Reading Four: Frances Karttunen, “After the Conquest: The Survival of Indigenous Patters of Life and Belief,” *Journal of World History 3:2* (Fall 1992):239-256

Abstract: Historians have long assumes that the conquest of Mexico and the migration of Europeans to the Americas overwhelmed the indigenous culture of the Aztecs and their Mesoamericans neighbors. Indeed, Spanish rule and Roman Catholic institutions certainly established themselves solidly in colonial Mexico. Recent scholarship has shown, however, that many indigenous values and cultural elements survives the conquest of Mexico and persist even to the present day. This article examines four of these values-cardinality, duality, reciprocity, and propriety-discussing their roles in preconquest Mexico and showing how they survive into contemporary times.

Relatively few Spaniards ever were able to cross the ocean to the New World, yet they succeeded in impressing their culture on an enormously larger number of Amerindians. The inherent attraction of European civilization and some undeniable technical superiorities the Spaniards had at their command do not seem enough to explain wholesale apostasy from older Indian patterns of life and belief. Why, for instance, did the old religions of Mexico and Peru disappear so utterly? Why did villagers not remain loyal to deities and rituals that had brought fertility to their fields from time immemorial?

William H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (1976)

IN answer to William McNeill's question of why Mesoamerican religions and their related cultures disappeared after the conquest, I would like to propose that certain principles of social organization and behavior shared by the Aztecs and their neighbors in Mesoamerica are alive and well, even today.[1] The arrival of Europeans in the early 15003 radically altered the civilizations of Mesoamerica, but during the past four and a half centuries, indigenous institutions and values have survived with remarkable toughness. This may not be evident at first; if we expect too much of appearances, we will be disappointed. Much that is considered traditional in indigenous dress and handicrafts actually has its origins in European styles, skills, and aesthetics. Catholicism has been virtually universal from the beginning of the contact period, and local government has been modeled on European forms that have been revised from time to time by the European and mixed elements of society. The Aztecs' language, Nahuatl, and many other indigenous languages have survived, but they are much altered by centuries of contact with Spanish. Since the beginning of this century, these languages have increasingly been spoken only by the elderly and people in remote areas in a world where hardly any place remains remote, thanks to the building of roads and the institution of bus service. For a "purist" of the sort Jane Hill and Kenneth Hill describe so vividly in their book *Speaking Mexicano,* the late twentieth century is a very discouraging time. These purists are mainly older men who challenge their neighbors to produce sentences, count to large numbers, and coin neologisms without recourse to the Spanish language. Some samples of neologisms are *tepozcoatl* (literally, "metal snake") for train, *huecaittayotl* (literally, "far vision") for television, and *tepoztonaltlatamachihualli* (literally, "metal measurer of days") for clock. The effect of these challenges has been to undermine the confidence of women and young people in their ability to speak Nahuatl adequately.

Yet despite the impression of yielding and mixing, the traditional indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica remain apart from and misunderstood by the burgeoning neo-European and mixed *(mestizo, ladino)* population. One thing that continues to separate the two groups is language. Although most individuals who retain the language of their ethnic group today are bilingual and have a useful command of Spanish, virtually nobody who is not an "Indian" learns to speak an indigenous language.[2] But there are other, more subtle distinctions based on what we might call the Mesoamerican world view, something that has taken scholars of Mesoamerica quite a long time to perceive, since to do so requires that we both set aside our own assumptions about the way the world and society work and resist being swept away on a tide of romanticism. One of the first to accomplish this was Miguel Leon-Portilla in his book *La filosofía náhuatl estudiada en sus fuentes,* first published in 1956 and translated into English as *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind* (1963). Since that pioneering work appeared, it has been joined by a host of other serious works that offer interpretations of the world as seen from an indigenous Mesoamerican point of view. Especially influential among these have been Evon Vogt's 1969 study of the Tzotzil Maya community of Zinacantan; Victoria Bricker's 1981 work, *The Indian Christ, the Indian King: The Historical Substrate of Maya Myth and Ritual;* Nancy Farriss's *Maya Society under Colonial Rule: The Collective Enterprise of Survival* (1984); the various publications of Dennis Tedlock and Barbara Tedlock based on their experiences as initiates into the ritual lore of the Quiche Maya (B. Tedlock 1982; D. Tedlock 1985); and the recent revision of ideas about Classic Maya society by Schele and Miller (1986) and Schele and Freidel (1990). Currently controversial is John Bierhorst's (1985) interpretation of the sixteenth-century Aztec songs as vehicles for returning spirits of deceased ancestors and heroes to aid in indigenous resistance—a religious and political movement that, if it ever existed, was so covert that it went completely unmarked in its time. Less controversial are the beautifully Grafted works on Chiapas by the Norwegian anthropologist Henning Siverts (1969, 1981); the social histories of indigenous communities in the colonial period based on original sources and written by many young historians and anthropologists trained to work with archival material in indigenous languages; and the constellation of recent studies of modern Nahua communities, the brightest star of which is the Hills' sociolinguistic study of the communities on the slopes of the Malinche volcano (Hill and Hill 1986). Given all these sources, it becomes possible and indeed requisite to try to understand the descendants of the Aztecs and all the Mesoamericans on their own terms, while giving close scrutiny to the terms we are accustomed to use in talking about them and the frameworks we would impose upon our perception of them.[3]

Here I will discuss and illustrate four principles I believe to be of fundamental importance to Mesoamerican peoples past and present. I do not mean for these four to be taken as an exhaustive set. For instance, the notion of historical cyclicity has been su thoroughly explored elsewhere (Bricker 1981; Edmonson 1982; B. Tedlock 1982) that it hardly needs to be called to the attention of Mesoamerican scholars. But since these works have dealt specifically with Maya groups, both ancient and modern, it might be well to point out that the Nahua have shared with the Maya and other Mesoamericans the calendar of interlocking cycles of 13 days, 20-day months, 200-day and 365-day periods, all coming together in 52-year units. Moreover, readers should consult James Lockhart's 1985 article, "Some Nahua Concepts in Postconquest Guise," for detailed exposition of cellular (vs. hierarchical) organization, concepts of office, certification of legality, and micropatriotism— ideas that will appear here, too, distributed among the four principles I am about to take up. I shall call these four principles *cardinality, duality, reciprocity,* and *propriety.*

In the traditional Mesoamerican view of the world, one stands at the center and looks to the four cardinal directions: east, north, west, and south. The beginning point and the counterclockwise rotation through the cardinal points are all but inalterable. The center from which the cardinal points are viewed is sometimes perceived as a fifth direction or point, but it is clearly different in nature from the cardinal directions. The principle of rotation through four points to reach a fifth state that completes the count or rotation is fundamental to indigenous Mesoamerican counting, calendar, ritual observances (surviving to this day, as in the case of those described by Alan Sandstrom and Pamela Sandstrom [1986], among others), and even literary form.

Let us briefly consider Mesoamerican counting and the calendar. Mesoamerican counting systems, whether Nahua, Maya, Mixtec, Zapotec, or other, are vigesimal systems based on units of twenty rather than ten as in decimal systems. These units are composed of four groups of fives, and each group of five is made up of 1 through 4 followed by what we might call "the fifth number." In Nahuatl the names for 5 and 10 seem to contain the stem *ma/mah,* "hand"; I have no analysis of the word for 15. At the end of the fourth group, the fifth number is called something like "the (full) count," in Nahuatl *pohualli.* The Nahuatl names of all numbers through 399 are made of compounds of these eight stems. The next named unit after 20 is *tzontli,* "400" (20 x 20), and the next is *xiquipilli,* "8,000" (20 x 400). The names for all intervening numbers and those on to infinity are names formed by compounding.

When we look at the Mesoamerican calendar (actually two interacting calendars), we see the same structure. Like those of their neighbors, the Nahua ritual calendar consisted of a 260-day cycle in which the numbers 1 to 13 were associated with twenty day-names. The day-names, for their part, were associated with the four cardinal directions, five sets making up the twenty. In the solar calendar, time was divided into groups of four days followed by a market day. Four sets of these groups made up a twenty-day "month." The solar year was made up of eighteen of these twenty-day periods plus a five-day period each year to correct the calendar, since (18 x 20) + 5 = 365. (See Andrews [1975, pp. 401-405] for a comprehensive summary of the two calendars with their Nahuatl day-, month-, and year-names.) It is not at all surprising that among the earliest Spanish loan words into Nahuatl were the Spanish names for the days of the seven-day week and the months of the twelve-month year, since these had no equivalents in the Mesoamerican calendar. However, since both the Mesoamerican solar calendar and the European calendar year were 365 days long, it is also not surprising that after the Europeans established themselves in Mesoamerica, the indigenous peoples continued to name the years by their own year-names. As can be readily seen in the annals of Puebia and Tlaxcala, the Nahua continued to rotate through the four year-names, "Reed," "Flintstone," "House," and "Rabbit," and to enter the hieroglyphs for these names into their annals, even though the annals were otherwise kept in alphabetic writing.[4]

In surviving indigenous ritual, the four cardinal directions are consistently honored with offerings, the sprinkling of water, the puffing of tobacco smoke, and the like in each direction. References to these practices abound in recent anthropological descriptions of agricultural rituals and healing rites, as well as in the seventeenth-century description of Nahua practices in what are now the states of Guerrero and Morelos by Hernando Ruiz de Alarcon (see Andrews and Hassig 1984).

Perhaps one of the most remarkable manifestations of the continuing application of the principle of cardinality has to do with what appears to be Spanish-style civil government. Philip C. Thompson argued very persuasively in his Tulane University doctoral dissertation that among the Maya of Yucatan the old practice of rotating civil and religious responsibilities through four groups within each community was maintained during the Spanish colonial period. The colonial Maya called the officials of their civil government by Spanish titles *(alcaldes, regidores, juezes* sometimes *gobernador),* but when Thompson carefully examined the annual records of which individuals in the community of Tekanto held which offices each year, he found that the old four-step rotation was maintained. Thus, the Spanish observers believed the Maya had adopted Spanish-style governmental organization, although somewhat imperfectly learned, while the Maya in fact continued their traditional form of government under new nomenclature (Thompson 1978). Turning to the Nahua, Lockhart discussed the adaptation of the outward forms of Spanish civil government to existing indigenous structures—once again including rotation of responsibilities, although not so clearly in a fixed quadripartite pattern (Lockhart 1985, pp. 468-73).

As a matter of fact, Spanish observers were confused by what Lockhart calls the cellular (and often quadripartite) divisions of Mesoamerican communities (in Nahuatl *calpolli [calpulli], tlahxilacalli)* and tried to interpret them geographically as *barrios.* But the social organization of these communities was based on rotating responsibilities, not neighborhoods. The construction of neighborhood chapels may have localized responsibilities, but this was an imposition of the Catholic Church.

Another example of the aesthetic importance of groups of four is the formal poetry of Mesoamerica. Several hundred Nahuati poems were redacted in the sixteenth century, and there is at least one poem of the same form preserved in Yucatec Maya. Moreover, some of the poems in Nahuatl in the collection known as the *Cantares mexicanos are* identified there as Otomí poems, so we may well be dealing with a pan-Mesoamerican form. These poems are written in pairs of verses, and the dominant form is four pairs (Karttunen and Lockhart 1980). Moreover, one might say that the four verse pairs rotate around a common theme with no beginning pair and end pair either thematically or form variant to variant. One variant of a poem may begin with one pair, another with another, but the integrity of the pairs and their arrangement around a central theme remain inviolate.

It is interesting that the art historian John McAndrew, seeking to define the indigenous contribution to sixteenth-century church architecture in Mexico, concluded that it lies in an endlessly repetitive filling of all space, leading to no great climaxes (McAndrew 1965, p. 199). Whereas European Gothic principles lead the eye up and up to vaults and pinnacles, Mesoamerican aesthetics have to do with endless repetition that conies back only on itself, like the great cycles of the Mesoamerican calendars and the little universes of the four-part poems circling a single theme with no clear beginning or end.

DUALITY

Many scholars writing about indigenous Mesoamerican literature have placed great emphasis on the rhetorical role of the couplet (Garibay 1971, pp. 65-67; Garibay 1965, pp. xxvii-xxxi; Edmonson 1968, 1971; Bricker 1974, 1981; D. Tedlock 1983, 1985; Hanks 1986). In elevated, "important" speech, statements are repeated with minimum change, as for example in reference to a deceased

Nahua ruler: "thus truly today the lord went (away), he went to lie down, he (whom) our Lordship the Possessor of heaven, the Possessor of the earth, the Possessor of the underworld, has made to disappear, has hidden. He left raising, he left leaving the bundle, the carrying frame, the instrument for carrying, the instrument for bearing" (Karttunen and Lockhart 1987, p. 183). At least for Nahuatl this by itself is a prose convention, while in Nahuatl poetry it is fit into further patterns of duality; Nahuatl songs and poems we have seen to be made of pairs of verses in which the order of the pairs may vary, but the two members of the pair cannot be separated. Even at the most elemental level of naming things, Nahuatl and the other Mesoamerican languages tend to name an entity by reference to two of its qualities. The armadillo, for instance, is called *ayotochin* in Nahuatl (from ayotl*,* "turtle," and *tochin,* "rabbit"), because it has a shell like a turtle and ears resembling those of a rabbit. Angel Maria Garibay, one of the most prominent scholars of Nahuati literature in the recent past, named this rhetorical practice *difrasismo.*

Leon-Portilla, Garibay's successor, perceives the whole of Nahua thought in terms of duality (Leon-Portilla 1956, 1963). Nahua deities (and Mesoamerican deities in general) seem to come in pairs, male and female, but another way to think about them is that like everything in the whole cosmos, they have their two complementary parts: male and female, beneficent and malevolent, dark and light, and so forth. What we might perceive as disturbing contradiction, from the Mesoamerican viewpoint is complementarity, wholeness, and harmony.

In social organization we once again see duality manifesting itself and being misunderstood by European observers. Some Nahua communities had a definite moiety structure, with two rulers, two sets of officials, and two sets of rotating responsibilities (Lockhart 1985, p. 471; Lockhart and Schwartz 1983, pp. 171-72). The moieties were characteristically slightly unequal, with the upper moiety devoted to the status quo and the lower moiety anxious to gain advantage, hence open to innovation. However, to establish a base in such a community, it was necessary to ally one's cause with the upper moiety. The Spanish were largely successful at this in the first years of their presence in Mesoamerica, simply situating themselves at the top of all government and leaving the indigenous structure in place, even to the extent of maintaining "twin cities" that were virtually contiguous, although they might have main churches of equal size, or alternatively divide the use of a single church in ways mysterious to the Spanish.

In traditional Mesoamerican society there was and still is very little possibility of social mobility, and one of the most reprehensible kinds of behavior is "self-magnification" (to use the term D. Tedlock has chosen in translating the Quiche term in the *Popol Vuh).* One is born into one's proper place, one's fate (Nahuatl *tonalli)* is largely determined by one's birthday according to the ritual calendar, and the role of education is to ensure that each person learns his or her role to perfection. The punishments for nonconformity have been and continue to be severe. (Consider the "linguistic terrorism" practiced by the guardians of tradition in (the Nahua communities studied by the Hills.) Conformity's reward, on the other hand, has been security within the community and freedom from the painful process of individual self-actualization. In the mid sixteenth century, when indigenous religious observances had been condemned for a generation and Mesoamerican civilization lay in shambles from the European assault, survivors of the conquest looked back nostalgically to the better ordered, morally safer days of their youth. Concerning children growing up in the aftermath of the conquest, an elderly survivor urged that they be carefully guarded and chastized, "because evil and bad behavior are greatly growing, increasing, and hardening in them;

hardly are they born when they begin not to care about anything, not to obey, to have no shame" (Karttunen and Lockhart 1987, p. 149).

In that older order there had been two social classes (duality yet again): the ruling class (Nahuatl *pipiltin)* and the common people (Nahuatl *macehualtin).* It is probably mistaken to think of any Mesoamerican city-state as having a pyramidal, hierarchical governing structure leading up to a "king" at the top. One or another member of the ruling class assumed primary leadership, taking on that responsibility on behalf of his class. The contribution of the ruling class to society as a whole was to maintain good order, to keep things running smoothly, and to mediate between human beings and deities—the last of these tasks being an arduous and self-consuming process involving sleep deprivation, self-bleeding, rigorous fasting, and similar discomforts.[5] The contribution of the common people was production. Far from living in idleness while supported by the toiling masses, the children of the ruling classes were carefully instructed in all the same arts as the commoners: in agriculture, arts and crafts, military defense, and homemaking (Karttunen and Lockhart 1987, pp. 149-55). Although there were different institutions of learning for the offspring of the rulers and for the common people, what was taught was very much the same. Here again we see the principle of duality at work: society had two parts that were by no means equal but also not antithetical or in conflict. On the contrary, they were largely complementary.

This ideal has been maintained to this day. Influential people within indigenous communities must keep a low profile. When individuals put themselves forward and become conspicuous, they place themselves in jeopardy, as the full force of the community is brought to bear to enforce conformity. Sometimes this is done by threat and harassment, sometimes by practice of witchcraft, often by malicious and ongoing personal slander. Thus, outside efforts to support strong local leaders are probably misguided, since traditional communities operate on consensus more than on individualistic leadership. When one examines the record of indigenous rebellions, one finds them characteristically led by mestizos, sometimes disaffected schoolteachers. Strong indigenous leaders such as Jacinto Pat, who engaged in negotiations to conclude the Mayas' nineteenth-century Caste War in Yucatan, have been prone to assassination by their own colleagues, and the rebellions have been ineffective.[6]

RECIPROCITY

Indigenous communities operate largely by exchanged favors. One of the great social supports of indigenous society has been the institution of *compadrazgo,* or "coparenthood," the relationship between the natural parents and the godparents of a child On the surface this appears to be a Roman Catholic institution that indigenous society took up with astounding fervor, but in order for *compadrazgo* to have flourished and elaborated itself so, its seeds must have been sown in fertile ground. For the Catholic Church contributed just the principle of naming sponsors for infants at baptism to be spiritually responsible for the children until they should reach the age of reason and assume responsibility for their own souls. But in Mesoamerican society it has come about that there are "godparents" for every event, every responsibility. An individual acquires godparents at baptism, godparents of the first communion, godparents of confirmation (when in principle one would be divested of all godparents), godparents of holy matrimony, and more (Hill and Hill 1986, pp. 21, 36-37).

These carefully chosen people (preferably mature married couples) enter into highly ritualized and constraining relationships with a person's biological parents. In this relationship, the godchild (or other object of sponsorship) is almost inconsequential; the important relationship is between the two mature couples. *Compadres* must be elaborately polite to one another, engage in repeated and often costly exchange of material goods, and assume equal responsibility for their common "offspring." In speaking Nahuatl, *compadres* must exert great care to use special forms of direct address with one another (Hill and Hill 1978, 1986). It does not do to enter into a relationship of *compadrazgo* with a close and cherished friend, because the demands of the formal relationship can cause people to avoid each other for fear of failing in the courtesy due each other. Certainly this was never the intent of the Catholic Church.

But this does make sense from the point of view of indigenous society, where security lies in being able to depend with absolute certainty on one's counterpart, and where accounts are not added up or credits checked against debits. People do their part and trust that as they give, so will they receive. When there is a breakdown in this system, the only appeal they can make is to point out that they kept their own end of the contract. This is very clearly illustrated in indigenous "prayers" to Mesoamerican deities, from those recorded in the 1500s down to those of today.[7] When the spring rains were late, or when a ruler died or any misfortune befell a community, a representative (someone from the ruling class, of course, since this was part of its responsibility) set forth in an eloquent speech to the relevant deity what had happened, how much suffering and uncertainty human beings were suffering, and what the consequences of continued misfortune to human beings would be. The spokesman would go on in his speech searching for some possible way in which the human beings had failed to uphold their part of the reciprocal relationship between people and gods, and the end of the prayer would be a statement of resignation on the part of the community to do their best and wait to see the outcome.[8] There is little supplication in such "prayer," only a reminder of a breakdown of reciprocity between man and god.

Modern indigenous communities can be disappointed in their expectations of reciprocity with the nonindigenous world. Offers of material goods or influence on higher levels may look to outsiders like anything from remuneration for services rendered to frank bribery, but a community may perceive the offer of goods or aid as a move to enter into an ongoing reciprocal relationship, an outward sign—a sort of sacrament—of the assumption of major responsibility. Of course, if the person offering immediate incentives has no intention of being responsible in a large way for the community in the future, then there is bound to be disappointment and a sense of injury at the community level. Indeed, a common theme of conversation is how trusted outsiders, whether politicians or anthropologists, have gone away and forgotten the people they misled with gifts and fine words and proffered friendship.

PROPRIETY

Mesoamericans have a tremendous sense of rectitude. It invests every aspect of behavior. Even when people offend every norm of proper behavior, as Mesoamericans often do when they are feeling miserable, they always know exactly how and to what degree they are misbehaving. Among members of a community there is little sense of relativity or mitigating circumstances, no feeling that people should refrain from condemning others and a strong feeling that they must defend themselves. In a long Nahuatl monologue recorded in the 1980s, a Nahua woman who had been on

a drunken binge admitted frankly that the spree had caused a lot of trouble, but pointed out that she had never failed to wash and iron her stepchildren's clothes (K. Hill 1985). Such a statement is not an evasion or justification, but an assessment of which norms have been broken and which maintained. One of the most cherished norms of propriety is *respeto,* the courtesy due to other people at one's own level or above. This is linguistically enshrined in Nahuatl in the complicated forms of honorific speech. To fail to use the correct verb forms, the correct pronoun, the correct prefixes due another person is to insult him or her mightily and to shame oneself. The early European friars, as they began to learn Nahuatl, noticed that it was not sufficient simply to construct grammatically correct sentences in Nahuatl. They might be mocked behind their backs or to their faces for their plain speech, and they made an effort to learn to speak well in order not to undermine their evangelistic efforts (Karttunen and Lockhart 1987, pp. 2-6, 29).

When we examine the *Bancroft Dialogues,* a sixteenth-century Nahuatl text that exemplifies polite direct address among people of different age, rank, and sex, we find that courtesy involves indirection to the point of actual inversion of stated relationships. Personal names are avoided in direct address, and euphemistic kinship terms are substituted for actual ones. Thus in the *Bancroft Dialogues* an older sister refers to a younger one not as "dear younger sister" but as *noconetzin, notlazohichpochtzin,* "my child, my dear daughter" (Karttunen and Lockhart 1987, p. 107). Only reference to the younger woman's husband, not present, as *nohuehpoltzin,* "my brother-in-law," tips off the reader to the real relationship of the two women. Often kinship terms are avoided altogether when real kin engage in conversation. In the *Bancroft Dialogues,* sons address their mother as "mistress," "noblewoman," and "lady" *(notecuioOe, cihuapille,* "Oh my mistress, oh lady"; *nopiltzintzine, cihuapille,* "Oh my noblewoman, oh lady"). Although adults generally address all children as their "grandchildren" (stem: *-(i)xhuiuh),* when a lady speaks to her own grandchild, she refers to him as *xoloton,* "little page." The same speakers extend kinship terms to people who are patently not kin, calling subordinates and aides "progenitors" (stem: *-techiuhcauh)* or "fathers and mothers" (stems: *-tah, -nan).*[9] Noblewomen's attendants are variously referred to as "elder sisters" (stem: *-pih),* "grandmothers" (stem: *-cih),* and "aunts" (stem: *-ahui),* while boys' schoolmates are referred to as their "younger brothers or cousins" (stem: *-teiccauh).* In the text of a sixteenth-century Nahuatl play about the visit of the Magi, the kings call each other "elder brother" (stem: *-tiachcauh),* although they cannot literally each be the other's older brother (Gardner 1982), and elsewhere "elder brother" is also seen to be the proper term of address among mature men (provided, perhaps, that the addressee is not in fact an elder male sibling).

These euphemisms are extensions of a sort we can easily appreciate. However, in the service of deferential indirection, Nahuatl speakers have also made use of inversions that turn relationships upside down and make it most important for readers of formal texts not to take them entirely literally on first reading. While making great of what is lesser and subordinate makes sense to us, as in conferring symbolic senior kinship upon one's aides and personal servants, making small of what is great might seem to us overly familiar rather than deferential. For this reason, Bernardino dc Sahagún's report of how children might address their parents (quoted in Gardner [1982]) seems puzzling. According to Sahagún, in addition to addressing their parents literally as "mother" and "father" and with such titles as "honored noble person" (with vocative honorific *-tzintzine* added to the stem *pil,* "noble person"), sons might address their father as their "honored younger brother or cousin" *(iccauh-tzine),* and daughters might address their mothers as their "honored offspring, child" *(-cone-tzine).*

Going outside the family, a nobleman and his wife in the *Bancroft Dialogues* refer to the ruler as their "youngest child" *(-xoco-yohue),* their "honored grandson" *(-(i)xhuiuh-tzin),* their "male child" *(-oquichpil-tzin),* and their "honored offspring" *(-cone-tzin).* When a young ruler seeks in marriage the hand of the daughter of a noble couple, they refer to him as their "honored nephew" *(-mach-ttzi),* while he refers to the bride-to-be as his "honored elder sister or cousin" *(-huelfihuah-tzin).*[w]

Perhaps this type of polite inversion can be better understood if we keep in mind the concern of Mesoamerican society that all members conform and that no one be magnified unduly lest he or she be struck down. Certainly nobles and rulers did stand out mightily in preconquest indigenous society, but the conventions of speech provided polite falsehoods by which subordinate individuals were raised up, and the mighty were laid low.

This convention of inversion may throw light on two sets of morphemes in Nahuatl. The first set seems to be built on one root, *pil.* One sense of *-pil,* as it appears in the second element of compounds, is "appendage," as in *mah-pil-li,* "finger," literally, "hand-appendage." One can see a potential connection between this and *-pil* (always possessed unless in the diminutive forms *pil-piltzin-tli* and *pilton-tli*)meaning "child, offspring." However, there is also *pil-li,* with its special honorific form *-pil-tzintzin* meaning "noble person." In a given situation, as in the *Bancroft Dialogues* when the mother of the groom addresses one of the speakers at a wedding—a person clearly of mature years and her superior—with *-pil,* both the "child or offspring" sense of polite inversion and the outright sense of "noble person" are intended, and this may well retrace the route from "appendage" to "noble person."

There is a second, potentially analogous case, namely, that of honorific *-tzin* and diminutive *-tzin.* If diminutive *-tzin* were conventionally used to make small of that which was great, then it would be no wonder if the diminutive suffix should come to have an overtly honorific sense.

Honorific speech is alive and well in some Nahua communities today, even more elaborated than our samples from the sixteenth century—one manifestation of the strength of the Mesoamerican sense of propriety.

Recently some Nahua and others have dictated their life stories to investigators, and in these autobiographies we see clearly how concerned they have been throughout their lives with doing things the right way, how defensive they are, how concerned that no one think they have failed in their duties, their responsibilities, and due courtesy." When we look back to the first century of European presence in Mesoamerica, we find a sort of indigenous literature known as "ancient word(s)" (in Nahuatl *huehuehllahtolli,* in Quiché *oher tzih)* that everyone apparently knew and that was constantly recited by parents, rulers, teachers, priests, anyone in authority. This genre included maxims for proper deportment instructing people in how to behave by making contrasts: this is how a good physician behaves, and this is how one can recognize a bad physician; this is what a good artisan does, and these are the identifying characteristics of a poor artisan; here is what a virtuous man looks like, and here is how one can tell that a man has been promiscuous. Children were told how they were expected to behave, and they were told of the terrible punishments for disobedient children (Karttunen and Lockhart 1987, p. 151; visually illustrated in the *Codex Mendoza,* fol. 60r). Young men and women were instructed in their responsibilities to each other when they entered matrimony. Rulers were exhorted to behave responsibly and warned of the suffering that their failure would bring to the people for whom they were responsible. This didactic instruction apparently went

on constantly, insistently enforcing social conformity. To this day some of these speeches, especially those instructing the bride and groom before the wedding ceremony, have survived in indigenous communities. Everyone has ample opportunity to know what is expected of him or her. Sometimes, indeed often, people fail to live up to the accepted norms of propriety, but the norms themselves are not questioned. If people rebel, still their rebellion is shaped by what they rebel against. In the sixteenth century people lamented that since the European destruction of the old order, morality was in shambles, and individuals did as they pleased, sinking into total perdition (Karttunen and Lockhart 1987, p. 149). Today the same complaints are heard, that the generation now in young adulthood has abandoned all that is good and decent and is on the road to utter moral decay. But the better part of five centuries has passed between the first warnings and these we hear today, and all through that time the absolute sense of what is right and proper has been passed on. It is in completely unquestioned matters like this that Mesoamerican values and principles survive and surely will survive for some time to come.

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[1] This paper was originally presented at the Institute for Developing Countries in Helsinki, Finland. Material about polite indirection and inversion in the section about propriety was presented at the symposium, "Whatever Happened to the Aztec Empire?" at the 1986 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association.

[2] A minor exception to this may be among some families in Yucatan, where the children still learn serviceable Maya from Maya-speaking nannies.

[3] In a review of Schele and Miller (1986) in the *New York Review of Books* (26 February 1987), Octavio Paz observed that almost all the new and perceptive work on Mesoamerican history has been done by North Americans. I think this is by no means a fluke, since North Americans as a whole have fewer preconceptions from which to free themselves and less investment of their personal identities in their perception of indigenous societies before and after the conquest.

[4] The Puebia annals are No. 184 in the Gómez de Orozco collection of the Library of the National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City. The Tlaxcalan annals are in the Historical Archives of the National Institute of Anthropology and History.

[5] See Schele and Miller (1986) for Classic Maya practices and Clendinnen (1991) for Aztec ones.

[6] See Bricker (1981) for the histories of several of these rebellions. One might even perceive the assassination of Emiliano Zapata as part of this indigenous pattern.

[7] See, for instance, the prayers to Tezcatlipoca and Tlaloc in book 6 of the *Florentine Codex* (Dibble and Anderson 1969).

[8] See Karttunen and Lockhart (1987, p. 147) for a more personal exemplar of this sort of contemplative speech.

[9] See B. Tedlock (1982) and D. Tedlock (1985) for "mother-fathers" among the Quiche Maya.

[10] Because he addresses her as such, we can be quite confident that whatever her relationship to him may be, it is not that of elder sister or cousin.

[11] For example, see Horcasitas (1974), Estrada (1977), and K. Hill (1985).