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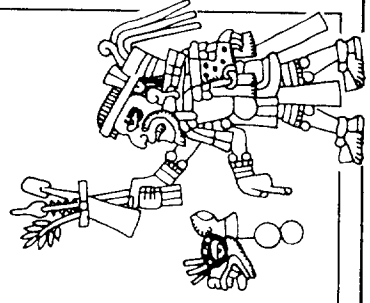
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SAHAGÚN AND THE BIRTH OF MODERN ETHNOGRAPHY: REPRESENTING, CONFESSING, AND INSCRIBING THE NATIVE OTHER

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Unlike Africa or southeast Asia, which continue to serve anthropologists as key settings for theoretical speculation, America, notwithstanding its cultural complexity, is not counted among the sites where today's critical ethnographic experiments with conceptual models and narrative strategies are taking place. Indeed, with notable exceptions (e.g., Tedlock 1983; Todorov 1984), Mesoamerican studies have remained at the margins of the current debates on the epistemological foundations of the human sciences and the relations between narrative discourse, representation, and meaning. This brief essay—based on the research in progress for a book that analyzes the links between (1) the colonization of the intimate life of the natives of New Spain, (2) the deployment of confessional practices as part of a disciplinary regime, and (3) the birth of modern anthropology as a mechanism for the extraction of (practical) local knowledge—seeks to plot the work of Sahagún and his assistants within the framework established by these theoretical and methodological controversies. In particular, this study, making use of analyses drawn from critical anthropology, poststructuralism, and literary theory, explores in a preliminary manner the role the Sahaguntine project played in the rise of modern anthropology.

INTRODUCTION

The humanities and social sciences are experiencing a so-called "crisis of representation" whose causes and effects are studied in a number of recently published monographs commonly identified as poststructuralist, postmodernist, or deconstructive (e.g., Foucault 1980; Culler 1982; Boon 1982; Tedlock 1983; Fabian 1983; Foster 1983; Lyotard 1984; Taylor 1984; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986; White 1987). In anthropology the challenge is coming primarily from scholars who are self-consciously reflecting on the sociocultural implications of their fieldwork experience or who are questioning the epistemological and semiotic consequences of ethnographic narrative as it is conventionally written. For our purposes, the most significant result of their deliberations is the claim that fully objective descriptions or "translations" of cultural reality, where the narrative or image and the referent

have an unmediated and transparent relation, are either fundamentally problematic or not possible at all. Therefore, encompassing theories and overarching paradigms that contend that their methods yield such descriptions must be rejected as deceptive. However, these skeptics assert that some of the misleading effects of the problems inherent in any attempt at representation can be avoided through field methods, narrative styles, and the use of theoretical constructs that break out of the descriptive and explanatory molds that, like structuralism, Marxism (materialism), functionalism, or interpretive anthropology, tend to overdetermine the results by transforming the representations into artifacts of the specific rhetorical style, narrative, or (usually implicit) theoretical/ideological concerns that characterize them.

This skepticism about the foundations of knowledge, supported at the extremes by deconstructionists who argue that texts can only refer to other texts rather than to the "real" world (Culler 1982), has meant that for a growing number of academics problems of description have become problems of representation. That is, problems generally associated with method, as in *how* can one translate from one realm of experience (say a ritual performance) to another (like written narrative), have become problems of epistemology, wherein the possibility of linking a description to its nontextual referent is put in question. This quandary has made necessary new ways of evoking the assumed link between the object of study and its inscription, leading some anthropologists to experiment with the methods, interpretive strategies, and narrative styles employed in ethnography (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986).

In a somewhat analogous manner, in sixteenth-century Mexico secular officials and missionaries, who felt challenged by the empirical and intellectual ruptures of their time and the new world they inhabited, were forced to reconsider both the appropriateness of many of the traditional categories of description and the utility of some of the methods commonly used to gather data. Like their ethnographer counterparts today, those early investigators, who self-consciously faced the intriguing intellectual problems of doing "fieldwork" in a new world and who labored to inscribe objectively the non-European other and the natural history of their American context, were unable to escape the uncertainty surrounding the methods, meaning, and possibility of representation (see, for instance, Gerbi 1978; Rabasa 1985).

Most scholars today are hesitant to attribute to sixteenth-century thinkers the kind of self-consciousness about their intellectual predicament that they are quick to claim for themselves. The history of medieval and Renaissance thought is framed by assertions that people lacked our capacity for self-reflection (e.g., Jacob Burckhart quoted in Heller et al. 1986:35). However, some students of anthropology and history persuasively argue for the need to reassess some of the prejudices on behalf of our time (e.g., Fabian 1983) and our modern world (e.g., Davis 1986:53-63). Though the differences between our consciousness and that of a sixteenth-century Spaniard are admittedly significant (see Keber, this volume), this essay considers the way in which a

writer like Sahagún could be as conscious of some of his conceptual and methodological assumptions as are some of his intellectual counterparts today. Sahagún's constant search for the best description of Nahuatl culture, his tireless editing of his native assistants' texts, and his continual experimentation with philological, hermeneutic, and methodological approaches suggest that he did not assume a simplistic objectivist epistemology founded on a naive belief that the representation of the other was not problematic.

While it is true that the encounter between the Old and New Worlds was conceptualized very slowly in Europe (Elliot 1976), in the Americas the obstacles to and possibility of capturing and communicating the nature of the New World, when potent preconceptions stood firmly in the way, were immediately recognized. This is made evident by both the popularity of the highly deformed images of human and natural landscapes that made up the first images of the Americas (see, for instance, the studies in Lehner and Lehner 1966; Honour 1975; Chiappelli 1976), and the speed with which these early distortions in perception and description (Gerbi 1978; Boon 1982) were put aside. By the end of the second decade of the sixteenth century New World observers like Hernán Cortés (1963) were forging naturalistic images of the natives' appearance and surprisingly realistic descriptions of their culture. Among New World authors, preposterous, superficial descriptions quickly became more rare and their use more bracketed as the rich and enigmatic intellectual and natural content of Mesoamerica became better known. With regard to pre-Contact Nahuatl (Aztec) society, simplistic and metaphorical visions were steadily challenged as a more focused image of what today is called a state-level form of organization, with a complex material and spiritual culture, came into view. Still, this new image was difficult to accommodate within the canons of an orthodox Christian sociology and a medieval natural history that could not anticipate such a unique and complete civilization beyond the realm of the known Christian or infidel worlds (Weckmann 1984). However, the Lutheran revolt, revolutionary scientific advances, and the growing secularism identified with the Renaissance were eroding confidence in authority and a unified Christian vision of the meaning of humanity and the natural world. In the absence of these traditional assurances, ideological and epistemological openings were found through which the otherness of the New World could be more easily apprehended and assimilated with less conceptual uncertainty.

For the Europeans, Mesoamerica was replete not only with surplus labor but with surplus meaning. Neither Cortés nor the Crown lost time in recognizing that the exploitation of the former required the reduction of the latter. A stable, encompassing interpretation of native reality was necessary to harness indigenous minds and bodies to the colonial effort; however, without adequate means for collecting relevant data, the formulation of useful (self-serving) descriptions of the indigenous ideological, socioeconomic, and natural resources would be impossible. To the colonists' good fortune, from the first contacts between Europeans and Nahuas, curious individuals immediately became

amateur field investigators and the most literate among them, like Cortés (1963), Andrés de Tapia (1971), Francisco de Aguilar (1977), and the "Anonymous Conqueror" (Gurría Lacroix 1961), quickly set quill to paper. This was especially true of missionaries in the vein of Pedro de Gante (García Icazbalceta 1954), Toribio (de Benavente) Motolinía (1971), and Andrés de Olmos (1972; Baudot 1977), whose pastoral concern with understanding the nature of their charges made a form of ethnographic fieldwork a fundamental aspect of their occupation from the time they set foot in the New World (see Klor de Alva, this volume).

Fray Bernardino de Sahagún belonged to the "second wave" of preacher-ethnographers. He arrived in 1529, only eight years after the defeat of the Nahuatl leadership of Tenochtitlan. Having been convinced by the priests who preceded him that the natives had left their "idolatry" behind them, rather than struggling against it, he immediately devoted himself to learning Nahuatl and studying Nahuatl culture in order "to preach about moral things concerning the articles of the faith" (García Icazbalceta 1954:382-383). Within a decade he was editing sermons in the language and translating fragments of the Bible, while continuing his initial survey of Nahuatl culture. However, though still motivated by the desire to know the new converts better in order to indoctrinate them more efficiently and thoroughly, by the late 1540s or early 1550s—urged by his provincial, Fray Francisco de Toral (Sahagún 1950-1982: Introductory Volume:53-54), and perhaps inspired by Olmos (1972) and Motolinía (1971), whose interest in Nahuatl culture is well known—Sahagún's work began to focus extensively on topics that were clearly foreign to basic pastoral needs.

Through the use of native informants he began to systematically gather data on and to write documents about the ancient rites, gods, religious beliefs, and medical, social, political, and moral practices (Nicholson 1973a). These early studies, that together make up the *Primeros Memoriales*, were eventually used selectively and in modified form to write the various versions of the *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*. These and other texts, which together make up Sahagún's ethnographic corpus, have yielded some of the most important insights we have into the new Spanish conception of early colonial and ancient Mexico. Despite the excellent work of Fray Diego Durán (1967, 1971) and other students of non-European others (in the Old and New Worlds), the Sahagún corpus undoubtedly constituted the most thorough, objective, and complete study of another culture that had ever been attempted.

Unlike the case of the narratives on the other that preceded his, where ethnographic authority was founded primarily on the observing and questioning author, because of the dialogical methods Sahagún employed in composing his ethnographic corpus, authorship and authority must be primarily attributed to the informants and trilingual native scholars, the *collegiales*, who worked with him and who were once students and later teachers in the Colegio de Santa Cruz in Tlatelolco. Because of their role in the formation of the text, along with their Europeanized vision, the corpus includes the fullest record

available of the natives' own reconstruction of their culture and natural history. Thus, since the *Historia general* and the other texts written by Sahagún in collaboration with his Nahuatl assistants permit us to piece together native images of pre- and, to a great extent, post-Contact reality (Klor de Alva 1982a), they are a critical source of information on the key features of the Nahuatl conceptualization of themselves and their world. But this brief essay does not address the pre-Contact Nahuatl conceptual integration of the social, political, religious, and geographical spheres (see Zantwijk 1985). Instead, motivated by today's preoccupation with the nature and possibility of representation, I will focus below on the effects on Sahagún of the sixteenth-century questioning of traditional forms of representation in order to show how his experiments, undertaken directly or *indirectly* to address this concern with the nature of description, led to the first examples of modern ethnographic fieldwork and narrative, thereby genuinely making him the first modern anthropologist.

THE SIXTEENTH-CENTURY CRISIS OF REPRESENTATION

Notwithstanding our scientific biases, representation, used here as the conceptualization or "translation" of sociocultural reality and its discursive or pictorial description, is the product of intellectual, social, political, and economic forces that change over time. In the sixteenth century, a period of dramatic transformations in every area, traditional modes of conceiving and rendering cultural and physical phenomena faced many challenges and underwent considerable alterations.

Sahagún lived in a new world whose topography was being surveyed by many opposing parties. As long as all sides in the colonial struggle for control generated disparate, self-serving descriptions of the native other that led to conflicts over interpretations of rights and responsibilities, it was impossible to map a clear cognitive and sociopolitical path by which to travel around the complex terrain of Nahuatl-European relations. Furthermore, in the background of these struggles over the representation of the indigenous could be heard the strains of the trans-Atlantic clashes over religious truth and political hegemony that echoed antiphonally in New Spain, as the cry to defend the faith from the Protestant challenge alternated with new (providential and utopian) religious claims produced by the colonial circumstances. Even among the missionary-ethnographers of the same order, basic descriptions of the natives changed drastically with the political fortunes of the time, at home and abroad (Klor de Alva 1981a).

New Spain's ubiquitous political conflicts are well known: Nahuatl struggled against Europeans, the Crown and the friars fought against the *encamenderos*, and, by mid-century, the religious orders were also clashing with the colonial officials, the secular priests, the hierarchy, and each other (Ricard 1966). However, since the topic has received little scholarly attention, the degree to which the changing philosophical and religious climate of the time contributed

to the creation and resolution of problems of interpretation and description is difficult to assess.

With regard to philosophy, the scholastic reforms taking place in late medieval Spain were promoting simplification, empiricism, and a pragmatic orientation (Bataillon 1966). This intellectual movement is particularly evident in New Spain in the work of Fray Alonso de la Veracruz, the most influential professor of philosophy in sixteenth-century Mexico (Cerezo de Diego 1985:21). He studied in Alcalá de Henares and Salamanca, where Sahagún had also gone to school, and by the time he reached America in 1536 he had come to accept as part of his intellectual charge the suggestion of the archbishop of Valencia, Santo Tomás de Villanueva, "that in the New World all things should be done anew" (Larroyo and Escobar 1968:72). Therefore, he set up in New Spain his own course in "arts" (philosophy), divided into three books that reflected the reformist movement in favor of clarification and the use of primary sources. One of these, *Dialéctica resolutiva* (1554), analyzed the categories of Aristotle in a way that argued against sterile disputations, promoted a closer examination of Aristotle's own arguments and the use of original works, and advocated less reliance on authority (the "magister dixit" approach) and more on logic and empirical data to resolve arguments or verify positions. His *Physica speculativa* (1557) linked this modernizing approach to an encyclopedist effort that summarized the sciences of physics, astronomy, natural history, botany, meteorology, and psychology, all in the spirit of the reforms. His work suggests the extent to which the New World was ripe for the novel philosophical approaches that put in question much of the traditional, and by then decadent, scholastic philosophy (Larroyo and Escobar 1968:71-76; Gallagos Rocafull 1966). In the limited intellectual environment of New Spain, where, in the newly established university, Veracruz held the chairs of theology and of St. Thomas Aquinas, thinkers like Sahagún, who spent much of their lives in and around the city of Mexico, would not have been able to escape the influence of his renovating challenge to the disciplinary boundaries and traditional methodologies. Unfortunately, the effect of Alonso de la Veracruz's modernist tendencies on Sahagún's work remains to be studied, but it is difficult to imagine Sahagún dismissing its relevance to his own pioneering research.

The effects of Renaissance humanism on the sixteenth-century intellectual milieu have been studied by Lewis Hanke (1965, 1975), Silvio Zavala (1972, 1978), John Phelan (1972), Marcel Bataillon (1966), Prometeo Cerezo de Diego (1985), and others. The clash between faith (theology and canonical laws) and reason (Aristotle's political and social philosophy) reached its political crescendo in the Valladolid debates of 1550-1551, when Bartolomé de Las Casas used Aristotle and his first-hand experiences in the New World to defend the indigenous from Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda's attacks. At stake in this and many other debates of the time were the social and cultural natures of the inhabitants of the New World, the proper method by which to assimilate them into European culture (that is, how to introduce Christianity, Spanish laws,

and Hispanic culture to them), and the juridical rights and responsibilities of sovereignty (who has a right to make war, exploit, enslave, appropriate, and control). For some, like the Archbishop Juan de Zumárraga and Bishop Vasco de Quiroga (who like Las Casas was a close friend of the philosopher Alonso de la Veracruz), it was a time to free themselves from past customs and corrupting influences by planning and building ideal societies, sometimes explicitly modeled after Thomas More's *Utopia* (Zavala 1937; Maravall 1948-1949). The Franciscans, in particular, were deeply influenced by utopian visions of a separate Indian Republic of Christ (Phelan 1972; Kobayashi 1974; Gómez Canedo 1977). However, though Sahagún shared the goal of founding a Christian community where the Indians could be insulated from the abuses and bad example of the Spaniards, his realism and pragmatism kept him from being either utopian or visionary (Nicolau d'Oliver 1952:155-160). Instead, he fixed his attention on the objective study of the native culture.

Consequently, since the political and theological debates of mid-sixteenth-century Mexico were fundamentally anthropological (the nature of the indigenous, their societies, their cultures, their languages, their traditional use of the environment, and the need to discover the best ways to establish effective culture-contact relations), the "invention" of modern anthropology was waiting to happen. Sahagún's scientific bent, his intellectual curiosity, his language skills, and his obvious empathy with many aspects of native culture, placed him in the best position to take advantage of the sociopolitical need for an applied anthropology.

As is the case today, when some ethnographers are battling against the limits imposed by the four-part structure of anthropology in order to open it up to the theories and methods of other disciplines, Sahagún struggled against the boundaries of his scholastic training by countering its rationalist, anti-empirical tendencies with an ethnography founded on the philosophical and religious reforms and philosophical concerns that dominated much of the humanism of his time. Though we know practically nothing of Sahagún's formal intellectual education, his writings suggest that he was aware of the need to stretch the limits of nominalism and Aristotelian realism in order to describe the Nahua world as truly new. This stretching of familiar boundaries permitted him to do the following: (1) to encompass the empiricism common to St. Thomas Aquinas's emphasis on sense experience, with its attendant requirement that an empirical methodology precede the formation of concepts about the temporal world; and (2) to use a particularist epistemology that could break with idealist theories of universals, embedded in Christian thought since St. Augustine. This latter position logically led Sahagún to a limited, but genuine, perspectivist epistemology with its accompanying relativism. Of course, relativist sentiments were rare at this time—thus the importance to the history of anthropological thought of Bartolomé de Las Casas's profound cultural relativism (see Las Casas 1942, 1951, 1965, 1967). Yet Sahagún's sincere respect for the language, the texts, and the (nomidolatrous) customs of the pre-Contact Nahuas, and his subsequent difficulties with his religious colleagues, leave no doubt

that he was experimenting with an ideology whose time had not yet come.

Standing guard over philosophical (natural and moral) and theological orthodoxy were the weight of traditional scholarship, his fellow religious' versions of common sense, and the Inquisition. Nonetheless, anticipating twentieth-century attitudes, Sahagún was conscious of the fact that meaningful research in the field implied a commitment to the empirical study of reality as free from preemptive judgments as Christianity permitted. Furthermore, he understood that the interpretation of his findings, in ways that made them accessible to his Spanish-speaking peers, necessitated translations that identified native ways of being, doing, and experiencing as equivalent to European counterparts. In this inevitable legitimization of native ways he was once more flirting with the relativism that Las Casas was pioneering.

Why not? Early colonial America left much space open for interpretation. Traditional behavioral rules and conceptual schemes were forced to compete with alternative codes of comportment and reflection. Sahagún inserted himself further into this tense terrain when he set out to explore the Nahuatl world. The vast complex of Nahuatl culture that survived the Conquest and early plagues made it intellectually possible for Sahagún to probe the Nahuatl world as a complete and, to a great extent, separate reality. But the basic categories of religion, society, politics, ethics, and philosophy were different for the Nahuatl, and to recognize these differences in the sixteenth century, however poorly it was done, implied a Herculean task, especially for a priestly investigator. The only solution for Sahagún was to weave many descriptive strands into one representational sash that could gird both Christian universalism and ethnographic particularism. To undertake this task he had to fit Nahuatl culture into Christian categories while permitting it to maintain its singularity. This paradox, and the problem of data collection, were resolved by the deployment of the confessional practice.

THE CONFESSONAL, SELF-EXAMINATION, AND THE BIRTH OF MODERN ETHNOGRAPHY

Sahagún specifically identifies the reasons for doing (what today would be called) fieldwork and for recording the results with the proselytizing and hegemonic concerns common to the missionary-ethnographers of sixteenth-century New Spain. Since their central goal was to domesticate (make docile and predictable) the native other within a European regime of disciplinary practices, they focused their missionary efforts on the retraining of the indigenous through pedagogical and evangelizing techniques. Sahagún noted that these normalizing exercises required that the friars learn everything possible about pre-Contact religious customs so that fellow and future priests could identify and extirpate those that were subversive to the Christian mission (Sahagún 1950-1982: Introductory Volume: 45-46). In turn, this research effort called for a complementary task: the compilation of a thorough list of the relevant vocabulary and its usage (Sahagún 1950-1982: Introductory Volume: 47,

50; Campbell and Clayton, this volume). Lastly, though not always fully articulated, Sahagún (1950-1982: Introductory Volume: 47) sought to create a credible record of the Nahuatl past and present that would highlight the positive aspects of the culture, thereby protecting the natives from unwarranted charges of incompetence or cultural inferiority, while justifying his and his colleagues' own extensive concern with their well-being. This record could also be used to preserve the approved customs that were found to be useful in the Franciscan's proposed Republic of Christians (where the indigenous, living apart from the Spaniards, would form a Christian community in the spirit of the early followers of Christ [Nicolau d'Oliver 1952: 155-171; Phelan 1972; Baudot 1977]). But it is evident that more than this motivated and inspired Sahagún; after all, the work of Molina (1970, 1972), Durán (1971), and Olmos (Baudot 1977) make clear that there were far easier, more orthodox, and perhaps more effective ways to fulfill these ends than those Sahagún ultimately used.

Sahagún responded in two related ways to the conceptual problems I have been outlining. First, taking advantage of the Christian concern with self-examination and self-presentation (Foucault 1980, 1985; Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983), he applied in the course of fieldwork the confessional techniques of his time to the systematic elicitation of personal and cultural information from confessor-informants, in the native language and taking into consideration indigenous cultural reality, to the extent his own prejudices permitted. This methodological and ideological approach, whose application I can only suggest in this brief essay, marks the beginning of an objective and thorough ethnographic procedure that justifies calling its first consistent practitioner the "father of modern ethnography."

His method required that confessionlike practices be applied systematically outside their sacramental context and that the informants be imbued with the ideological framework of self-examination that permits the self to be both subject (narrator) and object (the subject matter of the narration) at once (Freccero 1986). While this conceptual division was familiar to those who had been raised as Christians, it had to be developed in informants new to the faith. Consequently, Sahagún's questions, like those of some modern ethnographers in the tradition of Franz Boas and his students, had to be couched in terms that led the informant to examine himself and his culture in a way that (1) made him see himself as both in and outside of it, and (2) made him willing to and capable of divulging the results of his reflection on himself and his world. Though anthropology today expects this inquiry to take place in a noncoercive fashion, this ideal is often compromised, as was the case in Sahagún's time, by the asymmetrical relation that usually exists between the questioning ethnographer and the answering informant (see Fabian 1983). Thus, fear and/or the manipulation of the moral conscience was and is an unacknowledged but common circumstance in confessional practices like those that characterize informant-ethnographer encounters.

Sahagún's second response took into consideration that his fieldwork approach

yielded results that called for new methods of inscription if they were to be fully represented in textual form. Therefore, he was faced with the need to experiment and develop novel ways of recording ethnographic data. These new methods, like his fieldwork strategies, were to be reinvented numerous times in the future as scholars drew inspiration from the same need to engage in inquisitorial practices to tame, through the creation of new knowledge, the others encountered in the colonial context (see Asad 1973). I will discuss his experiments in ethnographic writing below, but first I will briefly sketch the role of the confessional as a colonial practice during Sahagún's lifetime.

The magnitude of the sixteenth-century encounter between Europeans and state-level indigenous cultures called on the Europeans to make use of every strategic advantage at their disposal. The Christian concept of sin and sacramental confession were quickly mobilized and came to form an important part of the European technique of domination, serving both as an external mechanism of social control, by subjecting personal behavior and subjective ideas to the public scrutiny of non-Indians, and as an internal mechanism of self-control, which resulted from successful attempts to inculcate guilt, fear, and devotion upon the minds of the penitents. Behind sincere spiritual motivations could be found a pragmatic desire, on the part of religious and lay officials, to develop in the minds of the indigenes an ethos of Hispanic order, loyalty, obedience, and responsibility that would obviate the need for expensive administrative and military controls. The power to demand auricular confessions and determine penances (even outside the formal confessional) shifted to the Church a large portion of the policing responsibilities that would otherwise have fallen on the overburdened shoulders of the secular powers.

Sahagún and his colleagues were fully aware that an efficient administration required that the behavior of the natives and Europeans be predictable, docile, and productive in ways that would benefit the Church and Crown. The missionaries sought this end at the local level through techniques of reward, punishment, discipline, and surveillance. However, the crass measures of the monastic and, later, episcopal inquisitions suffered an early failure, as evidenced by their limited application to Indians after the 1539 burning of the *cacique* of Tetzcoco, Don Carlos Ometochtzin (in which Sahagún participated as an examiner and translator [González Obregón 1910:61]). The decline in the Inquisition's role as overseer, only ten years after Sahagún arrived in New Spain, left more limited, less notorious forms of intelligence gathering and religious discipline to be employed to control the behavior of the neophytes. Chief among these strategies of surveillance and ideological regulation were coerced and induced confessions within and outside the confessional, penances consisting of forced restitutions and voiced apologies, and practices of public shaming, ridicule, and physical punishment.

Even though individuals confessed infrequently, the sacrament of penance played a critical supporting role in the colonization of the native mind and body. The proliferation and popularity of bilingual penitential guides point to the importance attached to the confessional by both religious and secular

authorities, who clearly understood the importance of the ideology of sin and the institution of auricular confession in the formation of a disciplined, colonialist will. These manuals for confessors managed to simplify the implementation of missionary and Hispanicizing agendas while serving as a handy catalog of native resistance and survival strategies. The basic aim of the interrogations was consistent: to Christianize the natives and to transform them into peaceful, loyal subjects of the Crown. All of this was encouraged by designating deviations as sinful and therefore subject to temporal and eternal punishments. However, to succeed in imposing a new ideology and in extinguishing previous customs required a careful examination of native beliefs and practices. Given the limited knowledge natives and priests had of each other's language and culture, without these bilingual texts most confessors would have been unable to carry out the detailed examination of conscience that had become popular in the sixteenth century (Tentler 1977).

Thus the confessional complex justified many of the more visible regulating forces and made possible, for more Europeans, a deeper understanding of Indian life at the local level than the cultural barriers would have otherwise permitted. It was Sahagún's desire to make this latter function of the confessional more efficient that inspired his experiments with field methods that we can identify today as modern. In his prologue to Book I of the *Historia general* he explains himself as follows:

The preachers and confessors are physicians of the souls for the curing of spiritual ailments. . . . for the confessor, in order to know how to ask what is proper and understand what they may say pertaining to his work, it is very advisable to know what is necessary to practice their works. . . .

To preach against these matters, and even to know if they exist, it is needful to know how they practiced them in the times of their idolatry, for, through [our] lack of knowledge of this, they perform many idolatrous things in our presence without our understanding it. . . . And the confessors neither ask about them, nor think that such a thing exists, nor understand the language to inquire about it. . . . In order that the ministers . . . who will follow . . . may not have reason to complain of [our] having left the facts about these natives . . . undivulged, I . . . wrote twelve Books of the . . . idolatrous, human, and natural things of this New Spain. . . . [Sahagún 1950-1982: Introductory Volume:45-46].

Drawing on the experience of his missionary-ethnographer predecessors and colleagues, in the late 1540s the Franciscan initiated his fieldwork with questionnaires, systematic interrogations, specialized informants, and "participant observation" (López Austin 1974b). By the time the second phase of Sahagún's research project was being completed in the 1560s, Fray Alonso de Molina was busy at work on the first bilingual manual for the confessors of Indians (Molina 1972). This manual, and those to follow, form a single

confessional discourse that textualized the Christian colonial practice, in which the desire to save (that is, to normalize and discipline) is transformed into both the duty to impose an ethic of self-examination and the right to inquire into the results of this practice through, at least initially, forced self-presentation. As quoted above, Sahagún's work is an integral part of this discourse.

Building on the fieldwork techniques of Olmos (Baudot 1977), Sahagún initiates modern ethnographic practices by going beyond the manuals via a number of related innovations. First, like some of his ethnographer colleagues, he takes the interrogative regime farther out of the Church and sacramental setting than was customary among European confessors. But, unlike Olmos, he draws on the legalistic-bureaucratic tendencies of his time in order to apply the interrogative regime to selected informants throughout Central Mexico in a systematic fashion, which is reminiscent of the *Relaciones Geográficas* that were to be produced between 1579 and 1585. He thereby transformed mere fieldwork, composed of observation and casual or coerced dialogue, into an ethnographic technique of highly ordered, directed questioning using, at times, fixed questionnaires aimed at drawing the most information possible from carefully chosen informants.

Second, he exercises his moral right to know, founded on the sacrament of penance, to studiously expose the personal and social life of his confessor-informants (the overt pastoral aim of his inquiries) and that of their ancestors (the ethnographic goal he set for himself that went beyond mere pastoral interests).

Third, like a modern ethnographer, he inscribes the resulting information using a series of rhetorical devices that have as one of their effects the synecdochical transformation of personal narratives into representations of cultural wholes. This is done with realistic narrative aimed at objective descriptions.

Fourth, his texts (those written in Spanish) suggest an implicit, and at times explicit, interest in theoretical problems concerning human culture. For instance, they reflect a precocious cultural relativism (limited, of course, by Sahagún's rejection of the native faith and its bloody practices), an inchoate typology of cultural wholes, and a fairly thorough classificatory scheme of cultural and natural phenomena, inspired, in part, by classical scholars, the medieval encyclopedists, the work of Veracruz (?), and the categories of sinful beliefs and practices commonly employed in confessional guides. Thus, I argue, he inaugurates modern ethnography not merely as a colonial practice (cf. Asad 1973), but as a *Roman Catholic* colonial practice. While today anthropology is rarely done for the purpose of writing handbooks for the agents of change, its role as a generator of information about the other remains cognate with the unspoken but very real effect of a confessional practice that necessarily created new knowledge of the other. With this in mind, I now turn to Sahagún's efforts at representation.

THE SAHAGUNTINE CORPUS AS AN EXPERIMENT IN ETHNOGRAPHIC WRITING

Because conversion, confession, and the objective study of Nahua culture (ethnography) were linked in Sahagún's mind, but his age did not easily permit the relativism this implied, he used two related approaches to resolve the inherent contradiction between Christianity's moral and historical claim that it possesses universal categories, and the need to accurately describe Nahua culture as truly unique on its own terms. First, he strove to create space between the conversion process and the ethnographic project; second, he endeavored to separate description from interpretation.

With regard to the first goal, at the highest level of organization he separated literary genres in order to balance the imperative to Christianize with his desire to understand the Nahuas in their own context. Despite his stated goals, the writings overtly aimed at evangelizing are primarily limited to collections of sermons, songs, edifying works focused on explicit religious themes, and translations of Holy Scripture; whereas his more ethnographic and linguistic pieces stand apart, concerned as they are primarily with information concerning Nahua culture and language (see Nicholson's introductory essay and Burkhardt's study, this volume). Within the *Historia general* this division is also evident; explicit references that take into account its proselytizing end are invariably limited to the margins of the ethnographic text, usually as prologues, appendices, or apostrophes (see Dibble 1974, and this volume). This strategy was not unique, it was the normal practice of humanistic editors and glossators who attempted to keep their texts free of extraneous material. However, it was *not* the custom of missionary-ethnographers, like Motolinía, Mendieta, and others, to write about native cultures with this textual segregation in mind.

His second related goal, the separation of description from interpretation, impossible to achieve fully, was much more difficult to translate into a specific plan of action. The *Historia general*, in its various phases, represents constant experimentation with ways of resolving the problem of describing the frequently enigmatic data on Nahua culture while avoiding explanatory interpretations that overdetermine the meaning of the information by forcing it into Christian molds. The shifting conceptualizations of the project, evolving fieldwork methods, varying representational strategies, and alternating discursive modes all attest both to the struggle Sahagún had representing his subject and to his groping for solutions.

Though Sahagún's research plans, fieldwork methods, and ethnographic results have been the subject of a number of excellent studies (see Nicholson's introductory essay, this volume), it was not until Tzvetan Todorov's *The Conquest of America* (1984; see also, Urvoy 1974) that Sahagún's interpretation of the other, as encoded in his discursive practices, received more explicit attention. Despite the fact that Todorov makes too sharp a distinction between the interpretive and descriptive narratives in the *Historia general*, his insights

tale of an unhappy people duped by the forces of evil to celebrate painful rites and suffer untold hardships; on the other, as a manual for priests, 'it is a promise of future redemption for the Nahuas only if fellow priests take cognizance of their responsibility to do everything to eradicate the effects of the devil's plays.

• Though tragedy links the separate narratives, realism, as noted above, dominates Sahagún's experimental mode of description in the ethnographic narratives, while irony does the same for the interpretive commentaries that frame the text. The ironic mode in Sahagún's asides is in part a result of the *Historia general's* striving for realism by stringing details foreign to many indigenes too young to be familiar with them. Not only were multiple and contradictory interpretations made possible for them and the Europeans but, by making them available to the Nahuas and others, in the very process of exposing them in order to bring them to an end, he helped to propagate the beliefs described. But the trope rests on an even firmer foundation: the sixteenth-century's propensity for irony. It is an age marked by fundamental transformations, and faith in authority and religion were on the defensive. After all, the proselytizing theories had become thoroughly politicized, and the mendicant orders were losing their hegemony. The recognition by Sahagún, Durán, and many others that the initial conversion process had failed served to underline both the limits to evangelizing theories and their inability to account for genuine religious fervor not aimed at the Christian God. Furthermore, the Protestant attacks represented a formidable in-house challenge to the conceptual unity that had reigned until late medieval Christendom. Lastly, irony could not be kept at bay when Sahagún himself was unsure of the results at which the whole ethnographic effort explicitly aimed: the Christianization of the indigenes.

Sahagún was caught in a vicious circle. In ways similar to those being tried today by experimenting social scientists who are searching for a way out of an ironic mode (Marcus and Fischer 1986:14-15), Sahagún sought a solution to the problem of representation, reflected in his own ironic narrative, by exploring in the ethnographic text new ways of describing at a microscopic level the process of cultural integration and religious expression of the Nahuas. But, as noted above, this solution at the textual level served only to heighten the irony at the metatextual level. That is, by using realistic narrative in the *Historia general* a credible picture of a complete culture is painted; however, the integrity of this culture, described in detail and for the most part in its own terms, puts in question the explicit intent summarized in the prologue to Book I as merely pastoral and linguistic (Sahagún 1950-1982:Introductory Volume:45-46). Only an ironic reading of the total work is possible because too much is written that clearly serves neither purpose.

• There was no escape from this ironic predicament. First, because in considering itself a historic period of fundamental change, the age saw itself providentially moved by forces beyond the human and objectively comprehensible realm. Second, it was not permitted by the ideological possibilities

open up much needed readings into the significance of these contrasting texts. His study also serves as a corrective to the traditional overreliance on Sahagún's explicit explanations to reconstruct the plan, goals, procedures, and meaning of his work. These literal readings have made it difficult to understand how the Sahaguntine corpus came to conceive in novel ways Nahua culture and its natural environment.

The isolation of the descriptions from his interpretations logically led to the amassing of many details neglected by his ethnographer peers. The deployment of numerous descriptive particulars, giving an air of ethnographic realism to his narratives, was consciously used to lend credibility to his work by having them substitute for the traditional authorial references, necessarily absent in what is fundamentally an indigenous text (Sahagún 1950-1982:Introductory Volume:53). • The separation of description from the Christian categories of moral behavior, though not always possible or successful, also served Sahagún as a rhetorical device by which to reconcile a critical paradox: in the representation of the pre-Contact ceremonies the Nahuas are pictured as great idolaters capable of the most abominable rituals, yet the fact that they could sacrifice their loved ones in bloody ceremonies for their gods implied they were extremely religious (Sahagún 1950-1982:Introductory Volume:47, 49, 57). To resolve this apparent inconsistency, Sahagún restricts his judgments to the periphery, wherein he blames the devil for the evil acts by interpreting them from a Christian point of view, in a bracketed manner distanced from their description. • This strategy limits the interpenetration of both perspectives, the natives' point of view and Sahagún's Christian vision, by circumscribing each in its own narrative. • This device makes his works appear more authentic and "objective" than those of Durán, Motolinía, or Olmos, the other serious contemporary investigators of native customs.

While the separation of conflicting representations suggests a romantic bent (in Sahagún, his assistants, and the informants), where the past and present are distinguished and a nostalgia for the former predominates (Sahagún 1950-1982:Introductory Volume:48-49, 74-81), the overarching employment strategy of the *Historia general* is tragedy, not romance. For Sahagún, as was the case with some of the other missionary-ethnographers, New Spain was the premier site where the cosmic battles between good (Christianity) and evil (Satan, his Lutheran heresies, and the infidels of the world) were being fought, and the hapless natives were merely the locus of these conflicting forces. "It certainly seems," he writes, that "in our times, in these lands and with these people, our Lord God has willed to restore to the Church that which the demon robbed her of in England, Germany, France, Asia, and Palestine" (Sahagún 1950-1982:Introductory Volume:50). This providential role was not easily played by the Nahuas, spurring Sahagún to claim in 1576 that if the Spaniards abandoned them, "in less than fifty years there would be no trace of the preaching which has been done for them" (Sahagún 1950-1982:Introductory Volume:98). In effect, tragedy as an employment strategy is working at various textual and metatextual levels: on one, the *Historia general* is a didactic

available to a truly Christian ethnographer who faced evidently authentic and living spirituality that was clearly pagan and, therefore, intolerable. While Sahagún's dilemma, the desire to state objectively what one rejects morally, ontologically, and epistemologically, is common to practicing ethnographers today, his age and conceptual limits are not. Thus, the more details he gave the more the text could be useful for eradicating idolatrous beliefs and practices; in turn, the additional details helped to further legitimate the integrity of the culture, and so the vicious circle continued.

THE NAHUA OTHER IN SAHAGÚN'S TEXTS

While the native-language text that forms a significant (the most important) part of the Sahaguntine corpus was written primarily by his trilingual assistants, they and the confessor-informants used by Sahagún are not the sole intellectual authors of the Nahuatl narratives that make up the *Historia general's* ethnographic descriptions. In ways clearly analogous to those that characterize ethnography today, the information and point of view of the informants were affected (1) by their desire either to hide data from Sahagún or to please him; (2) by the Franciscan's ultimate control over the general plan and the topics of inquiry; (3) by his circumscribing the range of data to be gathered through the use of questionnaires; (4) by frequently limiting the lexical items employed to those that attest a European/Christian judgment and interpretation of the referent; and (5) by using assistants and informants who were already exposed to and partly assimilated into Euro-Christian culture. Nonetheless, from within these tight constrictions the voice of the Nahuas is clearly audible.

The Nahuas informants, editors, and scribes were responsible for most of the content within the boundaries drawn by Sahagún, who generally specified the topic and the relevant themes within it (López Austin 1974b, 1980). As I note in the essay on Sahagún's introduction to ethnography (this volume), he and Durán, among others, became skeptical about the claims of Nahuas elders that they had truly converted to Christianity. Thus, although the friar praises the key informants that provided most of the data for the ethnographic texts, the asymmetrical situation in which these elders found themselves, the cultural gap that existed, and Sahagún and others' general distrust should put us on guard. Fieldwork conditions where the informant is in a subordinate position to the ethnographer or among peoples with substantially different cultures often include less than candid informants who sometimes withhold information altogether. Consequently, it should not sound too speculative to suggest that in the same way that Sahagún limited the topics to be discussed, the native elders (described as the central informants) censored their oral narratives and the pictorial manuscripts employed in the writing of the ethnographic texts. First, just as Sahagún could indicate what he wanted extracted, they could limit access to the texts by identifying which or what aspect would be studied. Second, as the interpreters of the texts they could filter their content by controlling their meaning (cf. Baird, this volume). Furthermore, like inform-

ants today, they could escape the consequences of their own heterodox beliefs by attributing practices to the past that were still dear to them.

Except for the distortions introduced by the addition, on the part of the Nahuas, of Christian interpretations or self-serving regional perspectives (since geographically distinct groups of informants were used), the natives' self-censored responses to the fixed questionnaires and extemporaneous inquiries survived the process of redaction and editing with relatively few modifications of ethnographic content. This is attested to by the very few contradictions evident in the information provided by the various sets of informants that produced the data included in the Tepepolco manuscripts of 1558/59-1560/61, those of Tlatelolco written probably between 1561 and 1565, and the final drafts of 1565-1569 and 1578-1579 (see Nicholson 1973a, and this volume). Though the language used in the texts is necessarily modified to fit within the canons of a written, European-style work and the ideas are sometimes edited to suit the propagandistic ends of the Franciscan, as is the case in the description of the gods or the omens (Sahagún 1950-1982: I, V), the lexical items, referents, and concepts are predominantly Nahuas (for comparisons to contemporary ethnographies see Madsen 1960; Montoya Briones 1964; Nutini and Isaac 1974; López Austin 1980; Taggart 1983).

Though the point of view and the selection of information are circumscribed by Sahagún's focus on the world of the native elite, the pictorial manuscripts, as rendered by the Nahuas elders, and their own memories, as interpreted by the indigenous editors, were captured by Sahagún's confession-generated ethnography with a fidelity unmatched by his ethnographer colleagues. Where the descriptions are brief and transparent, we can be sure that the interlocutors were either purposefully laconic or ignorant; where they go on at length, their information was considered safe and the topic most likely was breaking out of the artificial interrogatory discourse into a true, free dialogue. Indeed, much of what Sahagún's assistants left us, for instance the speeches of Book VI, the Conquest narrative in Book XII, and much else, surely approximated what one might hear in the presence of the informants. However, in what concerns religious beliefs, rather than practices that could be objectively described (with the past serving as a repository for anything unacceptable in the present), what we have is a distilled version of what a Christian priest and Christianized *colegiales* would edit after listening to some judiciously self-censored responses.

Still, Sahagún's ignorance and ideological filters, his and the informants' self-censorship, and the other distortions, in part produced by the Franciscan's ethnographic experiments themselves, all contribute to the representation of a Contact-period Central Mexican Nahuas culture that is more Western and linear, though sometimes richer and more authentic, than is suggested by other native sources like the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca: Anales de Quauhchinchan* (Berlin and Rendon 1947; Kirchhoff et al. 1976), the *Anales de Cuauhtitlán* and the *Leyenda de los Soles*, both in the *Códice Chimalpopoca* (Lehmann 1938; Velázquez 1975), or the *Cronica Mexicayotl* (Alvarado Tezozomoc

1975). Useful interpretive readings of the seemingly straightforward prose of Sahaguntine ethnography, which suggest its complexity, can be found in modern ethnohistorical studies like Zantwijk's *The Aztec Arrangement* (1985) and López Austin's *Cuerpo humano e ideología* (1980), or in contemporary ethnography (e.g., Hernández Cuéllar 1982; Taggart 1983).

A two-stage process worked to oversimplify the data. First, the effort made by the informants to make enigmatic concepts accessible to Sahagún, and the need of the Nahuatl editors to do the same for the expected European readers, caused the data to be presented with so much detail and so little context that it appears both exaggeratedly transparent and misleadingly familiar. Second, Sahagún and the Nahuatl authors edited the information so as to fit both the European organization that the Franciscan adopted for the *Historia general* and the European cognitive categories of social, natural, and supernatural phenomena. Therefore, Nahuatl labels for cultural and empirical phenomena are sometimes deceptively identified with European cognates without any explanation for their subtle and not so subtle distinctions.

• This precocious relativism, which deceptively worked to lessen the cultural differences between Europeans and Nahuas, makes the *Historia general* seem more holistic than it is. The cultural pieces, however foreign, are made to fit into each other creating a too familiar picture. The authenticity of the natives' point of view is made to rest on the use of a realistic mode expressed in Nahuatl, rather than on its being founded on the Nahuas' interconnections between their symbols and meanings and the place these had in the native codes of interpretation. The positive side of this camouflaging of the exotic is that it permitted Sahagún to experiment in the ethnographic narrative with making his unit of analysis "Nahuatl culture," rather than "abominable pagan heresies." The price, of course, is that our attempts to reconstruct genuine Nahuatl classifications must rely on linking many disparate pieces using primarily modern cognitive tools assisted by very few authentic guidelines. Despite these difficulties, some critical studies of Nahuatl classifications of physical and sociocultural phenomena have been written in the last few years (see Nicholson, this volume). However, there is a serious need for many more in-depth analyses of the Nahuas' cultural categories, focused on the variety of key topics that preoccupy modern ethnographers, before we can gain a comprehensive view of the Nahuatl conception of their own civilization in its ecological setting.

A brief analysis of some relevant sections of the *Historia general* can serve to illustrate some of my observations concerning the effect Sahagún's experiments in modern, or "confessional," ethnography had on the representation of the informants' conception of their culture and world. I will take my examples from the Nahuatl texts of the *Florentine Codex*, and earlier Nahuatl drafts, since Sahagún's Spanish version was made for a different audience and therefore adds to, subtracts from, or otherwise modifies the "original" narratives of the informants.

The *Primeros Memoriales*, which, with the exception of the materials for

Books VI and XII, is believed to be the earliest Nahuatl text compiled by Sahagún on ethnographic topics (Sahagún 1958:154, n. 4; Nicholson 1973a, this volume), gives a brief description, on folio 270v of the *Códice del Real Palacio*, of what the informants of Tepepolco thought of the god Huitzilopochtli:

He maintains people,

Huitzilopochtli:

he makes people inappy,

he makes people rich,

he makes people rulers,

he gets angry at people

he makes people die

[Sahagún 1958:155; my translation from the Nahuatl].

Though the *Primeros Memoriales* is a polished document, well arranged and well integrated, this text comes the closest to the now lost "field notes" that make up the *Historia general*. Here we have a description of an enigmatic, complex deity that nurtures people, keeping them alive, content, supplied with their needs, and governed. However, the supernatural entity exacts a price for this: because people make him angry (?), he causes their death. This may mean that he demands sacrifices because people must balance what they receive with a proper payment, a concept common among the Nahuas. The text is somewhat opaque, but it is not difficult to see that the informant is respectful towards and feels indebted to this powerful phenomenon. By contrast (as happens with ethnographers today), the "field notes" (in this case, the early polished texts) underwent a substantial ideological transformation when they were supplemented with the data provided by new informants and then were reworked and re-edited. This can be seen in chapter 1 of Book I of the *Florentine Codex* (derived from the *Manuscrito de Tlatelolco* written three to seven years later and based on the information supplied by the informants in Tlatelolco), where Huitzilopochtli is described as follows:

Uitzilopochtli was only a commoner, he was only a man, a sor-

cerer, an augury [*tezaujiti*], a disharmonious inhuman person, a

deceiver of people, creator of war, an agent of war, a war-lord.

Because it was said of him that he cast on them the turquoise

serpent, the fire drill—that is, war, divine water, burnt. And when

a feast day was celebrated, captives were killed, bathed slaves

were killed, offered by the merchants [Sahagún 1950-1982:I:1;

my translation from the Nahuatl].

Here the new text, like the bilingual confessional ritual, becomes a site for the clash of cultures. Because the *Florentine Codex* narrative is adapted from the testimonies of a different region gathered several years later, when the Nahuatl editors were more knowledgeable of Euro-Christian culture and were perhaps more steeped in it, it is impossible to distinguish the extent to which the data was different or the editors had changed. However, Huitzilopochtli is

now described, by obviously more assimilated natives, using a common Franciscan and, possibly, native belief that pagan deities were deceased heroes of the past (Motolinía 1971:39; Mendieta 1971:84, 91; Torquemada 1969:II:20-21; Sahagún 1975:1:34; García Icazbalceta 1954:385). Thus, the tutelary god of the Mexico is reduced to being a former witch who deceived and made war, while demanding human sacrifices. Therefore, the deity, stripped of its life-maintaining virtues, is transformed into a totally evil, one-dimensional figure. This representation fits the Europeans' dualistic moral and supernatural categories, where good is opposed to evil, but disregards the crux of the Nahuatl cosmological/religious classification of the good, captured in the earlier *Primeros Memoriales* text, as the balancing of order and chaos within the same moral system.

As this example points out, because Sahagún's experimentation with a dialogical fieldwork and discursive style permitted the native editors to present glimpses of authentic (unmediated) Nahuatl conceptions throughout the Nahuatl texts, the narratives are thoroughly interpenetrated by different and at times opposing world views. This diversity goes far beyond that which could be expected to result from the testimonies of different sets of informants all of whom belong to the same language and (Nahuatl) culture. The ethnographic narratives are culture-contact battlefields strewn with fragments of Nahuatl concepts that Sahagún and his assistants too often tried to sew back together with form rather than content. For instance, the supernatural entities are sometimes more easily distinguished from each other by their being separately discussed in distinct paragraphs than by the details of the descriptions themselves.

Though it is well known that Huitzilopochtli and Tezcatlipoca were at times theologically merged, with the former considered an avatar of the latter (León-Portilla 1966:97, 174; Garibay K. 1979:23-24), if we attempt to contrast the descriptions of the two in either the *Primeros Memoriales* or the *Florentine Codex* we will be unable to clearly distinguish the two deities by anything other than their name and their different location. Compare, for example, the descriptions of Huitzilopochtli above with the following for Tezcatlipoca (the first from the *Primeros Memoriales*, the second from the *Florentine Codex*, derived from the *Manuscrito de Tlatelolco*):

Tezcatlipoca:

creates things [lit., something],
creates people [lit., someone]
makes war on people [Sahagún 1958:155; my
translation from the Nahuatl].

Tezcatlipoca: he was considered a true god [vel teutl] whose abode was everywhere. . . . He brought discord among people, wherefore he was called "the enemy on both sides." He created, he brought down all things. He cast his shadow on one, he visited one with all the evils which befall men; he mocked, he ridiculed men. But sometimes he bestowed riches — wealth, heroism, valor, position

of dignity, rulership, nobility, honor [Sahagún 1950-1982:II:5; translation by Anderson and Dibble].

The similarities between the two deities point to their being conceived by both sets of informants as integrally related aspects of the same supernatural creative and destructive (transforming?) force. Though the closest analogy to this theocracy that comes to mind is the relation between the Holy Spirit and God the Father in the Catholic Trinity, Sahagún used instead the (safer) model of the Classical pantheon to represent a very different conception of the supernatural than that suggested by the informants. In Sahagún's Spanish version this point is made explicitly. There he notes that "this god called *Huitzilopochtli* was another Hercules. . . . *Tezcatlipoca* . . . another Jupiter" (Sahagún 1975:31). But the Classic suit does not fit well. Sahagún clearly had it in mind, but his native assistants rarely used it in the Nahuatl narrative to distinguish the deities, suspecting, correctly, that the Nahuatl informants meant something else by their parallel descriptions. So the Classical analogy is reserved for Sahagún's marginal commentaries and his Spanish text meant for a Spanish audience.

It is this type of ambivalence and conceptual ambiguity (a product of a novel ethnographic approach that strove through the use of European categories to make the opaque clear, while at the same time letting the natives speak in their own voice) that make it both possible and frustrating to attempt to reconstruct from the Nahuatl narratives authentic, abstract Nahuatl images.

The reconstruction of the Nahuatl conception of natural phenomena, as reflected in the Nahuatl texts, is necessarily subject to some of the same constraints mentioned above. In part, this results from the informants not making the analytical distinctions between the "natural" and "supernatural" orders common to Sahagún and his assistants, thereby forcing Nahuatl classifications into European categories. Two critical points at which a union takes place, of what sixteenth-century Europeans considered two separate spheres, are Books IV and V, where the *tonalamatl* ("book of days") and the *tezcatlhuil* ("omen[s]") are discussed. Both books create discursive space for the description of the dialectical relation between "matter" and "spirit" that seems to underlie Nahuatl morals, ontology, and theology, but this dialectic is once again rendered too familiar by the mechanisms of normalization noted above. For all the rich ethnographic detail found in Book IV, concerning the good and bad fortunes that would be the lot of those born on favorable and unfortunate days, there is no explicit connection made either to the native theological reasons for the respective fates or to the natural and behavioral contexts that would generate the consequences described. None of this is surprising, for Sahagún saw Nahuatl divination sometimes as a demonic (idolatrous) affair and at other times as childish superstition. The parallel reduction of the Nahuatl *tezcatlhuil* to mere superstition is a predictable disregarding of the Nahuatl interpretation of their divine into the spheres of time, space, and the natural world.

Whatever their ethnographic shortcomings, these two texts and others make

abundantly evident that the Nahuatl world was populated with supernatural forces that needed to be avoided, appeased, or challenged depending on when, where, and why they were confronted. Likewise, they underline the Nahuatl belief that (perhaps) all the material and immaterial objects of the natural world were or could be hierophanies. However, the Nahuatl calculus for predicting what was or was not a hierophany is not yet clear, but its discovery is not impossible.

Contemporary experimentation in the doing and writing of ethnography may provide some of the solutions to this and many other problems. But the most important data with which to do so we owe to Sahagún's experiments in both "confessional" fieldwork, which imposed European categories while permitting the extraction of detailed autochthonous information, and ethnographic writing, which made possible realistic narratives penned by natives in their own tongue. Not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with authors like Franz Boas (1888, 1967) and Paul Radin (1926, 1933), would fieldwork and the native voice become so important again. Thus, through their reliance on systematic fieldwork and objective descriptions, these experiments gave birth in the sixteenth century to the first modern account of a native culture, genuinely earning for Sahagún the title of "father of modern ethnography."

SAHAGUN AND HERMENEUTICS: A CHRISTIAN ETHNOGRAPHER'S UNDERSTANDING OF AZTEC CULTURE

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The work of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún has long been an object of study and admiration among students of Mesoamerican culture. Many have praised him, even granting him the title of "father of American ethnography." This praise has been directed both to the scientific value of his work and the moral sensitivity that informed it. In his effort to understand Aztec culture he was, like a scientist, careful about the factual accuracy of what he described. As a Franciscan missionary, his religious and moral beliefs assured a measure of respect and reverence for the Aztecs beyond their usefulness as a source of invited study and speculation. To understand Sahagún as an interpreter of Aztec culture, rather than merely using his work as a source for information about it, demands that we do justice both to the missionary and to the ethnographer.

While the assertion of Sahagún's generosity of spirit would excite no denial, to exaggerate the breadth of his tolerance will not do. Howard F. Cline concludes an article on the *Historia general* thus:

A spirit free from ethnic, cultural, or patriotic prejudice, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún was not moved to seek Crown favor or advance his own personal interests. Before being a subject of his emperor (Charles V) or of the "Prudent King" (Philip II), he was first of all a member of universal society, of the Christian Republic whose limits he tried to broaden by converting the pagan. Converting them, yes; assimilating them, no. Our missionary, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, remained convinced that the conquest of the New World brought only one arguable gain: religion. For him, apart from this, native cultures were not inferior in anything substantial, and in some points were even superior to imported European cultures [Nicolau d'Oliver and Cline 1973:207].

In addition to the implied idea of the separability of religion and culture, which is scarcely credible—try thinking of the culture of sixteenth-century Spain without Catholicism—this encomium would yield us that scholastic will-o'-the-wisp, the man without prejudices. A more promising approach would be to insist on Sahagún's prejudices rather than to deny them.