

Catholic Friars and Nahua Women In the Early Colonial Valley of Mexico

Caterina Pizzigone*

INTRODUCTION

When Hernán Cortés vanquished the Nahuas (1519-21), he could not have imagined that the role the Malinche and the other indigenous women had in his victory was only the beginning of a basic relationship between women and conquerors. The encounter of the indigenous and the Spanish was mainly “female-to-male”¹ in the sense that native women played a key role in helping the conquerors penetrate the New World. However, at the same time women developed alternative forms of resistance that favored the preservation of ancient traditions. This article aims to consider their controversial and complex role, specifically examining the new model for women the Spanish introduced into the Valley of Mexico through the Catholic friars.

I will analyze this change by initially looking at the conception of women the Spanish and Nahua societies had developed and how they interacted during the



Doña Marina, “La Malinche,” lithograph by Iriarte and S. Hernández.

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conquest through the key role played by the mendicant orders. Colonization led to a particular vision of indigenous women which will be considered in the third part. And finally, in the last section, I will examine the friars’ vision of indigenous women and the reaction their attempt to impose a new model prompted.

THE SPANISH CONCEPT OF WOMEN

The status of women under Spanish law is a starting point to show which rights and duties they were entitled to. Various laws and royal decrees were issued on the matter, but the main ones are the

Siete Partidas, a code from the thirteenth century issued under King Alfonso the Wise, and the 1505 *Leyes de Toro*. They stipulated that women remained wards of their fathers (who exercised *patria potestad*, or custody) until the age of 25, when they usually passed to their husband’s legal protection. Despite this, they retained control of their own property and dowry after marriage; they could inherit; and wives and children were considered the preferred heirs, with women’s rights protected by law.²

As this shows, women’s legal position in society was unequal to that of men. Actually, women were subordinate to men; they could not act independently, and at the same time they bore the burden of the household, child rearing and family life. Moreover, they were responsible for the family honor through their behavior, “since any breach in her behavior concerns not only her, but also stained the father or husband.”³ Husbands’ and fathers’ authority was so important that women’s mistakes or disobedience prompted punishment to restore men’s honor.⁴

* Italian historian.

Patriarchal authority was particularly strong for wives and daughters, directly subjected to men, while widows and spinsters could act more independently since they were outside the family, so their behavior did not affect a family's honor.⁵

Finally, women's activity remained confined to the domestic realm, and any kind of formal participation in political and religious affairs was strictly forbidden.⁶

Underlying women's position in society was a strong religious ideology stressing the importance of female honor and purity, which restricted them to a sort of confinement so both would be preserved. Women were deemed weak and subject to sin and the violation of religious commands. All this undermined their ability to hold positions of responsibility and authority.⁷

THE NAHUA CONCEPT OF WOMEN

In Nahua society, men and women also had separate spheres of activities, the latter being in charge of households and family care. But the Nahuas' conception differed from that of the Europeans in terms of the public and private realms. The house and related activities were considered a representation of the cosmos, so home life was seen as an integral part of social and public life. In their traditional realm, women's were "equally necessary roles" to those of men in politics and warfare.⁸

Women could occupy important public roles like supervisory and administrative positions in marketplaces or in guilds associated with craft production. Moreover, they could be priestesses and teachers for girls in the *tepochoalli* and

calmecac (schools for the youth). Of course, they did not reach the main positions of authority assigned to men especially in political and religious fields, but still their participation was important.⁹ When Tenochtitlan was founded (1325), the most important positions of



Detail, Yanhuitlán Codex in *La Jerusalem indiana* (Jerusalem of the Indies).

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authority had both male and female connotations, the main leader being described as a paternal and maternal figure. This may be interpreted as a sign of the importance women had in society: "Terminological references to females at the highest levels, although the posts were occupied by men, suggests that women may have played leading positional roles."¹⁰ Roles and labor were divided according to sex, but all in the framework of a kind of egalitarianism. However, women's situation changed with the rise of the military dynasty (Itzcóatl, 1429-1440) when their activity became more confined to the domestic economy, since they had no place in the new predatory economy. They were denied access to the military and bureaucratic hierarchies and

therefore excluded from new sources of wealth and prestige. Thus, the specialization of roles was reinforced.¹¹ However, they preserved their functions in various institutions like schools and temples, and their domestic activities continued to be highly appreciated, especially in a society where men were often at war so they could not work.¹² To sum up, despite the militarization of society which led to a kind of male dominance, native women retained their autonomy, confirmed by their contribution to work and the family's sustenance and by the fact that they continued to enjoy property rights.

This is why it can be said that the Nahua society was based on a kind of male-female complementariness. There was a gender hierarchy, of course, since men usually occupied positions of higher status, but in a way complementariness counterbalanced it. The key role of domestic functions was acknowledged and not considered less important than men's activities, as in Spanish society. Men and women acted inside parallel social structures, ceremonies and cultural conceptions, which did not create equality, but a kind of gender parallelism.¹³

Complementariness can be seen concretely in the equal importance given to home and battlefield, the two faces of a single reality: women who died in childbirth were comparable to the warriors who lost their lives on a battlefield fighting for their community.¹⁴ This parallelism can be explained by the Nahua duality-based forms of culture and ideology and by a kinship structure in which maternal and paternal ties had equivalent weight.¹⁵

But gender complementariness was destined to disappear in the encounter

etration into individual thoughts in an intimate sphere was often perceived as an attack, so many women reacted by withdrawing.²⁶

A complementary means to this was preaching. Through sermons, the friars tried to transmit the major points of the doctrine and the values indigenous women were supposed to instill in their families. Many books of sermons were written in Nahuatl; the first, by Friar Juan de la Asunción, appeared in 1577.²⁷ Usually they started with a quotation from the Holy Gospel and continued with advice on good behavior, proposing models to be used in the education within the family.

An examination of the education of young girls is another way to shed light on the friars' vision of indigenous women.

The Franciscans were the first to reach the New World (1524), and they showed interest in female education early. As Motolinía wrote, "It was not good that only men be cared for, since God made both sexes in the beginning and after the Fall, He sought out both of them, to heal and save."²⁸ Since their cultural and ideological background was European, their approach to women was similar to the Spanish conception presented above. In general, all mendicant orders considered women, and native women in particular, subordinate to men. For instance, the Jesuit conception of hierarchy a few decades later (1572) excluded women; only men could be appointed for religious duties and affairs. Indigenous women were considered unprepared for professing the faith. In fact, they did not share this experience with Spanish women and *criollas* until the eighteenth century, when

the first convent of indigenous nuns in Mexico City was built, the Franciscan monastery of Corpus Christi (1724), "the most important eighteenth century monument to the recognition of the equality of the daughters of God."²⁹



Conversion was not an easy task. *La relación de Michoacán* (The Story of Michoacán).

At the beginning, all native girls both *principales* and *macehuales* were educated in the patio of the convents, and only Christian doctrine was taught, but not reading or writing. It was difficult to intervene more deeply in women's education since there were no religious women to do it. Then, in 1529 the first *colegio* was founded in Texcoco, in the palace of Netzahualcoyotzin, by the Franciscan Toribio de Benavente Motolinía and, as was the case for the instruction of boys, only the daughters of the *principales* were admitted.³⁰

The Archbishop Zumárraga of Mexico strongly supported this change in the education of indigenous girls: "The thing which occupies my thoughts and which my will is most inclined to is that this city and every town of the bishopric have

a monastery large enough for a great number of girls, the daughters of the Indians."³¹ A few years later (1536), he asked for permission to forcibly separate the girls from their parents to be educated in schools.

The friars looked for Spanish women as teachers; they were called *beatas* and came from the third order of Saint Francis. The first *beatas* arrived in Mexico in 1531 and started working in the Mexico City *colegio* with 200 girls.

From 1530 to 1545 several *colegios* for native girls were founded in Mexico, Tezcoco, Otumba, Tepepulco, Huexotzinco, Tlaxcala, Cholula, Coyoacán, and later in Chalco, Cuauhtitlán, Xochimilco, Tehuacán and Tlalmanalco.³²

The task of this education was mainly to introduce the model of Christian wife and mother. Girls should marry boys instructed by the friars, so that the Christian conception of marriage could spread. But the *beatas* had also the task of teaching native girls how to protect their honor and form "a new awareness of their status as persons, so they would not allow themselves to be given away or sold by their parents to powerful Spaniards or indigenous *caciques*."³³ This intention was put into practice through the teaching of the Christian doctrine and of typical women's housework and activities.

But soon the *maestras* abandoned the schools to teach in private houses where they were better paid, one of the reasons the education of native girls started to collapse. In fact, it should be added that indigenous families, especially fathers, were not particularly well disposed to giving their daughters to the friars. Moreover, they were educated according to Spanish habits, so that the indigenous

boys they were supposed to marry refused them fearing they had lost the traditional skills a woman should have.³⁴ In particular, native girls were taught a different conception of relationships and work inside the family according to which the woman did not have to work to support her husband and children, as this responsibility was transferred to the man. Therefore, the attempt to educate native girls failed by the middle of the sixteenth century.

However, the penetration of Christian ideology had more lasting consequences. Female honor and purity, the nuclear family based on hierarchical gender patterns and a more marked division between a male, public sphere and a female, domestic one all contributed to modifying women's status by the seventeenth century.

In addition, women's legal identity became intertwined with that of their husbands; they did not act independently in legal cases, as they had before. Moreover, many of the social institutions in which they played a key role (like churches and schools) were disrupted.³⁵ As a consequence, they lost their status in society and their sources of authority outside the family.

WOMEN'S REACTION

By the second half of the sixteenth century, with the failure of education for indigenous girls, it seemed that women were denied equal opportunities with men for social mobility and social status.³⁶ In the same period, a few forms of reaction began to appear: Indian women were experimenting with new paths outside the former political and religious structures.³⁷

In general, female opposition was not aimed directly against the friars; however, it can be viewed partly as a result of the Christian ideology's model of women they had introduced, thus making a brief analysis worthwhile.

One response was witchcraft, through which native women tried to reverse the usual order imposed by men acting within the private sphere. They developed patterns of beliefs and acts as a sort of retaliation against the more open forms of male violence.³⁸ It was a kind of reaction that involved all women, since they all shared a subordinate position in society, but indigenous women played a key role because they held the secret of potions and herbal mixtures. Consequently, *mestizas* and *criollas* went to indigenous women for help. Being confined to the private sphere, women tried to use witchcraft to react against male dominance, especially at the most private level, that of sexuality. For instance, herbs were used for magical spells to make a man impotent, as the case of Magdalena de la Mata, a *mestiza* who received the following prescription from an indigenous woman: "Take an egg, pierce it with a straw, and place in it a few of her husband's hairs. Then bury the egg in the ground where her husband urinated," and he would become impotent.³⁹ This was seen as a blow against the main symbol of male power.

However, native women also manifested their response more publicly, in the courts. They frequently applied to the courts charging their husbands or other men for abuse or mistreatment, especially for adultery and battery. Moreover, they used lawsuits to defend their property, for which they even acted against

the Spanish on behalf of their husbands. Again, this was not used against the friars, but it proves a reaction and an active attitude vis-à-vis the model of passive woman the political and religious authorities were trying to impose. "Women's frequent participation in the courts, where all of the officials were men and proceedings were lengthy and complex, belies a passive and naive role."⁴⁰

The fact that native women crowded the courts may be seen also as a way to compensate for the lack of power and authority they suffered with the disruption of the ancient institutions like schools and temples.⁴¹

However, as we have seen before, during the seventeenth century the number of women who independently began a lawsuit decreased and their legal status became intertwined with their husbands'.⁴² This means that men were gradually gaining control over this instrument of female resistance, and in fact the number of men bringing cases on behalf of women later increased.

CONCLUSION

Women's reaction did not prevent the friars from continuing to interfere in indigenous family life. Despite everything, indigenous women offered a unique opportunity for penetrating the private sphere. But on the other hand, the friars were unable to disassociate the vision of the native woman from its negative component, her connection with the Devil. In practice, she continued to be conceived as His favorite instrument to deceive men due to her weakness and temperament. Few expressed this idea better than Friar

Andrés de Olmos when he wrote, "Women allow themselves to be dominated by wrath and ire; they are easily angered; they are jealous and envious; making others suffer, imposing torments on them, they try to quiet their own hearts and they easily long for sad, painful things to happen to others. This is why it is said that they follow the Devil, who aids them in doing what they desire."⁴³

This ambiguity in the friars' vision of indigenous women still leaves some points up in the air. It is not completely clear, for example, why the friars abandoned indigenous girls' education if it was so important to them for transmitting the new values to indigenous families through women. Moreover, how effective the friars were in instilling Christian ideology in the native private realm is still to be researched. The research area is open and the gap waiting to be filled with studies of local, concrete cases. ■■

NOTES

¹ Elinor C. Burkett, "Indian women and white society: the case of 16th century Peru," Asunción Lavrin, ed., *Latin American Women. Historical Perspectives* (Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1978), pp. 119-20.
² Silvia M. Arrom, *The Women of Mexico City 1790-1857* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1985), p. 55; Susan Kellogg, *Law and the Transformation of Aztec Culture 1500-1700* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), pp. 105-106; Asunción Lavrin, "In Search of the Colonial Woman in Mexico: the 17th and 18th Centuries," Lavrin, op. cit., p. 30. Two other bodies of law are worthy of note: the *Ordenamiento de Alcalá* and the *Ordenanzas de Castilla*.
³ Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, ed., *Familias novohispanas. Siglos XVI al XIX*, Seminario de Historia de la Familia, Centro de Estudios Históricos (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1991), p. 12.
⁴ Susan M. Deeds, "Double Jeopardy: Indian Women in Jesuit Missions of Nueva Vizcaya," Susan

Schroeder et al., eds., *Indian Women of Early Mexico* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), pp. 262-3.
⁵ Arrom, op. cit., pp. 93-97.
⁶ Kellogg, op. cit., pp. 105-106 and Susan Kellogg, "From Parallel and Equivalent to Separate but Unequal. Tenochca Mexica Women 1500-1700," Schroeder, op. cit., p. 140.
⁷ Kellogg, *Law and the Transformation...*, pp. 114-115; Asunción Lavrin, "Sexuality in Colonial Mexico: A Church Dilemma," in A. Lavrin, ed., *Sexuality and Marriage in Colonial Latin America* (Lincoln, Nebraska and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 65.
⁸ Luise M. Burkhart, "Mexica Women on the Home Front," Schroeder, op. cit., pp. 25-6, 31-2, 52; Susan Kellogg, "The Woman's Room: Some Aspects of Gender Relations in Tenochtitlan in the Late Pre-Hispanic Period," *Ethnohistory* 42 (1995), pp. 564-6.
⁹ Kellogg, op. cit., pp. 565-569.
¹⁰ June Nash, "The Aztecs and the Ideology of Male Dominance," *Signs* 4 (1978), p. 353.
¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 361.
¹² Kellogg, *Law and the Transformation...*, p. 96.
¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 88-91.
¹⁴ Burkhart, op. cit., pp. 22 and 52.
¹⁵ Kellogg, "From Parallel and Equivalent...", pp. 125-126; Kellogg, *Law and the Transformation...*, pp. 164-165.
¹⁶ Burkhart, op. cit., pp. 33-34.
¹⁷ Serge Gruzinski, *The Conquest of Mexico* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p. 174.
¹⁸ Friar Andrés de Olmos, *Tratado de hechicerías y sortilegios* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1990), p. 19.
¹⁹ Schroeder, op. cit., p. 9; Burkhart, op. cit., p. 52.
²⁰ Josefina Muriel, *Las mujeres de Hispanoamérica. Época colonial* (Madrid: Editorial MAPFRE, 1992), p. 115. On the role of native women as cultural mediators, see Clara S. Kidwell, "Indian Women as Cultural Mediators," *Ethnohistory* 39 (1992), pp. 97-107.
²¹ Friar Toribio de Benavente Motolinía, *Memoriales o Libro de las cosas de la Nueva España* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1971), pp. 315-316.
²² Friar Juan de Torquemada, *Monarquía indiana* (Mexico: UNAM, 1977-79), Book 13, pp. 219 and 238.
²³ Burkhart, op. cit., p. 27.
²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

²⁵ For this and more detailed information about confession see Serge Gruzinski, "Individualization and Acculturation: Confession among the Nahuas of Mexico from the 16th to the 18th Century," in Lavrin, *Sexuality and Marriage...*, pp. 96-111.
²⁶ Deeds, op. cit., p. 261.
²⁷ Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, *Historia de la educación en la época colonial. El mundo indígena* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1990), pp. 222-224.
²⁸ Motolinía, op. cit., p. 258.
²⁹ Muriel, op. cit., pp. 138-139. Other references: Gonzalbo A., op. cit., pp. 25-26, 153-154; Lavrin, ed., *Latin American Women...*, p. 9; Deeds, op. cit., p. 259.
³⁰ Friar Gerónimo de Mendieta, *Historia eclesiástica indiana* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1971), pp. 318, 419-420; Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, "Paideia cristiana o educación elitista: un dilema en la Nueva España del siglo XVI," *Historia mexicana* 33 (1984), pp. 191-192; José M. Kobayashi, *La educación como conquista (empresa franciscana en México)* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1974). The friars' intention was to educate the children of the noble families as an example to the whole society.
³¹ In date 1529; Muriel, op. cit., p. 73; Gonzalbo A., *Historia de la educación...*, p. 82.
³² Kobayashi, op. cit.; Muriel, op. cit., pp. 63-73; Gonzalbo A., *Historia de la educación...*, pp. 81-82.
³³ Muriel, op. cit., p. 64; Kobayashi, op. cit. An example of this is given in Motolinía, op. cit., p. 260.
³⁴ Kobayashi, op. cit.
³⁵ Kellogg, *Law and the Transformation...*, pp. 111-115, 205-210.
³⁶ Actually, indigenous girls went on to be educated only in the *patio* of the convents, while renewed interest in founding institutions grew during the eighteenth century (Muriel, op. cit., pp. 87-89).
³⁷ Kidwell, op. cit., p. 10.
³⁸ For witchcraft in colonial Mexico, see Ruth Behar, "Sexual Witchcraft, Colonialism, and Women's Power: Views from the Mexican Inquisition," Lavrin, ed., *Sexuality and Marriage...*, pp. 179-198.
³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 184-185.
⁴⁰ Lisa M. Sousa, "Women and Crime in Colonial Oaxaca," Kidwell, op. cit., p. 202. On the way native women used the courts in colonial times, see Kellogg, *Law and the Transformation...*, op. cit.
⁴¹ Kellogg, *Law and the Transformation...*, p. 107.
⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33, 87-88.
⁴³ Friar Andrés de Olmos, op. cit., pp. 48-49.