

Recalling memory to not lose identity: the Texcocan pictographic histories of the XVI century

Workshop no. 4

After the fall of the Mexica empire, in the December of 1521, the three major “capitals” of the central area in the Valley of Mexico, Tenochtitlan Texcoco and Tlacopan, underwent a very short period of rapid changes in which the old ruling class tried to survive getting used very quickly to the new balances of the system that had just been built up. The old narrative for which the native culture was flattened out by the Spanish newcomers seems here to fail as the indigenous groups showed a high level of resilience, managing to perfectly exploit the possibilities offered in order to keep their prestige. An important point that needs to be stressed out so to have a clear view of the dynamics that highlighted this period and characterized it.

But how do they managed to do that?

One of the main problems they had to face concerned the huge number of attacks they received by marginalized groups who tried to undermine their positions, claiming the nobility and ancestry of their blood by showing up in the courts pretended proofs of their precious lineages. But in order to do that they needed to change the way in which they communicate and spread the information not only towards the indigenous groups but mainly with the new *cabildos coloniales*, the debuting actors in the scene.

That’s the reason why next to the old pictographic writing system used in the valley, which conveyed a combination of history, myths and often calendrical information, these groups began, also thanks to the precious help of the religious orders who came to convert the indigenous people, to use the western alphabet and transfer on the paper their languages and thier numerous dialects. Already around the 1530’s litigations and lawsuits filled up the court in Mexico City, the colonial settlement founded over the ruins of the old Tenochtitlan and now capital of New Spain. Which was the matter of contentious? Often it dealt with lands property, territorial boundaries, possessions and of course prestigious offices.

My actual presentation focus on the Acolhua people (with *colli* meaning in Nahuatl grandfather/grandmother that is to say generally speaking “ancestors”) and the city of Texcoco, which was situated on the east side of the lake which bears the same name. At the peak of its power, it controlled a huge territory which included the important *altepetl* of Cohuatlichan Huexotla and Coatepec on the south edge besides an important portion of settlements placed northwards as Teotihuacan, Otompan, Tepeapulco, etc. After the Spanish conquest it had to deal with some fierce struggles and competitions, especially over the role of *cacique-tlatoami* which identified the most important office, at least until the death of don Antonio Pimentel, the last “natural” son of the great ruler Nezahualpilli.

We can look at one clear example of all what we introduce if we observe the so-called Oztoticpac Lands Map. This is in fact, a cadastral map made around 1540-41, which shows all the properties and lands belonged don Carlos Ometochli, one of the last “*señores naturales*”, and probably the appointed ruler of Texcoco after the death of don Pedro Tetlahuehuetzquititzin (1534 – 1539), but that was nonetheless charged with heresy and burned at the stake by the Franciscan archbishop Juan de Zumárraga before he could achieve the office. In the process papers, that have come down to the present days, is it possible to feel how a whole bunch of nobles, allegedly belonging to the opposing faction of don Carlos, tried by all possible means to discredit his position in order to take his place and rule over the city. The result of this struggle, apart from the death of don Carlos, was that all his properties had to be claimed back and challenged by the Acolhua nobles who fought in court for them.

The Oztoticpac Lands Map as said (together with its paired Humboldt Fragment VI), shows all these territories, precisely measured and calculated in their length and width, combining two ways of

communication, that is to say the indigenous one, pictographic with the images conveying the crucial message, and the western one, written in alphabetic scripts or glosses that were spread all over the document, recalling either stories about each parcel or the dynastic belongings of each ruler, whose rights were often lost amongst the mists of time. The main actor and protagonist in this litigation was don Antonio Pimentel Tlahuilotzin, another *pilli* or noble, but descending from a cadet line, as his mother was not one of the principal wives of the old ruler Nezahualpilli.

To back up his position in front of the *cabildo* don Antonio had to strongly work on two sides: firstly, he had to convince the indigenous nobles that he had all the rights to rule and therefore present himself as a legitimate candidate for the cacicazgo; secondly, he obviously needed to strengthen his role even in front of the Spanish's eyes. In order to achieve all this don Antonio began and financed a huge promotional campaign in which he presented himself as the great leader of the community as well as the most legitimate in the rulership, the only one able to enhance the position of Texcoco.

The Boban Calendar Wheel, painted in 1538 when don Pedro Tetlahuehuetzquititzin was the tlatoani of Texcoco, is a perfect example of all this. In this amazing document, we can see inside a calendrical route that framework the page three different images that synthesize the history of the altepetl of Texcoco, culminating in the final message who needed to be propagated.

Starting from the bottom part we see three different images showing precise moments of the past of the city: a past in which the Acolhua were initially hunter-gatherers, living in caves covered with animal skins, to a contemporaneity in which a full degree of civilization has been reached and achieved, especially thanks to the two the feats of the great rulers Itzcohuatzin of Tenochtitlan and Nezahualcoyotzin of Texcoco, the “poet-king” of the Acolhua people, the ones who managed to free their altepetl from the domination of the Tepanecs and surely the most important actor of their past.

In the upper part instead, is it possible to see two different figures: don Antonio Pimentel and his nephew don Hernando Chavez, respectively represented as *alcaldes*, seated on their thrones with these resting on a depiction of a mass of water and of a mountain. The graphic diphthysm of these two glyphs below (a typical expression of the Nahuatl language) represents the words *in atl in tepetl*, a metaphor meaning, “the altepetl”, that is to say the representation of the “state” of Texcoco with the two *alcaldes* staying over it in a position of power, almost as rulers. This very strong image, together with the rest of the document, could hint us that up to that time there was an internal struggle within the city as the real governor was indeed don Pedro Tetlahuehuetzquititzin as stated before. Later on, the two of them will achieve their purposes as they will become the future rulers between 1539 and 1565, despite belonging to a cadet line as mentioned above.

As we can see, and drawing the first conclusions, we are facing a very dynamic situation, in which different groups of nobles were violently competing to access to the most prominent positions of power, a pattern that we see spreading not only within the main capitals but actually even in the smallest societies that gravitated around them. These deep changings will settle only some years later, around the turn of the century, in the XVII. The outcome will be the birth of a new society, founded not anymore on lineages and blood but on the concept of *mestizaje*, intended not only as a biological point but also as a phenomenon that will invest every category of the living, including the way in which these groups communicated.

Nonetheless, still in 1608, the castizo chronicler and historian from Teotihuacan (a racial classification used to refer to people who were three-quarters White by descent and one-quarter Amerindian) Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, presented in front of the *municipalidades* of San Salvador Quahltatzinco and of Otumba a whole bunch of sources he used to write his masterpieces as the so-called *Relaciones* and

the *Historia de la Nación Chichimeca*, two works in which he tried to back up his position: he needed to “legalize” his sources because he built up a whole narrative in which he presented himself as the legitimate successor of his great grandfather don Hernando Cortés Ixtlilxochitl and thus putting himself in the picture of becoming a valid candidate for the most important offices in the city.

In order to this, as mentioned, he used as his sources some of the most famous Mesoamerican codices that we know nowadays, as the Codex Xolotl, and possibly the Mapa Quinatzin and the Mapa Tlotzin.

Despite their claim for ancientness, these documents were almost surely made after the conquest (even if it is not excluded that some of them could have been copies of older pre-Hispanic documents) and show how noble and prestigious was the Acolhua lineage, recalling the history from the time of the first rulers who initiate the greatness of the city.

Made around the half of the XVI century these precious leaves of *papel de amate* (Xolotl and Quinatzin) and deer skin (Tlotzin) represent some of the most amazing documents of this culture.

The way in which they communicate and convey the messages they wanted to present is an extraordinary example of how the Nahua mentality managed to arrange its old pictographic system into something relatively new, not only in the adding of the glosses spread all over the surfaces but also in the pictographic rendering of the images that, especially in the Quinatzin and the Tlotzin, suffered the influence of the western painting styles. Another interesting part deals with the fact that usually these documents had to be read by highly specialized classes of priests, who just by looking at one image could initiate a whole narration that could be told by heart. We are talking about the *buehuetlahtolli*, that is to say “the word of the elders”, highly ritualized speeches that were repeated always identical following a determined pattern. Katarzyna Mikulska (2010a; 2016: 53-56, 173-4; 2020) has recently characterized and analyzed the graphic communication system employed in indigenous graphic manuscripts in Mesoamerica. As she reckoned this system used four operating principles: glottography, iconic representation, notation, and a semasiographic principle to very different extents than are found in Western writing systems. The semasiographic principle links graphic expression to oral performance (sounds, music, songs, incantations, prayers), as well as ritualistic performance (conjuring), mostly because the indigenous cultures were predominantly oral. Chanting, and orally transmitting historical information was a well-embedded practice in Acolhua traditional modes of communication prior to Spanish arrival. In 1582, Juan Bautista Pomar, an important sixteenth-century Texcocan chronicler, notes in his *Relación de Texcoco*, that the nobles of Texcoco would make a particular effort to compose such chants, “in which they introduced through history many fortunate, as well as adverse episodes, and notable acts of the kings and of illustrious and prominent persons, and this ability [of composition] reached a point in which it became highly esteemed, because these [chants] had almost eternalized the memory and fame of the episodes contained in them...” (Pomar, 1975: 35). Through these major channels of communication, indigenous ethnic groups communicated and transmitted social, cultural information on to the generations that followed. In a recent study about the neurocognitive science of storytelling, Ye Yuan, Judy Major-Girardin, and Steven Brown suggest that “narrative production is not only about recounting a sequence of events, but also about conveying embodied episodes in which the perspective of a protagonist is automatically assumed as a default process... In most stories, there is a central protagonist (be it oneself or a character), who drives the actions of the narrative and who serves as a focal point by which perceivers (listeners or readers) understand the goal structure of the story's actions... As a result, people see the central conflict of the story from the protagonist's perspective” (Yuan, Major-Girardin and Brown, 2018). This article stresses a single narrative and a single protagonist, which may well characterize Western literacy in its canonical form. This also coincides with cultural history's approach to the study of collective memory from the vantage point of major events and leading figures in the history of a state, nation, or

cultural movement. Such figures are singled out and subsequently commemorated periodically on public sites such as pantheons, cemeteries, and through the pedagogical apparatus of museums and schools. Cultural memory “maps” these events and leading figures as they are singled out, and follows the direction of their ongoing influence and the group’s consensual identification with them. This collective memory as such may always be a canonical construct, crafted and influenced by ruling ideologies and intellectual currents of the time. Cultural memory deals predominantly with commemoration of major events and leading figures (Olick and Robbins 1998).

To finally conclude and taking these cues, our goal here is to establish how oral, commemorative, and ritualistic forms of transmission of social memory were manifested in the codices we mentioned and how these were exploited by their commissioner in order to back up and strengthen their position inside the Texcocan policy, a world that we have seen to be highly dynamic and in which the new actors in the scene, were very far from being absorbed by the Spaniards, showing instead an amazing degree of resilience that allows them to create and promote a new culture, based on the permeability between the western and the indigenous world.