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Introduction

We wish now to relate some information, so that Your Majesty may understand our ancient state, and thus be persuaded to more easily concede that which we ask.

Don Antonio Cortés Totoquihuaztli, tlatoani of Tlacopan, 1552[1]

King Nezahualcoyotl demonstrated [greatness through] vast personal wealth as well as an estimable spirit . . . His household expenditures [were so vast that I would not have believed it] if . . . I had not had in my possession the true and correct amount as recorded in the accounts written by his grandson, who after becoming Christian was named don Antonio Pimentel . . . . And while some people lie, I esteem myself in writing the truth, [as] this is not some romance novel . . . but a history in which everything I say is true and fully credible.

Fray Juan de Torquemada, 1615[2]

In 1740, a young theology student from Mexico experienced a divine marvel, although he was unaware of it at the time. José Mariano Díaz de la Vega was the sacristan for the Franciscan priory in Tlaxcala, east of Mexico City, during a terrible drought. As they had before in such times of need, the indigenous leaders of the Nahua community in Tlaxcala turned to heaven for succor – more specifically, the Virgin Mary, whose painted wooden image, titled the Virgin of Ocotlan, they honored in a

[1] Don Antonio Cortés to Emperor Carlos V, Tlacopan, Dec 1, 1552, in PRT, 174–75.
[2] Juan de Torquemada, *Los veinte y un libros rituales y monarquía indiana* . . . 3rd edn., 7 vols. (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, 1975–83), v. 1, 231–32.

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local sanctuary.[3] Díaz was impressed by the Tlaxcaltecas' deep reverence for the statue, which they brought out for the traditional nine-day cycle of prayers and processions.

Afterward, the Franciscans decided to honor their own church by temporarily relocating the Virgin of Ocotlan there for another round of devotional acts. It fell to Díaz to prepare the sanctuary to receive the image, which was placed on the lower portion of the altar. Yet he was dissatisfied with the results; such a holy image, he thought, demanded a more exalted throne, and although it was already late in the day and the others had left he resolved to raise the Virgin to a more prominent spot himself. She was heavy – heavier than anything he had ever lifted before – but he succeeded in lifting her to the altar's upper level. It was not until later that he discovered what the people of Tlaxcala already knew: The Virgin of Ocotlan could alter the weight of her image. Carved of strong and dense wood, the statue normally required four men to lift, yet at other times a single person might be sufficient, and even find it as light as a feather.

Recalling the episode forty-two years later, Díaz noted that this marvel was merely one of countless many by which heaven had favored Mexico, and especially its native inhabitants. In Díaz's vision, signs of divine immanence were everywhere across and within the Mexican landscape for those who had the eyes and faith to see them, tucked beneath its hills and hidden within its forests. However, he lamented, these wonders had gone unheralded among Mexico's educated, Spanish-speaking elites, and had been exiled by silence and time to an undeserved obscurity and forgetfulness. Fortunately, the humble Indians – and especially their leaders, pious Christians descended from the ancient noble houses of pre-Hispanic Mexico – had shepherded this "ancient and glorious" knowledge into the modern era, despite lacking the pens and ink with which to record it. Suffering widespread scorn and mistreatment, for centuries they quietly tended the shrines and preserved the secrets of Mexico's proud heritage. To uncover the Indians' esoteric wisdom, therefore, was to understand the triumphant truth: That although they were "unhappy, abject, and disdained among men," they were "beloved, favored, and exalted" in heaven. Díaz exhorted his skeptics to see for themselves; "come to Mexico," he exclaimed, and speak with the blessed native folk

[3] The Nahuas are the Nahuatl-speaking peoples of central Mexico whose ancestors are sometimes remembered as the "Aztecs."

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"to whom the Sacred and Holy Empress Mary has appeared on repeated occasions."[4]

Díaz de la Vega described the cult of Ocotlan as an ancient indigenous tradition, but its historical origins exemplify the intricately blended and syncretic culture for which Mexico – and Latin America more generally – is justly famous. During the eighteenth century, the devotion flourished as a rich and elaborate example of baroque religiosity, complete with chapels, paintings, and devotional acts, and in 1755 the city of Tlaxcala proclaimed the Virgin of Ocotlan as its official patroness.[5] Yet the earliest news of the cult dates to the late-seventeenth century, and its spread can be attributed to Tlaxcala's leading families seeking to promote civic pride and boost their town's reputation within the composite monarchy of Spain.[6] Thus, while Díaz was not wrong to describe devotion to the Virgin of Ocotlan as a venerable "Indian" tradition, her advocates were products of and participants in a dynamic colonial social and political arena.

Díaz's vision was not typical, but neither was it unique. Many of his fellow educated *creoles* (American-born Spaniards) were likewise inclined to locate patriotic symbols and legends among what they portrayed as the primordial traditions of Mexico's diverse native population. To them, Mexico's Indians – and especially its leaders – were the guardians of a secret ancestral wisdom. They were the unchanging human expressions of the Mexican landscape, and therefore symbols or proxies of an eternal Mexican spirit. By adopting native symbols as their own, creoles who identified as American rather than European distinguished themselves from their Spanish grandparents and retrofitted their young, colonial society with an ancient, prestigious, and distinctly American heritage. Yet like the cult of Ocotlan, many of the "Indian antiquities" and memories the creoles cited were in reality artifacts of a more recent colonial experience, developed within colonial legal and religious parameters, for specific immediate purposes, and with the participation of numerous non-native authorities, observers, and sympathizers. By representing native memories as inherently timeless and ancient, the creoles ignored an entire history

4 José Mariano Díaz de la Vega, "Memorias piadosas de la nación mexicana," UCB M-M 240, ff. 49–52.

5 Jaime Cuadriello, *The Glories of the Republic of Tlaxcala: Art and Life in Viceregal Mexico*, trans. Christopher J. Follet (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 151–61.

6 Rodrigo Martínez Baracs, *La secuencia tlaxcalteca: orígenes del culto a Nuestra Señora de Ocotlán* (Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2000), 13–63.

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of colonial interaction and change, domination and violence, negotiation and adaptation.

We sometimes reproduce this fallacy in our own era. By investigating creole identity without also critically examining the indigenous symbols upon which they were built – or by researching those symbols without acknowledging the colonial legal regime within which they were produced – we have implicitly accepted Díaz's erroneous premise: That the "Indian memories" he explored were ancient (because they were Indian), and therefore unreflective of any historical process. By historicizing elite native self-representation and its relationship to creole historiography, the present study targets this imbalance. To be specific: How did the historical reconstructions of native leaders reflect their unique and precarious status within the colonial world, and how did these practical concerns inform and facilitate the broader creole appropriation of native memories, symbols, and texts? This book explores the political and legal activities of the hereditary indigenous nobility of central Mexico under Spanish rule (1521–1821), and traces their personal, thematic, and textual intersections with the contemporaneous development of Mexican creolism. It argues that, for different reasons, many native leaders and some erudite creoles preferred similar interpretations of the Mexican past, leading the latter to sympathize with and emphasize the authority of the former. As a result, there was a distinct indigenous role in the creole project to imagine a Mexican nationhood emphasizing native roots.

Known generically as *caciques*, for three centuries indigenous nobles and their descendants engaged colonial authorities and institutions hoping to secure, preserve, and expand their relative status in the colonial order. Citing Spanish laws acknowledging the inherited rights of native leaders who aligned with the Spanish crown and the Catholic Church, in their negotiations with the colonial regime many caciques strategically portrayed themselves as lords of ancient pedigree as well as loyal vassals and pious Christians. Such visions of alliance and cooperation between native dynasties and the Spanish crown were sometimes explicit, and sometimes sublimated into accounts, both historical and semimythic, of indigenous champions of Hispanism and Christianity. Their purpose was to reduce the perceived cultural and political distance between local noble lineages and the colonial regime, thereby rendering pre-Hispanic history and its attendant indigenous identities marginally less controversial to Spanish authorities. Thus did they represent themselves, not as the defeated remnants of a vanquished order, nor merely as provincial bosses with inherited rights, but as co-architects of the Hispano-Catholic

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colonial entity known as "New Spain," and therefore deserving of special prerogatives and protections by its own standards.

Going further, the caciques' accounts often invoked precolonial precedents to validate colonial pursuits of social prestige and local authority – or, conversely, retrofitted local, ancestral memories with colonial values and concerns. In doing so they implicitly asserted continuity between pre-Hispanic and colonial Mexico, thereby reinterpreting New Spain as the cultural and political "heir" to the native civilizations that preceded it. This historical vision, in which the roots of colonial society lay not with the Spanish conquest of 1521 but rather Mexico's ancient indigenous legacy, resonated strongly with the patriotic longings of Mexican-born Spaniards, many of whom were eager to adopt a distinctly American identity while remaining loyal to the colonial, Hispano-Catholic principles underlying their own elite status. Both directly, through personal interactions and shared genealogy, and indirectly, through texts and artifacts, certain influential creoles incorporated the caciques' icons and memories into their own. By the eighteenth century, a number of patriotic legends circulated through the erudite creole world, many derived explicitly from elite indigenous accounts. Thus did the caciques' legal, political, and intellectual efforts to secure their place in the colonial order help infuse neo-Aztec sentiments into the patriotic historiography of New Spain – and therefore modern Mexican nationalism, which embraces an indigenous historical identity within and alongside Hispano-Catholic institutions, laws, and beliefs.[7]

This is not a story of one-way memory transmission, but rather of resonances, dialogues, intersections, and parallels. The cacique agenda of self-fashioning developed in tandem with creole historiography, with both informing one another over generations as caciques navigated colonial laws and prejudices via references to ancestral history, and as creoles

[7] As an ethnonym or demonym, "Aztecs" is only properly applied to the twelfth- and thirteenth-century ancestors of the Mexica of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco before they joined the sedentary civilization of central Mexico; that is how the seventeenth-century Nahua chronicler Chimalpahin employed it. In this book, "Aztec" refers less to an historic culture than to an object of recall – that is, how pre-Hispanic central Mexico has been represented and invoked since 1521 in Mexican testimonies and historiography. "Neo-Aztec," then, refers to post-1521 people, practices, and ideas that explicitly invoke or represent themselves as direct derivations of the pre-Hispanic culture of central Mexico. Domingo Francisco de San Antón Muñon Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Codex Chimalpahin: Society and Politics in Mexico Tenochtitlán, Tlatelolco, Texcoco, Culhuacán, and Other Nahua altepetl in Central Mexico*., trans. Arthur J.O. Anderson and Susan Schroeder, 2 vols. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), v. 1, 29.

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mined cacique accounts for patriotic symbols to call their own. Their immediate goals differed, but as both were served by similar visions of Mexican history they became historiographical allies, citing and collaborating with one another across time.

By revealing an indigenous role in the emergence of Mexican creolism and, by extension, the long-term construction of Mexican nationhood, this volume seeks to bridge the perceived gulf between Latin American nationalisms and local expressions of American indigeneity. Recent scholarship has explored how, over the long colonial era, local native identities gradually gave way to broader categories of class, race, and nation – for example, how "Indians" became "Mexicans."[8] The present study, in contrast, asks how native memories informed and shaped those broader categories – how the national category of "Mexican" came to connote a certain brand of indigenous heritage – as well as how that heritage was itself derived from a colonial history of negotiation and adaptation. Mexico's richly intricate synthesis of Hispano-Catholic and neo-Aztec sympathies was not merely the passive result of ethnic and racial mixture, I argue, but also an indirect legacy of calculated campaigns by indigenous leaders to preserve their inherited authority by reconciling it to the colonial order. In their own and the creoles' imagination, they were the heirs and guardians of Mexican antiquity in the modern era, but it was an antiquity reinterpreted according to the needs and longings of the guardians themselves.

Attributing ancient roots to a colonial society

Modern Mexico is a land where Hispanic political and legal structures overlay indigenous cultures and histories. "Any contact with the Mexican people, however brief," Octavio Paz famously observed, "reveals that the ancient beliefs and customs are still in existence beneath Western forms."[9] This mixed heritage – often referred to as a *mestizo* (mixed) culture due to its association with widespread racial and ethnic blending between Native Americans and Europeans – derives from the three long centuries

[8] See R. Douglas Cope, *The Limits of Racial Domination: Plebeian Society in Colonial Mexico city, 1660–1720* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994); David Frye, *Indians Into Mexicans: History and Identity in a Mexican Town* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996); and Colin M. MacLachlan, *Imperialism and the Origins of Mexican Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

[9] Octavio Paz, *The Labryinth of Solitude and Other Writings*, trans. Lysander Kemp, Yara Milos, and Rachel Phillips Belash (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 89.

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of the colonial era, in which the Spanish regime in Mexico imposed itself upon preexisting indigenous structures without entirely erasing them.[10] As historians have demonstrated, one of the deepest and most characteristic features of Spanish America was the tendency for indigenous identities and cultural practices to survive, adapt, and resurface in often surprising ways, despite pervasive and hegemonic processes of race-mixing and cultural Hispanization.[11] Spanish imperialist efforts to restrict and smother indigenous ways of thinking and behaving often failed. In many cases native practices survived in occult, underground forms; yet just as often, they adopted new, superficially amenable guises, paying overt obedience to colonial authority while simultaneously subverting and mocking it. Mexican traditions of art and literature have drawn freely from a deep well of eclectic traditions ever since. Like the "Indian symphony" of Carlos Chávez, which inserts Mesoamerican instruments and themes into the formal structures of European orchestral music, they deliberately confuse where the indigenous ends and the Hispanic begins: A world of seamless contrasts that explicitly proclaims unity even as it revels in dissonance and tension.[12] In today's Mexico the Virgin Mary is often identified as a Mesoamerican deity, while neo-Aztec dancers regularly offer veneration to the Virgin Mary. The ruined temple of Tenochtitlan occupies the same physical space as the Metropolitan Cathedral of Mexico City, and both are essential symbols of national patrimony and heritage.

Mexico's layered identity also informs its conventional narrative of national history as presented in schools, museums, and other public spaces. Mexican historiography traces the nation's origins not to independence from Spain in 1821, nor to the Spanish conquest of 1521, but

[10] See Colin M. MacLachlan and Jaime E. Rodríguez O., *The Forging of the Cosmic Race: A Reinterpretation of Colonial Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

[11] See, for example, the latest research into "urban Indians," which demonstrates that native peoples who lived in Spanish cities nonetheless maintained distinct cultural practices derived from indigenous precedents, and even developed new ones. Dana Velasco Murillo, Mark Lentz, and Margarita R. Ochoa, eds., *City Indians in Spain's American Empire: Urban Indigenous Society in Colonial Mesoamerica and Andean South America, 1530–1810* (Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press, 2012).

[12] "Mesoamerica" refers to the densely populated pre-Columbian culture area stretching from roughly Nicaragua in the southeast to the modern Mexican states of Jalisco, Nayarit, Zacatecas, and Colima in the northwest. On the eve of contact with Europeans, the area in and around Mexico City and the states of Mexico, Tlaxcala, Puebla, Hidalgo, Morelos, and Veracruz were the most prosperous, with an estimated population of about twenty-five million.

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to the Mesoamerican past.[13] This tendency, present in the nineteenth century even under Hispanophilic, conservative governments, became even more explicit and visible following the Revolution of 1910. Yet while the emphasis on native roots – what Rebecca Earle has called "Indianesque" nationalism – is rather obvious and banal to many Mexicans today, it was not an inevitable result of the colonial experience.[14] Mainstream national history in the United States, for example, only rarely admits Native American themes and memories – and even then typically represents them as parallel, rather than foundational to, the national character; dubbing it "the great nation of futurity," the heralds of Anglo-Saxon expansionism did not envision the US as the heir to any indigenous tradition, but rather a purely new entity that had emerged, like Athena, entirely from the minds of its Founding Fathers.[15] The opposite is true in much of Latin America, and especially Mexico, where neo-Aztec sentiment is prominent and the "imagined community" of the nation-state does not pretend to be unmoored from history.[16] In showcasing the great artifacts of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City explicitly represents itself as a treasury of national patrimony. In Washington, DC, meanwhile, the Smithsonian's Museum of the American Indian and Museum of American History lie in two separate buildings.[17]

Yet if the composite, neo-Aztec nature of Mexican identity was not inevitable, neither was it coincidental. To a large degree it is the legacy of the distinct Spanish approach to colonization in America: Rather than treating native societies as sovereign nations to be subdued, removed, or segregated, the colonizers forcibly integrated them as corporate vassals of the crown.[18] Yet this volume argues that it was also a consequence of active efforts by indigenous elites, especially in the Nahua-dominated

[13] Michael J. Gonzales, "Imagining Mexico in 1910: Visions of the *Patria* in the Centennial Celebration in Mexico City," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 39, no. 3 (2007).

[14] Rebecca Earle, *The Return of the Native: Indians and Myth-making in Spanish America, 1810–1930* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

[15] John L. O'Sullivan "The Great Nation of Futurity," *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 6, no. 23 (1839).

[16] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

[17] Paz himself placed this distinction at the root of his assessment of the essential differences between Mexico and the United States. Paz, "Mexico and the United States," in Paz, *The Labryinth of Solitude and Other Writings*: 359–63.

[18] Charles Gibson, "Conquest, Capitulation, and Indian Treaties," *American Historical Review* 83, no. 1 (1978).

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central areas around Mexico City, to grandfather patrimonial rights into the postconquest world. As Frederick Cooper argues, "colonial regimes and the oppositions to them reshaped the conceptual frameworks in which both operated"; by demanding inclusion in the colonial hierarchy via the telling and re-telling of their own histories, native leaders extended the historical awareness of New Spain into the pre-Hispanic past, and therefore also the themes, emotional contours, and beginning points of what we today call "Mexican history."[19]

In the decades following the 1521 Spanish defeat of Tenochtitlan, the most powerful entity in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, central Mexican indigenous leaders saw their populations collapse and alien institutions co-opt their customary social, religious, and political modes of authority. While many resisted violently, others pragmatically engaged the colonial regime itself, negotiating for a measure of autonomy. By conceding allegiance to the Spanish monarch, they sought to avoid the harshest terms of colonialism and preserve the integrity of local political structures – and with it, their traditional rights to govern and extract tributes from their communities. Yet such arrangements were never secure. Almost immediately, frustrated native leaders – especially Nahuas from in and around the emerging Spanish nucleus of Mexico City – were appearing regularly before imperial officials complaining of plundered patrimonies and trampled rights. Dispossessed and increasingly incapable of projecting direct power over native commoners, they turned instead to the realm of words and rhetoric, demanding justice, protection, and even restoration from their conquerors. Yet to be effective the caciques had to craft their pleas carefully, and attune their self-advocacy to the myriad prejudices and ideologies of the colonial authorities who determined their fates. At stake was their survival as a discrete provincial elite.

Seeking a persuasive moral and political case for recognition, the caciques relied on history, the location of their greatest glory. Invariably, whenever and wherever they engaged the colonial regime – in petitions, disputes, and legal testimony – native elites implied that preconquest modes of local authority retained their legitimacy despite (or even because of) the imposition of Spanish rule, Christian evangelization, and the relentless flood of European fortune-seekers into America. They were, they argued, the heirs to a grand and ancient legacy who had willingly embraced the Spanish monarch and the Catholic Church at the

[19] Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 25.

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first opportunity. They typically ignored or de-emphasized any sense of tension in this version of history; in fact, they insisted, their eagerness for baptism and Spanish vassalage not only secured their position in the colonial order, but was also evidence of their own meritorious virtue, nobility, and wisdom as inherited from antiquity.

The recurring themes of primordial greatness, fealty to the king, and religious orthodoxy were not coincidental, as they spoke directly to Spanish laws and conceits, valorizing native lineages according to Hispano-Catholic criteria while nullifying the neo-Crusader justification for conquest and domination. If most Spaniards thought nothing of depriving naked savages of their freedom and wealth, it was difficult, even for the most strident of imperialists, to disregard the claims of sophisticated and pedigreed aristocrats who had converted to Christianity and committed themselves to the Spanish monarch at the first opportunity. Not only did such stories invoke Spanish laws promising autonomy to those who submitted voluntarily to the crown, it resonated emotionally and theologically with the archetypal conversion story of St. Paul on the road to Damascus. Thus, although the caciques' strategies reflected the imperatives of Spanish colonial justice, they also contained a substantial political substance: They were implicit arguments for autonomy and noble privilege, within Spanish imperialism yet derived from pre-Hispanic antiquity. They reimagined themselves as Mexican vassals of the Spanish suzerain, reconciling their inherited legacies to the colonial regime so as to promote their status within it. They were also highly critical of colonial misrule, if not colonial rule as such, as they called upon the king to make amends for the abuses of Spanish settlers and provincial officials.

Going further, stories of ancient splendor, services to Spain, and Christian piety implied harmony and alliance between Mexico's ancient native lineages and the new colonial regime – a vision that necessarily de-emphasized the role of conquest and rupture in the creation of New Spain. In the Mesoamerican context, conquest could unmake political sovereignty, but if the ruling lineage persisted, so did the ethnic polity they represented.[20] It is appropriate, then, that the caciques did not announce or concede the displacement of their own noble traditions as they integrated into the colonial order, but rather insisted on their survival and continued relevance within that order. But in doing so, they retrofitted it

[20] Susan Schroeder, "Introduction: The Genre of Conquest Studies," in *Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica*, eds. Laura E. and Michel R. Oudijk Matthew (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 12.

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