icazbalteca vol. 1, 138: “Sin los que se enseñan aparte en las salas de las casas que son hijos de personas principales hay otros muchos de los hijos de gente común y baja que los enseñan en los patios porque los tienen puestos en costumbre de luego de mañana cada día oír misa y luego enseñarles un rato y con esto vanse á servir y ayudar á sus padres y de estos salen muchos que sirven las iglesias y después se casan y ayudan á la cristiandad por todas partes”.
and their sages... both friars and natives made possible the spiritual and intellectual transfer of the Nahua religion to Christianity.  

Upon converting to Christianity, indigenous leaders required their constituents to participate in Christianity, both physically and financially. From their superior access to religious instruction, some nobles found great inspiration in their Christian instruction and took their instructors’ words to heart. Motolinía mentions an extreme example of a young principal who chose a monastic life and encouraged his constituency in Christianity by both by word and example:

A youth named don Juan, señor principal and inhabitant of a village in the province of Michoacán which in that language is called Turecato, and in Mexico Tepeoacan; this youth read the life of San Francisco (which was translated into their tongue), with such devotion that he promised to become a monk; and because his vows were not taken with frivolity, he persevered in his mission robed in rough sackcloth and granted freedom to his many slaves and preached to them and taught them the commandments and what more he knew; he polished them, as if he had knowledge of God for himself; and before he had given them freedom, they knew that they were free from that point henceforth, and he prayed that they would love one other, and that they would be good Christians, and that if they did so he would have them as brothers... This young man was a señor and was very well known as having been a great example in the entire province of Michoacán which is very large and very populated where there has been large mines of all [types of] metals.

This is an unusual account: most principales were not called to religious life, but it is a stunning instance of indigenous leadership by example. This account is also worth noting because of its focus on the wealth and influence of the region. By becoming a Franciscan,

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60 Morales, 143.
61 Icazbalteca vol. 1, 132-133: “un mancebo llamado don juan señor principal y natural de un pueblo de la provincia de michuacan que en aquella lengua se llama turecato y en la de México tepeoacan este mancebo leyendo en la vida de san francisco que en su lengua estaba traducida tanta devoción que prometió de ser fraile y porque su voto no se le imputase á liviandad perseverando en su propósito vistióse de sayal grosero y dió libertad á muchos esclavos que tenía y predicóles y enseñóles los mandamientos y lo que él más sabia y lijóles que si él hubiera tenido conocimiento de dios y de sí mismo que antes les hubiera dado libertad y que de allí adelante supiesen que eran libres y que las rogaba que se amasen unos á otros y que fuesen buenos cristianos y que si lo hacían así que él los tendría por hermanos... Este mancebo como era señor y muy conocido ha sido gran ejemplo en toda la provincia de Michuacan que es muy grande y muy poblada adonde ha habido grandes minas de todos metales”.

Don Juan gave up control of any stake in the mining resources of Michoacán in favor of a religious life. Many other nobles remained part of the lay population and retained control over some resources, but managed to become examples of Christian behavior in other ways.

After some nobles had converted to Christianity, the use of luxury resources in religious ceremony was redirected to celebration of Christian rituals. Instead of locating these goods in the houses of leaders, offerings and celebrations were held in the church or chapel. Motolinía recounts that upon the construction of the first church (San Francisco de México) in Tetzcoco, he found that resources were being used in a very similar way to how Sahagún described pre-conquest rituals:

In this land, the sign of the cross is so glorified by all in the towns and streets that it is said that no other part of Christendom is it more extolled nor [worshiped] by so many, nor are there such high crosses [anywhere else], in particular those in the courtyards of the churches which are very solemn; every Sunday and every celebration they adorn them with many roses and flowers, and bulrushes and branches in the churches and the altars are [adorned with] gold and silver feathers, and not solid but of gold leaf and feathers over [a framework of] poles.  

The gold, feathers, branches and flowers found in private pre-conquest rituals held by nobles subsequently appeared in communal Christian celebrations, as seen at San Francisco de México. This implies that private luxury resources once disbursed in private were now given as part of a public ceremony. This could be interpreted in two ways. Nobles may have relinquished their exclusive right to these resources and designated them for community use. Or, they considered it their duty to provide the resources

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62 Icazbalteca vol. 1, 137: “Esta tan ensalzada en esta tierra la señal de la cruz por todos los pueblos y caminos que se dice que en ninguna parte de la cristianidad está mas ensalzada ni adonde tantas ni tales ni tan altas cruces haya en especial las de los patios de las iglesias son muy solemnes las cuales cada domingo y cada fiesta adornan con muchas rosas y flores y espadañas y ramos En las iglesias y en los altares las tienen de oro y de plata y de pluma no macizas sino de hoja de oro y pluma sobre palo”.
necessary to properly conduct Christian ceremonies for the benefit of themselves and
their constituencies. Also, this behavior mirrors pre-conquest activity as noted by
Sahagún: “The noble and rich… wrap their houses in branches called *axcoyatl*; they also
cover all of their gods in flowers, for each [person] they have in their houses”\(^6\). Although
in this passage Sahagún qualified persons as noble and rich separately, nobility clearly
practiced this activity. The use of floral decoration to denote a sacred space remained
consistent, but by changing the place of display to the church, the audience expanded to
include all who attended, which included the *macehuales*.

The concept of tithing to a parish directly mirrored the collection of tribute
previously part of Nahua tradition and transitioned smoothly into Christian practice,
aiding in the conversion to parish life and encouraging participation over resistance.
Celebrations of sacraments were the most visible Christian actions by which change
could be measured, and were often written about as verification that a population had
converted. Motolinía frequently noted that when *principales* took part in sacraments, their
constituents soon followed. He also claimed that participation in one sacrament
eventually led to participation in others, as when he recounted the celebration of a
wedding here:

>The most important thing after the señor married a señora ... [was that]
many people followed them and others did as they had done in their home,
[they] who had shown many by their good example, and there were many
who [followed] it. The señor principal, with many other people were
baptized, and others were married and gave confession.\(^6\)

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\(^6\) Sahagún vol.1, 89: “Los nobles y los ricos...enramaban sus casas con unos ramos que llaman *axcoyatl*; también enramaban a sus dioses y les ponían flores a los que cada uno tenía en su casa”.
\(^6\) Icazbalteca vol. 1, 119: “el más principal después del señor y casado con una señora ... seguía mucha gente así de su casa como otros que se allegaban por su buen ejemplo el cual era tanto que algunas venía con él. El señor principal con otra mucha gente de los muchos se bautizaban otros se desposaban y confesaban”.
By participating in Christian marriage, the nobility set the tone for participation in sacraments which most likely came at the direction of Spanish religious orders; circuitously, noble Christian marriage then acted as encouragement for the rest of indigenous populations to participate in penance and baptism.

Marriage was an aspect of conversion deemed essential for native assimilation by those charged with their conversion. By forcing conformity to Christian marriage, Spanish religious educators altered the significance of marital ceremony, kinship ties, heredity through familial bonds, and the concept of family, essential tenets of the preservation of nobility through inheritance. Although similar male-female relationships clearly existed in indigenous social constructs and the language of Nahuatl contains many instances of words and phrases meaning ‘spouse’, there appears to be no Nahua word equivalent to the Spanish matrimonio prior to the conquest; James Lockhart notes that some Nahua annals contain declarations that Indian marriage ‘began’ in the 1520’s. The transition to Christian marriage was most documented in noble populations, and accounts indicated that noble weddings were opportunities to transfer and preserve wealth and power. Christian marriage changed the lives of the macehuales as well, but is more frequently documented for the noble classes since the Spanish authors had more frequent and stronger communication with them. As Motolinia noted, noble classes were first approached and joined in matrimony, and they served as an example to the rest of the constituent populations, as in this example where he writes of the “first” marriage to take place in Mexico:

The sacrament of marriage in this land of Anahuac or New Spain began in Tetzcoco Sunday, October 14, in the year 1520. Don Hernando, brother of the señor of Tetzcoco publicly and solemnly married, and with seven

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65 Lockhart, The Nahuas After the Conquest, 80.
others all his fellow servants [present] in the house of God; and from five leagues around Mexico many honorable people were invited to the feast, who came to honor and celebrate their weddings; among those who came were Alonso de Avila and Pedro Sanchez Farfan with their wives, and they brought other honorable people who offered [gifts] to the bride and groom in the Spanish custom...and because [these] weddings were to be an example for all of New Spain, it was presided over very solemnly with the blessings and arras\textsuperscript{66} and ring as expected by the holy Mother Church.\textsuperscript{67}

Despite his statement that the nobility were to serve as an example in marriage, Motolinia also noted the resistance and struggle faced by Spanish religious educators. Both Indian tradition and Spanish behavior that the nobles observed proved difficult obstacles to enforcing Christian marriage in Indian life. The practice of concubinage greatly concerned the missionaries. Indian nobles recognized the same behavior practiced by Spanish inhabitants, and used the actions of Spanish authorities that they had witnessed to justify their own actions when challenged or questioned by members of religious orders\textsuperscript{68}. Motolinia remained firmly opposed to concubinage despite his obvious struggle with resistance, and noted that noble behavior was no different than that of the macehualin, despite verbal correction, and even despite his begging:

\begin{quote}
The señores and principales would steal all the women in such a way that when a common Indian wanted to marry he was barely able to find a woman; and they desired that the Spanish members of religious orders to resolve this...[the señores and principales] did not want to leave [their women], nor could they leave them; no pleas, nor threats, nor sermons, nor
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{66} Thirteen coins given by a bridegroom to a bride.
\textsuperscript{67} Icazbalteca vol. 1, 124-125: “El sacramento del matrimonio en esta tierra de Anáhuac ó Nueva España se comenzó en Tetzcoco En el año de 1520 domingo 14 de Octubre se desposó y casó pública y solemnemente Don Hernando hermano del señor de Tetzcoco con otros siete compaños suyos criados todos en la casa de Dios y para esta fiesta llamaron de México que son cinco leguas á muchas personas honradas para que les honrasen y festejasen sus bodas entre los cuales vinieron Alonso de Avila y Pedro Sánchez Farfán con sus mujeres y trajeron otras personas honradas que ofrecieron á los novios á la manera de España...y porque bodas habían de ser ejemplo de toda la Nueva España, velaronse muy solemnemente con las bendiciones y arras y anillo como manda la Santa Madre Iglesia.

\textsuperscript{68} Icazbalteca vol. 1, 125-126: “And they answered that the Spaniards also had many women and told them that if we had them for their service, then they had them for the same [reason] (y respondían que también los Españoles tenían muchas mujeres y si les decíamos que las tenían para su servicio decían que ellos también las tenían para lo mismo)".
anything else was sufficient to do anything with them, in order to get them to leave all [their women] and marry a single woman in the light of the church. 

This illustrates the challenges faced by Motolinía in his efforts to promote monogamy. It also appears that little faith was given to the value of Indian marriages. Fernando de Alva, despite his affinity for his own indigenous heritage, used ‘hijo natural’ to describe the births of children to indigenous nobility, even when discussing a child born to a married couple. This was phrase used to indicate a child born out of wedlock to parents in a steady relationship. In this context, his consistent use of ‘hijo natural’ serves to question the validity of Indian marriage.

Conversion to Christianity certainly aided the indigenous acceptance of Spanish culture, but it did not necessarily guarantee acceptance as equal social peers by Spaniards. Motolinía expressed frustration with his countrymen who did not believe that indigenous conversions to Christianity were genuine:

Many of the Spaniards do not believe in the conversion of the Indians and others live as if they were a thousand leagues from them and do not know them nor do they see them, for they are obsessed with attempting to acquire the gold that they came in search for, and returning back to Spain with it, and to show their notion, their regular oath is always ‘God lead me to Spain’; but the virtuous and Christian knights and nobles are very edified to see the conversion of these Indians.

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69 Icazbalteca vol. 1, 125: “los señores y principales robaban todas las mujeres de manera que cuando un Indio común se quería casar apenas hallaba mujer y queriendo los religiosos españoles poner remedio...no las querían dejar ni ellos se las podían quitar ni bastaban ruegos ni amenazas ni sermones ni otra cosa que con ellos se hiciese para que dejadas todas se casasen con una sola en haz de la Iglesia”.
70 Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, Obras históricas de don Fernando, 276.
71 Icazbalteca vol. 1, 135: “muchos de los Españoles están incrédulos en esto de la conversión de los Indios y otros como si morasen mil leguas de ellos no saben ni ven nada por estar demasiadamente intentos y metidos en adquirir el oro que vinieron a buscar para en teniéndolo volverse con ello á España y para mostrar su concepto es siempre su ordinario juramento así Dios me lleve á España pero los nobles y caballeros virtuosos y cristianos muy edificados están de ver la buena conversión de estos Indios naturales”.

While Motolinía’s work did not guarantee that all of the conversions he made were legitimate, this disbelief discounts his work and his mission in the New World. From this account, it is clear that some Spaniards desired a completely separate society from their indigenous neighbors. This was problematic for nobility who wished to retain agency in the political and social happenings of colonial life; without acceptance by their Spanish compatriot, their leadership was negated.

The ruling classes maintained a degree of control over economic matters by regulating resources and demanding specific forms of tribute from their constituents. First, a receiver of tribute was immediately identified as a leader; to exact tribute indicated power. The pre-conquest tribute network had effectively moved goods and services around the valley of Mexico, fueled by the practice of religious ceremonies and sacrificial offerings. Fernando de Alva notes that his namesake, Texcocan ruler Ixtlilxóchitl I, controlled the cotton industry by regulating its production for tribute. Extensions and alterations to the tribute networks were most often gained through physical combat. Goods, captives and sacrificial victims were secured through frequent battle. War also decided secession between multiple heirs, or in the instance of an open throne. The ruling class also chose allies and enemies. Upon the arrival of the Spanish, this meant choosing whether to side with the Spanish an attack the center of power in Tenochtitlan, or oppose and face their new attackers.

Land and resource possession indicated persisting indigenous social and economic control after the arrival of the Spanish. Before Spanish conquest, land was

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72 Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, Obras históricas de don Fernando, 328.
73 Frederic Hicks has written extensively on post-conquest Nahua land control; see “Land and Succession in the Indigenous Noble Houses of Sixteenth-Century Tlaxcala”. Ethnohistory 56, no. 4 (Fall, 2009): 569-588.
held as controlled common space and private holdings\textsuperscript{74}, and land ownership signified nobility. Although the Spanish conquest completely changed the political and social environment of Mexico’s central valley, indigenous nobility found opportunities to maintain their resources, and in some cases, increased their power base. Indigenous leaders began using their land in a manner that emulated their Spanish conquerors, and “caciques used their land for Spanish-style agriculture (especially raising livestock) and commercial relations with Spanish traders, clerics and authorities”\textsuperscript{75}. By acquiescing to Spanish notions of land ownership, nobles were able to participate in or retain control of landless dependent working populations and natural resources. Spanish authorities allowed for indigenous leadership to continue as long as there was a semblance of conformity with Spanish and Christian social activity. Based on this allowance of Christian Indian power, it appears that Spanish authorities felt that Christian values were necessary for indigenous leadership. However, dependents began to make claims to land based on their occupation and care, despite previous custom which would entitle the nobles to whom they were bound. Dependents took their cases to Spanish courts\textsuperscript{76}, many winning the right to the lands they had worked, yet not owned, for generations. These changes in land distribution resulted in a social equalization among Indians of different social classes\textsuperscript{77}; land ownership was no longer a defining characteristic of Nahua nobility. Many of these court cases are documented in Nahuatl, but closely follow the format of

\textsuperscript{74} Hicks, 572.


\textsuperscript{76} Lockhart, The Nahuas After the Conquest, 114

\textsuperscript{77} Lockhart, The Nahuas After the Conquest, 117
Spanish land proceedings. These cases indicate that Nahua people participated in the Spanish justice system, yet also indicates that they maintained agency in control of procedures involving land. Motolinía notes that after the initial conquest, nobles in some cases retained or returned to control of their lands after having them seized by Spanish settlers:

They also returned the estates that they had possessed prior to knowing that they could not own them in good conscience even if they had inherited or acquired them according to their ancient [indigenous] customs; and those that were theirs with good title, they kept many of the taxes and tribute that they usually collected from the macehuales or vassals for themselves, and the señores and principales tried to make sure that their macehuales were good Christians and live in the law of Jesus Christ.

According to Motolinía, control over land resources is justified by the Christian conduct of the nobles; their religious behavior makes them worthy of social and economic participation. Practices of Nahua landholding in general are widely debated and not always understood, but it is certain that there were several types of land holdings, many of which were shared and had little to do with accumulation of wealth, and some were inheritable portions of noble estates.

As Spanish influence took hold and a colonial presence was established, indigenous nobility ceased to exercise the formal political agency they once possessed. The colonial period brought reorganization of the entire social hierarchy, engendered by

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79 Icazbalteca vol. 1, 121: “Restituyen asimismo las heredades que poseían antes que se convirtiesen sabiendo que no las pueden tener con buena conciencia aunque las hayan heredado ni adquirido según sus antiguas costumbres y las que son propias suyas y tienen con buen título reservan á los macehuales ó vasallos de muchas imposiciones y tributos que les solían llevar y los señores y principales procuran mucho que sus macehuales sean buenos cristianos y vivan en la ley de Jesucristo”.
80 For further discussion on indigenous land succession, see Hicks, 572.
displacement by Spanish or non-noble indigenous political entities\textsuperscript{81}, physical relocation via encomienda or congregaciones, and vacancy due to war and disease. It became increasingly uncommon for members of indigenous aristocracy to be completely of indigenous heritage; many were mestizos of both Spanish and Indian decent. They acknowledged their indigenous bloodlines and retained Nahua titles of leadership, yet behaved according to Spanish social values, and used their Spanish heritage to distinguish themselves among the greater Nahua population and pursue opportunities. Indigenous leaders became advocates for indigenous populations, yet distinguished themselves from their race. Gibson notes "[t]heir decline was an aspect of a much larger process: the decay of the enthusiastic Mendicant tutelage of the early post-conquest period; the ineffectual efforts of the government to control white exploitation of Indians; the failure of Indian towns to preserve their lands and status; the subordination of Indians to systems of hacienda and peonage"\textsuperscript{82}. These conflicting objectives, coupled with a colonial environment unreceptive to pre-conquest, pre-Christian leadership, resulted in a decline in the population of indigenous nobility (as defined as direct descendants of those who were considered noble prior to the conquest). There was also a change in the social role played by Indian nobles; leaders either lacked the authority and financial capacity to equate to past leadership, or they were not ‘Indian enough’, and lacked the language, tradition, dress, and even bloodline linking them to their Nahua ancestry. The role of

\textsuperscript{81} Gibson, “Aztec Aristocracy”, 182: “An observer of the 1550's asserted that in various parts of Mexico the number of new or pseudo-principales was greater than the number who belonged rightfully and by birth to this class. And a mid-century corregidor reported that in a community of 3000, one-third had become “nobles” by illegal means. Such practices contributed to a further blurring of the border-line between principales and maceguales, a process that became more pronounced in time and one that was affected not only by macegual ambition but by economic status, miscegenation, latifundia, and many other standard conditions of colonial existence”.

\textsuperscript{82} Gibson, “Aztec Aristocracy”, 193.
indigenous nobles was reduced to a social title, lacking the military and political power of the pre-conquest period.

Spanish law both limited noble power and preserved it, as exemplified by the 1591 grants to nobles that laid the basis for the colonial cacicazgos amounted, in retrospect, to the founding of a series of new, smaller houses that would come to replace the old. Thus we might say that Tecali was transformed from a prehispanic ‘house society’ to a late colonial ‘society with houses’.83

The late colonial houses may have lacked the political and economic power of their predecessors, but they relied on and perpetuated similar indigenous notions of descent and inheritance, preserving a sense of indigenous identity despite the imposition of Spanish rule and culture. Native leaders remained imperative to controlling and communicating with the Indian populations at large, and thus remained as part of the social hierarchy, and at times found new opportunities and thrived in this new environment. For indigenous leaders both hereditary and newly appointed through opportunity, “Hispanization was both a symptom of authority and a method of maintaining authority”84.

Nahua leaders were politically and environmentally adaptive, and retained autonomy and identity in a period of incredible suppression. While their political agency and sense of identity changed radically over time and varied by location, the unique existence of Nahua people confirmed that both power and identity were still present and a part of their existence within the new colonial world. The great numbers of Indian nobles, their diverse backgrounds and the changing definitions under which they were able to rise or maintain power complicates this examination, but again keeping Levi-Strauss’s

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83 Chance, 499.
84 Gibson, “Aztec Aristocracy”, 181.
concept of the noble house in mind allows for an evaluation of the office of nobility rather than the individuals who held noble positions. Despite the vastly diverse experiences over several generations, indigenous nobles remained part of Mexico’s colonial history as a recognized social entity.

These variables complicate the formation of a modern understanding of indigenous nobility. Perceptions of their identity clearly changed depending on societal framework, location and personal situation. This is further complicated by a swift generational change accelerated by disease and genocide. These sixty years demonstrate a short but powerful evolution in how Mexican indigenous leaders were defined and conceived, both outwardly and through self-identification. This period forever altered how indigenous noble wealth, power and influence affected the rest of the history of Mexico.
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