

# **UCLA**

## **UCLA Historical Journal**

### **Title**

Mixtec and Nahuatl in Colonial Oaxaca

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2mh909qf>

### **Journal**

UCLA Historical Journal, 10(0)

### **Author**

Terraciano, Kevin

### **Publication Date**

1990

### **Copyright Information**

Copyright 1990 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

# Mixtec and Nahuatl in Colonial Oaxaca

Kevin Terraciano

Little did Don Thomas know that we would be peering into his past from our distant present. After all, the *demanda* filed against the noblewoman Doña María de Mendoza for a plot of land which allegedly belonged to his family was, perhaps, not even the talk of Teposcolula during those two weeks of testimony in April, 1714. A good sixty leagues from Mexico City, in the mountains of the Mixteca, Don Thomas de San Juan García was merely repossessing land that his grandfather had loaned to another Indian. The evidence that he brought to those proceedings, however, compel our attention to his story. He furnished three documents to lay claim to the land, each in a different indigenous language: a land grant from a noble written in Nahuatl (1551); a grant of the same land in Mixtec (1579); and a testament transferring this land in the Chocho language (1680). With these multi-lingual documents and three witnesses, Don Thomas made his case before the *alcalde mayor* of the province, and a record of the proceedings has been preserved on twelve folios in the language of Castile.

Such a unique document will not, of course, reveal a comprehensive view of life in Oaxaca during the colonial period--no single type of source will. But this one document does span more than a century and a half, revealing the confluence of cultures and languages which characterizes this region, and Mesoamerica in general. From our window we can watch the interplay between continuity and change, conflict

---

*Kevin Terraciano received his B.A. and M.A. from the University of California, Los Angeles, where he is currently a doctoral candidate in Latin American history.*

and coexistence. Several culture groups interacted in various ways, resulting in a rich, complex scenario overlooked by traditional Indian/Spanish perspectives. The successive subjugation, in varying forms and degrees (usually violent), of the Chocho by the Mixtecs, the Mixtecs by the Aztec Triple Alliance, and all of the above by the Castilians, provides a context that should not be overlooked when one considers the indigenous response to Spanish rule. Continuity and change intertwine in the passing of time; nowhere is this better illustrated for colonial Latin American history than in these sources. Here, we hear Indians speak and catch privileged glimpses of how they lived.

Historians, anthropologists and linguists have recently proven the value of using indigenous-language sources, especially in their work on the Nahuas ("Aztecs") of central Mexico. However, little to nothing has been written utilizing the writings of other major Indian groups--some work has been done on the Maya, but there is *none* on the Mixtecs of Oaxaca.<sup>1</sup>

We can attribute this lack of research on other regions and indigenous groups to the field's nascency, especially for historians. The success of indigenous-language studies in the central area has set a new agenda for social and cultural history in the colonial period, and many of the techniques and skills for comparative study of other indigenous languages have been honed in the process. Only now can we begin to apply the same methods to other indigenous cultures. In a sense, historians have followed in the footsteps of the Spaniards, attending to sources in central Mexico before venturing to the rest of New Spain.

Southern Mexico, with its dense and complex Indian populations, seems ideally suited for our purposes. This area may be characterized by a more gradual pace of change, and has been largely the study of anthropologists and archaeologists who have traditionally attempted to reconstruct the preconquest past. Scholars in general were too quick to identify the conquest with the decline of indigenous society, lending perhaps too much credence to sources from the center of the Aztec empire which lamented its collapse as if it were the end of civilization itself. It is true that the Indian population suffered a precipitous and calamitous fall in numbers within the first few generations, due to the unchecked spread of diseases which had never been encountered in this part of the biosphere.<sup>2</sup> In spite of this fact, indigenous societies survived and in many places persist

in the present.

Oaxaca is one of these southern areas where indigenous life continued to flourish; in the relative absence of Spaniards, Indians were still the largest landholders in the Valley of Oaxaca by the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Between the valleys of Mexico and Oaxaca (Antequera) lies the mountainous Mixteca, straddling the Nahuatl world, yet removed from the flow of silver, people and goods which moved from the mines in the north to the capital and then down to the coast and across the Atlantic. A road joining the two valleys meandered through the mountains, bringing that part of the Mixteca which lie along it into minimal contact with Spaniards. The Dominican Order moved into Oaxaca immediately after their rivals, the Franciscans, had occupied the best parts of the central valley. So it is an area relatively near the center, with a dense Indian population at the time of contact, yet it's not a place where Spaniards were likely to settle. [See Figure 1]

My approach to studying the Mixteca is necessarily comparative. All too often, research has been so specialized in this field that many seem to think that their work or subject of research is entirely unique, or exists in some micro-historical vacuum, failing to place their findings within a larger context. I intend to draw from our understanding of the Nahuatl, and make frequent comparisons between Mixtec and Nahuatl. Before analyzing the languages, a few introductory remarks on the early history of the Mixtecs will provide a requisite background.

### The Mixteca

The Mixteca is a cultural and historical term for a jagged region running down from the cloud-covered mountains to the flat, hot Pacific coast, spreading out over a spectrum of landscapes and ecosystems. Roughly speaking, it stretches from the Río Atoyac of Puebla in the east to the edges of Oaxaca's central valley in the west, bounded by the steep Cañadas and the ocean.<sup>4</sup> Today this territory would encompass the western half of the state of Oaxaca and neighboring portions of Puebla and Guerrero. It is an area of well-developed civilization, part of the Mesoamerican cultural complex, yet with an identity of its own.

We associate this identity with the people who bear the same name as their land. However that name was not theirs. The *Mixteca* is derived from the Nahuatl *mixtecatl*,



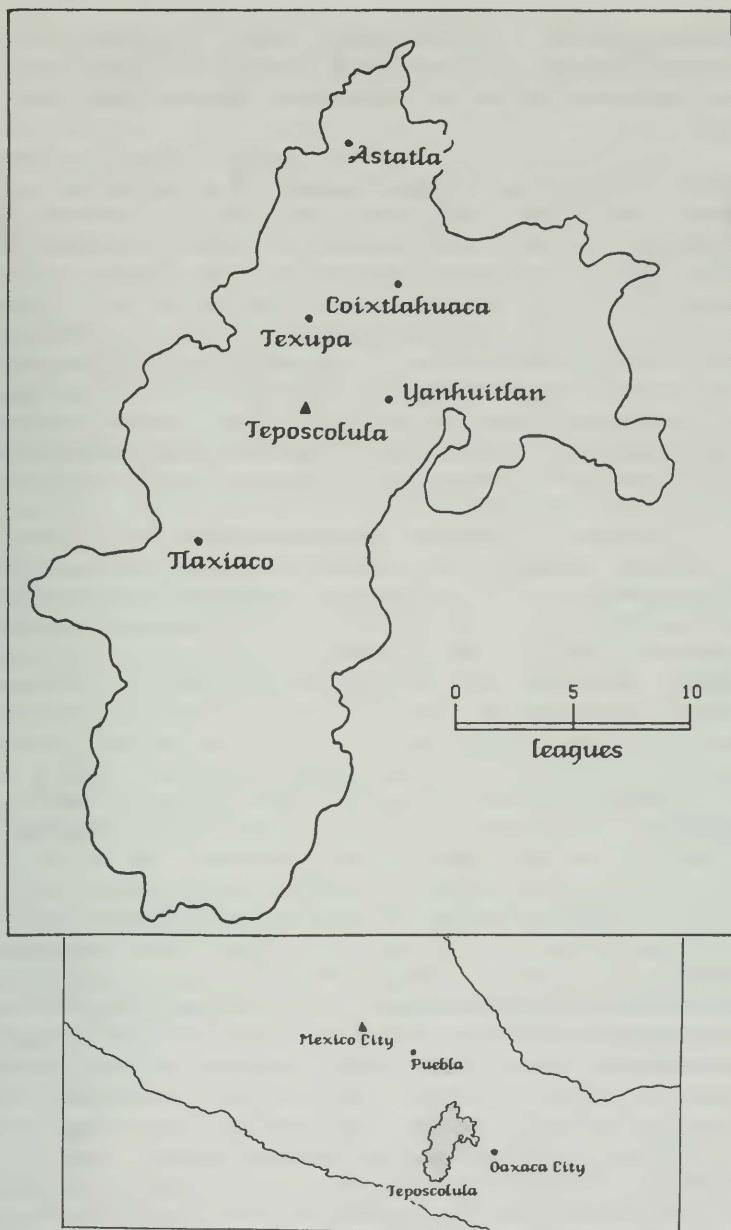


Figure 1: Province of Teposcolula, in the Mixteca Alta, Oaxaca. Modified from Peter Gerhard's *Historical Geography of New Spain, 1519-1821*.

which means "the place of people by the clouds" (*mixtli* = clouds). Similarly, people from the mountainous Mixteca Alta called themselves *tay ñudzavui* --"people from the land of rain."<sup>5</sup>

Anthropologists believe there was a Mixtec migration to the southeast from the Puebla area some time after the decline of Teotihuacan around the sixth century AD. Until the twelfth century, they seemed to be under the powerful influence of another central valley empire, the Toltecs at Tula. Gradually, through a combination of extensive intermarriage and warfare, the Mixtecs had infiltrated the Valley of Oaxaca by the mid-fourteenth century, claiming many Zapotec sites as their own. Royalty were burying their dead in the famous tombs of Monté Alban at this time. Their artistic influence spread throughout Mesoamerica, producing some of the finest manuscripts (some eight pre-Columbian codices survive), sculpture, pottery, mosaics and metalwork.

Though Mixtecs are most prominent here, there existed several substantial enclaves of other culture groups with distinct but often related languages, such as the Chochos, Popolocas, Triques, Chatinos, Ixcatecs, Amuzgos, Cuicatecs, Mazatecs and neighboring Zapotecs. They were probably all in one way or another displaced by the movement of the Mixtecs, but also loosely united with them through the intermarriage of nobility. The broken landscape may be one reason why these groups managed to retain their own languages and identities. As we will see, it also contributed to a divergence of dialects in the Mixtec language itself; some modern linguists will go so far as to call the various dialects languages in their own right.

The terrain may have also blocked effective political unification by force. The existence of a Mixtec kingdom in the prehispanic period seems to be more myth than reality. The historians Woodrow Borah and Sherburne Cook likened the disintegrated political situation of the Mixteca to that of the city-states of ancient Greece. Even the most notable Mixtec ruler in history, the mighty "8 Deer" from Tilantongo (named after the calendrical date on which he was born) could not succeed in his eleventh-century quest for a unified Mixtec empire. According to the codices, he had his nose pierced in the royal, ceremonial manner at Tula, he married five times into noble families and subjugated many neighboring city-states. But these lofty ambitions met a tragic end when he was captured and put to the sacrificial blade. A generation before the Spaniards, the Aztec Triple

Alliance led by Tizoc established two outposts in the Mixteca; still, this merely meant the payment of some tribute, and local rule was left alone. Ironically, the Spaniards would later use Aztec tribute lists to assess the region's contribution to the new empire.

Divided by twisting mountain ranges, settlements were situated in small and often isolated valleys, ranging from nucleated centers with nearby, dispersed population clusters--like Texupa--to a more complex hierarchical organization of settlements, each with its own ruler--as in Coixtlahuaca. Teposcolula was apparently divided along ethnic lines and contained groups of people who had come from other places.<sup>6</sup> Spaniards would later apply the terms *cabecera* for each nucleated center, *barrio* for the nearby population groups and *sujeto* for the distant (usually subordinate) ones. Each city-state or *tayu* (one of several Mixtec words for a settlement) operated within a network of dependent units with some autonomy, making it possible for ethnic groups, often with different languages, to function together as a whole. Like the *altepetl* of central Mexico and perhaps the Mayan *cah*, the *tayu* seems to be a cellular unit capable of expanding and contracting without changing its essential structure, a phenomenon most important when we consider the effects of the Spanish presence and depopulation.

The Spaniards established control over the Mixteca in the 1520s with relatively little resistance. The Mixtecs had undoubtedly heard about the fall of Tenochtitlan, and probably entertained few notions of fighting these weird warriors on four-legged beasts from who knew where. Already by 1530 Teposcolula gave sixty-five pesos in gold and a hundred black and white cotton shirts in tribute to the crown.<sup>7</sup> A *corregidor* (Spanish official in charge of a colonial jurisdiction) arrived a year later. In 1529, the Dominicans founded a house in Yanhuitlan, followed by one in Teposcolula (1541) and another in Coixtlahuaca (1544); they would establish eighteen houses in the Mixteca by 1581, and introduce the profitable silk industry in the area to help sustain them.<sup>8</sup>

The Dominican Order devised ways to completely finance its activities in this new land, drawing on the resources of Indians and Spaniards alike. In order to convert the Mixtecs into obedient servants of the lord who they represented on earth, the friars had to become intimately close, to learn the customs and language of the region in order to preach, instruct and to even listen (to confessions). In the

Old World, Dominicans were known for commanding an audience in the vernacular, rousing common folk with fiery oratory and histrionics. For this they had to know the language, down to the very idioms which they could use at the pulpit. It was inconceivable for the Indians to learn Spanish in the early period; there were too few teachers and there was not enough contact between the two cultures. In the sixteenth century, the Dominican presence was the Spanish presence in the Mixteca; other Spaniards would gravitate to the cities of Oaxaca, Puebla or Mexico.

The religious orders which set out to learn indigenous languages were probably better prepared than anyone in Europe to undergo such a task. The Franciscans and Dominicans in Spain were renowned for their intellectual ties to the University of Salamanca, which was flourishing in those imperial times. The Mediterranean intellectual world in general had a long history of contact with other languages; many of the Greek classics were transmitted to the west as Constantinople crumbled, others were translated from Arabic. Biblical studies were a veritable babel, grappling with languages from Chaldean to Hebrew. The Dominican Thomas Aquinas, working with fresh translations of Aristotle in the mid-thirteenth century, wrote his *Summa contra Gentiles* to aid friars in the conversion of heretics and infidels. By the fifteenth century, Latin itself was giving way to many local languages. In the prologue to his Castilian grammar of 1492--a product of Salamanca and the first of its kind in Europe--Antonio de Nebrija confidently stated that "language was always the instrument of empire," and that Castilian would eventually be accepted by the conquered "barbarous peoples and nations of foreign tongues" as well as others who came into contact with Spain.<sup>9</sup>

In the Mixteca, Dominicans continued this tradition of learning foreign tongues; in 1529 Gonzalo Lucero, who also studied Nahuatl, was apparently on his way to writing and speaking Mixtec. He was followed by a network of other friars like Francisco Marín, Domingo de Santa María and Juan Cabrera, who compiled working papers for religious instructional and dictionaries. Benito Hernandez composed several lengthy Christian doctrines in different dialects in the 1560s.<sup>10</sup> Yet it wasn't until Antonio de los Reyes published his *Arte en Lengua Mixteca* and Francisco de Alvarado presented the *Vocabulario en Lengua Mixteca*, a collaborative effort in 1593, that anything was produced in Mixtec comparable to the Nahuatl-language materials published in central



Mexico. Nahuatl dictionaries and grammars appeared as early as the 1540s; the Franciscan Alonso de Molina had already published his second dictionary by 1571. The lag of time for similar works in the Mixteca may be explained by the lack of activity relative to central Mexico. Yet the authors of the two works indicate that it may have had something to do with the language itself.

Reyes and Alvarado worked with one another in the area of Teposcolula, consciously crafting their works to conform to that dialect, which they considered to be "more universal and clear, the best understood in all of the Mixteca."<sup>11</sup> Reyes delineates five or six dialects in the Mixteca, and enumerates some of their idiosyncrasies. Both acknowledge that it is a tonal language, and that the same word can have various different meanings depending on its pronunciation. Though Alvarado speaks highly of its complexity he laments that "this language is not content with what nature gave us to pronounce."<sup>12</sup> Obviously, the Spanish alphabet was somewhat deficient in capturing the phonetic transcription of Mixtec sounds, and orthography varied considerably. Both authors seemed to have come to terms with these problems and established a consistent vocabulary.

In compiling his dictionary of two-hundred and four folios, Alvarado spent four years organizing the notes and unpublished texts of his predecessors, especially the works of Juan Cabrera (who began to compile a dictionary but died in 1563) and Antonio de los Reyes, and then checked his final version against the "Indians themselves, who are the best teachers...and have been the authors [of this dictionary]."<sup>13</sup> This is perhaps the most important statement in his prologue, and verifies that although Spaniards determined the nature of the entries (Spanish-to-Mixtec) of the work, Mixtecs helped compose and edited the final version. These works are invaluable sources for the language today. There is no indication, however, that any Mixtecs ever used these materials.

The friars worked extensively with nobles in teaching them to write, grooming scribes for the record-keeping responsibilities of the Spanish-style government. Writing flourished in the Mixteca, like many other places in Mesoamerica, because there was a preconquest precedent for it in the art of pictographic painting known as codices. There are many surviving Mixtec codices painted on bark or deerskin, which record the dynastic histories and conquests of





Figure 2: Page from Códice de Yanhuítlán (c.1545). Mixtec painting of the cathedral in Teposcolula bearing a hybrid caption of Nahuatl and Mixtec--*huey nuhu yucundaa*.

the nobility. It is most likely that the noble (or his descendants) who painted before would become the public notaries or scribes of the colonial period. The word for *escribano* in the Alvarado dictionary is *tay taatutu* or "one who writes/paints on paper," the distinction between writing and painting being obscure, like in Nahuatl. The first texts produced by Mixtecs in the colonial period combined both pictorial and written elements.

One of the more famous postconquest writings in the area, the *Codice Sierra*, combines pictorial with Nahuatl text. This codice is an account of Texupa's expenses for the period 1550-1564. Texupa is where our Don Thomas de San Juan García lived, and the Nahuatl document he furnishes in the proceedings is from the same period. So we know there was a significant Nahuatl presence here, though it is listed in 1579 as a Mixtec and Chocho population.

Another contemporaneous codice from the Mixteca Alta combining pictorial and written text, representing the conflux of cultures in this area, is the *Codice of Yanhuitlan*. [See Figure 2] In this example, the cathedral of Teposcolula is depicted in a mixture of European (three-dimensional) and indigenous styles. By the would-be atrium below is written a hybrid phrase combining the Nahuatl word *huey* or "great" with the Mixtec word for Teposcolula *ñuhu yucundaa*. This is a clear representation of multi-faceted cultural interaction.

There are hundreds of local documents of all types written in Mixtec for the entire colonial period--a significant corpus of materials on which to base several extensive linguistic and historical analyses.

### Transcription and Translation of Documents

I found the two documents presented here in the Judicial Archive of Teposcolula in legajo 15, on opposite sides of the same page.<sup>14</sup> The Nahuatl is one of few extant examples of this language in the Mixteca, though there are certainly more. The Mixtec is one of the earliest surviving local records that I have seen to date.

In the transcription, numbers in parentheses represent the beginning of the corresponding line in the original. Brackets are used to indicate words which are unclearly written or puzzling in the original, or missing elements in the translation which are implied but not actually stated. For the Nahuatl, I have inserted an *n* where the overbar indicates only when it is appropriate.

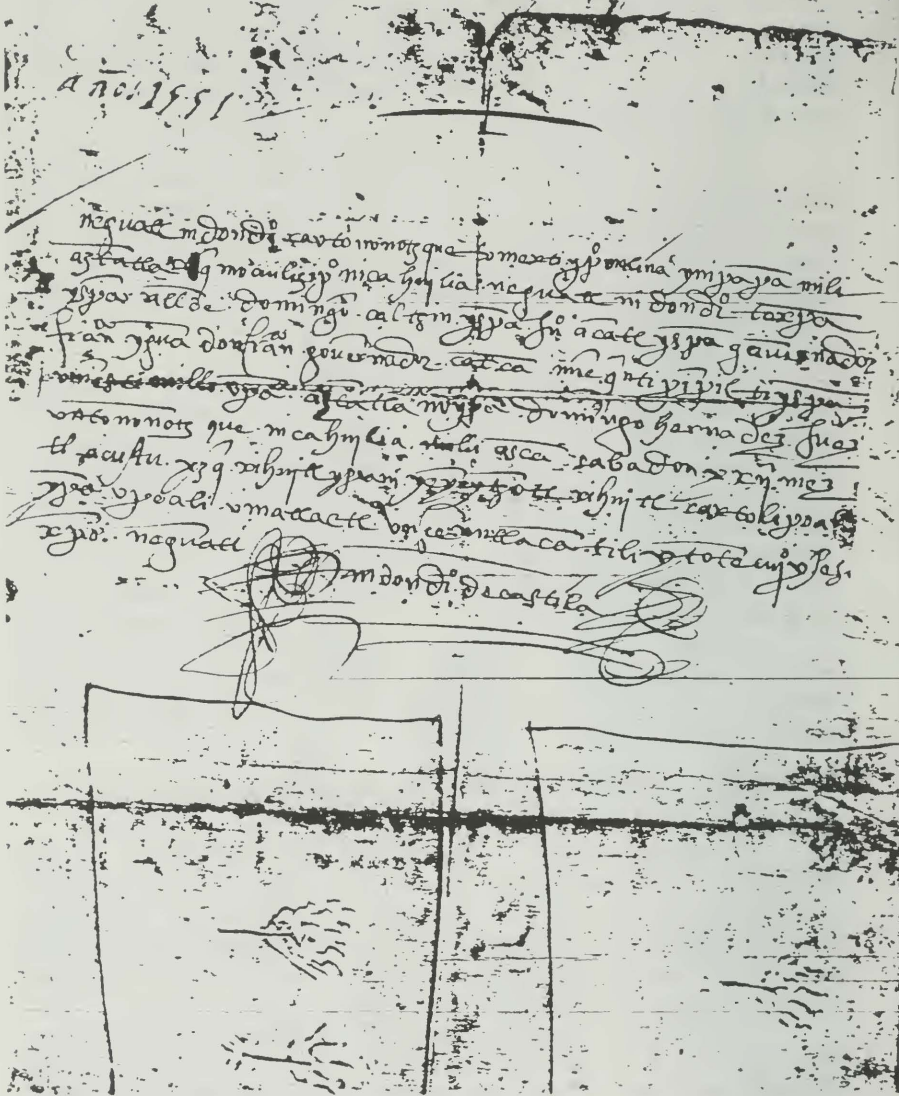


Figure 3: Nahuatl from Archivo Judicial de Teposcolula.

## Nahuatl

años 1551

(1) neguatl ni don di° ca vtomonotzque tomexti y p° molína yn ipanpa mili (2) aztatlan quimocuiliz i p° nicahuilia neguatl ni don di° texpan (3) yspan aHde domingo caltzin yspan Ju° acatl yspan gobernador (4) franco yguan don franco gobernador catca miequintin pipiltin yspan (5) vmesti milli vnpa aztatlan no ypa domingo hernandez Juez (6) vntonotzque nicahuilia milli ascan sabadon xxii mez (7) tl acustu yzq xihuitl ypan i yeyey tzotl xihuitl caxtoli poal (8) ypa vpoali vmatlactl vnce vntlacatili y totecui° y Jesu (9) xpo neguatl

ni don di° de castila [rubrics]

## Translation

years 1551

I am Don Diego. We both have agreed, Pedro Molína [and I], about the land in Aztatlan. He will take it, I leave it to Pedro. I Don Diego, in public, in the presence of alcalde Domingo Caltzin, before Juan Acatl, before the governor Francisco and Don Francisco the former governor, in front of many nobles. Both fields [are] over there in Aztatlan. Also before Domingo Hernandez the judge, we agreed that I leave him the land today Saturday, xxii [of the] month [of] August in the year twelve-hundred (3 x 400), three-hundred (15 x 20) and fifty-one (40 + 11) of the birth of our lord Jesus Christ, I

Don Diego de Castilla







## Mixtec

(1) huitna Juebes Usi de mayo quiya de 1579 años niqui  
 (2) dzahua ñadza ñadzaña Don Gabriel Corado saha yttu  
 (3) ndumayahui saha yttuyaha nitasi tahadza Don  
 marthin (4) Corado bario yniyada nicuhuitahui ñadzaña yttu  
 (5) yaha yosahañahada dzayacadada yya ttomas de san (6) Ju°  
 dzihui yttu dzumayahui yondihui una yunttas (7) caha tnaha  
 yttu don Juan bautistta [yoy] usa dzico brasa mi (8) ni si dza  
 [quhni] dzico usa brasa cani si testigos yya (9) gobernador  
 Don franco maldonado testigo alcalde Don (10) Jose de  
 gusman

Don franco mal  
 donado g° [rubric]

Don Josphe de  
 gusman aldes  
 hordinario [rubric]

Uhui sichi yocuhui sihi bario tiyaya  
 si don grabiel corado  
 escribano de cabildo Juan mesquitta

## Translation

Today Thursday the tenth of May, year of 1579, I Don Gabriel Corado have done this concerning the land [called] *ndumayahui*. About this field that my father, Don Martín Corado from the barrio called *yniyada*, gave to me as a gift, I present this field as a gift to my son-in-law the noble Tomas de San Juan. The field called *dzumayahui* takes eight yoke of oxen to plow and is next to the land of Don Juan Bautista, it is one-hundred and forty brasas (7 x 20) wide by eighty-seven brasas (4 x 20 + 7) long. The witness [is] the noble gobernador Don Francisco Maldonado [and] witness alcalde Don Joseph de Gusman  
 signatures of governor and alcalde

Before the two it is done here in the barrio *tiyaya*  
 by don Gabriel Corado  
 signature of the public notary of the town council

## Analysis of Nahuatl

The Nahua-speaker named Don Diego de Castilla who drew up this document in a practiced, skilled hand exhibited a full command of the conventions of writing and orthography at this early date. Whether or not he was a Nahua is unclear. This was presumably written in an area of Mixtecs and Chochos, at a time when Nahuatl served as the *lingua franca* within the new order, a bridge between the Spaniards and the various indigenous cultures. It is likely that the nobility of this region was already familiar with the language of their former conquerors, learning it to obtain advantage within the Triple Alliance empire. Nahuatl became known also through intermarriage and various other means of cultural interaction.<sup>15</sup> Just as Don Diego had adopted a prestigious Spanish surname, Juan Acatl and Domingo Caltzin represent a borrowing from two conquering cultures, assuming that they are non-Nahuas. It is likely they are not, considering the Aztatlan mentioned in the document is in the Mixteca Alta, near Teposcolula about seven leagues north of Coixtlahuaca. Why would Nahuas be on a *cabildo* (Spanish-style local government) in the Mixteca? It is more likely that they've inherited or assumed the Nahuatl equivalent of their calendrical names.<sup>16</sup>

Judged by his title, writing and signature, Don Diego was an important noble. The only other person appearing with the high title at this early time is the former governor Don Francisco, who was certainly a cacique carrying on his traditional right to rule.<sup>17</sup> Though Don Diego writes in a fine sixteenth century Spanish manner, the pictorial sketches of the land and the style and content of the document betray a decidedly pre-Hispanic oral tradition. First, he writes as he would speak, introducing himself to the assembly of nobles who sit on the Spanish-style *cabildo*, the same type of people he would address in this regard before the conquest. He is careful to note everyone's presence, testifying to the importance of witnesses in the oral tradition. The pictorial representation of the land accompanying the text is another example of how indigenous forms of writing persisted alongside European script.

The fact that the language and sketch referring to the land is so vague is somewhat surprising, considering that in sources from the central area, and in the Mixtec document, lands were measured very accurately at this time. Perhaps we

see here an unfamiliarity with that part of the formula at such an early date, or merely a reliance on oral tradition to identify the land which such a prominent noble gave. No money is mentioned, there's no notary, and nobody else signs the document, perhaps because nobody else could write.

The language itself does not deviate from the Nahuatl of the central area, beyond a few foibles.<sup>18</sup> The use of *g* in place of *h* in the pronoun *neguatl* is rather uncommon. In *otomonotzque* (preterit of *nonotza* = to agree) he has contracted the middle element of *tito-* (subject and reflexive pronouns) to read *to-*, a known but quite uncommon technique in the central Mexican valley. He writes *ontlacatili* instead of *omotlacatili* for the reverential verb in line 8, which is clearly incorrect but excusable. The omission of the *i* from the absolutive suffix *tli* of *meztli* and *tzontli* is different but not unheard of, and may have been nothing more than a regional characteristic.<sup>19</sup> As usual, there's the loss and insertion of the letter *n* throughout the document, often represented by a line scrawled over the word. The omission of the syllable-final nasal in many of the words could be related to regional pronunciation: in the case of a Mixtec-speaker from the Teposcolula area we would not expect to hear a similar sound since there are no syllable final consonants in the language. On the other hand, for this same reason we would not expect to see the omission of the *i* from the end of nouns for the same reason. Overall the language is sound; despite the atypical use of *yzquin* before the year count and the *yeyey* instead of *yey* for "three," we have to commend his command of Nahuatl.

What is perhaps most noticeable about this document is the relative absence of reverential speech associated with the nobility, especially during the early period. Whereas the Mixtec document contains frequent uses, there is only one example of a properly enunciated Nahuatl word in the reverential--*quimocuiliz*. The use of the reverential would be more prominent with nobles at this time in the central area. It could be that Don Diego is not familiar with the terminology, or that it is merely uncommon on the fringes of the Nahua world. How did Nahuas interact with Mixtecs on these loosely-defined fringes? Can we even consider this area a fringe, or was it rather an extension of the center, in more or less constant contact with the Nahuas and various other groups? Though we get a good view of the complexity of the early colonial situation in this document, we need further examples to make more informed statements.

### Analysis of Mixtec

The Mixtec document of 1579, like the Nahuatl, exhibits a well developed, nearly fully articulated writing of the language, complete with reverential formulae and complex verb structures. I will examine this text in greater detail, because we are at a much earlier stage of analyzing Mixtec language documents and consequently, know much less relative to the Nahua sphere.

Everybody carries the title of Don here except the notary, Juan Mesquitta, whose surname is a curious hispanization of the Nahuatl word *mizquitl*. The governor is yet another Francisco, who probably took his name from the prominent encomendero of this area Don Francisco Maldonado, appointed by Cortés in the 1520s. Don Gabriel Corado (a version of Coronado?) calls his son-in-law *yya* Thomas de San Juan, using the Mixtec equivalent of the noble title *don*. The nobility borrows Spanish names fully, something we would expect to see at this time in the central area, too.

There are many Spanish conventions employed throughout the text: *años* is used alongside its Mixtec equivalent *cuiya* (often seen as *quiya*). The writer almost freely borrows Spanish terms which have no precise Mixtec equivalents in the opening formula, even using *de* before the month and year, but he chooses to stay with the Mixtec *usi* for the number ten. The measurement of the land by *brasas* and *yuntas* is uncommon for this early stage of contact; Nahuas usually used some equivalent term such as *quauitl* or *matl* to measure land.<sup>20</sup> The appearance of the word *bario* instead of the Mixtec *siqui* as it is defined in the Alvarado dictionary would seem to represent a deviation from the pattern of borrowing Spanish terms only when there was no indigenous equivalent. Although it is much too early to say for certain, I tend to think that there may not be a precise equivalent Mixtec term; the use of *siqui* in the documentation seems somewhat rare. Though *calpulli* and *tlaxilacalli* may have corresponded to the Spanish urban unit in the more nucleated *altepetl* or city-state of the central region, it may not apply to its counterparts--*tayu*, *n̄uu* or *yucunduta*--of the Mixteca. All three of the latter terms are used to describe the Mixtec provincial unit, the last is the literal equivalent of the Nahuatl *altepetl* (water and hill), representing the two ancient needs of survival and



sustenance. The size and structure of each of the three relative to the others remains to be seen.

For an appreciation of how the language works, let us begin to examine its grammar and syntax. At the end of line 1 is probably one of the most common verbs in all documents *quidza* (to do or make), with the *ni-* tense prefix coming before the verb root indicating its preterit form. Attached to the root is the adverb *hua*, an abbreviated version of *huaha* meaning "well." This *huaha* appears so frequently after *quidza* that it seems to be part of the verb itself, connoting resolution or accomplishment.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps it is a term directly associated with a legal, public action or maybe it is just a very common verb, for I have not seen a document without it. In testaments, it could refer to doing something "with a sound mind," as it is usually followed by a disclaimer about the sick body, a typical and important distinction for testators. The whole construction should end with *-ndi* the first-person, singular subject indicator. This is also the possessive ending following a noun with no chance of consonant collision since all words in the language end in a vowel. Instead of this ending, however, Don Gabriel uses the reverential *ñadza* to refer to himself. In his *Arte en Lengua Mixteca* Reyes speaks of a reverential language used by the nobility (called *yya*) and by commoners when addressing them. He even compiles two nearly parallel vocabularies for the different groups. Reyes indicates that *ñadza* is the subject pronoun (from *ñadzaña*) of the verb, placed at the end of the construction, and often shortened to *dza*, as we will see later.<sup>22</sup> Thus the standard verb complex is ordered in the following manner:

tense / root / adverb / object / subject (reverential)

In most respects, the order of construction is the mirror opposite of conventional Nahuatl.

The subject comes after the verb and the dependent clause is introduced by the ubiquitous *saha* which functions much like the Nahuatl *ipampa* (about, concerning). Land is called *yttu* as a cultivable field or milpa, equivalent to *milli* in Nahuatl, and is recorded as *ytu* in the Alvarado dictionary; we have already seen the almost arbitrary use of a double consonant in Nahuatl. In the Mixteca, all land bears a name which seems to be a descriptive toponym and is identified accordingly. Here it is first referred to as *ndumayahui* and later as *dzumayahui*. The difference between the two renderings



highlights the unclear distinction between similar sounds in Mixtec orthography. Such details are important to note for reconstructing words from their variant spellings. Reyes instructs us about pronunciation in his work: the explosive syllable-initial *dz* is pronounced by "striking softly on the *d*, and more strongly on the *z*", just as the emphasis in the nasal *nd* would be on the *d*.<sup>23</sup> But if we consider that *z* was probably an interdental voiceless fricative, pronounced as "theta" in sixteenth-century Castilian (as it is now), the *dz* would be quite similar to both *d* and *nd*. With *yahui* we could expect to see *vui* or *yui* or even *vi* in place of *hui* to produce the *w* sound (the *v* serves as a *u* in Latin and Spanish orthography). This toponym refers to maguey in *yahui* and *dzuma* literally means "tail" but, like the correlation between relational terms and animate body parts in Nahuatl, can by extension mean anything in back of or behind something. Thus I take the word to mean "behind the magueys."<sup>24</sup>

Don Gabriel proceeds: "about this land" (*saha yttu yaha*)--"My" reverential (*dza*) "father" (*taha* appears as *taa* in the dictionary but is pronounced as *táá* and in this case is written with a glottal stop using the letter *h* which usually only appears between like vowels) "Don Martin Corado from the barrio called green heart" (*yni* = heart; *yadza* = green, with *dz* being written as *d* for reasons described above) "gave it" (going back to the verb in the beginning: *ni* preterit, *tasi* = to give); "it was a gift to me" (*nicuhui* is the preterit form of the verb "to be" and *tahui* = gift). He in turn gives it to his son-in-law as a gift, this time using the reverential construction *yosahañahada* found in Reyes, with *dzayacadada* for "son-in-law."<sup>25</sup>

At this point the size of the land called *dzumayahui* is stated, conforming to the Spanish style of measurement mentioned above. Counting the number of oxen it took to plow a field is assuredly not indigenous, but Mixtec accommodates the meaning by only borrowing one Spanish noun--*yuntas* or yoke of oxen (plural). *Yondehui* is the present form of the verb "to enter," *una* is "eight" and the verb "to plow" is either understood or is represented by *caha* on the next line (*caa* = copper, with glottal stop as in *taha*, or by normal extension any metal tool which might be used to plow): the construction completes the Spanish phrase "entran ocho yuntas arallas" ("it takes eight yoke of oxen to plow them") found later in a summary of the document.<sup>26</sup> The field is located near Don Juan Bautista's, using *tnaha* or

"ear" to connote something on the side (i.e. of the head).

Like the Nahuas, the Mixtecs use the vigesimal system of counting based on multiples of twenty common throughout Mesoamerica; arabic numerals are only used for the date at the top of the documents. *Usa dzico* is seven twenties; *quhni dzico usa* is four twenties and seven.<sup>27</sup> The Spanish *brasa* is used with the Mixtec words for wide (*mini*) and long (*cani*), both followed by the relational particle *si*. The word in brackets immediately preceding the land measurement is incomprehensible, but could be a metathesized form of the irregular verb "to be"--*yyo*. After the measurement, the noble witnesses are promptly introduced with a mixture of Spanish and Mixtec titles, as in "*testigo yya gobernador Don Francisco Maldonado*." Though it is difficult to say for certain, Juan Mesquitta seems to have signed for both the governor and alcalde. The last line is obscured but verifies that the document was drawn up in the barrio called *tiyaya*, which is something like "place by the road."

This document, written in the same year that the Relaciones Geográficas were being compiled for the Spanish Crown, shows Mixtec writing at a well-developed state, and conveys an enormous amount of linguistic information in scarcely nine lines. But what does it all mean?

### Historical Context

These two documents are accompanied by a third from Coixtlahuaca in 1687: Don Gabriel de San Juan's testament drawn up in the Chocho language, bequeathing the land called *tzotasin* (the Chocho equivalent of *dzumayahui*) and eight other lands to his two grandsons, Don Thomas de San Juan García and Domingo de San Juan. He is careful to note that he loaned the land called *tzotasin* to Don Domingo Alabes--Doña María de Mendoza's father--and that it should be returned. It is likely that Don Gabriel is the grandson of Don Thomas de San Juan, who received the land from his father-in-law Don Gabriel Corado in 1579, who inherited it from his father Don Martín, who somehow acquired it from Pedro Molina along with the original Nahuatl title of 1551. Thus we see one piece of land passed along several generations, changing hands at least ten times, recorded in Nahuatl, Mixtec, Chocho and Spanish.

Supporting these documents, Don Thomas produces three witnesses from different areas of the Mixteca who testify that the land does indeed belong to his family. One of

these witnesses, Don Sebastian de Castilla, is a *cacique* (Arawak term used by Spaniards for Indian ruler) who speaks Castilian, dresses like a Spaniard and signs his own name to his testimony. He may even be a descendant of the original owner of the land, since such a high name would not likely be shared by many people in the same region.

Yet Don Sebastian is not the only acculturated noble present at the proceedings. Doña María de Mendoza, the defendant, is a widow and *casica* of Coixtlahuaca who appears in Spanish clothing and responds to all the questions in the language of the court. She replied to the *demanda* that the field in question is further down from hers, and that the land she rightfully possesses is called *yodzocoo*, which is Mixtec for Coixtlahuaca, but that she doesn't have any title.<sup>28</sup> Doña María is arguing, then, that the land belongs to the community and is part of her inheritance as *cacica*. In the 1551 document, the land was referred to as being in Aztatlan, which was a *sujeto* or subject settlement of Coixtlahuaca. We also learn from a separate document that Doña María's late husband, Domingo de Mendoza, was *cacique* of Aztatlan.<sup>29</sup> She challenges Don Thomas, who is also a noble (*principal*) of Coixtlahuaca but lives in Texupa because of his marriage there, on the grounds that he is claiming royal lands as his own patrimonial property.

Doña María's claim does not hold in court. With his written documents and reputable witnesses, Don Thomas is awarded the land "without its workers," implying that it is being sown by people in the service of the *cacica* or the community.

There are a number of notable observations to be made from this one case, some which of course must be made tentatively until further similar cases are examined. Indians in Oaxaca made use of the Spanish legal system from the beginning, creating records as soon as they could and valuing them for future use. Though the timing of these innovations seems to lag somewhat behind the central area, it may not be as far behind as we thought. Moreover, there seems to be a complex network of interaction in the colonial period between Nahuas and Mixtecs (and other indigenous groups) which has been overlooked to date, precisely because it is difficult to document.

Land is a commodity handed along as a grant, a gift, part of an inheritance, and even as a loan. There is a definite sense of private ownership, but in the latter case, it seems to be related to utility. A noticeable feature of Don Gabriel de



San Juan's will is the mixture of Spanish and Indian possessions, which range from eight lambs and a painting of "Señora Carmen" to an Indian digging stick (*coa*) and two *metates*. There is no mention of money in the will or anywhere in the entire document.

The nobility is still intact, marrying into other city-states as Don Thomas does to perhaps create new alliances. Despite Doña María's loss here, caciques seem to retain much of their status nearly two centuries after the conquest by ironically adapting in part to the new order, acquiring as many Spanish trappings as possible--including learning Castilian, no small feat in these parts. This is a clear example of the interplay between continuity and change whereby Indians adapted to change and adopted new ways to gain advantage and consequently maintain their traditional rights.<sup>30</sup> Only two Indians appear in such a manner and they are both caciques. Furthermore, one of them is Doña María de Mendoza, the cacica of Coixtlahuaca who rules, possesses land and defends herself in court, something quite rare in the Spanish world.

Thus we glimpse a dynamic society in the Mixteca, far from the picture of decay and despair painted by some of our predecessors. In time this fleeting sight will become a more informed view from which we can begin to draw the larger, more detailed picture. We can expect a greater retention of indigenous ways in Oaxaca, relative to the central area, and these ways are best disclosed in the analysis of documents such as the two presented here. In addition to their linguistic value, they contain the type of information on life in the colonial period that we cannot expect to find in Spanish-language documentation alone.

## Notes

1. Ronald Spores and Maarten Jansen have followed in the footsteps of the great pioneers, Alfonso Caso and Barbro Dahlgren de Jordan in studying Mixtec codices and Spanish-language documents, and using the language to varying degrees. María de los Ángeles Romero Frizzi and Rodolfo Pastor have also done a considerable amount of work on the Mixteca. But to the best of my knowledge, nobody has used Mixtec-language sources from the colonial period, though I understand this may be changing and I look forward to contributing to this new area in the field. One of the best introductions to the language and sources in the colonial period is provided by *Essays in Otomanguan Culture History*, edited by J.K.Josserand, et al.

(Vanderbilt, 1984).

2. Sherburne F. Cook and Woodrow Borah *The Population of the Mixteca Alta, 1520-1960*. (Berkeley: UC Press, 1968). Cook and Borah calculate that the Mixteca Alta (elevated, north-eastern region) had seven times the population in 1520 than in 1570. Epidemics were especially virulent in 1576-81, 1591-92, and 1599. The population of 1570 was halved by 1600 and halved again by the mid-seventeenth century, when it reached its nadir. By 1800, it was about 7-10% of the original preconquest population. There is much debate about the accuracy of such calculations, but the conclusions are essentially the same.

3. See William B. Taylor, *Landlord and Peasant in Colonial Oaxaca*. (Stanford, 1972).

4. Some geographers have considered the region a complex union of the Sierra Madre Oriental and the Sierra Madre Occidental. The Mixteca has been traditionally divided into three sub-regions: Alta, Baja, and Costa. I will address only the former in this essay, since all of the documentation is from this area. Settlements here lie between 1800-3400 meters above sea level.

5. Fray Antonio de los Reyes, *Arte en Lengua Mixteca*. (Mexico, 1593) reprinted by Comte H. de Charencey (Paris, 1870). In p. 2 of the prologue, Reyes says that the Mixteca Alta was called *ñudzavui ñuhu* which he defines as "something divine and esteemed." I read it as "place of the rain god."

6. Francisco del Paso y Troncoso, ed. *Papeles de Nueva España: Segunda serie: Geografía y Estadística*. 6 vol. (Mexico, 1905). IV. pp. 53-57. Relaciones Geográficas for Texupa, 1579. See also: Borah and Cook, p.12.; Reyes, p. vii.; Spores, *The Mixtec Kings and their People* (Oklahoma, 1967).

7. Archivo General de Indias: Contaduría 657, f. 767.

8. *Vocabulario en Lengua Mixteca* por Fray Francisco de Alvarado (Mexico, 1593). Reproducción facsimilar con un estudio de Wigberto Jimenez Moreno (Mexico, 1962). See also Robert Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico: An Essay on the Apostolate and the Evangelizing Methods of the Mendicant Orders in New Spain, 1523-1572*. (Paris, 1933). trans. by Lesley Byrd Simpson (Berkeley: UC Press, 1966).

9. Antonio de Nebrija, *Gramática de la Lengua Castellana* (1492), ed. I. González-Llubera (Oxford, 1926) pp. 3-6.

10. Two of these copies are in the Huntington Library in Pasadena (1567, 1568) in the dialects of Tlaxiaco and Achiutla.

11. Reyes, Prologue, iii.

12. Alvarado, Prologue.

13. *ibid.*, Prologue.

14. I am most grateful to Gonzalo Guerrero, who is in charge of the Archivo Judicial de Teposcolula, for his assistance and expertise.

15. In a sample of Mixtec caciques and nobles who testified in



the dispute between Yanhuitlan and Tecomatlan in 1571, about half claimed they knew Nahuatl. On the other hand, one Juan Gaytan didn't know what the court meant by Yanhuitlan or Tecomatlan--he only knew their Mixtec names. Archivo General de Indias: Escribania, leg. 162C, ff. 516-520.

16. The Nahuas and Mixtecs shared the same calendar, dividing the solar year into 18 20-day periods, each day represented by a sign. *Acatl* is "reed" and *Caltzin* is "house" (reverential) in Nahuatl, two signs in the calendar which had their Mixtec equivalents.

17. As Charles Gibson has demonstrated, governors in this early period were most certainly caciques and the two positions rotated according to preconquest design. See *Aztecs Under Spanish Rule: A History of the Indians of the Valley of Mexico, 1519-1821*. (Stanford, 1964).

18. As always, I am grateful for James Lockhart's help with this analysis.

19. I understand this is common in the census materials from Cuernavaca, for instance.

20. A *brasa* is something like the average distance between the thumbs when one's arms are outstretched horizontally, or about four to five feet. Thus the land was probably about 600 x 350 feet. The Nahuatl *quauitl* refers to a stick with which to measure and *matl* is the equivalent of a yard or so. For terminology, see *Beyond the Codices: The Nahua View of Colonial Mexico* by Anderson, Berdan and Lockhart (Berkeley: UC Press, 1976) pp. 90-91 for example.

21. The second definition for *hacer* given by Alvarado in his *Vocabulario* is *yoquidzahuhandi*, after *yoquidzandi*.

22. Reyes, p. 14 and pp. 74-86.

23. *ibid.*, p.2.

24. Curiously, one of the words for a Nahua given by Alvarado is *tay ñudzuma* or "someone from the place behind" or the "place of the tail."

25. The proper construction in Reyes for "*hacer mercedes el señor*" is *yosahañahata* and "son-in-law" is *dzayacadza*. The *da* endings may be *dza*. Reyes, p. 76.

26. *Caa* is found in Alvarado as a generic term for metal, much like the Nahuatl use of *tepuztli* for "iron." A natural response was to call European objects or phenomena by familiar terms, using the nearest known equivalent as a model. Another example is using "deer" for "horse"--*maçatl* and *ydzu*. For a discussion of the adaptation of Nahuatl to Spanish, see *Nahuatl in the Middle Years: Language Contact Phenomena in Texts of the Colonial Period* by Frances Karttunen and James Lockhart (Los Angeles: UC Press, 1976).

27. *quhni* is a twisted form of *qhumi* or *qumi* for the number "four."

28. Most placenames in the Mixteca during the colonial period (and still today) were designated by the conquering Aztecs and

continued by the Spaniards. They are usually equivalent terms. *Coaitlahuacan* is *Yodzocoo* in Mixtec and *Yuguinche* or *Nuguichee* in Chocho, meaning the "plains of snakes." *Texupan* is *Ñundáá* meaning "blue earth"; *Teposcolollan* means "place of curved copper axes in Nahuatl, but the Mixtec, *Yucundaá* means "maguey hill."

29. Archivo General de la Nacion: Tierras, v. 232, exp. 1, 53ff.

30. This is also a recurring theme in James Lockhart's past and present work, especially in his forthcoming book on the Nahuas.