

FROM THE “PEOPLE” TO THE “NATION”:
AN EMERGING NOTION IN SAHAGÚN, IXTLILXÓCHITL
AND MUÑOZ CAMARGO

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The idea of forging nations by means of ethnicity has not only been a European tendency (think of medieval Spain and France, or post-Soviet Eastern Europe), but also representative of other cultures. Such is the case of the Nahuatl cultures of Anahuac, the Spanish conquerors, and their mestizo progeny. Elements of that complex process have been documented in the early colonial chronicles.

It is difficult to penetrate the view the Nahuatl held of the “nation”, especially from their own unique perspective. In those elements of pre-Conquest thought that survived through Sahagún’s informants, for example, we find only the idea of “the people”, a fluid structure in ethnic terms, which waned and permuted as “the people” became acculturated with other “people”. The idea of a nation or republic simply does not exist in Nahuatl thought. Yet when Sahagún translated the words of his Nahuatl informants he described “the people” as a “república”. In some other cases he used the word “ciudad” to represent “life”. This is not the case with Anderson and Dibble’s twentieth-century translation. Consider the following chart:

<i>Florentine Codex</i>	<i>Sahagún’s Translation</i>	<i>Anderson & Translation</i>	<i>Dibble’s Siméon</i>
tlacanemi Litzli (Sahagún 1978, 176)	“Tenían su república” (Sahagún 1985, 601)	“they were city dwellers” (Sahagún 1978, 175)	“vida modesta, generosa, vida humana” (Siméon, 559)
tlacanemiliztli (Sahagún 1978, 176)	[Los otomíes] “vivían en poblado y tenían su república” (Sahagún 1985, 602)	“The Otomí had a civilized way “of life” (Sahagún 1978, 176)	“vida modesta, generosa, vida humana” (Siméon 559)
nauatlaca (Sahagún 1978, 176)	“su república” (Sahagún 1985, 602)	“Nahuatl People” (Sahagún 1978, 176)	“Las tribus mexicanas” (Siméon 306)

There are numerous examples of this type. I have sampled just a few. In spite of the European filter which creates the notion of a "republic" where none exists, Sahagún's informants do seem to accept the notion of distinctive ethnicity. When they comment on the Tamime, for example, they set them apart from the Nahua or the Otomi (Sahagún 1978, 171). This belief in distinctive ethnicities is later transferred to the individual mestizo author, educated, a product of the Renaissance, who found the Nahua worldview not so far from the European construct he had learned in school. While the word "nation" does not appear in the native informants, it does in the chroniclers, both Spanish and mestizo, who wrote their words directly into text form. This is not surprising. José Antonio Maravall (1984, 524), the Spanish philologist, finds in his research that the term "nation" was extremely common in the Spanish prose written during the sixteenth century, the moment of both Mexico and Peru's conquest. The Spanish concept of the nation, appropriated by the mestizo, became a filter to understand pre-Cortesian Mexico.

I. *Tollan-Tenochtitlan*

On the one hand the Nahua believed in a unified "humanity", the *macehuales* who were descended from the divine principal Ometecuhtli-Omecihuatl (see León-Portilla 1983, 181-182). Conversely the Nahua people were able to differentiate distinct population groups in terms of ethnicity. In fact such an awareness drove political and social relations between different groups of Nahuas. When the Spaniards arrived, Nahua notions of ethnicity also helped define relations with the invaders.

If one is to understand any society its notions of ethnicity cannot be discounted. Smith (1991, 43) proposes that the recuperation of an ethnic past is an important ingredient in the creation of a national identity. In the case of the Mexica (known more commonly by the less precise term Aztecs), that past is less biological, more mythological and cultural. Although their biological origins are from Aztlan, they revered the culture of Tollan. This mytho-cultural root-searching tendency is not unusual. The case of the modern and ancient Greeks will illustrate this point. The connection between these two groups seems to be direct in history. Yet Smith demonstrates that there is very little direct biological connection between them. One need only to *feel* a connection to achieve its power (Smith 1991, 29; his emphasis). The modern Greeks *feel* a tie to the ancient Greeks, and that is what is meaningful.

The bond between the Toltec past and the Mexica present was important for the Mexica, because —like the Greeks— it bestowed upon them a feeling of selectedness. They created what Smith (1991, 50) has called "a myth of ethnic election", also common to the Visigoths, Saxons, Franks, and Normans, establishing a clear developmental parallel between the Mexica and those important medieval European ethnic groups. The Mexica *felt* (Smith's word) themselves to be the torchbearer of the ancient Toltec civilization, cultivating an identity of what Smith has termed "ethnic chosenness" (Smith 1991, 36). Ethnicity, then, while having an initial basis in biology or race, begins evolving subjectively into something much more complex.

Any understanding of Mexica ethnicity must begin with their appropriation of Toltec culture. The Mexican capital, Tenochtitlan, reflected the Toltec royal city, Tollan (or Tula), also a place of rushes. From their nomadic beginnings to the eve of Moctezuma's meeting with Cortés outside the capital, the history of the Mexica can be defined by their quest to appropriate the Toltec world view. Their eventual fall from power must, at least initially, be understood within the cyclical pattern established with Tula's decline.

Any reading of the *Florentine Codex* suggests that Topiltzin lost his legendary battle for Tula because he had drunk an old man's white pulque (Sahagún 1978, 3:17-18). His opponent Huemac took advantage of Topiltzin's inebriated state and thus was able to prevail in the battle. Other interpretations place this great conflict in terms of good and evil. Another explanation, less mythological, less theological is proposed by Nigel Davies. Tollan falls because of ethnic tensions between two important groups, headed respectively by Topiltzin and Huemac. Davies (1977, 167-171; 349-414) paints a picture in which the Huemac's Nonoalcas defeated the Nahua under Topiltzin. A spiritual dimension is added to the temporal world of ethnicity when Topiltzin's Nahua followers associated themselves with Quetzalcoatl; when Huemac's Nonoalcas chose Tezcatlipoca. Ethnic conflict then could take on theological dimensions.

Is this the way the great Toltec civilization passed into remission? Did the divine Toltec leader Quetzalcoatl really disappear to the east, promising to return again some day, as a member of another ethnic group? For a Mesoamerican belief system that included destruction, creation, cyclical time, and ethnic awareness such a possibility is conceivable.

Civilization in Anahuac can be divided into four supreme moments: the Olmecs, Teotihuacan, Tollan, and Tenochtitlan. Evidence of ethnic neighborhoods goes back at least as far in archeological history as

Teotihuacan (Meyer 1973, 17). The Toltecs of Tula were also a multi-ethnic society (Diehl 1983, 14). This pluricultural trend continued after their decline. It could also be detected during the period in which Tenochtitlan dominated. Clendinnen (1991, 23) finds that "mixed populations were not rare, but [that] the outsider group usually lived in a distinct section or ward of the town, with their separateness acknowledged. "These ethnic divisions are substantiated in Sahagún. We have commented on the Tamine's separateness from the Otomí and the Nahuatl (see Sahagún 1978, 171). There are many other examples.

The Mexica, from the lowly *macehualli* or peasant to the most sophisticated noble, lived in a world of ethnic blending and cultural appropriation. The Mexica's genealogical history begins with a nomadic origin, from what is today northwest Mexico or perhaps even Upper California. They may have been Chichimecs or a chichimec like people. The Mexica did not disavow their humble origins in Aztlan. Yet as already mentioned, their cultural history pointed instead toward the more developed Toltecs, whom they emulated. Smith (1991, 35-36) theorizes that when one culture borrows from another, they increase their chances of ethnic survival. The history of the Mexica tends to support this proposition. As they looked to the Toltecs, they refined their culture while also becoming more powerful politically. So who were the Toltecs? In Sahagún's *Historia general* (1978, 10:165) his informants tell us that the Toltecs were also called Chichimecs, not existing a proper word. Also known as the Nahuachichimecs, they were bilingual (Sahagún 1978, 10:175). If they were bilingual, then they were also biethnic. If they were Nahuachichimecs, they, like the latter-day Mexica, may also have had nomadic origins, refining themselves with a more sophisticated culture, perhaps with the one which originated in Teotihuacan.

The informants distinguish between the Toltec-Chichimecs who spoke Nahuatl or Nonoalca, a clearly-spoken language-not barbarous-and other less developed groups, the Chichimecs, the Otomí, the Tamine, and the Teochichimecs (Sahagún 1978, 10:170, 171). In spite of this multiethnic milieu, the Toltecs were also a people with generalized, identifiable characteristics. They were learned, righteous, devout, rich, and tall (Sahagún 1978, 10:167-170). These differences and similarities demonstrated the possibility for both ethnic mixing and cultural elevation through assimilation. Sahagún's text reveals that there was a fluidity from one group to another.

The Teochichimecs, the Other, the "Extreme", lived on the plains or in the forests (Sahagún 1978, 10:171). Even though their mother tongue was barbarous, the Chichimecs would eventually learn a second language, Nahuatl (Sahagún 1978, 10:175), the language of the

very learned Toltecs. This same process would be repeated later in history when the Tamime began to learn Nahuatl or the Otomí languages (Sahagún 1978, 171). During the course of history in the valley, most groups could claim Chichimec or nomadic origins, from the primary Toltecs, to the Tepanecs, the Acolhuas, and the Mexica (Sahagún 1978, 10:196-197). Yet they all evolved to a higher level of cultural sophistication, generally associated with the Toltecs. It seems all people came to the center (Anahuac) to become civilized.

Tenochtitlan was the principal Mexica city, a conglomeration of peoples. It claimed a diversity of origins, ranging from the Mexica, the Culhua, Chichimecs, and even Tepanecs and Acolhuas. Yet it constituted a more or less unified entity. For Clendinnen, at the time of the conquest, this unity was not necessarily historical:

By the sixteenth century shared land and the notion of a shared past had become more a matter of sentiment than a historically based actuality, but the sentiment remained potent. (Clendinnen 1991, 21)

Clendinnen's "sentiment" is one and the same as Smith's "to feel". There was a felt cohesiveness on two levels: between the various contemporary cultures —horizontal appropriation— and with the Toltec mother culture —vertical appropriation—. If vertical appropriation brought a greater spiritual awareness and a greater cultural authority, horizontal appropriation brought with it greater temporal (read political) power. In Mexica society, the trend was toward ethnic blending, for without accumulating the power it brought, Tenochtitlan might would never have reigned supreme.

II. *Tetzcoco*

Tetzcoco along with Tacuba and Tenochtitlan formed the Triple Alliance, the dominant political force in the valley at the time of Cortés's arrival. Tetzcoco boasted a great history characterized by sophisticated rulers and by deep links to Tenochtitlan. Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl (1578-1650) could trace his heritage directly back to a long line of distinguished Tetzcocan rulers such as the poet king Nezahualcoyotl (1402-1472) and Ixtlilxóchitl II (1521-1531), the last ruler of an independent Tetzcoco. He could also claim blood lines to Tenochtitlan's ruling elite, including Cuitláhuac (1520) the penultimate *tlatoani* of Tenochtitlan. His family, defined by Acolhua and Mexica unions, was already accustomed to interethnic links at the time of the Spaniards's arrival. His grandmother married Juan Grande, his mother Juan de

Paraleda, both from Spain. Ixtlilxóchitl was in the end only one quarter Nahua.

His *Historia de la nación chichimeca*, as José Martí (1984, 79) once wrote, paints Tenochtitlan and Tetzcoaco as beautiful and elegant royal cities. The Tetzcoacan's chronicle provides a rich window into the world before Cortés, codifying elements from oral tradition. Yet in this text we also find the terms "kingdom" and "nation", superimposing themselves over the idea of "the people", distorting our understanding of those pre-Cortesian cultures.

Ixtlilxóchitl (1985, 161) takes advantage of the term "reino" [kingdom] when he refers to the holdings of the royal family, such as those pertaining to Nezahualcoyotl. Of course "reino" can also refer to the time during which a particular *tlatoani* governed (Alva Ixtlilxóchitl 1985, 177). Different from Sahagún's Nahuatl-speaking informants, Ixtlilxóchitl uses the term "nation", plainly and clearly in a prominent position, in the title.

He projects the idea of nationhood to the Chichimecs who probably did not live in cities. The Chichimecs of Xolotl, founded his beloved Tetzcoaco. Both Xolotl's Chichimecs and the late-arriving Acolhuas, who would eventually fuse with them, are both classified as a "nation" (Alva Ixtlilxóchitl 1985, 59 & title). Another group is classified as the "nación otomíe" (Alva Ixtlilxóchitl 1985, 60), a people previously mentioned by Sahagún's informants.

Setting the record straight, Ixtlilxóchitl purges the adjective "Chichimec" of its traditional meaning, heritage of dogs. (Dogs run in packs and are nomadic). For this descendent of Tetzcoacan rulers, phonic similarities have obscured its true meaning, which pertains to eagles (Alva Ixtlilxóchitl 1985, 58). It is possible, however, that Ixtlilxóchitl's defense of his gentility was overzealous. Siméon's Nahuatl dictionary (1977, 95a) lists the root of Chichimeca to be *chichi*, having four meanings, dog, to nurse-as with milk, to sew or darn, or from *chichitl*, to salivate. Ixtlilxóchitl rejects such meanings and constructs a glorious history for the Chichimecs.

Whatever the true etymological meaning of the gentile noun, Ixtlilxóchitl uses it to refer to a group of individuals who are generally associated with the great Xolotl and his heritage. This culture came to occupy Toltec lands after the fall of Topiltzin, somewhere after the year of *macuilli tecpatl*. Ixtlilxóchitl (1985, 53, 56, 75) praises the high culture and civilization achieved in various Toltec cities such as Tollan, Chollolan, and Tolantzinco. In general, as would the Mexica later, the Acolhua-Chichimec proudly assimilated Toltec culture, achieving a high level of civilization which flowered in Nezahualcoyotl and Nezahualpilli.

Ixtlilxóchitl describes the Chichimecs's observation and eventual acceptance of the Toltecs:

Era tan grande el amor que [el rey chichimeca] Techotlalatzin tenía a la nación tulteca, que no tan solamente les consintió vivir y poblar entre los chichimecas, sino que también les dio facultad para hacer sacrificios públicos a sus ídolos y dedicar los templos, lo que no había consentido ni admitido su padre Quinatzin... (Alva Ixtlilxóchitl 1985, 76).

The idea here is that the Chichimecs openly began to accept the victims of the Toltec diaspora. After allowing the Toltecs to practice their faith, the Acolhua-Chichimecs began to appropriate that faith. Finally they mixed ethnically with the "Toltec nation", forming a greater cultural and political entity. This blending did not take place in a framework of symmetry. Ixtlilxóchitl's concept of nationality is not derived so much from a mutual interaction between these two groups, but from the power that Toltec culture held over Xolotl's people. It is this cultural authority achieved through vertical appropriation, along with the political power consummated through horizontal appropriation of the Acolhua, which causes this group of Chichimecs to slowly gain prominence in the valley. Demonstrating the temporal power of horizontal appropriation they would accept the appellation Acolhua, from which ultimately is derived their kingdom's name, Acolhuacan.

Both Toltec and Acolhua civilizing influences became a defining characteristic for the now influential "Chichimec nation". And yet Ixtlilxóchitl's use of the term "nation" does not necessarily imply civilization. When he chronicles Cortés's deeds in Guaniganiga, he describes its inhabitants as belonging to "aquellas naciones gentílicas y bárbaras" (Alva Ixtlilxóchitl 1985, 225). The idea of "nation" can also be applied to a confederation of peoples. When he refers to Quiahuiztlan and to its people, he reports that they were of "valía y nación" (Alva Ixtlilxóchitl 1985, 234). It can also apply to people the Tetzcocans conquered, "las naciones que hemos sujetado y puesto debajo de nuestro imperio" (Alva Ixtlilxóchitl 1985, 172). Tetzco, as demonstrated from Ixtlilxóchitl's complicated blood lines, also understood its identity in its relationship to the Mexica capital, Tenochtitlan.

III. *Tlaxcallan*

If Tetzco's identity was derived in part from its alliance to Tenochtitlan, Tlaxcala defined itself in its resistance to Tenochtitlan. That defiance caused great suffering in Tlaxcala. The clearest symbol

of that mistreatment can be found in the differentiation of cloth in each municipality. The Tenochans usually wore cotton finery. The Tlaxcalans were limited to clothing sewn from burlap.

Diego Muñoz Camargo (1528-1600) hailed from Tlaxcala. When compared to Ixtlilxóchitl his double misfortune becomes apparent. First Tlaxcala was an impoverished nation surrounded by the Mexica's sphere of influence. Secondly he could not boast the royal pedigree that defined Ixtlilxóchitl's persona (for more on Muñoz's biography see Gibson, 1950). His father from Extremadura, his mother Tlaxcala, Muñoz Camargo also considered himself a member of the larger Hispanic nation, now mestiza, superior to the Chichimec provinces to the north (Muñoz 1986, 250). Born just seven years after Tlaxcala's capitulation Muñoz Camargo seems to share the younger Ixtlilxóchitl's view of nationhood. Thus he considered converting "nations" such as China, Japan and Tartaria to Christianity (Muñoz 1986, 263).

Yet, while they share the same idea of the Spanish nation, they differ on defining the Chichimec heritage-Ixtlilxóchitl's claimed gentility. Not of Chichimec stock, the Tlaxcalan uses the term as synonymous with barbarous. When he describes Florida, he sees it as unpopulated and "of Chichimecs", a suggestion that implies that whatever the Chichimec are, they are not capable of constituting "population" (Muñoz 1986, 260). Such an insinuation denies them humanity. Here Muñoz Camargo falls into the same narrow mind-set as did the Europeans, failing to define the Floridians in their own terms (early Seminoles?), lumping all non-Europeans in a single group, seeing them as the inferior "Other." Perhaps Muñoz's lower social standing impaired his ability to see "barbarians" as a nation.

The terms "Republic" and "gentility" (Muñoz 1986, 197, 206) inform Muñoz Camargo's idea of nationality. When he narrates the events that end in the assassination of the Tlaxcalan ambassador to Cholula, Muñoz Camargo (1986, 212) mentions the "terrible espanto y pena en la República". Certainly we would not expect less of a reaction for an ambassador who died "en servicio de su patria y República" (Muñoz 1986, 212-213). This Tlaxcalan national sentiment explains why they assisted Cortés in the alleged (probably true) massacre at Cholula, a city Muñoz terms "aquella nación y provincia" (1986, 213). Such nomenclature denotes Cholula's status as a "province" under Mexica control, and a "nation" in its own right resulting from its cultural authority. Such prestige may result from its adoration of the Toltec Quetzalcoatl. Yet it may also stem from Muñoz's admiration of Cholula's superior political and spiritual power.

While Muñoz's ideology differs here from Ixtlilxóchitl's, he does share with the Tetzcoacan an admiration for the Nahua past. Muñoz does not devalue Cholula in spite of its enemy status. Calling it a "nation" denotes respect. This was not the case, as we have seen, in his view of the Floridians. (Was this an inferiority complex, which impeded him from seeing the Chichimecs as "population" or as a "nation"?) Like Ixtlilxóchitl Muñoz accepted an ethnocentric hierarchy in which each distinct culture felt itself superior, sacrificing individuals from other ethnicities. The Cholulans sacrificed to Quetzalcoatl victims who were not from Cholula, but from "otras naciones" (Muñoz 1986, 214). Some of those victims were from Tlaxcala. This practice was very common in Anahuac. Alva Ixtlilxóchitl (1985, 260) tells us that the Mexica sacrificed a great number of Tlaxcalans to Huitzilopochtli during the holiday of *Toxcatl*. If true, this could explain why Pedro de Alvarado instigated the battle/massacre of *Toxcatl*, to avenge his Tlaxcalan allies's humiliation.

What we see before the conquest is a somewhat reduced concept of national identity, sometimes limited to a city—even the Tlatelolcans constantly had to remind the Tenochans, that although of a different municipality, they both shared common Mexica origins. Triple Alliance power was divided among diverse groups and actually was achieved by uniting three nations, the Mexica, the Acolhua-Chichimec and the Tepanecs of Tacuba. The irony of this is that, in spite of diverse origins, they all harkened back to what Davies (1980) has called the Toltec heritage—slowly redefining themselves through vertical appropriation in terms of a larger ideal. At the same time horizontal cultural fusion was also achieved by ethnic blending. The Cholulans and Tlaxcalans also fit this pattern. With the arrival of the Spanish, the importance of the vertical Nahua past decreased while cross-cultural horizontal contact began to reign supreme.

IV. *New Spain*

For the mestizo chroniclers, the idea of the "nation" was not limited to their view of Mesoamerica's pre-Cortesian inhabitants. They incorporated the old notions into a new construct known as Spain. Ixtlilxóchitl (1985, 268) refers to this entity as "nuestra nación española". How he could arrive at such inclusiveness can be gleaned from his view of history. Looking back in time, he inserts the destruction of Tula into a more universal context. First he gives the Nahuatl date, *ce tecpatl*, and then the Christian one, 956. He then provides us with a European con-

text for the Toltec catastrophe: the reigns of the Castilian king, don García, and of the Roman Pontiff, Johannes XII (Alva Ixtlilxóchitl 1985, 57). The history of Anahuac and Europe are presented in a framework of cohesion and symmetry.

Ixtlilxóchitl's "nuestra nación española" begs further comment. The origins of the Spanish nation itself are not held in common. They hark back to a multiplicity of *etnia*, people from Andalucía, the Basque Country, Castilla, Cataluña and Galicia. Viewed from another perspective, the Spanish nation also stems from Christian, Jewish and Moorish roots. Since the Islamic and Jewish religions were expelled or repressed in the peninsula after 1492, the Spanish nation is derived in part from uniting diverse ethnic origins, and also from forging religious and political unity. In this sense it prefigured "revolutionary" notions of the nation which burst onto the world scene in 1776 and 1789. This Spanish expanding trend toward national ethnic blending would fuse with the practices already described in Anahuac. The folding of Spanish conventions into Nahua customs allowed for the creation of a trans-oceanic nation that would quickly become the Spanish Empire, "nuestra nación española".

When Muñoz Camargo comments on Cortés in Cholula, he conceptualizes a Tlaxcalan-Spanish national confederation from the moment of the conquest. He describes the advance of "nuestros ejércitos" on Tenochtitlan (Muñoz 1986, 214). The Tlaxcalan-Spanish link implies that pre-Cortesian national differences between the Tlaxcalans and the Mexica had still not been attenuated during Muñoz's time. Due to historical hatred, it was easier for the Tlaxcalans to fuse horizontally with the Spaniards than with the Mexica.

Although intercultural practices were present in pre-Cortesian Mexico, they are much harder to document than those on the peninsula. This is true for two reasons. First the Spanish made a concerted effort to destroy Nahua documents. Second the Nahua hid elements of their culture as a form of resistance. The result of these two operations is that much Nahua culture was lost. What we can conclude from Ixtlilxóchitl, though, is that from the mestizo perspective the nation notion can be applied to any group, whether the not so barbarous Chichimecs, the very civilized Toltecs, the "barbarous" people of Guaniganiga or the larger multi-ethnic Spanish Empire. Muñoz held a similar view with the exception that he rejected the "barbarians" as a nation. Of tantamount importance was the sharing of certain ideals, religious, cultural and political, and a common expanding ethnicity, a non-biological notion that evolved as allowed by horizontal influences from other cultures.

Do the nation-forging successes of pre-Colombian Mesoamerica have to do with culture, ethnicity or lineage? As we have seen, the first two elements had their impact. Vertical lineage was also important. Muñoz Camargo describes the idea of lineage in terms of "gentilidad". When he refers to the marriage of doña María Luisa Tecuelhuatzin, the *tlatoani* Xicotencatl's daughter, he explains that she had to respect the norms of her "gentilidad" (Muñoz 1986, 197). What that means is that horizontal behavior (to whom she would be married) was defined by vertical norms. When vertical lineage and horizontal gender come together (see my forthcoming article), we get to the crux of the matter, the point where the national idea becomes extremely clear.

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