



Fray Bernardino de Sahagun and the Nahua : conflicting interests intertwined
by SilverMoon

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History
Montana State University

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Abstract:

Some men, a few men, in the early period of colonization, while helping birth New World mythology, and with their own Eurocentric purposes and curiosity at hand, recorded the world of the conquered people. One such man was the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagun, who wrote, with the collaboration of indigenous participants, an extensive, encyclopedic compendium. The twelve book work, *Historia Universal de las Cosas de Nueva Espana*, was composed of information gathered from certain groups of Nahua people, during the mid to late Sixteenth Century. A careful study of this work serves to prove that the conquest, and its aftermath, were equivocal, contradictory, ambivalent, and complex processes that involved many peoples, most of whom were not members of the European Imperial cast. The indigenous people were not the flat surfaces upon which Europe wrote history, but they were people with sophisticated and distinctive cultural constructs of their own, complex languages and historical recording processes that were not limited always to oral histories. They were people with serious attachments to their gods and to their traditions.

Only recently, in the last thirty years or so, the indigenous people's voices and versions of history have begun to receive their due credit among scholars and activists.

The information that Sahagun recorded has the power to adjust the indigenous stereotypes, and the historic assumptions, that still today function to subjugate those people imagined as the vanquished, the voiceless, those erroneously imagined as parts of cultures that somehow vanished. This work is part of the effort to show that the Conquest, and subsequent colonization were plurivocal processes. They were not the mere actions of a homogenized 'subject' empire over an equally homogenized Pan-Indian indigenous 'object'. Indeed, it was a 'come-and-go' of individual and group-specific interests seeking to represent themselves.

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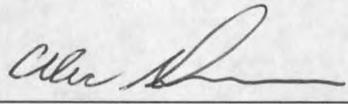
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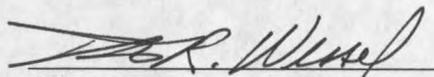
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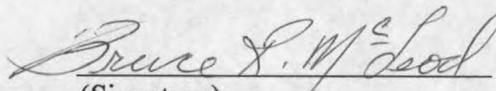
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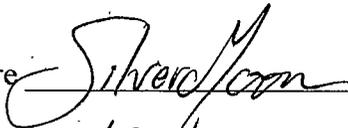
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ABSTRACT

Some men, a few men, in the early period of colonization, while helping birth New World mythology, and with their own Eurocentric purposes and curiosity at hand, recorded the world of the conquered people. One such man was the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún, who wrote, with the collaboration of indigenous participants, an extensive, encyclopedic compendium. The twelve book work, *Historia Universal de las Cosas de Nueva España*, was composed of information gathered from certain groups of Nahuatl people, during the mid to late Sixteenth Century. A careful study of this work serves to prove that the conquest, and its aftermath, were equivocal, contradictory, ambivalent, and complex processes that involved many peoples, most of whom were not members of the European Imperial cast. The indigenous people were not the flat surfaces upon which Europe wrote history, but they were people with sophisticated and distinctive cultural constructs of their own, complex languages and historical recording processes that were not limited always to oral histories. They were people with serious attachments to their gods and to their traditions.

Only recently, in the last thirty years or so, the indigenous people's voices and versions of history have begun to receive their due credit among scholars and activists. The information that Sahagún recorded has the power to adjust the indigenous stereotypes, and the historic assumptions, that still today function to subjugate those people imagined as the vanquished, the voiceless, those erroneously imagined as parts of cultures that somehow vanished. This work is part of the effort to show that the Conquest, and subsequent colonization were plurivocal processes. They were not the mere actions of a homogenized 'subject' empire over an equally homogenized Pan-Indian indigenous 'object'. Indeed, it was a 'come-and-go' of individual and group-specific interests seeking to represent themselves.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 1524¹ a group of Franciscans generally referred to as ‘the Twelve’ arrived in New Spain under the leadership of their superior, Martin de Valencia. Many, including their leader, belonged to strict groups of the Order of St. Francis that followed the Observant tradition.² These were men willing to suffer for their beliefs, men filled with missionary fervor. They landed in a world imagined as the soil for the new church. This was the land that God had chosen because it was pure from the corruption of the church in Europe. It was their mission, indeed their divine calling, to prepare the indigenous population in “the eleventh hour of the world”³ for the second coming of Christ and the establishment of his Kingdom. They carried with them a copy of the mandate that Francisco de Los Angeles, their Minister General, had given them soon before boarding

¹ This date taken from several secondary sources presents a discrepancy with Sahagún’s *Arte Adivinatoria*. He stated: “[Y] así el año de 1525 llegaron a esta tierra doce frailes menores de San Francisco, enviados por el Sumo Pontífice Adriano VI con toda la autoridad necesaria y con el favor del invictísimo Emperador Don Carlos V, para convertir a la fe católica a esta gente indiana de esta Nueva España, la cual ya había pacificado y conquistado el valerosísimo D. Hernando Cortés, y a petición suya fueron enviados estos predicadores evangélicos.” Quoted from Joaquín García Icazbalceta’s publication of parts of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún’s *Arte Adivinatoria*, in *Bibliografía Mexicana del Siglo XVI: Catálogo Razonado de Libros Impresos en México de 1539 a 1600 Con biografías de autores y otras ilustraciones*. Agustín Millares Carlo, Ed. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1954. P. 382.

² “Virtually from the order’s beginnings in the early thirteenth century, there had existed an internal tension over whether to adhere strictly to an original rule of austerity, simplicity, and renunciation of property...[Observants] or to lead more material lives as a way to exert greater influence in the world...[Conventuals].” Kenneth Mills and William B. Taylor, Edts. *Colonial Spanish America: A Documentary History*. Wilmington, Delaware: A Scholarly Resources Inc. Imprint, 1998. P. 47.

³ Statement made by the Dominican Father Bartolomé Las Casas in his “Octavio Remedio.” Quoted from Luis N. Rivera. *A Violent Evangelism: The Political and Religious Conquest of the Americas*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992. P. 59.

ship in Spain. It was a record of his words, and testament to the Franciscans' missionary zeal:

Among the continuous cares and affairs which daily present themselves to me and occupy my mind, this one presses, worries, and afflicts me first of all, as to how [...] I might labor with the apostolic man and father of ours, Saint Francis, toward liberating and snatching away from the maw of the dragon the souls redeemed with the most precious Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ, deceived by satanic wiles, dwelling in the shadow of death, held in the vain cult of idols.

[...] But now that the dawn is far spent and passing away, which is the eleventh hour of which the Gospel speaks, you are called [...] not hired for a price like the others, [...] not seeking your own interests, but those of Jesus Christ without promise of pay or reward [...] To you, therefore, O sons, with the last end of the world at hand, I your father cry out and bestir your minds that you defend the King's army already falling and presently fleeing from the foe, and, taking up the victorious contest of the heavenly Victor, you preach by word and work unto the enemy. [...] Run therefore thus with such speed as to gain the victory.

[...] I send you to convert with words and example the people who do not know Jesus Christ Our Lord, who are held fast in the blindness of idolatry under the yoke of the satanic thrall, who live and dwell in the Indies which are commonly called Yucatan or New Spain or Tierra Firme. [...] I charge and command you the twelve through the merit of holy obedience, and the rest who in the future should join your company [...].⁴

Only five years later, Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún followed in their footsteps as one of "the rest who in the future should join."⁵ He arrived in New Spain in 1529. In his own words: "The first to come after them [the Twelve] were the Dominican fathers, and the

⁴ Partial quote from the "Orders Given to the Twelve" by Fray Francisco Angelorum, Minister General on October 30th. of the year 1523 (Originally given in Latin). Published in Kenneth Mills and William B. Taylor, Edts. Colonial Spanish America: A Documentary History. Wilmington, Delaware: A Scholarly Resources Inc. Imprint, 1998. P. 48-51.

⁵ Fray Francisco de Los Angeles (Angelorum). See note 4.

second were twenty observant friars of St. Francis (amongst whom I came).⁶ Sahagún was part of the same mendicant order as the Twelve, and bearer of the same dream. He had volunteered, as was the custom, to make the journey under Fr. Antonio de Ciudad Rodrigo.⁷ Sahagún and the other new Franciscans were, as the Twelve, obligated under the Minister General's mandate to preach to, and convert those indigenous people of New Spain living under the "yoke of the satanic thrall."⁸

After his arrival, Sahagún began a project that would encompass the remainder of his days, over half a century. He dedicated himself to the study of the Nāhua world, including multiple aspects of their culture, language, religion, social and governmental traditions, and the alleged Nāhua version of the Conquest. The result of his efforts translated into the most complete, if scattered at present, piece of "contact zones"⁹ writings on indigenous matters, in Mesoamerica, compiled during the colonial period. It has captured the minds, curiosity, and imagination of countless scholars. It even earned

⁶ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. In Icazbalceta, 1954. Prologue to the *Arte Adivinatoria*. P. 382, column 1. Original wording: "Los primeros que después de ellos [the Twelve] vinieron fueron los padres dominicos, y los segundos fueron veinte frailes de San Francisco de la Observancia (entre los cuales yo vine)."

⁷ Icazbalceta explains in his biography of Sahagún that Fray Antonio was supposed to recruit forty friars but was able to find only twenty. He explains the difference by noting that: "Por el voto de obediencia no tenían obligación de pasar a estas nuevas regiones, y así las reclutas eran de voluntarios, por la cual no siempre se obtenía el número deseado." Icazbalceta, 1954, p. 327n6.

⁸ Fray Francisco de Los Angeles (Angelorum). See note 4.

⁹ Mary Louise Pratt. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London and New York: Routledge, 1992. P. 4 and 6. Although Pratt's study is specifically directed towards post-Enlightenment travel writings, when there existed a sort of religious skepticism unlike the religious fervor of Sahagún's epoch, a few of her guiding premises are valuable for this study. She defines 'contact zones' writings as those produced in "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict." P. 6.

Sahagún the title of “Father of Anthropology in the New World.”¹⁰ This man is, without a doubt, one of the most intriguing figures of the sixteenth century.

The known corpus of his work is held by different hands around the world, an aspect that adds to the difficulty for scholars of Sahagún to form a complete picture.¹¹ And Although still much of Fray Bernardino’s work is unaccounted for or incomplete, Enough of his materials exist in order to attempt to answer two interrelated questions: What possessed this man to invest so much time and energy into the compilation of indigenous information, and what drove some of the indigenous people to participate in the project? The answers to these questions are a reflection of the complex and equivocal nature of the bi-cultural encounter. Both sides of the exchange, the Franciscan and the Nahua elite, used the compendium to pursue their own interests, and both sides maintained portions of control over the creative process. Sahagún was, at once, a scholar, a Spanish male of his times, and a devoted Franciscan. Each one of these roles interplayed with, and became affected by the utterly new cultural dialogue between the New World

¹⁰ Miguel León-Portilla. *Sahagún Early Years in Tlatelolco. Chipping Away on Earth: Studies in Prehispanic and Colonial México in Honor of Arthur J.O. Anderson and Charles Dibble*. Eloise Quiñones Keber, Ed. with the assistance of Susan Schroeder and Frederic Hicks. Lancaster, California: Labyrinthos, 1994. P. 19n10. Here, León-Portilla quotes an acknowledgment of Sahagún included in *Cross-Cultural Understanding: Epistemology in Anthropology*. New York: Harper and Row, 1964. P. v. which reads: “To Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, Franciscan Missionary, Father of Anthropology in the New World. He devoted sixty years of his life to understanding from the inside, in the light of their philosophy, the culture of the ancient Mexicans.”

¹¹ “There is no edition of the *General History of the Things of New Spain* in which the variants contained in the oldest extant manuscripts of the History or parts of it are considered [...] There exist, furthermore other texts by Fray Bernardino of which there is not even a precise description, let alone a critical edition. [...] We know for a fact that in the Ayer Collection, the National Library of México, and the Vatican Library there exist several other documents belonging to the body of Sahagún’s works which up to now either have not been taken into consideration or have not merited more than summary descriptions.” Miguel León-Portilla. *The Problematics of Sahagún: Certain Topics Needing Investigation. Sixteenth Century México: The Work of Sahagún*. Munro S. Edmonson, Ed. Albuquerque: University of New México Press, 1974. P. 240-241.

and the Old. The reasons for Fray Bernardino's obstinate dedication to his compendium were multiple and at times conflicting, and they were born out of Sahagún's historical, social, and religious context: As a scholar, the Franciscan felt drawn towards the learning, understanding, and preserving of a language, and culture (both homogenized in his mind)¹² unlike anything the Friar had ever known. As a teacher, Sahagún was moved by the culture and its people. He was impressed by his pupils' intellectual capacities, and the speed of their accomplishments. Fr. Bernardino sincerely loved his students and the Nahuatl teaching tradition. He was so impressed by it that it became one of his goals to save it. As a Spanish man, he had to find a way to make graspable, and translate a fully foreign experience, and then position the indigenous versions of 'Self' and the universe, to which he was constantly exposed, in relationship to Spain and the Catholic Church. Also, as a Spanish male in the sixteenth century, Sahagún had to reconstruct the indigenous reality into something that would fit his pre-existing categorical assumptions; such as redefining the position of indigenous females to match that of Spanish ones. As a Franciscan, Fr. Bernardino had come to New Spain after taking vows of obedience: He had to fulfill his superiors' mandates to gather the information that he set out to collect. Also as a Franciscan, Sahagún was part of a millenarian movement: The Messianic dream

¹² In the cauldron that concocted the dichotomical sophism between the 'Old World' and the 'New World', a few people faced with indigenous cultural, traditional, religious, and linguistic plurality (multiculturalism), through their American experience, could not escape meeting a challenge to their mode of oppositional thinking. These men fell in in-between crises that illuminates the conflicted nature of their human experience, and the struggles produced when contextualized categories are challenged. Tension cracks opened between these men's own cultural contexts, and their corollary ideologies, and the indigenous world all around them. One such man was the Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagún. One of his responses to the indigenous multi-cultural reality was to homogenize it, to lump all of the Native Americans into one 'Other'. This was one of the early exercises of Pan-Indianism.

set up the Americas as the depository, willing or not, of the Catholic God's grace. This land would be the seat of the New Church, and Christ would come back and set up his millenarian reign there. It was after Sahagún realized that the numerous conversions claimed, by the Twelve, to have taken place, were not complete, nor truthful, that he set out to save the dream by sounding the alarm on the indigenous deceit. His solution was to record every detail of idolatrous practices. This would make them known, and hence, it would make them easier to eradicate.

All in all, Fray Bernardino's agendas were many. Saving the culture and language conflicted with the eradication of indigenous religious practices, yet the Franciscan, somehow managed to allow all his agendas to co-exist. Perhaps the greatest buffer, that which allowed the convergence of opposing goals, was the Friar's perspective of himself, his culture, and religion, as superior to those of the indigenous people, to whom he referred at times in paternalistic, and infantilizing terms: "This people [the Nahuatl] so childlike and so easily deceived."¹³

The Modern Theorist Pierre Bourdieu defined this superior perspective as "strategies of condescension [...meaning] those symbolic transgressions of limits which provide, at one and the same time, the benefits that result from conformity to a social definition [Sahagún's contexts and categories] and the benefits that result from transgression [Sahagún's experience-near participation with the indigenous world]."¹⁴

¹³ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume II. Book VII. Prologue. P. 255. Original wording: "[E]sta gente tan párvula y tan facil para hacer engañada [the Nahuatl]."

¹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu. *Language and Symbolic Power*. John B. Thompson, Ed. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson, Trans. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991. P. 124. And supported as well on *Social*

For Sahagún, superiority and condescension, allowed him to infiltrate the Nahua world, and write about it in the era of the *Santo Oficio de la Inquisición*, while maintaining an omniscient voice.

Sahagún's compendium unintentionally opened the doors for Nahuas' agendas to represent themselves. The Nahua elite narrated their side of the story, and participated in the making of the new historiography. Their narrative represented their interests; interests that were grounded on their pre-existing categories and their own point-of-perspective¹⁵ as the vestige of the indigenous elite. These participants aimed to retain access to power, and as people subjugated under a completely foreign system, they faced fundamental issues: They needed to keep cultural cohesion and to retain a coherent sense of themselves and their experiences. They had to find ways to integrate, through their pre-existing concepts, the new faces of the supernatural. Through their participation in the creation of the *Historia General*, they made a bid for personal and cultural survival through sophisticated subversive, and traditional-based strategies, such as: The retrospective writing of history and the historiographical redemption of an empire lost, the assimilation of aspects of the outsider's world, the re-education of their young, and even the willful giving of misinformation to the outsider.

Space and Symbolic Power. In Other Words: Essays Toward a Reflexive Sociology. Matthew Adamson, Trans. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990. 123-137. P. 127.

¹⁵ 'Point-of-perspective' is a term that seeks to express the specific nature of the initial categories, in both sides of the exchange: It refers to those categories which met at the time of contact. I do not mean to imply, however, that those were static, primordial categories. In fact they had weaved themselves through time and experience into what they were at the time when 'the-many-Europes' (the many sub-groups and sub-contexts usually bunched together) met 'the-many-Americas', and continued to do so during and after the initial encounter.

The *Historia General* provided a very specific group of indigenous people with a chance to preserve their own point-of-perspective on their culture, their reality, what was or was not worth preserving, and even more significantly, it created conditions that would allow them to hold on and pass down that which was important to them, albeit in limited form. However, it was the version of particular groups of Nahua elite that was recorded, and not the *Universal* or *General Historia* of all of the indigenous people of New Spain.

The questions addressing the reasons behind the creation of Sahagún's compendium have remained unanswered on their own, and most significantly as they relate to each other. In the last three decades of the Twentieth Century, the scholarship on Sahagún has been defined by a poetic backlash to the centuries of near-obscurity suffered by the Franciscan's work, and subsequent traditionally Eurocentric interpretations. The new historiographical reaction has tended to eulogize the man and his efforts, and to celebrate the alleged early-ethnographic value of his work. As necessary as this equalizing tendency has been, the study of Sahagún as a pro-Indian ethnographer is incomplete. It misses the complexity of the Franciscan's, and the Nahuas' relationships with their New Spanish experiences. Sahagún can not be fully understood if he is limited to a representation of the colonial-encounter-birthing-indigenism. The *Historia General*, as its participants, must be analyzed through its complexity.

As early as 1970, scholar John Leddy Phelan referred to Fray Bernardino as “One of the pro-Indian leaders,”¹⁶ and “the scholar of the pro-Indian party, who found his investigation of Indian antiquities hindered and obstructed by the anti-Indian faction.”¹⁷ In 1974, Arthur J.O. Anderson, (together with León-Portilla the best and most respected of scholars in the field) wrote: “In becoming an indigenist and an ethnologist he [Sahagún] worked not only against the prevailing trends of his time but against what was a part of his own training, ambition, and personality.”¹⁸ In the 1980’s, Tzevetan Todorov eulogized Sahagún and admired his learning of the indigenous language. Todorov based his adulation of the Franciscan on the claim that “usually it is the conquered who learns the conqueror’s language.”¹⁹

In fact, Sahagún’s linguistic studies, although particularly magnificent in their quality were not uncommon. They were indeed the norm for the Franciscans in New Spain. Furthermore, linguistic agility did not constitute pro-Indianism, nor did it reduce the friar to an exceptional sort of conqueror. Also, in the 1980’s and 1990’s, distinguished scholars of Sahagún such as Miguel León-Portilla, Inga Clendinnen, Barry D. Sell, and Luis N. Rivera, have tended to look at Fray Bernardino in a compensatory manner that seeks to see beyond traditional Eurocentrism. Sell, for example, named the

¹⁶ John Leddy Phelan. The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World. Second Revised Ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970. P. 74.

¹⁷ John Leddy Phelan, 1970. P. 57.

¹⁸ Arthur J. O. Anderson. “Sahagún in His Times.” Sixteenth Century Mexico: The Work of Sahagún. Munro S. Edmonson, Ed. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974. 17-25. P. 24.

¹⁹ Tzevetan Todorov. The Conquest of America. New York: Harper Perennial, 1982. P. 219.

friar as the “initiator of a ‘golden age’ of Nahuatl related scholarship as well as participant in it,”²⁰ while Clendinnen, who consistently tends to eulogize Sahagún, described the *Historia General* as “the record of the recollections of native nobles of the world they once knew, compiled and transcribed thirty and more years after the conquest, under the direction of the remarkable Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagún.”²¹ This description creates the impression that Sahagún’s own interests were not imposed in the project. Nothing could be further from the truth.

León-Portilla wrote, in 1994, that “he [Sahagún] thought it was of prime importance to record what we now call ‘the Vision of the Vanquished,’” and he adds that the recording of the indigenous perspective came “at the sole initiative of Sahagún.”²² Neither of these statements hits the mark. Sahagún began the compilation of indigenous information upon orders from his superiors, and the Franciscan himself explains his intention in the prologue to Book XII: “It was not done so much to obtain some truths of the versions given by the same Indians who took part in the conquest, as it was to record the language that the natives used on things of war and the arms they used.”²³ Finally, Rivera presented the Franciscan as an example of “the humanizing effect of Christian

²⁰ Barry D. Sell. “All the Way to Guatemala: Sahagún’s Sermonario of 1548.” *Chipping Away on Earth: Studies in Prehispanic and Colonial México in Honor of Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles Dibble*. Eloise Quiñones Keber, Edt. Lancaster: Labyrinthos, 1994. 37-44. P. 39.

²¹ Inga Clendinnen. *Aztecs: An Interpretation*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991. P. 8.

²² Miguel León-Portilla, 1994. P. 17.

²³ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún’s *Historia General*. Garibay, 1956. Volume IV. Book XII. *Al Lector*. Pg. 21. Original wording: “[It was] *no tanto para sacar algunas verdades de la relación de los mismos indios que se hallaron en la conquista, cuanto por poner el lenguaje de las cosas de la guerra y de las armas que en ella usaban los naturales.*”

doctrine,²⁴ based on the statement made by Sahagún that the indigenous people were “from the same trunk of Adam like us.”²⁵ Rivera’s praise forgets that Sahagún also wrote that the indigenous people were part of Satan: “This natives are a good part of him.”²⁶ The acknowledgment of Sahagún’s equivocal, and often contradictory statements, is the exclusive way to reach an understanding of the Franciscan’s contribution. Picking only those statements which support an apparently much desired indigenist perspective is an oversimplification. It only dilutes Sahagún’s expression. The best course of action is to follow James Lockhart’s example, who in his impressive 1992 study on the Nahuas wrote: “[E]verything in a given society, or simply in a given group of people in contact with each other, affects everything else, and some phenomena are pervasive, so that to achieve the greatest insight one should proceed on a broad front, seeing many elements in relation to each other.”²⁷

The intent of this work is to dialogue with recent historiography by continuing to step away from Eurocentrism, while avoiding a partisan, and exclusively positive exploration of Sahagún’s work. This study constitutes a move away from the dramatization of the Franciscan as the effigy of the conqueror. It stands in disagreement with scholars like Jesús Bustamante García who, in 1991, reduced Fray Bernardino’s

²⁴ Luis N. Rivera, 1990. P. 151.

²⁵ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. Prologue. P. 31. Also quoted by Rivera, 1990. P. 151.

²⁶ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume II. Book V. Prologue. P. 13. Original wording: “[E]stos naturales son buena parte de él.”

²⁷ James Lockhart. *The Nahuas After the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1992.. P. 9.

perceptive to that of a “nefarious” inquisitor.²⁸ It also aims to avoid eulogizing the friar as a pro-Indian activist. The complexity of Sahagún’s interests and agendas can only be fully explored by seeking the plurality of his experiences.

This analysis focuses primarily on the late Spanish version of Sahagún’s compendium put together in 1956 by Angel María Garibay titled *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España: Escrita por Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún Franciscano y fundada en la documentación en lengua mexicana recogida por los mismos naturales*,²⁹ and Joaquín García Icazbalceta’s publication of the prologue, the dedication to the reader, and the first chapter of the “*Arte Adivinatoria*” in 1954, together with a host of secondary texts, to find answers to the two questions posed above.

The basis of this study rests on a few fundamental guiding theoretical principles and assertions. Initially, it rests on the awareness that the study of the past from a new, contemporary perspective is always a presentist exercise that revises history as it seeks to understand it. Traditionally, Western culture has dictated the keys through which the rest of the world would be interpreted. Starting with Sahagún’s and those of his

²⁸ Bustamante García. Fray Bernardino de Sahagún: Una Revisión Crítica de los Manuscritos y de su Proceso de Composición. México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Bibliográficas, Biblioteca Nacional y Hemeroteca Nacional, 1991. P. 376. As quoted by Browne, 1996. P. 111. Original wording included: “Sahagún es, sin duda, un finísimo observador y un excelente conocedor de la cultura indígena tradicional, pero aquí, con más claridad que en otras partes, se destaca su punto de vista fundamental: no es un etnólogo, es un inquisidor.”

²⁹ Angel María Garibay K., Edt. *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España: Escrita por Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún Franciscano y fundada en la documentación en lengua mexicana recogida por los mismos naturales*. Translation: General History of the Things of New Spain Written by Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún, Franciscan, and based on the documentation in the Mexican language Gathered by the Same Natives. Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, S. A., 1956.

contemporaries, and extending towards the present, texts have tended towards Euro-diffusionism. These tendencies served to maintain the status quo. As J. M. Blaut, modern author, argued: "All scholarship is diffusionist insofar as it axiomatically accepts the Inside-Outside model, the notion that the world as a whole has one permanent center from which culture-changing ideas tend to originate, and a vast periphery that changes as a result (mainly) of diffusion from that single center."³⁰ Consequently, Native Voices have suffered. Traditional historiography treated the indigenous perspective as non-existent or derived from undependable sources. Tzevetan Todorov, in his 1982 thoughtful, although slanted work *The Conquest of America*, wrote: "[T]exts expressing Indians' point of views [are] especially problematic: as it happens, given the absence of Native writings, they are all subsequent to the conquest and therefore influenced by the conquerors."³¹ Historians can not afford to give credence to the colonialist illusion that there exists some, or any kind of Euro-cultural-superior-perspective, which produced the only applicable and usable historical sources. That belief, so imbedded that it functions often at systematically unconscious levels, is colonialism's self-serving delusional myth.³² In Sahagún's approach, although he interpreted the indigenous world from within the confines of his own categorical assumptions, the native people were never imagined as voiceless.

³⁰ J.M. Blaut. The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History. New York: The Guilford Press, 1993. Pg. 13.

³¹ Tzevetan Todorov, 1982. P. 54.

³² As Father Bartolomé de Las Casas noted: "It is a wonder to see how, when a man greatly desires something and strongly attaches himself to it in his imagination, he has the impression at every moment that whatever he hears and sees argues in favor of that thing." Father Bartolomé de Las Casas. Historia de las Indias. V. I, 44, as quoted by Tzevetan Todorov in The Conquest of America. New York: Harper Perennial, 1982. P. 21.

Without his collaboration with Nahua informants, Sahagún could have never produced his compendium. The Nahua elite used the *Historia General* to create what Mary Louise Pratt called an “autoethnography.” In it, they “represent[ed] themselves in ways that engage[d] with the colonizer’s own terms [...which] involve[d] partial collaboration with and appropriation of the idioms of the conqueror.”³³

“The mechanism of acculturation is basic to any culture; all cultures live in a state of permanent acculturation.”³⁴ This implies a need to steer away from over-simplification of events by treating the colonial experience at large, and the encounter between Sahagún and the Nahua people in particular, as a dichotomic event. This type of simplification is capable of creating a historiography that supports the dichotomy between colonizer and colonized, powerful and powerless, victor and vanquished, Christian and heathen, agent and subject, Europe and the New World.³⁵ The study of indigenous America under the visage of the dichotomy between two opposing poles is an illusory deception that serves to reiterate the position of the colonial force as winner, and the colonized as loser. As José Rabasa expressed it: “The dichotomy ...is too simplistic.”³⁶ These studies necessitate what modern scholar Walter Mignolo calls *diatopical*, and José Rabasa extends to

³³ Mary Louise Pratt, 1992. P. 7.

³⁴ Rigoberta Menchú. *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, Ed. Ann Wright, Trans. New York: Verso, 1983. Quote from the editor’s introduction, pg. xvii.

³⁵ New World terminology is itself obvious proof of Euro-diffusionist mentality. The continent that the Europeans ‘bumped’ into was only new to them, yet it has become an established term, with all its conceptual meanings, in historiography.

³⁶ José Rabasa. *Inventing America: Spanish Historiography and the Formation of Eurocentrism*. Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993. P. 13.

pluritopical understandings.³⁷ Ultimately, a simplistic approach based on totalizing representations objectifies the indigenous people. It turns them into a sort of literary form, whose purpose is to illuminate the greatness, or more precisely the power, eulogized or criticized, of the imperialist ruler. Defining-by-opposition ignores the fact that people, as they invent themselves, and the systems they create, are equivocal, contradictory, and fluid. It neglects the “contradictory impulses that motivate all human beings and groups.”³⁸ It attempts to create an ultimate, authoritative, solid, and final statement of power and powerlessness that consequently alienates the indigenous people that it seeks to understand. Indeed, it is no less a cultural construction than passing fashions, though sadly less ephemeral. The exchange of cultural, linguistic, organizational, political, and even religious traits moved in a bi-directional manner, at different levels of intensity, between the many different groups sustaining the exchange. Sahagún, and the indigenous people who participated in the compilation of the *Historia General*, as informants, scribes, or translators, co-created the compendium and affected each others’ experiences. The result was a magnificent four volume work that recorded the over-valorized perceptions of privileged voices: Sahagún and his Catholic-colonial narrative, and particular groups of Nahuatl elite and their versions of events, and of matters worth recording.

³⁷ José Rabasa, 1993. P. 14.

³⁸ Octavio Paz. *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in México*. Lysander Kemp, trans. New York: Grove Press, INC., 1961. P. 96.

Similarly, although Eurocentric³⁹ historiography has traditionally taken for granted that the arrival of ‘the-many-Europes’, and their representatives to the ‘New World’ was the momentous, and rupturing event that rewrote the whole world under European models, in reality, as “any new phenomenon is likely to be interpreted in the first instance in terms of existing images and categories.”⁴⁰ All the participants interpreted and constructed reality based upon their own pre-existing categories. Sahagún categorized the indigenous people, with whom he had contact, as homogenous representations of the indigenous world. This was a world automatically integrated, in Fray Bernardino’s mind, into the Christian landscape. However, those same indigenous people also integrated Christianity, and Sahagún himself, as an acceptable piece of their cosmology at large. In his study of the conquest of Mexico, modern scholar Serge Gruzinski explained the conflicted dynamics produced during the colonial encounter:

[T]he most disconcerting aspect of the Spanish conquest [and subsequent colonization] was probably the irruption of other apprehensions of the real, unlike those of the Indians, and not altogether like ours today. [...W]ithout visible reference, without local links, [...] the evangelizers wanted the Indians to bring their adherence, namely, to the Christian supernatural. The undertaking was at the same time easy and practically impossible. Easy, because [...] the two worlds agreed in valuing the supernatural to the point of making it the ultimate, primordial and indisputable reality of things. Impossible, since the way they conceived it

³⁹ I choose to use Rabasa’s definition of Eurocentrism: “By Eurocentrism I do not simply mean a tradition that places Europe as a universal cultural ideal embodied in what is called the West, but rather a pervasive condition of thought.” José Rabasa. *Inventing America: Spanish Historiography and the Formation of Eurocentrism*. Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993. P. 18.

⁴⁰ Olivia Harris. “The Coming of the White People: Reflections on the Mythologization of History in Latin America.” *Colonial Spanish America: A Documentary History*. Kenneth Mills and William B. Taylor, Edts. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1998. P. 34-45.

differed in every aspect. Misunderstandings proliferated. [...] Each hastened to project his own grids on to the adversary.⁴¹

Consequently, all sides of the exchange operated under what James Lockhart calls “double mistaken identity.” This is a process by which “each side of the cultural exchange presumes that a given form or concept is operating in the way familiar within its own tradition and is unaware or unimpressed by the other’s side interpretation.”⁴² Fray Bernardino de Sahagún categorized the Indigenous people of New Spain by molding that which appeared familiar so that it could fit his understanding of the world. That which appeared non-familiar was also forced into the pre-existing patterns of Sahagún’s cultural conceptions, becoming often marginalized as idolatry or indigenous ignorance, condemnable or curable. He homogenized the many indigenous groups in Mexico following “an old textual practice that readily complement[ed] the processes of deculturation and deterritorialization”⁴³ which the colonizing forces had already set in motion. The Nahua people responded in kind. They integrated, particularly in the initial stages of colonization, the Spanish/Catholic incoming information into their own pre-existing categories. They responded to the Christian God by accepting him as one more deity in their pantheon, following pre-Hispanic traditions that had historically build the ranks of Nahua Deities through the adoption of the Gods of people with whom they came

⁴¹ Serge Gruzinski. The Conquest of Mexico: The Incorporation of Indian Societies into the Western World, 16th-18th Centuries. Eileen Corrigan, Trans. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993. P. 184.

⁴² James Lockhart. “Some Nahua Concepts in Postconquest Guise.” *History of European Ideas*. Vol. 6, No. 4, p. 465-482, 1985. I have decided to go with Lockhart’s definition to support my argument without making changes. His expertise hardly needs adjustment here.

⁴³ Maru Louise Pratt, 1992. P. 64.

in contact. They appropriated the imposed forms and used them to express their own narrative. They interpreted the foreign experience in familiar terms. In an “unspoken presumption of sameness,”⁴⁴ they, as the Spaniards also had done, related to “Spanish introductions pragmatically as things they might make their own, according to criteria of familiarity, usability, and availability.”⁴⁵ Sahagún’s compendium fitted the criteria in all three accounts: It was a chance for the elite to continue their historiographical traditional control, it was a usable tool to express their interests, and it was most available; after all Sahagún asked the Nahua elite for help. Both the Nahua elite and Sahagún functioned under a system of dependent reciprocity which allowed for the creation of the *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España*.

⁴⁴ James Lockhart, 1992. P. 445.

⁴⁵ James Lockhart, 1992. P. 443.

CHAPTER 2

SAHAGÚN AND HIS WORK

Sahagún's New Spain Experience

Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún was born in 1499 or 1500, under the last name Ribeira,⁴⁶ in Leon, province of Spain, soon after the so called 'Discovery' of what became known as the New World. Later, upon taking the habit,⁴⁷ he adopted the name of his natal village as his own, just as Franciscans were accustomed to do. The good father lived until the fifth of February, 1590, when he departed this world after a period of illness. He died at the infirmary of the convent of San Francisco, México. He was about ninety years old and had spent sixty-one of those years in New Spain. Most of that time he dedicated to building the *Historia General*. The compendium was the physical manifestation of Sahagún's sense of guilt at his initial belief that the conversions had already taken place, which had lulled him into wasting time and allowing the upper hand to the Devil and his doings, and his intense dedication to the eschatological war he waged against the "enemy of God and of men."⁴⁸ The *Historia* was, in its simplest form, the collection of all the intelligence necessary to eradicate idolatry and save the indigenous people of New Spain.

⁴⁶ Joaquín G. Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 327. As this author summarizes, Fray Bernardino's last name appears to point to descent from Portugal or Galicia.

⁴⁷ Joaquín G. Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 327n5. Original wording: "Sahagún había tomado el hábito antes de 1529 en el convento de Salamanca, perteneciente a la compostelana."

⁴⁸ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 385 column 1.

Sahagún “arrived in New Spain in 1529 at the age of twenty-nine, or thirty, five years after the first group of Franciscan ‘apostles’ made their way across the ocean.”⁴⁹ Convinced as he was upon arrival of the veracity of the claims made by Motolinia,⁵⁰ and the other members of the Twelve, that the indigenous people had been successfully converted, the Franciscan concentrated on the indoctrination of the native population. Sahagún wrote that his main focus was the teaching of “the articles of faith and the seven sacraments of the Church.”⁵¹ To achieve proper indoctrinations, based on mutual, and thorough understanding, Sahagún’s early “missionary work [became...] primarily linguistic.”⁵² He composed devotional works such as *El Santoral* (1540, corrected and expanded in 1563), and a Náhuatl collection of sermons, now lost (1540), and the *Sermonario* (1548). Writings of this type served the Franciscans’ needs for building of the New Church amongst the Nahuatl. These materials were fundamental, for Sahagún and other Franciscans, to the missionary effort because they provided the vehicle to reach the largest possible indigenous audience. The composition of doctrinal work continued throughout Fr. Bernardino’s life, well into his later years: The *Psalmody Christiana*, “the

⁴⁹ Walden Browne. “When Worlds Collide: Crisis in Sahagún’s *Historia Universal de las Cosas de Nueva España*.” *Colonial Latin American Historical Review*. Spring 1996. 101-149. P. 101.

⁵⁰ This was Fray Toribio de Benavente’s Indian name. In his *Historia de los Indios de Nueva España*, Fray Toribio explained that he took the name after his arrival. He noticed that the indigenous people kept looking at the friars and repeated the word *Motolinia*. “Upon being told that it meant poor, and that the Indians were commenting on the Franciscans’ bare feet and patched and threadbare habits, he at once declared that because it was the first Náhuatl word that he had learned (and undoubtedly also because of its meaning) it should thereafter be his name.” *Life and Works of Fray Toribio Motolinia*. Elizabeth Andros Foster, Trans. and Ed. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1977. P. 2.

⁵¹ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Arte Adivinatoria*. Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 382 column 2. Original wording: “[L]os artículos de fe y de los siete sacramentos de la Iglesia.”

⁵² Munro S. Edmonson, 1974. P. 3.

only work to be printed in his lifetime,⁵³ was dated 1583, when Sahagún was in his early eighties.⁵⁴

Sahagún's other major preoccupation was his work as a faculty member at the *Colegio Imperial de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco*.⁵⁵ As a man educated at the University of Salamanca (1512-1514), he was able to use his preparation to aid in the foundation, and subsequent work of the *Colegio*. He became one of the few select teachers of that college. Sahagún wrote with apparent pride about the beginnings of the school:

After we came to this land to implant the Faith, we assembled the boys in our houses, as is said. And we began to teach them to read, write, and sing. And, as they did well in this, we then endeavored to put them to the study of grammar. For this training a college was formed in the city of México, in the Santiago Tlatilulco section, in which [college] were selected from all the neighboring villages and from all the provinces the most

⁵³ John W. Keber. *Sahagún's Psalmody: Christian Love and Domination in Sixteenth Century México*. In Eloisa Qíñones Keber, 1994. 45-64. P. 47.

⁵⁴ In 1983, highly respected scholar of Sahagún Arthur J. O. Anderson wrote: "These Náhuatl writings of Sahagún were a part of the body of devotional works that such missionaries as Sahagún, Olmos, Motolinia, Mendieta, and probably most of the regular clergy then in New Spain considered essential for the effective conversion of recently [Christianized] or still pagan populations then and for a long time to come speaking their native languages. During the two decades between 1560 and 1580 Sahagún succeeded in writing or compiling a great deal of such material before the ecclesiastical and crown policies that had at first encouraged such activities in the end stifled them." "Sahagún's Doctrinal Encyclopaedia." *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl*. Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Vol. 16, 1983. 109-122. P. 110.

⁵⁵ As faculty, he spent three periods of his life in the school: First from the foundation in 1536 to 1540, after which time he took a leave of absence to do missionary work. Second, from 1545 to 1558, after which period he left to do field research in Tepepulco until 1561, and finally, from 1571 to his final illness in 1589. He made his final journey to the infirmary of San Francisco where he died on February 5th., 1590, at the late age of ninety (plus) years. This information comes from a combination of data found in both: Walden Browne. "When Worlds Collide: Crisis in Sahagún's *Historia Universal de las Cosas de Nueva España*." *Colonial Latin American Historical Review*. Spring 1996. 101-149. And Miguel León-Portilla. "Sahagún's Early Years in Tlatelolco." Chipping Away on Earth: Studies in Prehispanic and Colonial México in Honor of Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble. Eloise Qíñones Keber, Ed. Lancaster: Labyrinthos, 1994. 13-20. For more biographical information consult Luis Nicolau d'Oliver's Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, 1499-1590. Mauricio J. Mixco, Trans. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987, and Joaquín García Icazbalceta's Bibliografía Mexicana del Siglo XVI: Catálogo Razonado de Libros Impresos en México de 1539 a 1600. Agustín Millares Carlo, Ed. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1954. P. 327-387.

capable boys, best able to read and write. They slept and ate in the same college without leaving it, except few times.⁵⁶

The *Colegio* served to educate mostly the children of the indigenous elite, much like the pre-Hispanic *Calmécac*, creating an illusion, in both sides of the exchange, of something in common, while in reality the *Calmécac* and the *Colegio* were fully different institutions: The first served to educate the young Nahua elite, and provide a continuation of the Nahua ways from within the context of their cosmology, and the second served the Spanish and more specifically the Franciscan's acculturation and indoctrination purposes. It was a case of double-mistaken-identity. Here, taking the place of the *tlamacazque*,⁵⁷ Fr. Bernardino instructed "a select group of Aztec nobility, whose skill—some could compose hexameters—astounded and stirred jealousy among many who aspire such feats."⁵⁸ Sahagún was also doing his ruler's work. In fact, in 1573, King Philip II made the role of schools for the indigenous people in the Americas all too clear: "Even though they seem to be pacified and ask for a teacher, be careful, asking first that they send their

⁵⁶ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume II. Book X. *Relacion del Autor Digna de Ser Notada*. P. 165. Original wording: "Luego que venimos a esta tierra a plantar la fe juntamos (a) los muchachos en nuestras casas, como está dicho, y les comenzamos (a enseñar) a leer y escribir y cantar, y como salieron bien con esto, procuramos luego de ponerlos en el estudio de la Gramática, para el cual ejercicio se hizo un Colegio en la ciudad de México en la parte de Santiago del Tlatilulco, en el cual de todos los pueblos comarcanos y de todas las provincias se escogieron los muchachos más hábiles, y que mejor sabían leer y escribir, los cuales dormían y comían en el mismo Colegio sin salir fuera sino pocas veces."

⁵⁷ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Garibay, 1956. Volume I. Book III. Chapter VIII. P. 305. *Tlamacazque* or Indigenous Ministers.

⁵⁸ John W. Keber. In Eloise Quiñones Keber, 1994. P. 47. Fray Bernardino de Sahagún expressed his sentiments of pride in his students in the *Relación del Autor, digna de ser notada*. Volume III. Book X. P. 165-166.

children to be taught—these will serve as hostages—and urging them to build churches first where ministers may go and teach and preach.”⁵⁹

Sahagún was a well-loved professor. His students would eventually become his assistants in the process of gathering and translating the ethnographic information that served as the basis for the Florentine Codex and the *Historia General*:

And in all this scrutiny, [making reference to the field research] there were grammarians from the College. The principal and wisest was Antonio Valeriano, from the neighborhood of Azcapotzalco; another one, not much lesser than he was Alonso Vegerano from the neighborhood of Cuauhtitlan; another was Martín Jacovita, whom I mentioned above. Another was Pedro de San Buenaventura, from Cuauhtitlan; All were experts in three languages, Latin, Spanish, and Indian. The scribes that produced all the work in good print are Diego de Grado neighbor of Tlatelolco, from the quarter of Concepción; Bonifacio Maximiliano, from Tlatelolco, from the quarter of San Martín; Mateo Severino, from Xochimilco, of the part of Utlac.⁶⁰

Fray Bernardino’s biographer, late nineteenth century Joaquín García Icazbalceta, illustrated the close nature of the teacher-students relationship when he quoted Father Mendieta, Sahagún’s contemporary. Mendieta recorded that at the end of Fray Bernardino’s life, before the Friar left the convent in Tlatelolco to go to the infirmary at the convent of San Francisco de México, Fray Bernardino. “He had his children, the

⁵⁹ King Philip II. July 13, 1573. From the “*Recopilación de Leyes de los Reinos de las Indias, Libro I, título I, ley 4.*” Quoted in Charles S. Branden. *Religious Aspects of the Conquest of Mexico*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1930. P. 198.

⁶⁰ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Garibay, 1956. Volume I. Book II. Prologue. P. 107. Sahagún has mentioned Martín Jacovita one page earlier and credited him with being “*el que más trabajó de todos los colegiales.*” (He who worked more than all the other students). Original wording: “[Y] en todos estos escrutinios [making reference to the field research] hubo gramáticos colegiales. El principal y más sabio fué Antonio Valeriano, vecino de Azcapotzalco; otro, poco menos que este, fue Alonso Vegerano vecino de Cuauhtitlan; otro fue Martín Jacovita, de que arriba hice mención. Otro Pedro de San Buenaventura, vecino de Cuauhtitlan; todos expertos en tres lenguas, latina, española, e indiana. Los escribanos que sacaron de buena letras todas las obras son Diego de Grado vecino de Tlatelolco, del barrio de la Concepción; Bonifacio Maximiliano, vecino de Tlatelolco, del barrio de San Martín; Mateo Severino, vecino de Xochimilco, de la parte de Utlac.”

Indians raised at the school, brought to him, and after saying good-bye, he was taken to Mexico, where after devoutly receiving all the sacraments, [...] he died and there he is buried.”⁶¹

The early period of Sahagún’s life in New Spain was a formative period where the Friar defined his role in the foundation of the New Church. In 1994, Miguel León-Portilla wrote that during Fray Bernardino’s stays at the *Colegio*, “besides acting as a teacher and missionary, he developed the most cherished concern of his life—that of learning about the culture and history of the Nahuatl people of México.”⁶² This statement by itself, although part of the truth, is deceptively incomplete. During this time Sahagún had a painful realization. Those first Franciscans, including Motolinia, had euphorically boasted that “the religious conversion of the indigenous population had been both profound and complete.”⁶³ Motolinia said: “Because where the doctrine and the word of Christ has arrived, nothing [of idolatry] remains that is known nor that needs to be taken into account.”⁶⁴ He went on to categorically defend what seemed as indigenous idolatrous practices, such as the making of idols, as necessary responses of the Indians to placate the

⁶¹ Mendieta quoted by Joaquín Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 333 column 1-2. From Mendieta’s *Historia*, Lib. V, pte. I, cap. 41. Original wording: “[M]ando traer ante si a sus hijos los indios que criaba en el colegio, y despidiendose de ellos, fue llevado a México, donde acabando de recibir devotamente todos los sacramentos [...] murio y está allí enterrado.”

⁶² Miguel León-Portilla. Eloise Quiñones Keber, 1994. P. 14. In reference to Sahagún’s “two well defined stays [at the *Colegio*]: 1536-1540 and 1545-1558.”

⁶³ Walden Browne, 1996. P. 103.

⁶⁴ Fray Toribio de Benavente or Motolinia. *Historia de los Indios de la Nueva España*. Georges Baudot, Ed. Madrid: Clásicos Castalia, 1985. P. 254. Quoted in Walden Browne. “When Worlds Collide: Crisis in Sahagún’s *Historia Universal de las Cosas de Nueva España*.” *Colonial Latin American Historical Review*. Spring 1996. 101-149. P. 103. Original wording was included: “Porque adonde ha llegado la palabra y doctrina de Cristo no ha quedado cosa [de la idolatría] que se sepa ni de que se deba hacer cuenta.”

Spaniards' greed.⁶⁵ It seemed, by the confident statements made by those first Franciscans that they were convinced of their success, and that the millenarian dream was well in its way to becoming a reality at the time of Sahagún's arrival. Sahagún's experience told him a very different story. Those first 'gleamy-eyed' claims were more than a little political and self-congratulatory. Fr. Bernardino's feelings on the matter are so intense he even questioned his God vehemently:

What is this, Lord? You have permitted for so long that the enemy of human kind rule, at his pleasure, without resistance, over this sad and forsaken nation, where with such liberty he poured all his grime and darkness! Lord, this injury is not only yours, but of all human kind. For that share which is mine, I beg you that after taking the power from the enemy, you grant abundance of grace where once was so much wrongdoing, and as there was such an abundance of darkness, that there will be an abundance of light over these peoples, which you have, for so long, permitted to be subjugated and oppressed under such tyranny!⁶⁶

From this moment of realization grew an intense pessimism and belief that the Nahua people were playing out an exercise in deceit: "Having set forth these two great inconveniences in the founding of this new Church, it is a clear thing that all is false, [...] in their hearts they don't stop having their gods as gods, nor rendering them occult service, offerings, and celebrations, in which account this affair suffers by being secret."⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Walden Browne, 1996. P. 103.

⁶⁶ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Garibay, 1956. Volume I. Book I. *Exclamaciones Del Autor*. P. 95. Original wording: "*¡Que es esto, señor Dios, que habeis permitido, tantos tiempos, que aquel enemigo del género humano tan a su gusto se enseñorease de esta triste y desamparada nación, sin que nadie le resistiese, donde con tanta libertad derramó toda su pozoña y todas sus tinieblas! ¡Señor Dios, esta injuria no solamente es vuestra, pero también de todo el género humano, y por la parte que me toca suplico a V.D. Majestad que despúes de haber quitado todo el poder al tirano enemigo, hagáis que donde abundó el delito abunde la gracia, y conforme a la abundancia de las tinieblas venga la abundancia de la luz, sobre esta gente, que tantos tiempos habeis permitido estar supeditada y opresa de tan grande tiranía!*"

⁶⁷ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. "Arte Adivinatoria." In Joaquín García Icazbalceta. *Bibliografía mexicana del siglo XVI*. Agustín Millares Carlo, Edt. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1981. 376-387. P. 383. Original wording: "*Habiendo precedido estos dos inconvenientes tan grandes en el fundamento de esta nueva Iglesia, es*

Sahagún felt, at one time, conflicting feelings for the Nahuas.⁶⁸ The Friar did not understand that the indigenous reactions to the initial conversions were the result of their pre-existing modes of understanding of the universe.⁶⁹ Still, his sense of deception co-existed with a deep level of love and admiration for aspects of the indigenous culture.

Sahagún became ill during an outbreak of plague in 1542: “Where in all this New Spain died the greater part of the people who lived there, and I found myself in the time of this plague (pestilence) in this city of México, in the part of Tlatilulco, and I buried more than ten thousand bodies, and at the end of the plague I became ill and almost died (was near the end).”⁷⁰ While Sahagún recovered, he heard some Native elders pray. When he heard those “words which truly issued from their hearts when they spoke,”⁷¹ the Friar could not but “admire [...] the force and wisdom of that Ancient word.”⁷² Upon that basic contradiction, between admiration and distrust, Sahagún built the great purpose of

cosa clara que todo esta falso,..., en lo interior no dejan de tener a sus dioses por dioses, ni de hacerles servicio, ofrendas y fiestas en lo oculto, en cuanto sufre el ser secreto este negocio.”

⁶⁸ “[His] work was driven by a sense of crisis...determined by his inability to reconcile a pre-existing, and ostensibly complete, medieval world view with his increasing awareness of the complexity of the world of the Nahuas.” Walden Browne, 1996. P. 102.

⁶⁹ “Sahagún was haunted by his discovery of an internal Nahua psyche that did not coalesce with outward demonstrations of Christianity and from this he assumed that everything about their conversion must have been false.” Walden Browne, 1996. P. 104.

⁷⁰ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Códice florentino*. Book XI:238r. As quoted in Browne, p. 115. Original wording: “[D]onde en toda esta Nueva España murió la mayor parte de esta gente que en ella via: y yo me allé en el tiempo desta pestilencia en esta ciudad de México en la parte de tlatilulco y enterré más de diez mill cuerpos: y al cabo dela pestilencia diome ami la enfermedad, y estube muy al cabo.”

⁷¹ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Códice florentino*. Book VI: 1969:1; 1979:2. Fol.1r. As quoted in León-Portilla. “Sahagún Early Years in Tlatelolco.” P. 15. Original wording: “Palabras que verdaderamente salían de sus corazones cuando hablablan.”

⁷² Miguel León-Portilla. In Eloise Quiñones Keber, 1994. P. 15. “Admirar la fuerza y sabiduría de ese mundo antiguo.”

his life, to gather, translate and compose a twelve book encyclopedia on the Nahuatl and their world.⁷³

It was sometime in the early 1540's that Fray Toribio de Benavente, commonly known by his adopted Indian name, Motolinia, gave the initial charge to Sahagún to collect the information that eventually grew into Fr. Bernardino's compendium: The Florentine Codex, and its Spanish version, the "*Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España*." Later, in 1557, Father Francisco de Toral formally reiterated his charge. "As Mexican Provincial he [Toral] had taken the hard decision to aid Fray Bernardino de Sahagún in the compilation of his great work on the religion and society of the Aztecs of México."⁷⁴ Sahagún wrote of this charge, which in fact constituted the formal reason for his work, his Franciscan vow of obedience: "Under mandate of the Reverend Father Fray Francisco Toral, Provincial of the Holy Gospel, and later Bishop of Campeche and Yucatán, I wrote twelve books of the divine things, better called idolatrous, and human and natural things of the natives of this New Spain,"⁷⁵ and later: "I was ordered through

⁷³ "The Florentine Codex, the work of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún and of learned Nahuatl, is made up of twelve books gathered in three volumes. The whole consists of about 2,466 pages. The general structure of the work is quite regular. Each page is divided into two columns. The Nahuatl text, written first, is on the right half, while the Spanish text and the illustrations, which were drawn last, are on the left. The only exceptions to this pattern are the title page, the prologues, the admonitions, and the summaries, which generally all occur at the beginning of each book." Quoted from Marc Thouvenot. "Sahagún and the Florentine Codex: An Example of the Non-Discovery of Aztec Writing." *Chipping Away on Earth: Studies in Prehispanic and Colonial México in Honor of Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble*. Eloise Quiñones Keber, Edt. Lancaster: Labyrinthos, 1994. 21-28. P. 21.

⁷⁴ Inga Clendinnen. *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517-1570*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. P. 85.

⁷⁵ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Garibay, 1956. Volume I. Book I. Prologue. Pg. 28. Original wording: "[P]or mandato del muy Reverendo Padre el P. Fray Francisco Toral, provincial de esta Provincia del Santo Evangelio, y después Obispo de Campeche y Yucatán, escribí doce libros de las cosas divinas, o por mejor decir idolátricas, y humanas y naturales de esta Nueva España."

holy obedience to my prelate superior, to write in the Mexican language what I considered useful for the indoctrination, acculturation, and maintenance of the natives of New Spain, and to help the workers and ministers that teach them.”⁷⁶

Building the compendium proved to be a formidable task. Besides the usual difficulties that most scholars must endure during field research, such as traveling long distances, and finding reliable informants, there was the huge scope of the work. Sahagún demonstrated tireless tenacity in a variety of ways which reflect the fact that the significance of the compendium was unquestionable for the Friar. During the epidemic of 1545, not only tens of thousands of indigenous people died, but Fray Bernardino himself became gravely ill (1546).⁷⁷ A second epidemic hit in 1576 devastating the indigenous population once more: “Due to which there is no one left at the school. Almost all have left dead and sick.”⁷⁸

The Franciscan also faced hostilities from his own religious superiors. In 1570, Father Escalona ordered the dispersion of Sahagún’s work throughout New Spain and stopped its funding. Escalona’s intention was to punish Sahagún. The reasons are complex, and the source of arguments amongst scholars.⁷⁹ Fr. Bernardino complained in

⁷⁶ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Garibay, 1956. Volume I. Book II. Prologue. P. 105. Original wording: “[A] mi me fue mandada por santa obediencia de mi prelado mayor, que escribiese en lengua mexicana lo que me pareciese ser util para la doctrina, cultura y manutención de la cristianidad de estos naturales de esta Nueva España, y para ayuda de los obreros y ministros que los doctrinan.”

⁷⁷ Joaquín Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 330.

⁷⁸ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume III. Book X. *Relación del Auto, r digna de ser notada*. P. 167. Original wording: “[Q]ue así no está ya nadie en el Colegio, muertos y enfermos casi todos son salidos.”

⁷⁹ Icazbalceta, in the late nineteenth century, postulated that Escalona’s attitude towards the Franciscan vow of poverty was such that it led him to view Sahagún’s work as a wasteful exercise. Joaquín García Icazbalceta, 1954. P. 372-373.

his *Historia* that after the cutting of funding he was put in the position to write everything by his own hand. Sahagún was then in his early seventies and his writing had become tremulous due to his age, and age related illness. The lack of funds meant that he could not hire scribes to aid him in the task of transcribing the information he had compiled. Sahagún complained that because “some of the Definitors thought it was against the vow of poverty to spend money on writing”⁸⁰ his works, and since his hands trembled (he was then over seventy years old) there was no progress in his work for five years. Also, in the prologue to Book I he commented, somewhat bitterly:

These twelve books, with the art and vocabulary Appendix, were put on paper in this year of 1569. They have not been written in prose yet, nor have the notes been added, as it was the original goal of this work; I do not know what it will be accomplished in the coming year of the seventieth decade, sine from the year mentioned [1569] to almost the end of 1575, nothing more could be accomplished in this work because of the great disfavor received from those that should have supported it.⁸¹

Escalona's decision to disperse Fray Bernardino's work might have also been a response to Sahagún's insubordination. Sahagún sent his *Breve Compendio*, a brief summary of his work, directly to the Pope, and his *Sumario* or summary of that same work to Spain:

⁸⁰ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book II. Prologue. P. 107. Original wording: “Algunos de los definidores les pareció que era contra la pobreza gastar dineros en escribirse aquellas escrituras, y así mandaron al autor que despidiese a los escribanos y que el solo escribiese de su mano lo que quisiere en ellas. El cual, como era mayor de setenta años y por temblor de la mano no pudo escribir nada ni se pudo alcanzar dispensación de este mandamiento, estuvieron las escrituras sin hacer nada en ellas más de cinco años.”

⁸¹ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia General*. Volume I. Book I. Prologue. Pg 28. Original wording: “Estos doce libros, con el arte y vocabulario Apéndice, se acabaron de sacar en blanco este año de mil quinientos y sesenta y nueve. Aún no se ha podido romanar, ni poner los escolios según la traza de la obra; no se lo que se podría hacer en el año de setenta que se sigue, pues desde el dicho año, hasta casi el fin de este año de mil quinientos y setenta y cinco no se pudo mas entender en esta obra, por el gran desfavor que hubo de parte de los que la debieron de favorecer.”

