

Sahagún and the world where new meets old

A literary and pictographic analysis of the ethnographic documents written in sixteenth century Mexico



Wouter Tempelman

- *These testimonies, as he (Sahagún) perceived and reiterated them, being bearers of wisdom and beauty, intertwined in a humanism distinct of that from Europe, enrich today the universal legacy of culture. – Miguel León-Portilla -*

Cover picture: Portrait of Bernardino de Sahagún by Cecil O’Gormon (Leon-Portilla 2002).

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Contents

- Preface.....	6
- Chapter 1: Introduction.....	7
○ 1.1: Main question.....	7
○ 1.2: Elaborated questioning.....	8
○ 1.3: Approach to this thesis and research methods....	8
○ 1.4: Archaeological significance of this thesis.....	9
○ 1.5: Theoretical framework.....	10
- Chapter 2: Sahagún's world and his place in it.....	16
○ 2.1: Sahagún's Spanish formation.....	17
○ 2.2: The order of Saint Franciscus and humanism.....	18
○ 2.3: Sahagún's Arrival in Mexico.....	19
○ 2.4: Conclusion.....	21
- Chapter 3: Ethnocentricity versus objectivity in Sahagún's writing.....	22
○ 3.1: The Primeros Memoriales.....	23
○ 3.2: The Historia general.....	29
○ 3.3: Conclusion.....	33
- Chapter 4: The Nahua reaction to the new religion.....	34
○ 4.1: Similarities between Nahua religion and catholic world view.....	34
○ 4.2: Susceptibility to conversion.....	37

○ 4.3: Conclusion.....	42
- Chapter 5: The use of terminology in describing the Nahua world.....	43
○ 5.1: Comparisons made with Satan and demons.....	43
○ 5.2: Terminology.....	49
○ 5.3: Conclusion.....	51
- Chapter 6: Sahagún's informants.....	52
○ 6.1: The illustrators of the Primeros Memoriales.....	53
○ 6.2: The assistants from the college of Santa Cruz....	54
○ 6.3: Conclusion.....	56
- Chapter 7: Conclusion.....	57
○ 7.1: Partial questions.....	57
○ 7.2: Case problem and its answer.....	59
- General glossary.....	61
- Summary.....	62
- Samenvatting (Dutch).....	63
- Bibliography sixteenth century sources.....	64
- Bibliography modern sources.....	65

- List of figures.....	67
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Preface

I would like to thank my parents for their support, my housemates for their vibrant lives and humour, my neighbours for not asking who that guy is that comes over every night, my dispute for always being the opposite of boredom, my friends for suffering my complaining, and Prof. Jansen for helping me in the process of writing this thesis.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Bernardino de Sahagún is an historical figure whose writings leave a variety of impressions on modern scholars. These vary from a view that it is the work of the first modern anthropologist (León-Portilla 2002, 10) or the work of a religious man in a medieval world, trying to root out the evil he perceives to be a threat by pulling himself away from medieval approaches, yet still upholding the belief in a living Satan that is corrupting the world (Browne 2000, 9). In my search for a thesis topic that comes as close as possible to a textbook example of the clash of two cultures, Sahagún's work was the finish line. I will use the limited space that I have for this thesis to make an in-depth analysis of Sahagún's writing and of the social, political, and religious environment that shaped the man that produced these writings. I will also try to give as clear a picture as possible of the different writers, assistants, and informants that aided Sahagún in his lifetime project to document the gods, religious beliefs and ritual practices of the native Nahuatl population of Mexico. I will do this because Sahagún was not a lone writer researching the indigenous people by himself. The information included in his written works were gathered by native informants and written down by Sahagún's assistants who were also of native origin.

Please note that the given space for this BA thesis and the amount of time given to write it I can never present a full coverage of Sahagún, his writing, and his legacy. This thesis simply serves as an introductory paper for those who would like to begin a reading into the works that Sahagún left us.

1.1: Main question

The general question of this thesis is:

- To what degree and in what manner can a clear confrontation be measured between Fray Bernardino de Sahagún and the Nahuatl population, which he studied during the 16th century in Mexico?

A more specific question is:

- With what intentions and prejudices does Fray Bernardino de Sahagún describe the customs and beliefs of the indigenous Nahua population, inhabiting the basin of Mexico, in his written works from his arrival in Mexico in 1529 to his death in 1590?

1.2: Elaborated questioning

From the above mentioned questions follow a number of sub questions. The sub questions are:

1. How can the social, political, and religious atmosphere in sixteenth century Mexico be described and in what way could this have influenced the writings of Sahagún?
2. How do the Spanish and native Mexicans clash in matters of religion and worldview?
3. To what extent and with what examples can a Spanish-catholic ethnocentric way of thinking be recognized in the descriptions of native Nahua rituals in Sahagún's work?
4. How does Sahagún describe the reaction of the native population to the Spanish presence and how much value does he attach to their opinions about this?
5. Does Sahagún describe Native ritual practices as a natural part of their society and culture, or as influences of the devil?
6. In what way, by using Sahagún's writing can it be determined what influences Sahagún's native students had on the eventual publications of his work?

1.3: Approach to this thesis and research methods

Bernardino de Sahagún spent two years in Tepepulco in the basin of Mexico, going there in 1558, gathering his original information and then a year and a half in Tlatelolco with Nahuas who "amended, explained, and supplemented" the original information (Sahagún 1979 in Browne 2000, 208). This thesis consists of a literature analysis in which Bernardino de Sahagún's work will be handled as autonomous writings, separate from their author. This is not that difficult because there is very little known about Sahagún himself. The writing I will handle, which for the purpose of this thesis consists mostly of Sahagún's *Historia General de las*

cosas de Nueva España and his *Primeros Memorialos*, will be analysed using my own critical opinion on the structure, language, and themes of the books, but also using various analyses by people who have published various books and papers about Sahagún in their careers and know more about the subject than I do. The framework that will dominate my theoretical approach to Sahagún is *Cultural hybridity*, written by Peter Burke in 2009. This work highlights the processes and results of multiple concepts that are each the result of the merging of two or more separate aspects. The relevance of this work in writing this thesis lies in the fact that the works that Sahagún produced contain elements and influences that originate from separate cultures, namely Spanish and Nahua culture. The described rituals, the interpreted deities, and the drawn pictures are, in their final presentation to the reader, a completely new hybrid entity that is made up of elements that each hail from parts of the world that are very far apart, both culturally and geographically. Burke is therefore a good guide for elaborating the hybridity of Sahagún's writings and placing it into a broader, more general context.

Complimentary to the analysis of Sahagún's work, a picture will be sketched of Sahagún himself in order to gain an insight in the reasons behind the motivations that can be deducted from his writings. This is important to understanding the context within which his texts are written, and the understanding of the context is crucial in creating a reconstruction of Sahagún's life-world in Mexico in the 16th century. In the chapter about his person I will include a sketch of the political and religious situation in Spain and Mexico during the 90 year lifespan of Sahagún from AD 1499 to 1590.

1.4: Archaeological significance of this thesis

Sahagún's work is a large and elaborate collection of writings about the history, deities, religious beliefs, and ritual practices of the native population that inhabited the basin of Mexico in the Early Colonial period after the conquest of Tenochtitlan by Hernán Cortés in AD 1521 (León-Portilla 2002, 4). The documentation of the information in these books took many decades to be completed. After the Spanish takeover, nearly 80 percent of the native population died over a time span of barely a century because of diseases, maltreatment, and

social oppression (León-Portilla 2002, 73). The Spanish takeover also caused many plants, animals, and ideas to cross the Atlantic Ocean in both directions, which happened on such a large scale that we have not seen since.

The documentation by the native population cannot be consulted anymore because most of the codices and manuscripts were destroyed by the Spanish. If an archaeologist would want to excavate an Aztec site or research Aztec society, he or she would first consult the writings of Sahagún. It is filled with information on deities, rituals, plants and geographical elements that were of significance to the native inhabitants and therefore to the archaeologist who wants to create a reconstruction of Mexico in the 16th century.

Reasons why Sahagún's descriptions of rituals that were practiced are a primary source for archaeologists that want to understand the way of life in pre-colonial Mexico are his mastering of the Nahuatl language and the advisement of his native students at the College of Santa Cruz in Tlatelolco. Besides this, he also distances himself from his Franciscan brothers in his thoroughness and his position between a medieval and modern way of thinking, where medieval is defined as the notion that knowledge is pre-existing and derived from God, and modern is defined as the notion that knowledge is derived by and in the human mind (Browne 2000, 9).

1.5: Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this thesis concerns cultural hybridity. When discussing the hybridity of cultures I would like to define culture in a very broad sense. In it I include attitudes, mentalities, and values. I will analyse their expression, embodiment, or symbolization in artefacts, practices and representations (Burke 2009, 5). Hybridity, which is defined as something that exists out of multiple things, can sometimes give the idea of a harmonious concept, which is misleading because it is mostly disjointed and confrontational. Besides this, hybridity can also lead to the loss of roots and traditions. When we look at hybridity in Mexico we see the result of a past that was very confrontational and where hybridity was forced by the Christian missionary work. Besides this, Nahua rituals were mixed with Christian concepts.

Burke analyses hybridity in three categories: artefacts, practices, and people. When discussing the hybridity of artefacts we can take the example of architecture. Multiple people from many countries can be involved in the concept of construction in a single place. Like this, images can also have a hybrid make-up. When in colonial times original native images were copied by colonists they modified what they copied, assimilating it into their own traditions (Burke 2009, 15). Influence of art can spur development like in China where landscape artists were inspired by European influence but resisted taking this over, resulting in a development of a unique style. This can also be connected to Mexican paintings. Like the drawings that were made by Sahagún and his assistants, these were copied by European artists who incorporated their own style and thus creating a completely new style. Affinities between cultures can take part in the process of interaction whereby a foreign holy figure can be assimilated into a culture on the basis of similarities with a native holy figure.

Hybrid religious practices in many parts of the world are often the result of a mixture of local gods with catholic saints. An example of this is the West-African gods interacting with catholic saints among native tribes in South America. This also happened in Mexico during early colonial times among the Nahua population where the newly adopted catholic saints were incorporated into native rituals. This was definitely not what the catholic missionaries like Sahagún had in mind because their goal was the complete conversion of the native population to Christianity. The adoption of saints into native rituals is a practice that will be discussed later in this thesis. These hybrid forms are often the result of multiple encounters rather than one. Each new encounter may reinforce or modify the earlier ones and they can add new ingredients to the hybrid entity. A practice that is a good example of hybridity is carnival. This was transported from the Mediterranean area to the New World and enjoyed a grand appeal from all groups.

Written texts can be hybrids, especially in translations. Translations like Sahagún's *Primeros Memoriales* are accompanied by the "equivalent effect" whereby new words are added to make it readable for the new reader but it takes a step away from the original text. Sahagún did write with a specific reader in mind, namely the people in Spanish socially high circles. This influenced his writing whether purposely altering texts or not.

Hybrid groups of people are present in many parts of the world. These people could have gotten into this situation by being born in a hybrid environment, but also because of capture or conversion. The life in between two cultures can often result in a double consciousness (Gilroy 1993 in Burke 2009, 31). To me, this means being aware of the facets of two cultures that influence your environment and way of thinking while being affected by it. If we take the example of the assistants that helped Sahagún with the copying of Nahua pictographic writing, we are presented with young nobles that were probably born after the conquest of 1521 but still had connections to their native heritage. They were born into hybridity and were aware of the Christian way of thinking which had a dualistic character of good and evil. Besides this they were familiar with the Nahua way of thinking that did not have such a dualistic character.

Since antiquity, the process of cultural interaction has been described as one of imitation. An alternative to this definition is “appropriation”. This can best be explained as a process where only aspects that are useful are taken but the rest is left alone. A more neutral term that can be used in this context is cultural “borrowing”. I will describe a situation further in this thesis that is a good example of this: the adoption of Saint John into a Nahua ritual. Here we can see cultural borrowing as a process where a forced religious figure seems best suited to be incorporated in a ritual that the Nahua do not want to abandon completely.

Cultural interaction may lead to acculturation. This is a process where a subordinate culture is overwhelmed by a dominant culture and therefore adopts their traits. Criticism of this view by Fernando Ortiz stressed that one-way acculturation should be replaced by two-way trans-acculturation because effects resulting from interaction always go both ways. However, it should not be understood that a cultural movement in one direction is met by an equal movement in the opposite direction.

Accommodation is another term that is used within the concept of hybridity. In the middle ages it was given a religious context. It was applied to the idea that during christening the pagan churches should not be destroyed but converted in order to facilitate the acceptance of the new religion (Burke 2009, 42). Accommodation has been revived because of negativity surrounding the terms “acculturation” and “syncretism”, since these terms imply both a complete change

and a deliberate mixture, yet in most cases cultural change was more in the form of addition than substitution.

Mikhail Bakhtin conceived the theory that the hybrid was linked to two concepts: Heteroglossia and polyphony (Bakhtin 1975 in Burke 2009, 50). Heteroglossia refers to the diversity of language within a single text and polyphony to the different voices adopted in a novel.

The analogy has been made that understanding a culture is like understanding a language. Edward Evans-Pritchard was one of the first to offer this comparison. This eventually grew into a movement that claimed that anthropology is an art of translation. However, some languages contain words and phrases that are untranslatable. This is the case in cultural translation as well. Therefore it is important in research to pay attention to what is impossible to translate and incorporate this in future research.

Creolization is the process where a lingua franca becomes more complex after people start to use it for various purposes and even adopt it as their first language. Sometimes this results in the two languages merging into one distinct language where structure is taken from one, and its vocabulary from the other.

Taking the concepts of equal and unequal there is a great variety of response associated with them. When European missionaries came to China they were a minority and therefore had to adopt many Chinese customs in order to fit in. In Mexico the evangelization process did not go on equal terms. Missionaries were able to use force in imposing Christianity on the Indians. The “lender”, a term to indicate the opponent of the borrower, was the one to take initiative in this case. In many parts of the colonized world the converters thought they had achieved full conversion but the natives simply thought they had incorporated new elements into their old religion. This resulted in a “working misunderstanding” where two sides are in some degree aware of this problem but choose to avoid the subject in order to avoid open conflict.

Bilinguals can be involved in “code-switching” whereby they shift between one language and the other on different occasions. In cultural language we can take Sahagún’s informants as an example of this because they must shift between their native heritage and Christian education. “Code-switching” can often be accompanied by “interference” which means that bilinguals are unable to keep a

complete separation or segregation between their two languages (Burke 2009, 70). It is therefore conceivable that code-switching does not stimulate hybridization.

The place where elements or people of two cultures meet is called a “contact zone”. One of the contact zones that facilitate the meeting is the frontier, like early colonial Mexico, where religions meet. The contact zones can also be called “intercultures” which stands for intersections between cultures.

There are four reactions to cultural import: acceptance, rejection, segregation, and adaptation. When discussing rejection it is a reaction that is dependant on multiple factors. Some cultures are more resistant to influence than others and this may be due to an increased self confidence. It is important to note here that cultures are not homogenous and different groups within one culture can react in different ways. The opposite of the rejecting cultures are “cultures of borrowing” who blindly or mechanically copy that which is of natural growth in other cultures.

The reaction of segregation means the line is not drawn between the self and the other but inside the home culture, renouncing the idea to defend the whole territory in order to concentrate on keeping part of it free from foreign contamination (Burke 2009, 90). An example of this is the Ottomans who wanted western weapons but not their liberal facilities of entertainment. Another form of segregation is the “double life”. A group or person fill in their lives with their traditional ways and what is taken from other cultures, just like the example of accepting Saint John in Nahua rituals.

The fourth reaction is adaptation where aspects from other cultures are borrowed and piece by piece are put into a traditional structure. It is a double movement of de-contextualization and re-contextualization, lifting an item out of its original setting and modifying it to fit its new environment (Burke 2009, 93).

Central to the process of hybridity are translators. Translators are often displaced people. Cultural interpretation has often been dependant on people who shifted their allegiance from one culture to the other. It is likely that these translators had a double consciousness and this aided them in translating because they were able to identify with both cultures as cultures that they were part of. As mentioned in this section, Sahagún used informants that were of native descent but schooled in European fashion. They were of two cultures and had allied themselves with

Catholic missionaries. Sahagún, as a translator of native documents, used his assistants to get a more complete understanding of the Nahua world view because on his own he would not have been able to attain such an understanding for he was not part of Nahua culture. It is an important question to ask how far the influence of native informants and assistants went on the translator in the person of Sahagún. This is a question that will be answered in this thesis.

Chapter 2: Sahagún's world and his place in it

In this chapter I will introduce the work of Sahagún by describing the person under whose name it was published. This is necessary because in order to make a proper determination of the intent behind his writing we must first discuss the influences in his life and the choices that he has made. In this first stage his written works will be presented separately and their analysis will not deal with the social-cultural context. Only in the later chapters of this thesis will a conjoined picture be sketched in order to come to a complete analysis.

The information given in this chapter about Sahagún's life is not based on concrete evidence because there is simply very little known about his life prior to his arrival in Mexico, and even after his arrival there are only short anecdotes available that were written by his contemporaries. Much of the given information is suggestive and deduced from how someone in his situation would have felt or reacted if the events of the sixteenth century were presented to him. I will clearly state if aspects are suggestive or factual and if certain pieces of information do not have a significant factual background I will not name them at all.

The aspects of Sahagún's life named in this chapter are probably all true, however they are speculative and according to Walden Browne they are used to fill up pages or create a dialogue with a living Sahagún (Browne 2000, 26). This is a practice that is common in biographies of Sahagún but it is very problematic according to two theoretical statements by Schütz and Luckmann (Browne 2000, 24). They state that it is impossible to reconstruct an intersubjective relationship with the predecessor through memory. The further away the predecessor is both spatially and temporarily, the more difficult it becomes to reconstruct even indirectly the meaning context in which the predecessor lived. Their second statement is that since the predecessor is experienced through an individual's typification as invariable due to his or her inability to enter into an intersubjective relationship with that individual, predecessors are inevitably alien or anonymous to a certain degree from the perspective of an individual's own actualized life-world (Schültz and Luckmann in Browne 2000, 25). What this means is that if I analyse the past, I would do this from the present and this would unintentionally influence my analysis, making it harder to form an objective opinion. We should

not use the lack of concrete evidence as an excuse to write circumstantial stories that are deducted from knowledge of Sahagún's past environment; however, careful use of background information may be used to help understand the situation after the information has been analysed in order to determine how accurate it is or can be. Therefore I will use the historical knowledge about sixteenth century religious thought and colonial practices to sketch a probable environment that shaped Sahagún. Societal and environmental reconstruction is justified and necessary because it is an essential practice in modern archaeology, anthropology, psychology, and much of the social sciences in order to fully understand the aspects of life in a certain time period and geographical location to place the material, in this case Sahagún's writings, into context.

2.1: Sahagún's Spanish formation

Bernardino de Sahagún was named after the town where he was born and spent his early childhood, namely the town of Sahagún, located in Tierra de Campos in Spain. He was probably born in 1499; we know this because he was described by Fray Jerónimo de Mendieta to have died in 1590 at the age of ninety years old, and Sahagún himself professed to be 73 when he gave a statement before the Spanish inquisition in 1572 (Leon-Portilla 2002, 30). The town of Sahagún was known as a stop for pilgrims and therefore a place where religion and a fondness for different arts came together. This must have sparked an interest in him, given that he pursued a religious life in his adulthood.

When Sahagún reached adulthood, he went on to attend the University of Salamanca, where he most certainly attended classes in grammar, history, cannon law, moral theology, and theology (Leon-Portilla 2002, 38). These courses are recognizable in his later writings and the descriptions made about him by his contemporaries, e.g. he would write a trilingual and grammar dictionary in which he would make references in Spanish, Latin, and Nahuatl.

The Renaissance atmosphere at the University of Salamanca and the reports from the New World must have ignited an interest in Sahagún for learning the realities of the newly discovered lands in the Americas. This eventually led to him joining the Order of Saint Francis, which probably happened during his studies. The Franciscans and their tendencies towards sixteenth century humanism

would have a profound influence on Sahagún before and after his departure for New Spain in 1529.

2.2: The order of Saint Franciscus and humanism

In order to inform the reader on the environment of Sahagún's formation I must include the Catholic order of Franciscus in which he spent most of his adult life. As noted above, Sahagún most likely joined the Franciscans when he was still studying at the University of Salamanca some years before his voyage to New Spain (Leon-Portilla 2002, 43).

Europe in the sixteenth century was a continent going through much religious turmoil. The whole of Christendom was being convulsed by various reform movements, particularly the one led by Martin Luther. This was hard to accept for the Catholics and especially the Franciscans. The Franciscans' religious core was "the denial of the flesh". This meant that they had turned away from the worldly and toward the heavenly (Browne 2000, 19), consequently making the body a vessel to serve purely as a vessel for devotion and conversion. John Leddy Phelan says: "De hecho, la génesis del buen salvaje puede encontrarse en la tradicional imagen franciscana de la naturaleza humana, desarrollada alrededor del culto a la pobreza apostólica, a la simplicidad primitiva y al misticismo Joaquinita" (In fact, the genesis of the noble savage may be found in the traditional Franciscan image of human nature, developed around the concept of the apostolic poverty, to the primitive simplicity and mysticism of Joaquinita) (Phelan 1972, 100). What they saw before them was a large part of Europe turning away from God and into heretical practices. They also viewed the earthly institution of the Roman-Catholic church with the pope at its head as not abiding to God's true will. This situation led the order to follow a strong humanist path that was rising under the influence of Erasmus of Rotterdam. Erasmus advocated a need for a new biblical humanism where the Holy Scripture would guide Christianity towards a new light, freeing it from falsehoods and corruptions (Leon-Portilla 2002, 44). Beside this, some groups of Franciscans were influenced by the Iluminados. This was a movement that advocated many changes, among them being the cessation of the power of earthly princes and the pope, and looking towards a New Jerusalem (Leon-Portilla

2002, 45). This would be a defining doctrine in their view and treatment of the indigenous people of colonial New Spain.

The reader should be aware that Sahagún's presence in this so called "renaissance humanist movement", especially combined with the frequently recurring label of "father of modern anthropology" can give the impression that he is seen as morally superior to his contemporaries (Browne 2000, 54). It is not my intention to use these terms to illustrate a moral hierarchy and I shall only use them as references to the sixteenth century opinions on this and in paraphrasing other writers. I would like to close this section by stating the definition of humanism which I think is the most explanatory, namely the one by Kristeller which must not be confused with any religious connotation. It reads as: Humanists are professional rhetoricians with a new, classicist idea of culture, who tried to assert the importance of their field of learning and to impose their standards upon the other fields of learning and of science, including philosophy (Kristeller 1979 in Browne 2000, 77).

2.3: Sahagún's Arrival in Mexico

In AD 1529 Sahagún sailed to what was called New Spain, which is present-day Mexico. The expedition that he was on was being led by a friar called Antonio de Ciudad Rodrigo and consisted of twenty friars and several native Mexicans who had returned from Spain. Fray Antonio had lived in New Spain since 1524 and had returned to Spain to request from Emperor Charles V if he could relieve the Nahua population from oppressive circumstances and he wanted to gather a group of Franciscan friars to go to New Spain with him (Leon-Portilla 2002, 27).

As previously told in this chapter, the Franciscans were looking toward a New Jerusalem as they were inspired by the Iluminados movement. The religious turmoil in Europe must have made them look to the newly discovered continent as the place where a new Christianity would be founded. This is strongly supported by the Franciscan view of the world, which states that it is divided into three complementary ages: The time from creation to the death of Christ; the age of the church; and a coming, final age in which Christ would return to rule a kingdom of absolute peace (Browne 2000, 54). The discovery and conquest of Mexico was seen as a sign that the millennium of peace was close and that the conversion of

the Native population was the only thing that was to be done before it could go in effect. With that thought in mind, the Franciscans saw themselves in a final battle against the forces of evil.

When Sahagún arrived in New Spain with his Franciscan brothers there was much conflict already present. Sahagún states that the friars of the Dominican order that were already present in the newly conquered territory presented the claim to Sahagún and the Franciscans that the Natives had been fully converted in a short time and preaching against idolatry was no longer needed (García Icazbalceta 1954 in Leon-Portilla 2002, 77). This could have been an example of the mentioned “working misunderstanding”, as explained by Burke in the context of hybridity, between the Dominicans and the Nahua. Here, the Dominicans might have believed a full conversion had been completed while the Nahua thought they had adopted new elements into their old religion (Burke 2009, 69). This was one of the strongest points of disagreement for Sahagún and in his later life he would repeatedly write that the conversion of the Nahua was false and he would even go as far as saying that the entire mission was a failure.

The social situation was also a cause for concern. The Spanish that had taken part in the conquest and had settled the new colony had taken the natives and bounded them to themselves. These units of bounded natives were called “Encomienda” and this servitude was a practice that embodied every aspect of slavery (León-Potilla 2002, 73). Consequently, the natives were treated very badly by their new masters. Sahagún and the Franciscans thought this was a wrong practice and stopping it had been one of the primary reasons for their journey. After strong disagreement and a few clashes among the Spanish themselves, Sahagún formed the opinion that in order for an authentic Christianity to be built one would have to separate the Indians from those who came to subjugate and exploit them (Leon-Portilla 2002, 93).

The third cause for conflict was politics. At the time of Sahagún’s arrival there were many corruption charges against multiple people and institutions that had recently been established. At the end of AD 1528 the Audiencia had been founded which had been entrusted with the judicial and administrative governance of New Spain. In AD 1529 corruption charges were named against the members and president of the Audiencia. The president, named Nuño Beltrán de Guzmán, had

been the protagonist in violent clashes with supporters of the conquistador Cortés and he had made various accusations against the Franciscans of sexual corruption with native women and supporting an independence movement (Leon-Portilla 2002, 83).

2.4: Conclusion

This chapter is derived from the idea that in order to conclude the analysis of Sahagún's writing we must first analyse the environment in which he lived. The circumstances of his time were of profound influence on his view of the world and religion and therefore of influence on his writing. The forming of his personality in Spain, his decision to become a Franciscan friar, and the situation in Mexico upon his arrival would be the basis for the works that he would write during his time in Mexico. Browne has nicely summarised the situation: "*Sahagún was neither a positivistic anthropologist approaching the Nahuas with photographic objectivity nor an anthropologist wrestling with the identity crisis of a modern-day discipline. Sahagún is the result of the tensions and conflicts of his own time and circumstances*" (Browne 2000, 72). The following chapters will present the books of Sahagún and possible intentions behind them.

Chapter 3: Ethnocentricity versus objectivity in Sahagún's writing

Bernardino de Sahagún is best known from his collection of writings about life in Mexico before the conquest by the Spanish. He gathered the information in the latter part of his life when he was ordered by his superior to collect as much information as possible about the lives, rituals, and deities of the Nahua population. This was to become a grand work that consisted of twelve volumes which he named the *Historia universal de las cosas de Nueva España*. When the manuscript was published later there was a mistake made which resulted in the changing of the title to *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*. The unique aspect of this work is that he wrote most of it in Nahuatl, the native language of the Mexicans. Sahagún was one of the few friars that spoke Nahuatl and he was known as one of the best speakers of it. The mastery of Nahuatl would give Sahagún a unique insight into Nahua culture and aid in his attempt to understand their ways of life. Sahagún after all believed that in order to eradicate the Nahua “idolatry” he would first have to understand the most hidden roots of their thought process, beliefs and practices (León-Portilla 2002, 94).

When starting his mission to gather information for the *Historia general* he would first gather a set of drawings and texts which are called the *Primeros Memoriales*. These were gathered in Tepepulco (see fig. 1), in the Basin of Mexico and gave much information about the eighteen-month cycle of ceremonies, deities, and warriors' insignia.

In this chapter I will analyse both the *Primeros Memoriales* and *Historia general* to determine if European influence is clearly perceivable or vaguely noticeable. The reader should note that I was able to access no more than five books of the *Historia general* since those were the only English translations accessible to me. The five volumes were 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6; these volumes are excellent sources to give a good insight in how Sahagún wrote and they are predominantly helpful in this analysis because they provide information on both Sahagún's bias in describing Nahua “idolatry” and his descriptive talent seen in the detail with which he describes Nahua deities and rituals. For learning the precise chronology of, and the relationship between, Sahagún's works we use the Handbook of

Middle American Indians (d' Olwer and Cline; Nicholson 1973, 186-217). The exciting aspect of this chapter is that although both the *Primeros Memoriales* and the *Historia general* contain textual and pictographic information, my use of the analyses by León-Portilla and Browne, concerning the *Historia general* are mostly textual analyses and my use of Baird's analysis of the *Primeros memoriales* is a pictographic analysis. This gives a profound insight from two vantage points into the works of Sahagún.



Figure 1. Map of the basin of Mexico showing Tepepulco (Tepeapulco) and Tlatelolco (Burkhart 1989, 17).

3.1: The *Primeros Memoriales*

The *Primeros Memoriales* consists of a collection of 544 drawings that are on paper pages accompanied with writing in Nahuatl. The reason that it consists of drawings is that the informants with whom Sahagún consulted in Tepepulco were accustomed to pictorial writing which means that they drew their experiences and history. The paper that was used for the *Primeros Memoriales* was clearly European and therefore excludes that they are pre-conquest documents (Baird 1993, 15). The manuscript is divided in four chapters, namely: chapter 1 “Ritos,

Dioses” (Rites, Deities); chapter 2 “Cielo e infierno” (Heaven and hell); chapter 3 “Señorio” (rulers); and chapter 4 “Cosas humanas” (human things). The manuscript distinguishes itself from Sahagún’s other writings in that it is not written according to a firm, preconceived questionnaire. Sahagún always uses a clear methodology of how, when, and where. This is however absent in the *Primeros Memoriales* which makes it seem that it has been written in quite a spontaneous manner (Leon-Portilla 2002, 162).

Baird offers a complete analysis for those who wish to read it, for I will not be able to attend to every aspect of the manuscript. Here, I will limit myself to the aspects of the *Primeros Memoriales* that include possible European elements and show preconceptions that Sahagún may have had towards the Natives that he was studying. The *Primeros Memoriales* is however too important to leave unattended because “awareness of the European elements in the drawings makes it possible to identify the purely indigenous elements and to use the manuscript more accurately to study both the pre-conquest past and indigenous art in the Early Colonial period” (Baird 1993, 161).

In order to determine the influence of European elements in the *Primeros Memoriales*, it is important to note what were typically European and pre-conquest Mexican aspects. In sixteenth century Europe it was common for books to be presented in codex form, as it is today. This means that pages are read from left to right and are bound together. Besides this, the written word is the primary conveyer of information. Illustrations serve as an added form of information in secondary position to the writings. In pre-conquest manuscripts the images *are* the text (Baird 1993, 25). They are mostly in screen fold form and made from bark paper or animal skin and can be read in any direction depending on the manuscript. The pictographic scenes are painted in polychrome and figurative style, according to a specific system of pictographic signs and conventions (Jansen and Pérez Jimenez 2011, 5). European drawings play with filling in space which is usually in the form of applying three-dimensional drawings to create depth. In pre-conquest manuscripts space is two-dimensional and just consists of the painting’s surface. European drawings also have variations in thickness and tone of line to render a three-dimensional illusion while in pre-conquest drawings there is little variation in width or tone of colour in each individual line (Baird

1993, 27). In the case of human forms the pre-conquest illustrations portray a body that consists of elements that seem detachable and separate. The images are not a realistic depiction but an iconic sign in a pictographic writing system. They also take on poses that are physically impossible whereby for example limbs are portrayed in a way that a human would never be able to bend in that way and still be able to stand. In European drawings human forms are more unified and as a result they take on more anatomically feasible positions.

The drawings of the *Primeros Memoriales* are in terms of format of European style. The pages are divided into columns, mostly two but sometimes more. The text is put in the left column and the drawing is put in the right column. The pages are made quite orderly and the use of vertically placed dual columns and use of alphabetic text are the most obviously European aspects of the *Primeros Memoriales*. There is a page in the manuscript that allows us to pinpoint a direct European influence in a drawing. The format of this drawing differs from the general outline where there is a vertical column with text on the left and one with a drawing on the right. Here there are two deities that are horizontally aligned with a third underneath the right one. Because the text is not exactly aligned with the drawings it is unclear to which drawing the referral is. The confusion has been prevented here by placing a pointing hand that indicates that the first paragraph describes the deity on the far right (see fig. 2). This indicates a concern with the reader's interpretation of the relationship between the text and the drawings. This concern would have been nonexistent in the pre-conquest world in the absence of an alphabetic script (Baird 1993, 34). This is a somewhat extreme case of when Burke says that when original native images were copied, colonists modified what they copied and assimilated it into their own traditions, as I noted in section 1.5 (Burke 2009, 15). Yet, the pointing hand makes a clear example of this. Another remarkable difference between alphabetic texts and pre-conquest pictographic texts is the direction in which they are read. A European alphabetic text is read from left to right; a Mexican pictographic text is read in the direction in which the figure is looking, which is from right to left.

We can see that the drawings were in many cases made before the text was added. This indicates that the illustrations were more important than the text. The differences between the pre-conquest images in the manuscript and drawings of

European style can be detected in the purpose they serve and can therefore be distinguished from each other. Sixteenth century European drawings may convey a mood, but they do not convey factual information about the pre-conquest past. Instead they serve an illustrated, almost decorative function (Baird 1993, 37).

To add to the analysis of how the drawings were displayed in opposition to what was displayed, we can use the depictions of the Veintena ceremonies. These are ceremonies related to the eighteen months of the 365-day solar year and they are called Veintena because the months consist of twenty days. The Veintena scenes would often be centred on the ritual sacrifice of a deity impersonator that would dress like a deity. On one page there are two lines that span the width of the page surrounding the drawings. This is another clear indication that the drawings were put on paper before the text was written (see fig. 3).

There are also clearly distinguishable copying errors. According to Baird it is not uncommon for copying errors to occur when artists do not thoroughly understand the materials they are copying. The occurrence of these errors indicates that the artist was unfamiliar with the prototype from which the copy was being made (Baird 1993, 109).

There are several elements in the drawings of the *Primeros Memoriales* that are influenced by illustrations from European books from the sixteenth century. This is primarily the use of eyebrows, profile eyes, and slender figures. These are virtually nonexistent in pre-conquest drawings. Other drawings portray a mixture of pre-conquest and European elements. In the section of the astronomical phenomena there is one drawing where the sun and moon are depicted. The sun is modelled after the pre-conquest manuscript known as the *Codex Borgia*, but the moon is a European style crescent moon and is quite similar to moons found depicted in various European books (Baird 1993, 135) (see fig. 4). Burke calls this the development of a unique style after resisting to completely take over the native style (Burke 2009, 16). The most obvious intrusions of European elements are the use of three-dimensional forms. The drawings are full of fold lines, hatching, and shading.

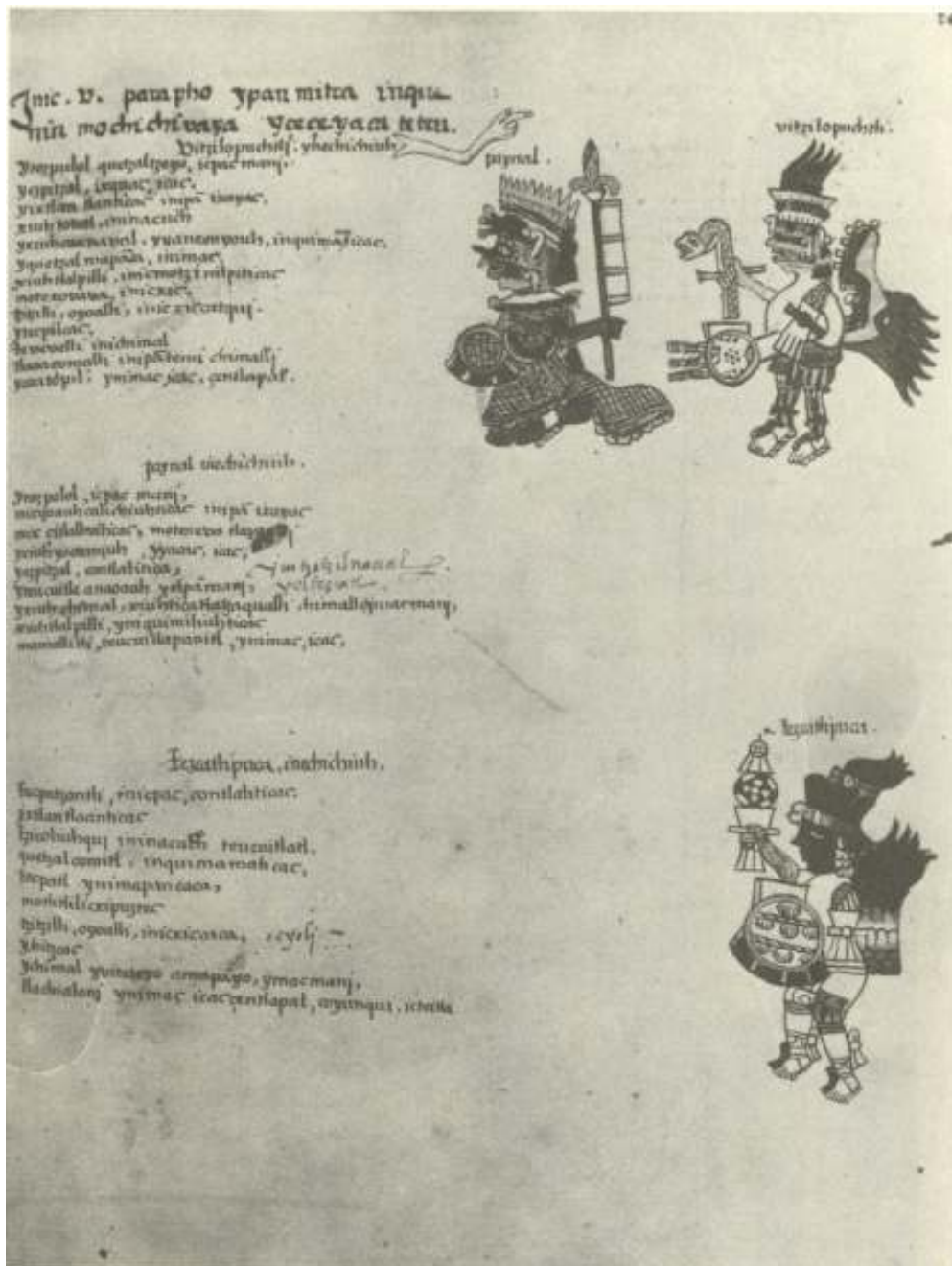


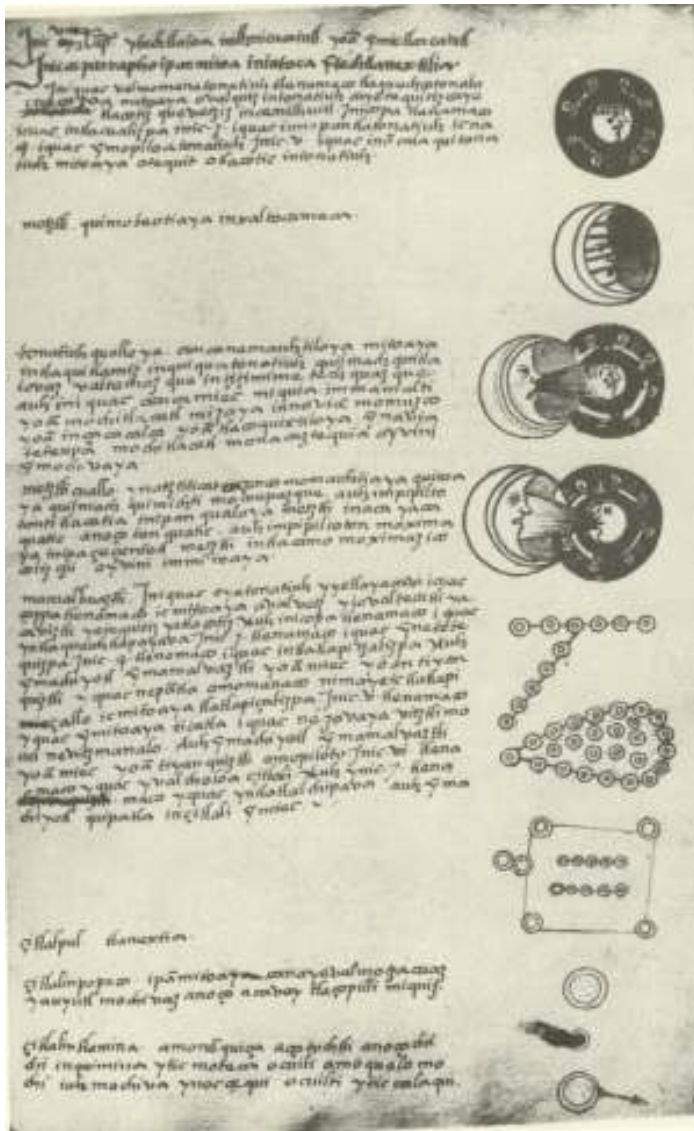
Figure 2. A pointing hand associating the text with the drawing (Baird 1993, 70).

The European elements that are detectable or even dominate the drawings mentioned in this section are indicative of much influence of artists that were alien to the culture they were studying. Sahagún may not have intended even the most significant of stylistic elements for his intended readers in the Spanish court but the *Primeros memoriales* gives us a very important image of two very different cultures that were trying to understand each other. Sahagún’s will to understand the Nahuatl is primarily seen in that “the inclusion of the pictures in the

manuscript indicates his acknowledgement of their textual value to the natives and it confirms the use of pre-conquest pictorial manuscripts” (Baird 1993, 109).



Figure 3 Primeros Memoriales drawing with outline around the pictures (Baird 1993, 63).



Figur 4. Depictions of a European style moon and a pre-colonial style sun.

3.2: The Historia general

The *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* is a fascinating document to read. It was written completely in Nahuatl and gives an elaborate collection of information on various aspects of the pre-colonial lives of the Nahuatl. In this section I will attempt to make an analysis of five of the twelve volumes and compare this to, and supplement this with, the writings of several scholars who have spent much more time studying Sahagún's work than I have. In the attempt to point out ethnocentric characteristics from Sahagún's writing I should first state that his writing should not be read expecting a sense of irony. The ability to read Sahagún's text ironically must be kept entirely separate from any claim that

Sahagún intended an ironic reading of his work, at least until more convincing evidence surfaces (Browne, 2000, 61).

When reading Sahagún there is a striking objectivity in which I have to search for his position on the matter that he describes. This remark may sound enigmatic but Sahagún shows a profound reasonable train of thought when writing about what he witnessed in his meetings with native Mexicans and what has been described to him by informants. He thoroughly describes point by point what is taking place and puts it into the context of the meaning it has to the indigenous people. However, in his writings there is a bias to discover. Nicolau D'Olwer sees this as well and puts the cause for this on Sahagún's translation into Spanish of the Nahuatl texts. He states: "It is not a literal translation, rather it is an abbreviated interpretation of the Nahuatl text...At times, Sahagún interrupts the translation, departs from the 'letter', as he calls the original text; we might say that he confronts it and, carried away by his religious zeal, he execrates idolatry and its rites" (D'Olwer 1952 in León Portilla 2002, 20-21).

Sahagún is clearly busy with telling his readers the bloodiest aspects of the gods of the Aztec Mexicans. In the case of the Goddess Centeotl there is a passage of a ritual performed before her with war games and the skinning of a woman after which a priest would wear her skin and parade it through the village (Sahagún 1971, 28). It is a good possibility that when it came to these descriptions, and especially the ones involving human sacrifice, Sahagún exaggerated the amounts and bloody aspects of the rituals. This was something he had in common with many of his missionary contemporaries. The practice existed but in a much more limited way and a much more rational context than the Spanish sources intended to make us believe: it was the ceremonial execution of enemy captains taken prisoner during battle, not unlike what was, and is, common in other cultures (Jansen and Pérez Jimenez 2011, 269).

There is also a bias that can be read in his description of the Goddess Tzapotlatena. Here, as well as in accounts of other Gods, Sahagún writes about the Gods in a suggestive manner: "As this woman must have been the first one that found the oil she was placed among the goddesses" (Sahagún 1971, 28). Sahagún leaves no dispute that what the Goddess' function is still needs to be proven. To further advance on this point there is a sentence where Sahagún used the phrases

“It is said” and “These Goddesses are said to” in the same sentence which forms a context where the given arguments are not true.

In the second book of Sahagún’s “Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España” he gives an elaborate account on the months of the Aztecs. He describes them separately and in detail and they are told in their bloodiest aspects. Almost every month that is accounted starts with a notification of how many people were killed in that given month and by what means this was put in effect. Whether this is true or false, there is a deliberate focus on human death, physical pain and sacrifice in the account. In the account of the third month called Tozoztontli there is first a description of a festival to the rain God Tlaloc where many children were killed. In these accounts Sahagún focuses on the rituals that are very far removed in performance from catholic rituals and typically those which function as a communal event where killing is being done. It should be noted that “children” was a mistranslation from the Nahuatl word “tlacateteuhmê” which in this context actually means “cut paper figures”. In this way the innocent solemnity of paying respect to the Rain Gods and invoking them with paper images, as is still done today, was transformed by the hostile imagination of the missionary into an act of bloodthirsty sadism (Jansen and Pérez Jimenez 2011, 270).

Although there is a bias to discover in describing Sahagún’s writing, it is not always one of condemnation. When he writes about rituals that contain dancing, he is quite lenient to this practice. He states: “They all sang...with very sonorous voices...but it is all very graceful and even highly mystical. Idolatry is not uprooted as yet” (Sahagún 1971, 38). Here, he admires dancing while it is done in the honour of a pagan god. Yet he chooses to wait before calling it idolatrous. He also calls the singers “really professional minstrels” (Sahagun 1971, 100). León-Portilla also notes in his description of Sahagún’s adoration for the Nahuatl that: In treating the abilities of the Nahuatl man, he speaks in minute detail of the many ways in which he had distinguished himself in pre-Hispanic times: As an artist working with stone, clay, feathers, and metals; as a wise man and master in the schools, knowledgeable about minerals, plants, and animals; as physician, merchant, astrologer, orator, and poet (León-Portilla 2002, 97).

Sahagún is sometimes prone to comparing Nahuatl traditions to catholic or traditionally Spanish ones that contain somewhat similar properties. He writes

about Pulque, whereby he states that it is the wine of the country (Sahagún 1971, 46). However, Pulque is made from the Maguey plant and not from grapes, ultimately making it a comparison to a term that Europeans would understand. Consequently this would make the reader associate all aspects of wine drinking to the drinking of Pulque, which do not necessarily have to be included. By making this comparison he is associating an unknown ritual with a known ritual that together do not have any common origin. In this example there is a context to discover in which the new is compared to the old, which can not give an objective view to the reader. Another example of comparison between old and new is that the Nahua Gods were compared to Classical Roman Gods in order to emphasize that worshipping these Gods was indeed idolatry and so that the Spanish king would be able to put the gods into a familiar context. This is a good example of the “equivalent effect”, explained in section 1.5, where new words are added to make the text readable for the intended reader but it becomes farther removed from the original text (Burke 2009, 17) Another possible reason could also be the persuasion of the king to give more money to the missionary cause.

Sahagún makes several attempts to associate with the victims of human sacrifice in sacred rituals. He often refers to the sacrifices as “these poor people” and he names a case where slaves are bought in Azcapotzalco and treated well in order to prepare them for sacrifice. When he talks about the victims when they are sacrificed to the brothers of Yacapitzaoc he says: “They did in no way fear or mind the death waiting for them” (Sahagún 1971, 43). Here, he puts his question in writing, why they did not fear their death. He is somewhat surprised of the obedience of the victims. He also prays to God to take care of the homeless because they are being treated in way that “Het bed waarop zij zich uitstrekken niet is om op uit te rusten, maar om er martelingen op te doorstaan” (The bed on which they lay themselves down is not for resting, but to endure torture) (Sahagún 1991, 15). This shows that next to exterminating idolatry, Sahagún is clearly involved with the social issue of Mexico.

The special status of priests is described as a cause for violent behaviour. Their immunity from criminal prosecution is said to be an instigator of robbery, assault, and even murder if the victim does not cooperate with the assailant priests. Sahagún seems not to be surprised at the most by their immunity, but more about

their lack of fear of punishment (Sahagún 1971, 59). This condemning is also done upon those of material wealth. He says that they are the same as everywhere in the world and look for Gods gifts, but not finding it and neglecting their duty in the process (Sahagún 1991, 32). These are comments that can be expected from a Franciscan, who is convinced that poverty is the path to God.

In the second book of the *Historia general*, Sahagún states that it is not necessary to try to discuss or disprove the idolatrous ceremonies; they are in themselves so cruel and inhumane that they would horrify anyone who would hear them, and fill him with horror” (Sahagun 1971, 72). This remark would not be acceptable in modern scientific reports. He is predominately steering the reader toward an opinion that he has created for them. He states his own opinion as an undisputed fact.

3.3: Conclusion

The two manuscripts that were elaborately handled in this chapter have given much information on the process of establishing Sahagún’s work and his description of native elements and people. Just as it has been indicated various times, there is a high amount of information concerning possible European influences in producing the *Primeros memoriales*, and we have seen descriptions in the rest of the *Historia general* that are clearly made from a point of view that is culturally so far removed from the aspects being described but wants to understand them in order to bring them to the righteous path of God.

The following chapters will give a view on several aspects of Sahagún’s description outside and within the *Historia general* to complement the information given above.

Chapter 4: The Nahua reaction to the new religion

When keeping the goal of this thesis in mind, which is to analyse with what intentions and prejudice the Nahua are described, it is important to take into account the reactions of the Nahua to their new neighbours and their Christian faith. In particular we want to know what Sahagún thinks of these reactions, be it words or actions that he beholds. Let us first examine the state in which the perception of the Spanish was at the time of Sahagún's arrival, especially since these Spanish were under command of Cortés, whose approach was different from that of the Franciscans to say the least. The previously discussed Encomienda system left the Nahua subjugated. When the Franciscans arrived in Mexico and started preaching against this treatment, the population certainly was to appreciate this attitude far more than that of their conquistador predecessors. In the formation of their parishes, the Franciscans simply ignored the Encomienda systems that were in place, although it should be noted that they drew much of their revenue from the Encomiendas (Lockhart 1992, 206). It is from this change in European attitude upon the indigenous population I want to research the reaction of the Nahua to the Franciscans, and in particular Sahagún himself. The two sections of this chapter will hold an analysis on both the compatibility of the religions and world views of the Nahua and Spanish, and Sahagún's opinion on the susceptibility of the Nahua for conversion to the Christian faith.

It should be noted that an actual analysis on how the Nahua felt is impossible today. Even the analysis given here is more about how Sahagún described the reaction of the Nahua than about their actual reactions. The lack of Pre-colonial and Early Colonial written testimonies of the Mexicans themselves can only give me and every other researcher a very limited look into how these people might have reacted.

4.1: Similarities between Nahua religion and Catholic world view

Sahagún was very busy in his research determining how different the Nahua were from Europeans and if the seed of Christianity could be sown here. He very often sought for similarities in religion and pointed this out. I will handle these

observations and take them to the next section where the susceptibility of the Nahua for Christianity and their reactions in accepting it will be addressed.

The religious differences between sixteenth century Catholicism and Nahua beliefs are many and therefore they caused much confusion with the Spanish missionaries and complicated their mission to convert the indigenous population of Mexico. These were not just different religions; they were different kinds of religions. Religions like Christianity or Islam can be typified as dualistic in orientation. This means there is “a transcendentalism setting the supernatural world apart from the material world that characterizes the world view; ritual centres itself on salvation rather than sacrifice“ (Burkhart 1989, 186). This stands far from the Nahua world view where the supernatural can move between planes of existence without limitations.

Sahagún is sceptical from the start about whether or not Nahua and Spanish cultures are able to coincide and produce the eventual conversion to Christianity. He finds it quite problematic that God has kept Christianity from the Nahua for so long. He states that: “It is certainly a thing of great admiration that God our Lord has kept hidden for so many centuries a forest of so many idolatrous peoples, whose abundant fruits only the devil has gathered and holds as treasures in the infernal fire (Sahagún 1979 in Browne 2000, 132).

One of the many critical points he makes is the Nahua’s “vigorous sensuality”. He says that it is the reason the Christian education is failing in Mexico. This is where a clash between world views can be seen, namely between the Nahua use of their body and the Franciscan view where the body is to be transcended. It is noticeable that when it comes to the body, Sahagún’s reasoning stops and goes over into misconception. In this moment, the Nahuas displayed an extreme form of alterity or “otherness” that held no place in the medieval Christian cosmology’s sense of itself as a unified, all-encompassing coherent whole (Browne 2000, 180). Alterity can be explained as a lack of identification with what is considered other than oneself. It is the rejection of the Nahua religious elements that fits in the rejection stated by Burke as one of four reactions to cultural import because it is clearly a result of the increased self confidence of Sahagún and the Franciscans who believe that their religion is true and excludes other religions (Burke 2009, 87).

However, Sahagún is often prone to comparing rituals and beliefs to catholic or traditionally Spanish rituals that contain similar properties. He describes the ritual for the god “Xipetotec” that is called “Tlacaxipealitzli”. The title for this ritual means the flaying of men. He describes a dance that he sees to be similar to the Spanish “Juego de cañas” (Sahagun 1971, 40). He also closes the sixth chapter of the sixth book of the *Historia general* with referring to the Chichimecs, one of the native ethnicities in the Basin of Mexico. He describes them as having only one God named Mixcoatl. Confusingly he immediately says that they have another god who is invisible and there is no effigy of him. His name is Yoalli Ehecatl, which has been translated in a Dutch publication as: “Onzichtbare en ontastbare god en begunstiger en beschermer en almachtige, door wiens deugd allen leven, die louter door zijn kennis regeert en in alles doet wat hij wil” (Invisible and intangible god and beneficiary and protector and almighty, by whose virtue all live, who rules purely through his knowledge and in everything does what he wills) (Sahagún 1991, 41). Despite what seems to be an error in writing, conception or translation about the Chichimecs having one god, there is a search recognizable by Sahagún for religious comparisons or even the presence of traces of Christianity before contact with the Spanish, in this case in the form of a monotheistic religion that worships an almighty god. In this light, there was a movement among early missionaries who saw an apostle of Christ in Quetzalcóatl, the feathered serpent god. Sahagún also depicted him as a figure with a Spanish appearance like a long face with a beard. However, later in his writing, Sahagún turns against the notion that Quetzalcóatl could be incorporated into the Christian cosmology by stating that his soul is being devoured in hell. This was probably to prevent a messianic movement among the Nahuatl that hoped for the return of Quetzalcóatl that would deliver his people (Lafaye 1976, 144).

Sahagún also describes Tlazulteutl, who is the Goddess of carnality. She was a Goddess that consisted of multiple Gods and she was especially talented in seducing men. Another property she had was the ability to forgive these men for their sins, which would come at the end of an extensive ceremony of confession. Sahagún spent a considerable amount of attention in describing this ritual. He seems to be captivated by this and draws a suggestive comparison to the catholic ritual of confession. The ritual included a man that confessed and a priest that

heard the confession. The priest was not to tell anyone else about the confession because this was a matter between the man that confessed and the Goddess (Sahagún 1971, 30). Sahagún here puts emphasis on the concepts of penitence and forgiveness. This is an example of a clear comparison to a confession in catholic surroundings.

The complication that came with rooting out evil, as was the Christian mission, was the concept of evil. This was much different among the Nahua than in Europe. In the Christian mind, evil was the absence of being good. With the Nahua, the notions of evil and the demonic were inextricably intertwined with their notions of good and the divine (Cervantes 1994, 40). The gods had many faces that were both benevolent and malevolent. It is this dualism within the divine power itself that was central in Mesoamerican cosmology and alien to the Spanish friars.

4.2: Susceptibility to conversion

The descriptions of the similarities and differences between the Nahua world view and Catholic practices would give Sahagún a broad arsenal of arguments on whether the Nahua were able to truly convert. He spent much time analysing the people practicing the newly learnt Christian rituals. It is important to keep in mind that the *Historia general* was written when Sahagún was already approaching old age and by this time he appears to have let go of the Franciscan “optimism” about New Spain. He appears very critical about the Nahuas’ acceptance of Christianity and blames the friars that had arrived in Mexico before Sahagún did because they had claimed that the Nahua truly left their idolatry behind them. He even went as far as saying that “this new church is founded on falsehood” (García Icazbalceta 1954 in León-Portilla 2002, 100). According to Sahagún this “deception” was due to the fact that these friars and those who had followed them had not been concerned with acquainting themselves with the beliefs and idolatries of the Indians (León-Portilla 2002, 7). He held on strong to his basic principle that understanding of what had to be converted was paramount to the entire process of conversion. This argument could have been made to get more support from the king of Spain for further missionary work.

One of the reasons that Sahagún and some of his contemporaries gave for the reluctance to give up traditional beliefs or even returning to old ways after conversion was the fact that Christianity was not a homogenous mass of people with one way to praise God. There were many orders with different customs, forms of penance, and doctrine. Sahagún was of the opinion that this must have led the indigenous population to the conclusion that their beliefs must have had a place among these many forms of practicing religion (León-Portilla 2002, 102). This would fit into their polytheistic world view. This difficulty for the Nahua population to incorporate Christianity into their religious lives led to a hybrid Nahua-Christian religion. This meant that the basic structure of the cosmos was maintained but certain entities were replaced with Christian figures like saints. Certain rites were connected with the Christian calendar and Christian purification rites functioned to remove tlazolli (filth, garbage) and restore order (Burkhart 1989, 187). Burke calls this hybrid form of religion the result of multiple encounters between two cultures and each new encounter adds another element to the mix (Burke 2009, 21).

Next to speaking out against clear “idolatrous practices”, Sahagún also denounces disguised forms of “idolatry”. During his stay in Huexotzingo he describes the people’s wish to use St. John as a cover for Telpochtli by saying: “And when the preachers heard tell that Saint John the Evangelist was a virgin and this is called Telpochtli in their language, they had occasion to hold that feast as they had formerly, palliated under the name of San Juan Telpochtli (Sahagún 1956 in León-Portilla 2002, 112). This concern with whether the Nahua people were sincere about their adopted Christianity is also present in Sahagún’s plea for an honest confession. He warns the people that a false confession or a confession to simply talk right the mistakes they have made welcomes God’s wrath upon them (Sahagún 1991, 35). These are significant problems that he perceives to be complicating the path to leading a true Christian life (see fig. 5).



Figure 5. A priest taking confession from a native who is being told what to say by the devil.

Alcohol is a recurring phenomenon in the descriptions of Nahua vices, especially in an abusive context. When intoxicated by pulque, people are described to commit murder and suicide. Afterwards this is blamed on the god of wine and not on personal faults. Sahagún seems to be curious about this. In fact, he claims that it can be adduced that the native Mexicans deliberately became intoxicated in order to commit what they had in mind, and would not be held against them as sin or crime in that condition (Sahagun 1971, 48). Here, Sahagun draws his own conclusion, condemning alcohol abuse because he finds the natives to be escaping God's judgement. This condemnation can also be found in the sixth book of the *Historia general* where the whole of chapter 14 is an anti-alcohol oration (Sahagún 1991, 71). Here Sahagún calls *Octli* (Pulque) the root of all evil and deprivation. The opinion that alcohol is abused to escape judgement can also be found later, where he states: "They evidently think that the erroneous conception held by them previous to their Christianization is valid today. Of course, they are very much mistaken, and it is necessary to impress them of their error in confession as well as on other occasions" (Sahagun 1971, 48). Here we

see a recurring phenomenon of the reactions of the indigenous people. They are written about as having childlike aspects in thinking that they can be excused from punishment in certain conditions like being intoxicated (see fig 6).



Figure 6. Illustration from the Florentine codex, depicting the fate of the drunkard.

Sahagún gives a message that contains a content of dissatisfaction with the perseverance in converting by the clergy. He states that “in order to preach against these things, it is necessary to know how they used them in the times of their idolatry” (Sahagún 1979 in Browne 2000, 31). He is stating the good as well as the bad in order to say that the Nahuas were not less apt for Christianity if they were to be duly cultivated in it (Browne 2000, 31). The duality in argument that can be interpreted from Sahagún’s books is present here. He gives a hopeful message wherein the Nahua’s path to Christian enlightenment is simply in the hands of proper guidance. The negative attitude toward the status of the Nahua conversion which he later adopts is quite contrary to this passage. This changing

of attitude that is sometimes noticeable in the *Historia general* is in my opinion because of the long time span of multiple decades in which information was gathered, sorted, written, and rewritten. It can also be an argument that Sahagún made for the necessity of more missionary work.

Susceptibility to conversion, as is noted above, proved to be complicated. Despite this, Sahagún writes that the Nahua were persuaded to abandon their gods without much interference and therefore fall in to Burke's category of acceptance. After a meeting with the Franciscan friars that came to Mexico before Sahagún did, the indigenous nobles proclaimed: "Oh, indeed, let us perish, since, indeed, the gods have died" (Coloquios 1986 in Browne 2000, 89). Even though this oration is part of a missionary dialogue and therefore possibly a literary creation that was not actually spoken, Sahagún points this out with a very good reason. The message is that every Nahua should defer to the example of the wise leaders (Browne 2000, 90). We can take this as another example of Sahagún's concern with the Nahua conversion and the intent to push them in the right direction which their leaders had already chosen.

By the end of his life, Sahagún had lost the positive standpoint for a complete Christian conversion. His *Arte adivinatoria*, written five years before his death in 1585, is a truly pessimistic conclusion to his life's work. In this he claims that everything about the Nahua conversion was false: "... It is clear that everything is false because, since they were all baptized as adults, and since children continue to be baptized, and their parents continue to catechize them in their faked faith and take them all out into public in order to receive the sacraments and celebrate the Christian holidays, in their interior they have not left off holding their gods as gods, nor rendering them services, offerings, and celebrations on the sly, and hence this affair suffers by being secret (García Icazbalceta 1981 in Browne 2000, 106). Here, Sahagún describes a situation that Burke would call "appropriation". Burke explains this as a process where only the things are taken that are useful to the culture that takes them (Burke 2009, 37). He also concludes that Mexico has been passed by and the mission should be continued further west, in the kingdoms of China (Códice Florentino 1979 in Browne 2000, 118).

4.3: Conclusion

The reaction of the Nahua to the new Christian religion is described by Sahagún to be contrary to his goal. He finds it to be incomplete and insincere which clearly leaves him frustrated with the lack of result. The relevance of this to this thesis is that this personal hardship that is expressed in describing the conversion process is an integral part in showing his intent in describing the Nahua in a general line, as will be answered in the conclusion. I will however stay alert to not digress into semantics on emotional state since this is not my purpose, but I have simply used suggestions of intent to bind aspects of Sahagún's writing together in order to understand the framework in which it was written.

Chapter 5: The use of terminology in describing the Nahua world

Next to the rituals discussed in chapter 3 there is also a fixation on various myths, stories and deities in Sahagún's writing. His mission to describe the aspects of pre-colonial culture led him to identify many "idolatrous" beliefs that he intended to identify as well as extirpate (Baird 1993, 20). This leads me to an interesting topic in continuing the analysis of Sahagún's preconceptions in his writing.

In the following sections I will begin with a textual analysis of what the specific intentions are behind Sahagún's use of language and terminology, and in particular the explicit relation he sees between Mesoamerican religion and demonic forces and Satan himself. The writing of this chapter is an attempt to describe aspects that will add another single dimension to the general outline of this thesis. The understanding of the manner in which deities and myths are described is paramount to interpreting the ceremonies that served as practical applications to the Nahua beliefs. To add to the importance of this, the centre of idolatrous actions, namely Satan, will be handled here.

This chapter will not be a word-for-word analysis of Sahagún's writing because the primary sources I use are translations of his manuscripts. I feel that in this case it is not feasible to gain an objective outcome using this method of research. Therefore I will do a "context analysis". This means that I will analyse terminology, phrases, and sentences that apply to a context explained either by me or in the sources I use. This approach is a proper way to create an outline that is both comprehensible to the reader, and scientifically testable.

5.1: Comparisons made with Satan and demons

In the appendix of the second book of the *Historia general* there is an entire section dedicated to how the land (Mexico) and its native people are affected by Satan. In this, Sahagún states that Satan's language can only be understood by the people that were born in this land. He states that the songs and psalms chanted by the people were created by Satan and are sung to him (Sahagun 1971, 168). This is preceded by multiple section titles where the gods are called demons (Sahagun

1971, 159), and eventually the title “ceremonies held in honour of Satan” (Sahagun 1971, 161). Here, Sahagún finds it necessary to identify the pre-colonial gods as creatures from hell that are against God. This is in my opinion an important part in the Franciscan mission to eradicate idolatry and goes against the conception held by many anthropologists that Sahagún was the first anthropologist. The problem with that conception is that Sahagún, like his contemporaries, does not recognize a civilization outside of Christian Europe and therefore he fits perfectly in Burke’s earlier mentioned category of rejection. This resulted in a situation where Sahagún was confronted with the sheer diversity of cultural data presented by the Nahua world; his goal was to reinscribe the information into a known, previously cohesive Christian cosmology (Browne 2000, 72). This is also present in the third volume of the *Historia general* where he translates the different planes of the Nahua afterlife as “heaven” and “hell” and levels in between. These are Christian terms for cultural elements that did not originate in Europe and are therefore not applicable (Sahagún 1971, 190). It is clearly perceivable in this case that hybridity occurred on unequal terms. The Indians suffered an imposed Christianity from the cultural “lender” of European culture, as indicated by Burke (Burke 2009, 68).

The comparison between the devil and pre-colonial gods is not uncommon for the sixteenth century. However, opposed to what many people today think, it was not done in an attempt of condemnation. Essentially, the devil became a *diabolus ex machine*, or hermeneutic wild card, for precisely those Europeans who felt a certain degree of sympathy for the plight of the indigenous population (Browne 2000, 190). The use of the concept of the devil was to shift the blame of idolatry from the Nahua to Satan and his demons. This was either done out of a sense of compassion for the Nahua or to personally comprehend the situation in Mexico.

It is important to emphasize that Sahagún believed that the Nahua gods were not fabrications but indeed demons and Satan himself who laid waiting for the opportunity to return to their place as gods (Browne 2000, 195). To explain the influence and position of the gods he makes comparisons to the gods from Classical times. He states: “This god, called Huitzilpochtli was another Hercules (Codicé Florentino 1979 in Browne 2000, 196) and Tlaculcutli is another Venus (see fig 7). He does this to convey the notion that the gods are actual demons, and

he proclaims that Tezcatlipoca is Satan himself because his worship was widespread and he was known by multiple names which are biblical aspects about Satan. Sahagún's attempt to show the relation between the Nahua gods and the devil can be seen in the illustration he gives of the Templo Mayor. Here, he gave Tlaloc a bearded goat-like visage, while Huitzilpochtli appears as an open-mouthed devil (Cervantes 1994, 26) (see fig. 8). These adjustments that are made to depictions of deities are a good example of cultural acculturation because the Nahua culture is very much overwhelmed by European culture and adopts the demonic traits that were applied to the deities (Burke 2009, 41). Beside this, it is also a good example of trans-acculturation because Sahagún is also affected by this in that he learns to see the native deities in a new demonic light which he brought along with his Christian way of thinking.



Figure 7. Tlacueteutl is called another Venus.

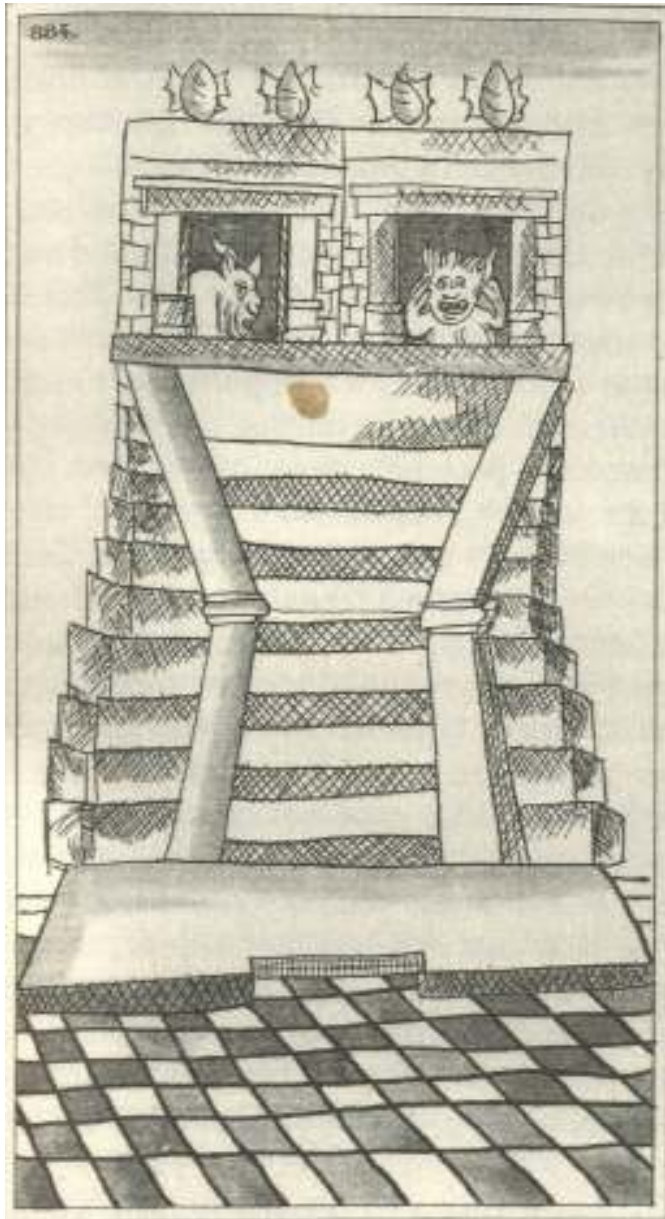


Figure 8. Depiction of Tlaloc and Huitzilpochtli in demonised form.

Comparing the gods to demons and the devil brought more confusion to the Nahua than a clear divide between good and evil. The ritual of sacrifice was something that was deeply imbedded in their culture. When the friars made it clear that it was the devil they were offering to, it most likely would have sent a message that the devil was an intricate part in the ritual life because the clear context of evil was not present. It would have been difficult for the people to conceive the devil as inherently evil (Cervantes 1994, 95). Another example of misconceptions about the opposition of good and evil in the Christian cosmology and the lack of it in the Nahua cosmology can be seen in figure 9, 10, and 11

where Mictlanteuctli is shown as a clawed monster convincing the humans to eat hallucinogenic mushrooms or human flesh. The drawings are supposed to indicate the mushrooms as a way of inviting evil, but the Indians traditionally identified divinity with these mushrooms which would have left many people with the notion that the devil plays an intricate part in the divine (Cervantes 1994, 47).

Sahagun's occupation of attempting to determine the relation of the Nahua gods with demonic forces is an example of a social tendency that was present in Europe in the second half of the sixteenth century and earlier part of the seventeenth century. The association of the Nahua with "demonic practices" was not perceived well among the European people. Anders and Jansen write: "Los sacrificios humanos y el culto hacia figuras en forma de animales, así como la acusación de antropofagia , fueron, para muchos europeos, elementos claros de lo pecamono y del nefasto paganismo" (Human sacrifice and the worship of animal figures and the accusation of cannibalism, were for many Europeans, clear elements of sin and of ominous paganism) (Anders and Jansen 1996, 46). The previously upheld notion of Satan as an impotent participant in God's plan was being abandoned and he took on a much more active role in causing "evil" in the world. Multiple European learned men sought the church's consent to write demonologies in order to measure the strength of the devil's influence (Browne 2000, 201).



Figure 9. Depiction of Mictlanteuctli seducing people into idolatrous practices.



Figure 10. Depiction of Miclanteuctli seducing people into idolatrous practices.



Figure 11. Depiction of Miclanteuctli seducing people into idolatrous practices.

5.2: Terminology

In section 1.5, I noted that translators are central to hybridity (Burke 2009, 100). By translating they can misinterpret words or manipulate terminology to suit their wishes. In the case of the Europeans and Nahua, we can see the ignorance of the missionaries concerning words in Nahuatl that they tried to use to indicate a concept that was alien to the Nahua. When the Spanish friars sought the proper terminology to sway the Nahua population from worshipping their indigenous deities and convert to Christianity they found that the word “Tlazolli” could be used in helping to achieve this. Tlazolli means dirt, in that the description of Tlazolli contains most aspects of what Europeans call dirt. In Nahuatl context it has certain positive annotations, e.g. fertilizer is also called Tlazolli, but it generally has many negative aspects associated with it. The word was used in name calling and when a new ruler was appointed, he would make a statement wherein he would say:”Indeed, I was living in the excrement, in the filth (Sahagún 1953 in Burkhart 1989, 89). The Spanish friars used this word to associate it with depravity, pollution, and demonic forces. Consequently they made clear that this was in contrast to everything associated with God, Jesus, angels, or saints. In this manner the Spanish friars perceived correctly that this symbolism could be effective in evoking the desired moral attitudes in their converts (Burkhart 1989, 98).

There was however a bridge to build between the Nahua conception of Tlazolli and the Christian concept of filth as a metaphor for sin. In the Christian cosmology, filth has a spiritual meaning with no relation to a physical manifestation in the world. The monistic character of the Nahua cosmology sees the spiritual and physical as flowing into one another and subsequently Tlazolli has physical manifestations as well as a spiritual meaning. Persuasive as the friars’ usage of pollution symbolism was, and the Nahuas’ acceptance of baptism and confession as purification rites suggest that it was convincing, such tropes were operating within a Nahua frame of reference (Burkhart 1989, 129).

When discussing Sahagun’s choice of language we can say that he often leaves his objective position of a researcher in a very obvious way when he identifies with sacrificial victims. He specifically calls the sacrifices “these poor captives” when they are described to be thrown into a fire alive and left there for a while,

after which they are pulled out and have their heart cut out and offered to the sun (Sahagun 1971, 59). This is a good example of both Sahagún's empathy for the Nahua which he was known to have, and also his mission to identify and fight idolatry.

It is remarkable to note that when a birth and a consecutive christening are described, the word "love" is used multiple times (Sahagun 1971, 243). This is a strong opposite of the description of Native religious rituals, which contain mostly associations like death and torture. He singles out rituals that are associated with the newly adopted Catholicism and describes them in such ways that a positive outcome of these rituals are conveyed to the reader and to emphasize that the population can be shown the path of Christianity.

The 29th chapter of the sixth book is where Sahagún calls the Temamacalitotique (He that makes the people dance in his palm) wizards (Sahagún 1991, 166). The appliance of a European term on the status of certain indigenous people is noticeable here. In sixteenth century Europe, a wizard is someone that does business with the devil and tries to strengthen the devil's presence and power among other people. By using this Spanish term, Sahagún is confirming that the presence of the Temamacalitotique in Nahua society is not acceptable and that they are people who are in league with Satan. It is in conjunction with the tendency of Spanish friars to use terms like witch or wizard to immediately associate a person or an activity with idolatry and eliminate any discussion that the accusation of idolatry leads to.

Idolatry itself was seen by Sahagún as a product of a soul that was in a diseased state and needed to be cured. The manner in which I phrase this is derived from a common concept of metaphors used by Sahagún and other Franciscans who saw themselves as physicians of the soul. At the beginning of the *Historia general*, Sahagún states that the purpose of his work is to serve as a tool for preachers and confessors who hope to "cure" the Nahuas of their "spiritual illnesses" (Browne 2000, 178).

5.3: Conclusion

The terminology and comparisons made by Sahagún lead to an interesting conclusion. In my opinion it is Sahagún's attempt to grasp the concepts in which the Nahuas experience their world that leads to greater chasm between the sixteenth century Catholic and the indigenous world. His mission to locate and fight idolatry causes a significant limitation on his ability to comprehend Nahua rituals and way of life. In this aspect Sahagún is very much struggling with the medieval views that are shared by his contemporaries and this can also be shown by stating his positive remarks concerning dance and music in Nahua society and his admiration for their government, rhetoric, and philosophy (Browne 2000, 204). He admires this to such an extent that he compares it to Classical Greek society (Browne 2000, 205) to indicate that these were aspects that were worth of conservation by relating them to the foundation on which many friars operated, namely a classic pre-medieval humanistic Christianity.

Chapter 6: Sahagún's informants

As I noted in Chapter 1, Sahagún was not a lone writer researching the indigenous people by himself. The information included in the *Historia general* and *Primeros Memoriales* were gathered by native informants and written down by Sahagún's assistants who were also of Nahua origin. These assistants had received a Spanish education at the college of Santa Cruz in Tlatelolco where Sahagún had resided for most of the time he spent in New Spain. It is these three elements: The Spaniard Sahagún, the humanistically educated young native assistants, and the traditional old native informants; together they shape the form and substance of the *Primeros Memoriales* (Baird 1993, 20).

In this chapter these informants and assistants are the focal point of my research into Sahagún's works. I will attempt to clarify the role that they played in writing and researching. The assistants must have experienced some form of conflict with the task that they were ordered with. They were children of the Nahua population and had allied themselves with the colonial religion which most likely caused a personal search for identification. The influences of two cultures makes the informants perfect examples of Burke's concept of translators, who are, according to him, often displaced people and cultural interpretation has often been dependent on people who shifted their allegiance from one culture to the other (Burke 2009, 100). However, even though this concept of people trapped between two cultures might paint a romanticised picture, it is not the goal of this chapter to present a case of semantics in which the emotions and allegiance of the informants are up for interpretation. It is my sole objective to establish a format upon which it is possible to attain an insight in the lives of the informants in order to reconstruct the influence they had on the writing of Sahagún's manuscript.

Because of the many writings done in Sahagún's name this subject is very broad and widely handled in other studies that are cited here. This is done to such an extent that it is only possible to present key information that serves the case put forward at the beginning of this thesis.

6.1: The illustrators of the Primeros Memoriales

As discussed in chapter three, the manuscript of the Primeros Memoriales contains drawings that show European influences. In the same manner of analysis the determination can be made that six different artists worked on the drawings by looking at distinguishable individual styles (Baird 1993, 139). Ellen T. Baird labelled these artists “A to F” and artists C and D show little European influence in their drawings. This might lead to the supposition that artists C and D are informants from Tepepulco where Sahagún went to gather the information for the Primeros Memoriales. Artists A, B, E, and F are most likely Sahagún’s assistants from the college of Santa Cruz in Tlatelolco, whose names were Antonio Valeriano, Alonso Vegerano, Martin Jacovita, and Pedro de San Buenaventura. These assistants were born into a hybrid environment which would have given them a double consciousness as explained by Gilroy (Gilroy 1993 in Burke 2009, 31). As stated in section 1.5, I interpret this as being aware of the facets of two cultures that influence your environment and way of thinking while being affected by it. The note that Sahagún made about copying his writing from a pre-colonial manuscript, with explanatory notes at the bottom of its pages, indicates that these notes were probably made by his assistants after which Sahagún would copy them (Baird 1993, 157).

When the Franciscans came to Mexico they established many schools where native children were given an education in reading and writing while also learning a trade. The two most prominent schools were San José de Belén de los Naturales in Mexico-Tenochtitlan and Santa Cruz, Tlatelolco. At Santa Cruz, founded in AD 1536, children of the native aristocracy were given training in liberal arts like Latin, Spanish, Nahuatl, philosophy, and the fine arts (Baird 1993, 8). The assistants that would later aid Sahagún in transcribing the Primeros Memoriales were students here and most likely close to Sahagún since that he spent much time here.

It is not my intent to say that the assistants were the only authors of the Primeros Memoriales. Sahagún’s own handwriting can be distinguished in the manuscript. This can be seen in parts that separate themselves from the rest in that they leave the orderly make-up of the pages that the manuscript is known for. In these parts the reader can see Sahagún’s own inserted notes in Spanish which can be

identified because of his own signature that he added (see fig. 12). This is spidery-thin, shaky, irregular, and cursive in contrast to the regularized, bold, neatly printed lettering of his scribes. Attributing the irregular handwriting to Sahagún is based on the notes he made in the prologue of volume two of the *Historia general*, where he stated to suffer from tremors. The assessment is that he was already suffering from this while he was gathering information in Tepepulco (Baird 1993, 32).

Sahagún's influence can also be shown by parts that were written down by his assistants because they show repetition of elements like human figures and clothing items. These were elements that were common in European books and less pronounced in pre-conquest manuscripts.

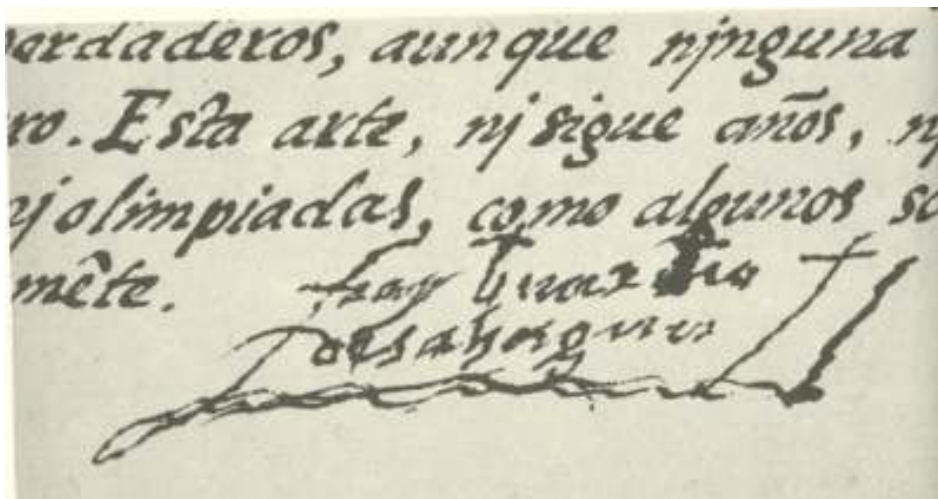


Figure 12. Sahagún's signature.

6.2: The assistants from the college of Santa Cruz

As stated before, Sahagún spent two years in Tepepulco, going there in 1558, gathering his original information and then a year and a half in Tlatelolco with Nahuas who “amended, explained, and supplemented” the original information (Sahagún 1979 in Browne 2000, 208). Before the eventual publishing of the manuscript, Sahagún altered it multiple times by himself to smooth out discrepancies. This can lead to an image of the involvement of his assistants that is contrary to how the writing process actually took place. It is therefore that we must proceed with care when analysing the *Historia general* and how much the assistants had to say in the final manuscript. However, I do hold the conviction that the involvement of assistants and informants can be ascertained from the

pictographic analysis of the *Primeros Memoriales* due to the ability to distinguish between styles and the following outcome of six different styles that can be identified according to the analysis of Baird.

In the second book of the *Historia general*, Sahagún makes it clear that he chose four assistants who he named “gramáticos”. These assistants were chosen from the college in Santa Cruz where they had been educated, most likely by Sahagún himself. This Franciscan education, inspired by the Erasmian humanism toward which many Franciscans leaned, had made them trilingual, possessing Latin, Spanish, and Nahuatl. Besides this they were well educated in European tradition (Baird 1993, 14). Being trilingual, just as Sahagún was, could have made them susceptible to “code-switching”. This means that they had to shift between different languages on multiple occasions. A side effect of this is “interference” where the assistants would not have been able to keep a complete separation or segregation between their languages (Burke 2009, 70). A good example of this is the earlier mentioned mistranslation of the cut paper figures that were offered to Tlaloc. The assistants were born after the conquest which made them neither completely Indian nor completely European in their view of the world. Baird makes an interesting, and perhaps a bit vague, comment when she says: “Indian by birth, European by education, they were fully participant in neither culture” (Baird 1993, 20). The lack of a clear culture or the presence of two cultures that they could have identified with leaves their signature in the *Primeros Memoriales*. This situation, where two cultures meet to make a single document is a good example of a “contact zone” (Burke 2009, 72).

When looking at the individual drawing styles of the assistants work the reader can see that two or more scribes worked on one page. Analysis by Baird points out that this work was done so intermingled that the separate artists were sitting next to each other (Baird 1993, 154). Following the division of assistants into “A to F” as noted before, the determination can be made that artists A and E were sitting in physical proximity to each other while working on the drawings of the first chapter of the *Primeros Memoriales*, titled “Rites, Deities” because they shared pages, folios, and sheets of paper.

The statement that Sahagún made about his assistants that accompanied him to Tepepulco is very clear about how many joined him, namely four. The

identification of six distinct styles of drawing and therefore six distinct artists complicates this matter somewhat. It is possible that two of the artists were in fact not from Santa Cruz but from Tepepulco where the information was gathered. This may indicate that the Primeros Memoriales was not executed in Tepepulco but in Tlatelolco, meaning that the two informants accompanied Sahagún and his assistants back to Tlatelolco. This is however conjecture, but it can be pointed out that the styles of Artists C and D show little European characteristics. Furthermore, artist C's distinct handling of the human figure sets him apart from the other artists (Baird 1993, 157). This leads to the conclusion that if artist C and D were in fact native informants, then artists A, B, E, and F were most likely Sahagún's assistants from the college of Santa Cruz.

6.3: Conclusion

A pictographic analysis of the drawings of the Primeros Memoriales tells the involvement of six different artists involved. The identification of European elements shows that artists C and D lack the incorporation of a focus on elements common in European manuscripts, like the human form. This leads to the most likely conclusion that these were in fact native informants from Tepepulco. This gives the reader of the Primeros Memoriales a profound insight in both Nahua influence and European involvement in interpreting pre-colonial manuscripts and copying them to a manuscript which Sahagún deemed comprehensible by European readers.

It is regrettable that there is not much known about the informants and assistants of Sahagún. However, the pictographic analysis described above gives us an understanding on where they originated from and what elements they focussed on in their drawings. It is clear that the native heritage and Catholic upbringing of the assistants creates a work where both elements are present. Yet the lack of familiarity with the drawings they copied which can be seen in their style in contrast to the drawings of artist C and D points out that they most likely attended the college at Santa Cruz from a very young age, having their native heritage pointed out as idolatry. This lack of Nahua education must have led to unfamiliarity with the pre-colonial manuscripts.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The thesis that I have presented has provided an insight into the writings of Bernardino de Sahagún, his cultural background, and the assistants and informants that aided him in constructing his ethnographic works during his lifetime. However complex this topic is, I hope to have given a clear overview of the aspects of Sahagún and his work in the limited space this thesis allowed me. In this conclusion I will go back to the partial case questions that I started working with before my research and answer them separately. I will end with answering the main case question which will conclude this thesis.

7.1: Sub questions

The sub questions are as follows:

1. *How can the social, political, and religious atmosphere in Mexico be described and in what ways could this have influenced the writing by Sahagún?*

In chapter two it became apparent that the social, religious, and political atmosphere was divided and hostile when Sahagún arrived in Mexico. The Franciscan order came looking for a new Christian utopia and found political incompetence, the mistreatment of the Nahuatl population, and religious differences with the Dominicans who believed the Nahuatl had already been converted. The natives had been forced into a hybrid situation via conversion on unequal grounds. This affected the writing of Sahagún in that he was very sceptical about Nahuatl conversion and the example the Spanish were setting. This scepticism would only grow as Sahagún grew older.

2. *How do the Spanish and native Mexicans clash in views of religion and worldview?*

The dualistic worldview that the Christian Europeans possessed contained the notion that there was good and evil and the distinction between them was very clear. This clashed with the indigenous Mexican worldview where the line between good and evil is vaguely drawn. Deities and other religious entities can

have good and evil traits and move in and out of the physical realm. The religious clash came forth out of the different ways in which Catholicism was practiced by the many Spanish groups in Mexico. The Nahua felt that if everybody could approach Christianity in their own way, they could too and wanted to incorporate it into their pre-conquest religion through a process of appropriation in which the useful elements of Christianity were adopted but the rest was ignored. Sahagún does his best to condemn the practices of the Nahua by calling it satanic worship and stating that the Nahua gods are in fact demons and Satan himself.

3. *To what extent and with what examples can a Spanish-catholic ethnocentric way of thinking be recognized in the descriptions of native Nahua rituals in Sahagún's work?*

The ethnocentricity in Sahagún's writing is detectable through his use of words. He is quick to empathise with victims of human sacrifice because in the Christian world this is deemed cruel. He is prone to write prologues to chapters in the *Historia general* where he states his intent to root out idolatry. The condemnation of Nahua practices is sometimes combined with reverence for song and dance however.

4. *How does Sahagún describe the reaction of the native population to the Spanish presence, and how much value does he attach to their opinions about this?*

The reaction of the Nahua to the Spanish and in particular Christianity is described in a negative context. The conversion was apparently incomplete and later in Sahagún's life he wrote that it was completely false. They merely incorporated new Christian elements into idolatrous practices because they were not fully cultivated by Christianity. This reaction to hybridity is best explained as "segregation" in which some new aspects are incorporated but part of the culture is kept separate from foreign influence. Sahagún describes the Nahua as being easily persuaded to leave their beliefs which makes them weak of character. He is strongly affected by their behaviour and eventually suggests that Christianity should move on to Asia where the people were indeed ready for conversion.

5. *Does Sahagún describe Native ritual practices as endemic to their society and culture, or as influences from the devil?*

This can be easily answered by stating that in Sahagún's perspective the devil was real and in Mexico. The Nahua gods were demons and the rituals belonging to the worship of these gods are literally devil worship. After his arrival in Mexico, Sahagún spent a long time wondering why God did not show himself to the Nahua so the absence of God was his conclusion and conversion was to remedy the sickness of the soul of the Nahua. Sahagún clearly rejects the Nahua cultural aspects concerning religion.

6. *In what way, by using Sahagún's writing, can there be determined what influences Sahagún's native students had on the eventual publications of his work?*

In researching and writing the Primeros Memoriales, Sahagún was given manuscripts and history of the Nahua by native informants from Tepepulco. His students copied the manuscripts and thus the Primeros Memoriales was written by people who were native descendants but had a Christian education. They were translators who were key instruments in a hybrid process where two cultures were involved in the making of Sahagún's manuscript. The unfamiliarity of the students with the pre-colonial drawings resulted in separate drawing styles and the incorporation of European elements in the new manuscript.

7.2: Case problem and its answer

The main question that was stated in the introduction and controlled the course of this thesis is:

With what intention and prejudices does Fray Bernardino de Sahagún describe the customs and beliefs of the indigenous Nahua population, inhabiting the basin of Mexico, in his written works from his arrival in Mexico in 1529 to his death in 1590?

This question took many chapters to answer. The answer has been supported by a pictographic analysis, searching the written text, and incorporating the effect Sahagún's students had on the text. The core of the outcome in this thesis is that

Sahagún's descriptions are that of a man convinced that he is able to separate good from evil and encounters a new world where his beliefs are met with resistance and complications, among them: cultural rejection and segregation. He is convinced that a Satanic influence holds Mexico in its grip and he must do all that he can to eradicate this influence in order to create a new Christian continent away from the debauchery of Europe that was going through a religious phase that turned away from Catholicism.

Sahagún describes the rituals in great detail and writes what is acceptable and what has to be stopped. The writing is in many ways subjective. Sahagún tends to let his mission to describe the Nahua culture be subjugated by his over-encompassing mission to fight idolatry. Fighting idolatry is the ultimate intent of Sahagún's writing and creates a mixture of reverence and disapproval of the native practices and emphasises the aspects that are in contradiction to Christianity in such a way that violent aspects of Nahua ritual life are brought to the foreground more than the aspects that he admires.

Sahagún's lifetime was long. The 61 years he spent in Mexico makes it impossible to state that his opinions are solid and did not change during the course of his life. Therefore this thesis has mostly pointed out his writing in the *Historia general* but it is clear that at the end of his life, Sahagún grew more pessimistic about converting the Nahua. This changed in such a way that the intent of Sahagún was no longer conversion but had a defeatist character.

General glossary

- Nahua:* The indigenous people inhabiting the Basin of Mexico during Sahagún's life.
- Basin of Mexico:* The area around the lake of Texcoco that is now Mexico City.
- Aztec:* The tribute empire that was conquered during the conquista of Hernán Cortez in AD 1521.
- Nahuatl:* The language of the Aztecs and other Nahua peoples.

Summary

When Sahagún came to New Spain he encountered the indigenous population who were in the process of converting to Christianity. He arrived with a group of fellow Franciscan friars with the mission to establish a new Christian utopia where a thousand year peace would reign. Sahagún was ordered to write down all that he could find about Nahua culture which resulted in the Historia general. In this manuscript there are various rituals and deities described in full detail and they are said to be idolatrous. Sahagún would take his students from his college in Tlatelolco and gather pictographic information from Tepepulco in order to copy it into the Primeros Memoriales. In this manuscript it is clear that European elements are incorporated in pre-colonial drawings.

The Nahua population proved difficult in adopting the Christian faith and kept holding on to traditional beliefs, often mixing old rituals with Christian rituals. This was something Sahagún became upset about, knowing that the traditional rituals were actually in honour of Satan and his demons that needed to be combated. When Sahagún reached old age he was of strong conviction that the mission to establish the utopia had failed and he suggested that Christianity should move on to other parts of the world where conversion would be more successful.

Samenvatting (Dutch)

Toen Sahagún in Nieuw Spanje aankwam trof hij de inheemse bevolking aan die zich in het proces van bekeren naar het christendom bevonden. Hij arriveerde met een groep medefranciscaanse monniken met de missie om een nieuwe christelijke utopie te stichten waar een duizendjarige vrede zou regeren. Sahagún werd opgedragen alles op te schrijven van de Nahua cultuur wat hij kon vinden wat resulteerde in de *Historia general*. In dit manuscript staan een gevarieerd aantal rituelen en goden in vol detail beschreven en het wordt afgoderij genoemd. Sahagún zou zijn leerlingen van zijn universiteit in Tlatelolco meenemen om pictografische informatie uit Tepepulco te vergaren om dit te kopiëren en in de *Primeros Memoriales* te voegen. In dit manuscript is het duidelijk dat Europese elementen in de prekoloniale tekeningen zijn geïncorporeerd.

Het bleek moeilijk te zijn de Nahua bevolking het christelijke geloof over te brengen en zij bleven hun traditionele geloof aanhouden waarbij oude rituelen vaak werden gemengd met christelijke rituelen. Dit was iets waar Sahagún ontzet van raakte omdat hij wist dat de traditionele rituelen eigenlijk in eer van Satan werden uitgevoerd, welke bestreden moesten worden. Toen Sahagún ouderdom bereikte was hij van mening dat de missie om een nieuwe utopie te stichten was gefaald en hij suggereerde dat het christendom naar andere delen van de wereld moest gaan, waar bekering succesvoller zou zijn.

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List of figures

- **Figure 1: Map of the basin of Mexico showing Tepepulco (Tepeapulco) and Tlatelolco.....21**

- **Figure 2: A pointing hand associating the text with the drawing.....24**

- **Figure 3: Primeros Memoriales drawing with outline around the pictures..... 25**

- **Figure 4: Depictions of a European style moon and a pre-colonial style sun.....26**

- **Figure 5: A priest taking confession from a native who is being told what to say by the devil..... 35**

- **Figure 6: Illustration from the Florentine codex, depicting the fate of the drunkard..... 36**

- **Figure 7: Tlaculteutl is called another Venus.....41**

- **Figure 8: Depiction of Tlaloc and Huitzilpochtli in demonised form..... 42**

- **Figure 9: Depiction of Mictlanteuctli seducing people into idolatrous practices.....43**

- **Figure 10: Depiction of Mictlanteuctli seducing people into idolatrous practices..... 44**

- **Figure 11: Depiction of Mictlanteuctli seducing people into idolatrous practices..... 44**

- **Figure 12: Sahagún's signature..... 50**