Webb, David
The nahua annal'. Genre from the sixteenth and seventeenth century (Mexico)
Scripta Ethnologica, vol. XXVII, 2005, pp. 9-23
Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas
Buenos Aires, Argentina

Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=14811516001
THE NAHUA ANNAL’. GENRE FROM THE SIXTEENTH AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURY (MEXICO)

David Webb *

Summary: In this paper the author explores the transition from the pictorial and semasiographic Nahua writing systems to alphabet prose in the Nahua annals during the XVI and XVII centuries. He traces these changes through the Codex Mexicanus, the Codex Aubin and the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca. The transition to the alphabetic script was necessary to compete with the graphic systems of the Spaniards. The tlacuilo (writers) were aware of the European bias towards the pictographic representation and slowly integrated the Nahuatl alphabetic script. However, the pictorial mode persisted as a counter discourse, underscoring indigenous influence and ethnic pride during the colonial period.

Key words: Nahuah codex, pictorial systems, alphabetic writings, XVI- XVII centuries, Mexico

Introduction

The Nahuas of Central Mexico employed a complex system of pictorial, semasiographic narrative strategies before the arrival of the Spaniards. The genres include genealogies, cartographic histories, migrations, divinatory texts and the annals. The Nahuas employed the term icuiloa, meaning both to write and to paint, since no distinction was made between the two artistic styles. The preconquest, pictorial annals were called xiuhpohualli (year-writing) or altepetlacuilolli (altepetl writing). This form of writing focuses on important events from each calendar year and was the most effective means of relating an altepetl’s history. The writer was a tlacuilo (a native scribe) who wrote or painted usually in tlilli in tlapalli (in the black and the red). Topics recorded were generally those of interest to the altepetl, especially meteorological events, military battles as well as public spectacles and religious festivals.

Although the annals were produced before the arrival of the Spaniards, all of the extant annals date from the colonial period. The reason being that many Nahua altepetl re-recorded their histories in order to legitimate claims to territory and their rights among other altepetl, using both pictorial and alphabetic ways of writing. This article focuses specifically on the annals’ genre and the transition from pictorial to Nahuatl alphabetic graphic systems. To better understand the alphabetic annals of Chimalpahin and Zapata y Mendoza, I believe it is indispensable to overview the transition from a pictorial to an alphabetic ways of writing. To illustrate this transition, I will briefly allude to three annals that best demonstrate the transition from pictograms to alphabetic prose and better theorize why the semasiographic system ultimately ceded to transliterated Nahuatl prose. By doing so, we will understand that the definition of writing is distinct to the European standards of the evolution of literacy.

*University of Hawai‘i, Mānoa and Seabury Hall. E-mail: webbdavide@yahoo.com
Mignolo asserts that scholars have traditionally possessed a narrow view of definitions of literacy and for this reason, many of the indigenous writings of the Americas have been neglected or not been completely accepted as literature because many texts do not adhere to the traditional definitions of literacy by recording speech. He states the following regarding this misconception:

“...whereas in Walter Ong's conception, writing is limited to alphabetic or syllabic systems. For its part, book is a concept united with writing only in the conceptualization of a culture in which writing is understood in the restricted sense defined by Diringer and Ong” (Mignolo, 1995).

In light of this redefinition of the book, this article illustrates how various Nahua communities did indeed possess a legitimate means of writing and literacy. In these texts, the various tlacuilo attempted to inscribe and reinscribe their identities as a colonized culture. By studying this evolution from pictures to prose, we will be better equipped to understand the development and evolution of the annals.

I contend that the transition to the alphabetic script was necessary to compete with the graphic systems of the Spaniards while still using Nahuatl as the main source of communication. This method allowed individual native communities to posture as a disenfranchised minority under Spanish colonial institutions.

Pictorial writing

The study of the pictorial annals are out of the scope of this study but what is quintessential is the notion that the interaction of the Spanish and Nahua writing traditions was crucial in the evolution of the postconquest annals. Although the majority of the preconquest codices were destroyed during the Conquest and its aftermath, many sixteenth-century annals employ preconquest graphic methods. This writing tradition did not adhere strictly to the definition of literacy in the European/Mediterranean sense. Only the earlier Maya had a system that approximated the reproduction of sounds and syllables recreating whole sentences. For reasons that are not clear, the Nahuas did not continue with the Mayan phonetic writing tradition. Instead, they employed conventionalized signs representing images such as the sun, mountains, and water so that a reader who did not speak Nahuatl could readily understand the images. In many cases, especially with the annals, scribes would write or paint mnemonic hints capable of oral interpretation by other scribes trained in this form of expression. Only minor attempts were made at the syllabification or the reproduction of spoken Nahuatl. For this reason, many scholars have discounted these texts as true forms of writing because they do not precisely adhere to the theories of Walter Ong, who bases his evolution of literacy on the European writing traditions that strive to emulate speech.

The first mode of writing is through pictogram glyph, which is a form of direct expression. The glyph is usually a one-to-one representation, so a pictogram of a stone represents a stone. The second type of expression is an ideogram or logogram, typically consisting of two or more elements combined to communicate the subject matter. An example is the depiction of the altepetl, which uses the two elements, atl-water, and tepetl-mountain (the two essential
Residual preconquest modes of writing: Codex Mexicanus

Although the use of alphabetic text spread quickly throughout the preconquest Nahua communities of Central Mexico, there are a few year-count histories that reveal little European influence. One of these, the Codex Mexicanus, written in 1571 by an anonymous tlacuilo (native scribe), supports the thesis that the infiltration of the alphabet in the Nahua annals was not consistent, illustrating the persistence of pictograms in the postconquest period (Lockhart, 1992: 330-331). The Mexicanus is a history of the beginnings of the Mexica people from their exodus from the mythical Aztlan, the establishment of the Aztec Empire and their experience under Spanish colonial rule. The last date of the Mexicanus is denoted by the year-glyph 1608. Its means of recording history is consistent with preconquest modes of record keeping that uses pictographic forms of representation to illustrate the rise of the Mexica.

The year-count relations in the Codex Mexicanus begin in leaf sixteen, which illustrates the departure of the Mexica in the year One Flint (1668). This event has been depicted in other manuscripts but the Codex Mexicanus stands apart from other colonial annals in that are entirely in pictographic form. The Mexicanus’ year-glyphs are placed horizontally, depicting their leader, Huitzilopochtli, having just ascended the One Flint year-glyph followed by the Mexica people. The Mexica were not initially a dominant force at the outset and “began their migration as a small and insignificant band of uncultured people” (Boone, 1994: 30). At this juncture, the Mexica were a small group of people following their leader, Huitzilopochtli, during the initial stages of their long and arduous journey to the Valley of Mexico. Huitzilopochtli is depicted in his hummingbird apparel. The migration continues in the Codex Mexicanus with the first fifty years rendered pictographically. The year One Rabbit, 1194, illustrates the legendary caves of Chicomoztoc with the seven other Nahua tribes emerging from their mythological origin. In many native writings these places are not identified, but the Mexicanus shows clearly that the Mexica begin their arduous journey from Aztlan and distinguishes them from other Nahuatl-speaking communities. As we will see in the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca, the place of the seven caves is emphasized as the common origin of all Nahua.

The Codex Mexicanus changes from a pictographic representation to Nahua alphabetic script at this point in the manuscript. While the pictograms narrate the various events pertinent to the early years of the migration of the Mexica, the Nahua script relates a different story. According to Ernst Mengin: “Ce texte, obscur, de caractère
astrologique, énumère les douze signes du zodiaque et indique le sort réservé aux êtres nés sous chaque signe" (Mengin, 1954: 423). Instead of employing the pictorial elements to emulate the oral component of the text, the written Nahuatl relates irrelevant details of the story, which is a characteristic more common in the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca.

As quickly as the Nahuatl alphabetic text appears in the Codex Mexicanus it falls out of use for the remainder of the manuscript, after which no more than a few words are employed. The Mexicas' arrival in Chapultepec is denoted by its ideogram of the hill and a grasshopper to represent the year-glyph Nine Reed (1267). Here, Huitzilopochtli warns his people that this place is not their destination as he senses hostility from the Culhua people. The battle between the two tribes is depicted in leaf thirty-eight atop the year-glyph One House (1285). Other battles are rendered in ensuing years during which the Mexica undergo further hardships following their arrival in the Valley of Mexico. Their fortune changes, however, when they stumble upon their long-foretold destination. This is depicted when Huitzilopochtli is illustrated leading his people to Tenochtitlan. Folio 44v contains the cactus, which is the ideogram place-name for Tenochtitlan (the place of the great, prickly cactus).

The formation of the Aztec empire is portrayed in the year next One-Flint year (1324) in the cyclical Aztec calendar. The Mexicanus now depicts the beginnings of the Mexicas' imperial history and the subsequent domination of other Indians and their lands. The first fifty years in Tenochtitlan is a period of growth and little information recorded. The Codex Mexicanus, next, illustrates the rise of the Mexicas' first tlatoani (the ruler or speaker) in the year One Flint. His name-glyph is denoted by the ideogram, A camapichtli (Handful of Arrows). His glyph is depicted with speech scrolls emanating from his mouth and a hand grasping three arrows.

The next series of glyphs portray the formation of the Triple Alliance of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tlacopan, following the loss of control by the Tepanecs. The first ruler of the alliance was Itzcoatl, who was installed in office in the year One Flint (1428) and is depicted by the tlatoani pictogram paired with his serpent name glyph. His reign strengthened the Aztecs' foothold in central Mexico, expanding the empire outside the Valley.

The ensuing pages depict the Mexica as a growing empire after further conquests in central Mexico. Curiously, the annals also illustrate military defeats and natural disasters that cause setbacks for the Triple Alliance, so that both positive and negative aspects of their history are highlighted. One of these is their defeat at the hands of the Huexotzinca people, in the year Six House (1485). The Huexotzinca place-sign is depicted atop the victor who is slaying a Mexica foe. Many earthquakes, floods and droughts are illustrated with pictograms and ideograms. An example is the earthquake that occurred in the year Ten House, which is illustrated by the movement of rocks. The years of Eleven Rabbit and Twelve Reed illustrate locusts devouring the crops and hailstorms that severely depleted the food supply. However, these setbacks do not receive the same treatment and attention to detail as the great achievements and the rise of the Aztec Empire.

The glyph One Reed (1519) marks the year of the Spaniards' descent to the Valley of
Mexico. This final section of the Codex Mexicanus reveals the installation of colonial institutions and ends with a final entry in 1590. Leaves seventy-six and seventy-seven of the Codex Mexicanus recreate the events that stem from Mexicas’ overthrow as a dominant entity in the Valley as well as the introduction of Christianity. Hernando Cortés is shown on a lord’s throne adjacent to Moctezuma II, who has an arrow piercing his neck, symbolizing his death.

While the formidable Triple Alliance was highly depicted in the preconquest years, empire, details of the Mexicas diminish in the postconquest years. For instance, the author pictures Hernando Cortés over the year-glyph 1516 instead of the accurate year, 1519. The arrival of the original twelve Franciscans is pictured in 1528, and not in 1524. The arrival of the first viceroy, Don Antonio de Mendoza, in 1535, receives the same rendering as the rise to power of a Mexica tlatoani. In addition, it is important to note that the Spanish socio-political institutions that are imposed upon the Mexica are not dwelled on by the native tlacuilo rather depicted as a historical continuum.

In conclusion, the Codex Mexicanus retains many preconquest graphic characteristics. An example of this tendency is how the procession of time is codified using individual date glyphs in conjunction with pictograms or ideograms atop or beside year glyphs. Also, the Mexicanus employs very little alphabetic script. The glyphs do not strive to emulate speech, but merely act as mnemonic cues to be interpreted by the reader. The discourse emphasizes the official history of the Mexica and, although mentions negative occurrences during the rise of the Aztec Empire, the text often glosses over or neglects details that would detract from their grandeur. This suppression or omission of information that detracts from a positive projection of an altepetl is consistent in many annals.

Alphabetic and pictographic hybrid graphic expressions: codex aubin

Whereas Codex Mexicanus is a paradigm for the least acculturated annals of the sixteenth century, the Codex Aubin displays pictorial and alphabetic graphic scripts working together to create meaning. The Codex Aubin is another interpretation of the Mexicas’ beginnings, rise to power and subsequent defeat by the Spaniards. The Aubin, like the Mexicanus, employs the year-glyphs as the backbone of its presentation. The name-glyphs run vertically instead of horizontally and are placed to the left of the page along with the corresponding explanation in written Nahuatl found in the middle and the pictographic representation to the far right.

Like the Codex Mexicanus, the beginning of the text indicates the Mexicas’ departure from Aztlan but employs distinct graphic modes of presentation. The name, Aztlan, is written alphabetically under its place glyph with Huitzilopochtli perched on top of the place glyph. The following pages of the Aubin describe the Mexicas’ departure from Aztlan, their patron deity Huitzilopochtli as well as other Nahuas tribes from their aforementioned place of origin.

The text reads vertically instead of horizontally during the next portion. In the year One Acatl the Mexica purportedly receive the maguey plant from the Chalca and make the fermented pulque beverage for the first time. The maguey plant is pictured to
the right of the year-glyph with a brief written description below. The Aubin goes on to relate in detail the Mexicas’ encounters with different groups before arriving in the Valley of Mexico. The Mexicas’ arrival in Chapultepec is unmistakable, as its place glyph occupies most of the page. The grasshopper is shown atop a hill under the date glyph One Rabbit and the Nahuatl script describes how the Culhua overpower the Mexica. The year One Flint (1324) portrays the eagle perched on the giant cactus rooted in the rocks, which denotes the place Huitzilopochtli had foretold would be their home. At this juncture, the two codices, the Mexicanus and Aubin, share many similarities in the manner in which they portray the Mexicas’ humble beginnings. However, the mode of portrayal varies considerably as the Aubin often includes entire pages of written Nahuatl that expand on important events and clarify ambiguities. The written Nahuatl serves as the preconquest oral component, which is an interpretation of the glyphs.

The following pages contain very few date-glyphs with any information and the scribe reverts to a horizontal portrayal. The first tlatoani of Tenochtitlan’s royal dynasty, Acamapichtli, is mentioned in the year One Flint. The second and third rulers are denoted by their name glyphs with the alphabetic text to the right. The Codex Aubin does not present any important information until it portrays the great flood of One Rabbit in 1454. In this year, Mexica families were forced, on many occasions, to sell their children into slavery (Boone, 1994: 50). Leaf 35r of the Aubin portrays slaves tied to one another and being led to the Gulf Coast to be sold to the Totonacs of Veracruz.

A xayacatl’s ascent to the throne is pictured in the year Five Reed and a string of victories depicts his twelve-year reign. What is not indicated, however, is the Mexicas’ defeat by the Tarascans of Michoacán during these years. Also depicted in A xayacatl’s reign, is the dedication of the completed Templo Mayor in the year Eight Reed (1487). The scene also describes how sacrificial victims were brought from outlying altepetl to consecrate the Templo Mayor. Reports from supporting historical documents estimate that as many as 20,000 people were sacrificed in this dedication. This event is portrayed in great detail and confirmed that the nascent Aztec Empire was a force to be reckoned within central Mexico.

Moctezuma Xocoyotzin II’s earlier accomplishments are often overshadowed by the Spaniards’ arrival. Although he did expand the Empire during his eighteen-year reign from 1502-1520, he is perceived to have facilitated the Spaniard’s entry and subsequent conquest of the Empire. The Spaniards’ arrival is noted as the tlacuilo departs from representational model to describe the events between 1519 and 1521. He speaks of the first sign of the Caxtilteca (Spaniards), their arrival in the Valley of Mexico and the occupation of the city and its downfall in the year Five Reed. The Codex Aubin contains a large section of written Nahuatl describing the Spaniards’ arrival and conquest of Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec Empire.

Subsequent to the Aztecs’ rise to power as an imperial state, the Codex Aubin also describes the early colonial period. The Aubin depicts the first portion of the period in great detail, as opposed to the Mexicanus, which lacks specificity regarding dates and other pertinent details. The arrival of the twelve Franciscans is noted under the correct year
marker, Six Flint (1524). There is a friar portrayed teaching religious doctrines to two Indians.

After portraying the Conquest, the Codex Aubin returns to its original horizontal composition. The arrival of don Antonio de Mendoza, the first viceroy of Mexico, is shown in 1536. The Codex Aubin also portrays the native perspective of society. One of the smallpox epidemics that eradicated much of the native population is rendered in the 1531 entry. The Nahuatl prose states that yuac totomonihuac (they broke out in blisters).

In the latter half of the sixteenth century the Codex Aubin portrays events in Mexico City. In this instance we see the use of phonetic glyphs to represent the names of Spanish officials. An example is in the year Three House (1573) when the governor, don Francisco Jimenez, died on Friday at midnight (Lockhart, 1992: 351). A collapsed body is portrayed by a phonetic glyph for Francisco: pan(ctli)-banner, ci(lin)-seashell and co(mitl) to form the Nahuatl pronunciation for Francisco-pancico.

Changes to Nahua political offices are also portrayed. In the same year, Antonio Valeriano is shown ascending to be judge of Tenochtitlan, portrayed by another phonetic representation. A figure is shown seated on a throne holding a Spanish staff with phonetic glyphs rendering his name: a(tl)and to(totl) or “a-to” for Antón.

While the Codex Mexicanus faithfully maintains preconquest discursive modes, the Codex Aubin represents an interstitial stage in which the alphabetic script is utilized to complement the pictorial elements. As Lockhart summarizes:

“Thus in the Codex Aubin, as in preconquest practice, the pictorial component identifies the topic and gives some basic information; the alphabetic text, assuming the role of the preconquest oral component, repeats the information and expands on it” (Lockhart, 1992: 351).

In some instances the Codex Aubin deviates from this scheme, but typically the text employs both graphic systems to create meaning and represents an important transition from pictures to prose in the annals’ genre in the sixteenth century.

European influences in mesoamerican writing practices: Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca (codex chimalpopocatl)

Whereas the Mexicanus and Aubin offer an official history of the Mexica and the Triple Alliance, the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca recounts the history of an ancillary altepetl, the Cuauhtinchan, from the Puebla region. The Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca is an elaborately constructed manuscript and is, curiously, the earliest of the three codices. The Historia was completed between 1545 and 1563 and the text displays obvious European influences (Kirchoff, et. al: 1976, 11-15). The Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca, despite its greater degree of European acculturation, retains some prehispanic graphic traditions. On occasion, it uses year-glyphs and pictorial elements, which serve as a framework for the Nahuatl alphabetic script. However, it represents the final step in the transition to Nahuatl alphabetic prose in the Nahua annals’ tradition.

The Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca begins with no mention of Aztlan, but rather starts in medias res. The text begins with a depiction of the Nonoaulaca arriving in Tollan with their allies, the Tolteca-
Chichimeca. After this time, a schism develops between the two groups because of a boy named Huemac who "... requests four virgins whose buttocks measure four spans across" (Leibsohn: 1993, 301). Although a year-glyph is present, the action is communicated predominately by the alphabetic script. The boy’s request incites animosities between the two groups who finally resolve their quarrels by killing Huemac. Afterward, the Nonoualca leave Tollan in disgrace. At this juncture in the year Two House, they divide and leave the Tolteca-Chichimeca group. Leibsohn (1993: 312) notes, "... they do not say good-bye, just because of fear". The Nonoualca now wander with some of their original group and establish their own altepetl. The place glyph for the Nonoulaca is the only pictorial component used in this instance with the Nahuatl alphabetic script occupying the majority of the page.

The following section focuses on the Tolteca-Chichimeca people, who remain in Tollan thirteen years after the departure of their former allies. At this juncture in the Historia, the tlacuilo refers to the Tolteca-Chichimeca people as just the Tolteca. This is done to distinguish them from the Chichimeca who later re-enter the history. This portion of the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca, which occupies seven leaves, depicts the Tolteca’s migration to Cholula and includes vibrant illustrations. This added dimensionality and shading are examples of European influences, however, the indigenous year-count model is still used. Unlike the Codex Aubin, which maintains a specific pattern throughout, the Historia Tolteca Chichimeca contains more prose than illustrations.

The Olmeca-Xicalanca group occupies the Cholula area but grants permission to the Tolteca to live among them. This is depicted in the detailed illustrations, subsumed in f.9v and f.10r, and expanded on in the following pages in the prose section. This arrangement becomes increasingly unsatisfactory for the Tolteca who wish to be a sovereign group and devise a ruse to defeat their hosts. The Nahuatl alphabetic script, in leaves 11r through 13v, describes the dance they pretend to perform for the Olmeca-Xicalanca. However, during the performance they ambush them and assume control (Leibsohn, 1993: 324-328). In the conclusion of this part of the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca, the tlacuilo outlines the new boundaries that the Tolteca have redrawn after emerging as the controlling power of the area.

The third section of the Historia occupies the majority of the manuscript and relates the outcome of the battle and the subsequent transfer of power to the Tolteca. The Historia now illustrates how the Tolteca maintain control of the Cholula area. Under the advice of their deity, Mocochehe, the Tolteca leaders travel to the cave of Chicomoztoc. Here they seek and receive the aid of the Chichimeca who reside in the cave. The depiction of this event is found in the multi-colored illustration of the Chicomoztoc. This scene is illustrated in full detail and explained again in the alphabetic section.

After much discussion between the various leaders, the Chichimeca people emerge from the cave and engage in a fasting ritual to do penance and gain strength for the ensuing battles. This full-page illustration depicts the four Chichimeca leaders, perched on separate trees with eagles above two and jaguars over the others. After the four-day fast, the seven
groups emerge from the cave in route to Cholula to aid the Tolteca in securing their sovereignty.

The succeeding leaves illustrate the groups’ return trek to Cholula to fight a battle against the Olmeca. The Chichimeca continue their sojourn because of the necessity to find a region in which to settle. The remainder of this section focuses on the Chichimeca’s establishment of their altepetl. The only groups that are mentioned from this point on are the Totomihuaque and Cuauhtinchantlaca. In this section of the text the alphabetic portion occupies more and more of the discourse.

Whereas the third portion of the Historia constitutes the largest portion of the text, the final section covers the longest time span, from the mid-twelfth century through the initial years of the colonial era. It deals specifically with the development of the Cuauhtinchan altepetl, its conquests and military battles, the relocation of people in various communities and the succession of rulers or tlatoque. Here, the tlacuilo abandons his detailed pictures and writes lengthy entries in Nahuatl prose.

The Cuauhtinchan have unstable beginnings but eventually develop into a formidable altepetl on the eve of the Spanish conquest. Their loss to the Tlatelolca is noted in the year Ten Rabbit in leaves 43v and 43r. The text has a full-page illustration depicting the Cuauhtinchan surrounded by the Tlaxcalans. A gain, European artistic influence is evident in the variegated color schemes. Leibsohn notes that, “...the body proportions of the warriors and their poses also derive from European paintings and/or prints” (Leibsohn, 1993: 390). Also noteworthy in this illustration is the bearded warrior that resembles a Spaniard clad in native garments. Leibsohn observes that this event constitutes one of two upheavals that have irrevocable repercussions on the Cuauhtinchan’s sovereignty (Leibsohn, 1993: 309). The second event occurs sixty-nine years later in the year Thirteen Rabbit when the Mexica, under Axayacatzin’s reign, dominate the altepetl of Cuauhtinchan and divide its land among five communities. Although the Cuauhtinchan gain some power, the Mexica subjugates them by the time of the Spanish conquest.

The colonial era receives little mention in the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca. The final four leaves portray the Spanish conquest and the imposition of Spanish cultural and socio-economic institutions. The final event mentioned in the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca is a land dispute in the colonial era between Cuauhtinchan and Tepeaca, during which the viceroy approves the petition supporting the Cuauhtinchan.

In conclusion, the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca exemplifies a further transition from pictures to prose in the Nahua annals and also is a counter discourse to the mainstream imperial history of the Aztec Empire. Its complicated narrative style traces the establishment of the Chichimeca as an autonomous altepetl in the late postclassic period, with particular emphasis placed on the Cuauhtinchan community. The tlacuilo aggrandizes his altepetl throughout the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca and attempts to reinscribe his community from the margins into the discursive mainstream in the sixteenth century. This text is also indispensable because it shows how the illustrations no longer work together with the prose to create meaning, but rather serve as
pictures that are, in many cases, irrelevant to the text. These illustrations, although found in some texts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, are rarely employed, as is seen in the following section with the beginning of the “mature” annals, which use predominately Nahuatl alphabetic prose to record the histories of an altepetl.

Toward an alphabetic form of expression

The Franciscan friar Motolinía, describing the five types of record keeping, states that only the annals “...can be trusted because it recounts the truth...” (Motolinía, 1941: 4-5). A perusal of these codices, however, casts doubt on this statement but does call attention to the importance placed on the annals’ genre in colonial Mexico. In each annals, an anonymous tlacuilo typically emphasizes the positive aspects of their altepetl’s history and suppressed the negative ones in an attempt to compete with other native communities in territorial disputes and to improve their lot under Spanish hegemony. In both the Codex Mexicanus and the Codex Aubin, the narrative thrust underscores the hardships of the Mexica people during the migrations to the Valley of Mexico, while the various successes following the establishment of the Triple Alliance are accentuated. The Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca, in contrast, offers a rendition of history that stresses the accomplishments of the Tolteca-Chichimeca groups. The Cuauhtinchan tlacuilo highlights some events while reducing the importance of others. An example of this strategy is encountered during the scene depicting the seven original Chichimeca groups, about which Leibsohn notes: “In setting these two groups apart from an anonymous Chichimeca rank and file, the Historia inflates their significance as it deflates the contribution of other groups” (Leibsohn, 1993: 113). In addition, the final portion of the text depicts the Cuauhtinchan’s military defeats and misfortunes are emphasized in order to communicate the unjust manner by which the Mexica usurped their territories and further divided their land among other groups. By establishing this preconquest precedent, the native communities were in a better position to present their land claims to Spanish officials.

If these annals were meant solely for delegations between various altepetl, as Leibsohn asserts (Leibsohn, 1993: IX-X), then the question arises as to why the tlacuilo chose to implement the European script when pictographic writing was equally effective and more universally understood (Mignolo, 1989: 51-96). The alphabet was one of the characteristics of the Spanish hegemony and was employed by other annalists, such as Chimalpahin and Zapata, who had more contact with Spaniards. The anonymous tlacuilo were also aware of the European bias toward the pictographic representation and slowly integrated the Nahuatl alphabetic script. However, the pictographic method did persist in many texts as a counter discourse, underscoring the indigenous influence and ethnic pride during the colonial period.

Annals written in Nahuatl prose

Although I have postulated that the residual pictographic and logographic forms persisted, the Nahuatl prose in Latin script was the predominant way of writing in the
annals after 1600. This section discusses the annals written in the Nahuatl alphabet before the Historia Chronológica.

Possibly due to accidents of preservation, the annals from the sixteenth century are primarily from the Valley of Mexico while the seventeenth and eighteenth-century annals are from the Puebla-Tlaxcalan region. The authors are usually anonymous and their annals focus on precolonial times since the goal of the sixteenth-century annals was to exalt the accomplishments of the native altepetl before the Conquest.

One annalist who was prominent during the beginning of the seventeenth century is the aforementioned don Domingo de San Antón Muñón Chimalpahin Quauhtlehuanitzin, or Chimalpahin. Not only is he the author of many texts in Nahuatl and Spanish, but also he is one of the few annalists who signed their works (Schroeder, 1991: 20). The following section discusses Chimalpahin’s texts and establishes him as a quintessential predecessor to Zapata y Mendoza.

Chimalpahin wrote predominately in Nahuatl but also was the author of chronicles in Spanish. Curiously, Walter Mignolo asserts the following regarding Chimalpahin and his style of writing:

“The fact Chimalpahin still maintained in his writing the repetitive structure of the oral is indicative of the fractures of colonial semiosis in the transition from oral narratives, in which repetition is a part of everyday speech, to an alphabetic written prose”. (Mignolo, 1995).

I tend to differ in opinion from Mignolo’s assessment of Chimalpahin being a transitional annalist between the pictorial and alphabetic Nahuatl annalists. His structure is very much in the style of the mature, alphabetic annals although many of his sources are purported to be from older manuscripts and oral narratives from elders in his community.

Chimalpahin’s most famous and recognized Nahua annals are his Ocho Relaciones, divided into eight sub-histories that recall the history of Chalco, and which focus on his native sub-altepetl of Atemcapa. Chimalpahin attempts to illustrate his knowledge of both Indian and European histories by relating important dates and events to provide a transatlantic perspective to his annals.

The precolumbian portions of the Relaciones focus on the tribes who settle in the Chalco region. During the colonial period, Chimalpahin writes about the Spaniards’ presence in Chalco and the ecclesiastics who came to the New World. He speaks more approvingly of the Franciscans than of the other mendicant orders. Also, he uses the birth of Christ as a point of reference to many events, both Mesoamerican and European. The Octava Relación is somewhat different than the previous seven in that it is a history of Chimalpahin’s sub-altepetl of Tzaqualtitlan Tenanco (Schroeder, 1991: 22). In conclusion, the Relaciones are an invaluable source of information about native history in the Valley of Mexico, especially during the preconquest years. However, it is far from an objective account as we see on many occasions Chimalpahin’s biases towards other Nahua groups and most certainly emphasizes the history of his sub-altepetl of Tzaqualtitlan Tenanco throughout the narrative. The most recent and accurate study Chimalpahin’s Ocho Relaciones is Susan Schroeder’s Chimalpahin and the

Although Chimalpahin’s Relaciones are his most recognized annals, his Diario or contemporary annals provide a insightful record of his life in Mexico City from a native perspective. The Diario was written during his stay in the capital from 1589 to 1615 and is in the form of annals and relates life in the capital during the time he worked at the chapel of San Antón Abad. Doris Namala’s doctoral dissertation focuses on the Diario and sheds light on colonial society and culture in Mexico City in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The Diario is, in many ways, more akin to Zapata’s Historia Chronológica because it provides a first-hand commentary of events. Chimalpahin, however, was not from Mexico City and remained outside the native elite, in contrast to Zapata.

A more recently discovered text residing in the British and Foreign Bible Society has been attributed to Chimalpahin. These manuscripts are part of the collection attributed to the mestizo historian Alva Ixtlilxochitl, which were traded for bibles in the nineteenth century by José María Luis Mora, the librarian of the Colegio de San Ildefonso in Mexico City (Schroeder, 1991: 20). Schroeder and Anderson published these manuscripts in a study entitled Codex Chimalpahin. The content of the manuscript focuses more on the histories of the Mexica and the Triple Alliance rather than Chimalpahin’s native Chalco. Chimalpahin is purported to be the author of “La conquista de México”, the oldest copy of the now-lost original of the second part of Francisco López de Gómara’s Historia de las Indias. Schroeder posits that, “Chimalpahin, while copying López de Gómara, took it upon himself to edit, correct, and expand the work where and when he saw fit” (Schroeder, 21). Schroeder is in the process of publishing an edition of this manuscript. In conclusion, we can surmise that Chimalpahin was one of, if not, the most prolific annalist in colonial Mexico, having written both annals and chronicles in both Spanish and English, regarding a variety of peoples, histories and subject matter.

As previously mentioned, the seventeenth-century annals are mostly from the Puebla-Tlaxcala region. There is a large corpus of annals written during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Frances Krug’s unfinished dissertation explores the connections and collaboration between the annalists of the various altepetl in this area. Like Chimalpahin’s annals, Zapata’s Historia Chronológica surpasses other annals from his time period because of its multidimensional characteristics and discursive style.

Final remarks

In conclusion, this paper explores the transition from pictograms to alphabet prose in the Nahua annals. I illustrate how the Codex Mexicanus, Codex Aubin and the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca provide clues as to why the glottified Nahuatl ultimately took hold, even though the pictorial element persisted as a complement to Nahuatl prose. This transition is important in illustrating how the alphabetic annals became the norm rather than the exception after the seventeenth century. Annalists such as Chimalpahin and the Tlaxcalan Zapata y Mendoza benefited greatly from their predecessors. The study of the evolution and growth of the annals’
genre, from its pictorial roots to its alphabetic Nahuatl means of expression, is indispensable in apprehending why the Nahua relinquished the preconquest modes of writing and also to underscore the persistence of an indigenous parallel discourse to Spanish letters during the colonial period.

Notes

1. Here I distinguish “glottographic” (or phonetic) writing systems that aim at representing speech, from “semasiographic” writing systems that communicate ideas independently of language.

2. Tlacuilo is the agentive of icuíloa (Lockhart: 1992, 326).

3. I use Lockhart, 1992: 326-329, as well as Galarza, 1979, as a guide to preconquest Nahua ways of writing.

4. I use Leibsohn’s doctoral dissertation for the Nahuatl translations and discussion of the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca. To date, her study is the first English translation of this text.

5. This information was communicated to me via personal communication from James Lockhart.

References

Boone, E. H.


Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitain, Francisco de San Antón Muñón

1983 Octava Relación (ed. Romero Galván, José Rubén). Mexico City: UNAM.


Galarza, J.

Karttunen, F.

Kirchoff, P.
Kirchoff, P., L. O. Güemes, L. Reyes García, (eds. and trans.)

Lehmann, W. and G. Kutscher

Leibsohn, D.

León-Portilla, M.

Lockhart, J.

Mengin, E.

Mignolo, W. de

Namala, D. M.

Schroeder, S.

Schroeder, S. and A. J.O. Anderson (eds.)

Zapata y Mendoza, J. B.

Resumen

En este trabajo el autor explora la transición de los sistemas pictográficos de los Nahua hacia escrituras de tipo alfabética durante los siglos XVI y XVII. La investigación rastrea los cambios a través del Codex Mexicanus, el Codex Aubin y la Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca. La transición a la escritura alfabética fue necesaria para competir con el sistema gráfico de los españoles. Los tlacuilco (amanuenses) tenían conocimiento de los problemas de los europeos para comprender las representaciones pictográficas y lentamente fueron introduciendo en el Nahuatl los signos del alfabeto español. No obstante, el modo pictórico de
expresión persistió como un contradiscuro, subrayando la influencia indígena y el orgullo étnico durante el período colonial.