A Step Ahead of Other Nations

The First American Ethnography and Implicit Biases

By Charlotte Mills

The publication of Bernardino de Sahagún's Florentine Codex in 1576 has been considered the first American ethnography and an authoritative text compiled from Aztec survivors of the Spanish conquest. However, the period in which source research was conducted potentially allowed for cultural misinterpretation. By examining European histories, colonial agendas, early drafts, and the final manuscript itself, this publication takes on an increasingly biased and Europeanized perspective. While the Florentine Codex originated Western ethnography in the Americas, because of its inherent prejudices and assumptions, it should not be considered the sole authentic source of primary knowledge of pre-Conquest Mexico.

Friar Bernardino de Sahagún (1499-1590) spent sixty years in colonial New Spain writing about the indigenous populations and recording Nahuatl[1], the language of the Aztecs. The Sahaguntine corpus encompasses ethnographic, evangelic, and linguistic tomes about the new Spanish colony, and the capstone of these writings is the *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* [*General History of the Things of New Spain*]. Also called the *Florentine Codex*—as Florence's Laurentian Library holds the best-preserved edition—this twelve-volume manuscript was created in 1576. It documents the religious beliefs, culture, society, economics, and iconography of the Aztec peoples, and includes richly detailed illustrations created by Mexican students at Tlatelolco. More than two thousand drawings complement the text and remain some of the most authentic artistic representations of Aztec culture.[2]

The *Historia general* presents the most complete written record of how the Aztecs perceived their world and constructed their culture. This *Codex*, coupled with the larger corpus, provide a critical source of information on the pre-conquest Nahau world.[3] This encompassing nature and cultural insight has led this text to be referred to as the first American ethnography. However, the intent, means, and writing conflict directly with the integrity of the text. The contemporary Spanish-Nahua relations, original intent, and inherent biases which were a direct product of the period suggest the *Florentine Codex* to be prejudiced towards the Aztec peoples. This is an incomplete history of both Mexica traditions and the conquest, and it neglects to tell the whole perspective of a fallen empire.

The time of the manuscript's creation came during the sixteenth century, a tumultuous time of radical change and paradigm shifts as Spain fought to establish a regime in the Americas.

Across the Atlantic, the European Renaissance ushered in a new age of empiricism and anti-dogmatic thought. Coming out of Italy, humanism represented the most fundamental philosophy movement of the time. It ultimately derived its origins from the Florentine class of lexicographers, language teachers, linguists, and rhetoricians—the *umanisti*.[4] For many, the humanism movement was seen as a departure from Catholic dogma and faith in favor of reason, classical education, logic, botany, and physics. Humanism directly countered Church-based superstitions, and this clash came to a head with the Valladolid debates of 1550-1551. Here, historian and Friar Bartolomé de las Casas used the philosophy of the humanists to defend the Nahua peoples from the genocidal attacks of holy conquistador Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, arguing that the indigenous population was capable of reason and therefore able to be "civilized" humanely.[5] It was into this mayhem the Franciscan friar Sahagún first began to write about the indigenous peoples of the Mexican valley, their cultures, and traditions.

However, in seeking to write the *Historia general*, Sahagún found himself challenging his Franciscan

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1 The indigenous peoples of the modern Mexico City metropolitan area have been referred to as Mexica(s)—*Mēxihcah*, "of the Valley of *Mēxihco*, of the Heartland"—Nahua/Nahuat— *nāhua-*, root for "clear", "language" —and Aztec—*Aztecah*, "People from Aztlan". For this analysis, these three terms will be used interchangeably. Nahuatl—from *nāhuatlahtōlli*, "clear language"—exclusively refers to the language of these communities (Bierhorst 1985).

2 Ellen Taylor Baird. "The Artists of Sahagún's *Primeros Memoriales*: A Question of Identity." in *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún: Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth-Century Aztec Mexico*, edited by J. Jorge Klor de Alva, H. B. Nicholson, and Eloise Quiñones,Austin (University of Texas Press, 1988), 211-227.

3 J. Jorge Klor de Alva. "Sahagún and the Birth of Modern Ethnography: Representing, Confessing, and Inscribing the Native Other," in *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún: Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth-Century Aztec Mexico*, eds. J. Jorge Klor de Alva, H. B. Nicholson, and Eloise Quiñones (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), 31-52.

4 Tony Davies, *Humanism* (New York: Routledge Publishing, 1997).

5 Klor de Alva, *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún: Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth-Century Aztec Mexico*, 36.

teachings. He sought to create an ethnography—a tome objectively studying the people and cultures of the Nahua community. The friar wished to examine the religious beliefs and morals of a culture being destroyed. Scholar J. Jorge Klor de Alva explains that, "As is the case today…Sahagún struggled against the boundaries of his scholastic training by countering its rationalist, anti-empirical tendencies with an ethnography founded on the philosophical and religious reforms and philological concerns that dominated much of the humanism of the time."[6] This contradiction is in part what makes the conception of the *Florentine Codex* so remarkable: without the influence of humanism, it is highly unlikely this manuscript would have been created. It's very existence ran against contemporaneous religious dogma.

The creation of the manuscript needs to be seen not just in a European Renaissance context, but also in the environment of the colony of New Spain. The Spanish friar arrived in the Americas in 1529, quickly learned Nahautl, and earned the reputation as one of—if not the—best interpreters (*nahauatlatos*) in New Spain.[7] Sahagún assisted in the 1536 opening of the Royal College of Santa Cruz in Tlateloco. The indigenous students here would later assist him in the writing and illustration of the *Historia General*. The first finished copy, called the *Primeros Memoriales*, first emerged in 1569 in the Nahuatl language. But it took another six years and the endorsement of Father Commissary General Fray Rodrigo de Sequera for it to be fully translated into Castilian Spanish. This translation and further expansion Sahagún dedicated to and named for his friend, the "Manuscrito Sequera."[8] For each of the volumes, the Franciscan *nahuatlato* included an introduction wherein he detailed the intentions of each book.

The introduction to the first volume Sahagún explains that, as a figure of Spanish authority, he understood that, "…an efficient administration required that the behavior of the natives and Europeans be predictable, docile, and productive in ways that would benefit the Church and Crown."[9] This necessity for obedience drove the evangelization of the native peoples, and in the chronicle's first of twelve prologues, Sahagún comments that, "To preach against [idolatrous traditions], and even to know if they exist, it is needful to know how they practiced them in the times of their idolatry, for, through [our] lack of knowledge of this, they perform many idolatrous things in our presence without our understanding it."[10] Yet despite being created under the designs of controlling the indigenous population through religion, the *Codex* is viewed as, "…the most thorough, objective, and complete study of another culture that had ever been attempted."[11] This text's objectivity can be viewed with a shadow of suspicion because it only ever existed to allow European colonizers to exert their influence. However, as he also articulated in the first introduction, he did seek to create a written record of the Mexica's past and present which would highlight the positive cultural aspects and further protect the indigenous peoples from charges of incompetence.[12]

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6 Klor de Alva, 37.

7 Charles E. Dibble. "Sahagún's Historia" in *Florentine Codex: Introductions, Sahagún's Prologues and Interpolations, General Bibliography, General Indices* by Bernardino de Sahagún, trans., Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press 1982), 9-23.

8 Martínez, José Luis. *El Códice Florentino y la "Historia General" de Sahagún* (Mexico City: Archivo General de la Nación, 1982).

9 Klor de Alva, *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún: Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth-Century Aztec Mexico*, 40.

10 Klor de Alva, 45.

11 Klor de Alva, 34.

12 Klor de Alva, 47.

With Sequera's support, Sahagún began the Spanish translation of the Nahuatl manuscript. Its initial incarnation as his *Primeros Memoriales* contained no original pre-Conquest material, and from the friar's own journals, it is surmised that in this phase of his investigations, the text was largely recorded by his student assistants at Tlatelolco.[13] But as he sought to flesh out his text and include testimonies of Mexica life prior to the invasion of the Spanish, he began to rely on first-hand accounts of indigenous oral history. He utilized the confessional to encourage village elders and leaders to self-examine their tradition and culture. He issued questionnaires, used specialized informants, and "participant observation" to collect information about their religious figures, their rhetoric, their philosophies, and their history.[14] He and his students spoke with the village elders—*principales*—and recorded their answers in pictographs. Later, those same students and other Franciscan friars assisting in interpreting these images and illustrations to compile the text known today as the *Historia General*. In total, more than two thousand illustrations accompanied the text.[15] The *Codex*, uniquely to the time, was created with the direct input of community leaders and edited by Mexica students. Sahagún arrived in the Americas just ten years before the decline of the Spanish Inquisition, and with the fall of this overseeing institution, the need for a more regulatory system became vastly apparent. The friar clearly knew this, and this may have driven his desire to create the *Florentine Codex*. In part, these field methods are seen as the criteria for which Sahagún has often been called the first American ethnographer. Because the *Florentine Codex* was compiled from contemporaneous sources with first-hand experience of the events described, it continues to be seen as the most complete documentation of pre-invasion *Mēxihco*.

These pictographs recorded the wisdom and culture of the Nahua elders. Covering more than twelve-hundred pages of the manuscript, they reflect the original writing style of the Aztec peoples. Most of these images are composed in color, though the last two volumes are largely in black and white. Art historian Diana Magaloni Kerpel attributes this to an epidemic of hemorrhagic fever which ravaged New Spain in 1576.[16] However, even without color, the artists portrayed a dynamic and chromatic world using traditional associative and evocative pictographic tradition. Some perceive this as evidence that color was not an added aesthetic, but rather as an organic part of the object being visually recreated. Magaloni Kerpel also estimates that, by examining the techniques and styles used, approximately twenty-two individual illustrators worked on the *Codex* with four standing out as the probable masters of their craft. These artisans created the colors using both European and indigenous pigments.

And these illustrations are remarkable for several reasons. They likely were created by the last of the pre-Hispanic *tlacuilos*, or manuscript painters. They represent an art form at a unique moment in Mexica history where native beliefs and the Catholic influences began to merge into a syncretic tradition. For example, the Renaissance's contemporaneous influence can be seen in, "…more volumetric individual figures, overlapping of figures to suggest spatial relationships, use of foreshortening and linear perspective to indicate spatial

13 Baird, *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún: Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth-Century Aztec Mexico*, 211.

14 Klor de Alva, 38.

15 Eloise Quiñones Keber.. "Reading Images: The Making and Meaning of the Sahaguntine Illustrations," in *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún: Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth-Century Aztec Mexico*, eds., J. Jorge Klor de Alva, H. B. Nicholson, and Eloise Quiñones (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988),199-210.

16 Diana Magaloni Kerpel.. "Painters of the New World: The Process of Making the *Florentine Codex*." In *Colors Between Two Worlds: the Florentine Codex of Bernardino de Sahagún*, edited by Gerhard Wolf and Joseph Connors (Florence: Officina Libraria, 2011), 50.

recession, delimitation of foreground and background zones, and space-defining background landscapes and architecture."[17] Prior to the Spanish, these artistic techniques had not been seen in Nahuat art. Sahagún and his apprentices' collaboration with the *principales* further makes this a remarkable text: it captured an art at a critical point in history and was made with the assistance of those artists and other primary sources.

The *principales* are a notable part of this manuscript's biography. Sahagún understood the Nahuatl language, but apart from the few texts that survived the Cortés invasion, he had no real sources of first-hand knowledge. He also knew that Spanish scholars would not be ideal in assisting him in this venture. To create the text he wanted, he had to work with the indigenous people. He developed his own methodology where he tried to capture the culture of the Aztecs in their terms, not European ideas. He looked at and listened to multiple sources. He even spoke to women, unusual in a male-dominated community like the Spanish and Nahua. Further, he adapted the tenements of the Catholic confessional—self-reflection and analysis—to make it clear to his contributors what he was looking for. He wanted primary sources on topics that could elucidate parts of pre-Conquest *Mēxihco*.[18] By speaking to the elders of the Mexica communities, he was learning from the greatest subject authorities.

Sahagún, in addition to asking the *principales* about Nahua religion, ceremonies, and philosophies, also recorded their memories of the conquest. The expansion of the *Historia General* from the *Primeros Memoriales* began in approximately 1576 occurred just fifty-five years after Hernán de Cortés landed in Veracruz and began his attack on the Aztec Empire. The Franciscan friar dedicated the twelfth and final volume to the indigenous memory of the Conquest, and began by writing, "To this it may be added that those who were conquered knew and gave an account of many things which transpired among them during the war of which those who conquered them were unaware." He then added, "And those who gave this account [were] principal persons of good judgement, and it is believed they told all the truth."[19] Sahaguntine scholar J. Jorge Klor de Alva disagrees with this statement, saying, "Fieldwork conditions where the informant is in a subordinate position to the ethnographer or among peoples with substantially different cultures often include less than candid informants who sometimes withhold information altogether."[20] As a means of self-preservation, these *principales* likely omitted parts of their "idolatry" that the Catholic Church would find repulsing. Should the Spanish wish to retaliate and destroy anything revealed by these elders, those traditions would be lost. Therefore, while the *Historia General* can be believed to be reasonably truthful, it remains highly probable the *Codex* does not contain certain aspects of Nahua life, and it cannot be seen as the most complete written documentation of life in Mexico before the Spanish.

In addition to the informants' self-censorship, their testimonies only truly focused on the worlds of the Mexica elite. Sahagún was immensely interested in studying their rituals and philosophy, details only fully known to religious orders or the upper class. In one instance, the tenth book of the *Codex* details Nahua rhetoric

17 Quiñones Keber, *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún: Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth-Century Aztec Mexico*, 208.

18 Klor de Alva, 34.

19 Bernardo de Sahagún, Miguel León Portilla, Charles E. Dibble, and Arthur J. O. Anderson, *Florentine Codex 1, Introductions, Sahagún's Prologues and Interpolations, General Bibliography, General Indices* (Santa Fe: The School of American research and the University of Utah, 1982a), 101.

20 Klor de Alva, 46.

and moral philosophy. These lessons are told through fables and stories passed down through the generations. However, the only ones recorded in this volume—and throughout the *Historia General*—have kings and priests as their protagonists.[21] Modern anthropology recognizes the necessity of studying all classes of a community to gain a greater, more holistic understanding of their life-ways. The perspectives of peasants and low-level artisans are wholly absent in this text. While the *Codex* allows for a study of the religious and philosophical morals, it neglects the histories that the peasant population might have been able to contribute. This view point is absent in the *Primeros Memoriales* and, six years later, the revised and expanded *Florentine Codex*.

Elaborating on his work in the *Primeros Memoriales* allowed Sahagún a chance to revisit and revise his earlier writings. *Primeros Memoriales* is generally believed to be directly written off the ethnographer's field notes. During the transition to the *Historia General*, scholars have pointed to some subtle writing differences which then resulted in a drastic change in meaning. The *Historia General* was encouraged by Sequera, who wished for it to be read by the luminaries of Europe and studied to further the Franciscan missionary work. Sahagún may have made changes to the original Nahuat transcription to make it more appealing to a European market. But by doing so, his Europeanization ensured many of the nuances did not translate. For example, in the *Primeros Memoriales*, he included a short description of the Mexica deity *Huitzilopochtli*:

> He maintains people,
> *Huitzilopochtli*:
> he makes people happy,
> he makes people rich,
> he makes people rulers,
> he gets angry at people
> he makes people die[22]

Upon revision in the 1570's, Sahagún took his field notes from the *Primeros Memoriales*—likely the original statements given to him by the *principales*—and reorganized them to now read:

> *Huitzilopochtli* was only a commoner, he was only a man, a sorcerer, an augury, a disharmonious inhuman person, a deceiver of people, creator of war, an agent of war, a war-lord. Because it was said of him that he cast on them the turquoise serpent, the fire drill—that is, war, divine water, burnt. And when a feast day was celebrated, captives were killed, bathed slaves were killed, offered by the merchants.[23]

This second text portrays *Huitzilopochtli* as a deceived sorcerer who made war and demanded human sacrifice. In Nahua culture, he is their patron deity and the one who led them to their capital at Tenochtitán. Both Sahagún and his students sought to tell the story of the Mexicas in terms that Europeans would understand. In other sections of the *Codex*, *Huitzilopotchli* was described as, "…another Hercules…*Tezcatlipoca* [god of night and wind]…another Jupiter."[24] This imposition of Classical European categories destroyed meanings and

21 Bernardo de Sahagún, Miguel León Portilla, Charles E. Dibble, and Arthur J. O. Anderson, *Florentine Codex 11, Moral Philosophy and Rhetoric* (Santa Fe: The School of American research and the University of Utah, 1982c).

22 Klor de Alva, 49.

23 Klor de Alva.

24 Bernardo de Sahagún, Miguel León Portilla, Charles E. Dibble, and Arthur J. O. Anderson. *Florentine Codex 2, The Gods* (Santa Fe: The School of American research and the Univ. of Utah, 1982b), 31.

distinctions which were characteristic of the Mexica culture. The inherent bias contained within comparative anthropological analyses strips any unique identifiers of a culture. This obscures testimony about the very "idolatrous beliefs" that Sahagún wanted to document, and does not allow for a more complete and accurate manuscript.

And as much as Sahagún wanted to create an accurate text, his bias remains implicitly clear in his own writings. The first month of the Mexica solar calendar is called *Atlacacauallo*, the "ceasing of the waves". To ensure good rains for the coming farming seasons, children were routinely drowned to call the waters from the realm of *Tlaloc*, god of rain. In the Spanish translation of the text, Sahagún protests, "I believe there is no heart so hard as not to be moved, stirred to tears, horror, and fear upon hearing of a cruelty like the one set forth above, so inhuman, more than bestial and diabolical."[25] He added several of these "reader's notes" throughout his manuscript, likely to justify his recording of "idolatrous rituals" to a European audience. However, it cannot be discounted that these are his own unedited reactions, and not the documentation of an unprejudiced researcher.

This general lack of editing both makes and breaks this text as accurate and encapsulating. In several places throughout the *Florentine Codex*, scholars have noted that the original pictographic masters' work has been preserved in its entirety.[26] Likely, these are the last of the *tlacuilos*' craft and work. But when further accounting for editorial missteps—such as equating *Huitzilopochtli* to both a witch and a hero—and Sahagún's own notes, the *Historia General* remains rife with misrepresentation and bias. This serves as a prime example of two vastly different world views colliding and attempting to meld into the creation of something syncretic. Where the two cultures can be distinctly separated from one another, they present as the most accurate versions of themselves. But any attempt to incorrectly melt them together returns a poor creation which does not represent either European or Nahuat culture.

With respect to Nahua philosophy, religion, and memories of the Conquest, the *Historia General* indeed remains the most complete text from the perspective of the Mexica. While some manuscripts survive from the times before the arrival of the Spanish, such as the *Zouche-Nuttall Codex*, they do not record the times immediately before, during, and after the fall of Tenochtitlan. The *Codex* also was the only fully-encompassing work with a profoundly indigenous-perspective created until Franz Boas' *The Central Eskimo* in 1888, three centuries later.[27] While it must not be considered a singular piece in the greater works of American ethnography, Sahagún's magnum opus certainly earns the title of the first such work produced in the Western hemisphere.

The *Florentine Codex* began a long tradition of American ethnography and laid the ground work for Western ethnography. While his biases are implicit in the writings, he emerged as a defender of the Mexicas, explaining that to his peers that they, "…are held to be barbarians and of very little worth; in truth, however, in matters of culture and refinement, they are a step ahead of other nations that presume to be quite politic."[28] Certainly, it cannot be considered the sole authentic source of primary knowledge of pre-Conquest *Mēxihco*, yet its significance in the history of the Americas must not be diminished.

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25 Sahagún et al, *Florentine Codex 1, Introductions, Sahagún's Prologues and Interpolations, General Bibliography, General Indices*, 57.

26 Magaloni Kerpel, *Colors Between Two Worlds: the Florentine Codex of Bernardino de Sahagún*, 50.

27 Klor de Alva, 43.

28 Klor de Alva, 46.

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