

## **The Resilience of Aztec Women: A Case Study of Modern Aztec Myths**

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### **Abstract:**

Archival documents have shown both Spain's attempts at Christianizing the Aztecs and their justifications for the destruction of traditional native beliefs and gender roles. More specifically, these documents reveal how Spanish and Christian andocentric ideologies attempted to pacify Aztec female roles and remove them from places of power. An examination of Aztec-Spanish relations, emphasizing the religiosity and mentalities of both the conquered and the conquerors, provides an interesting correlation between the transformation of native women's social status and their acceptance and/or denial of European patriarchal customs. This article focuses on the reciprocating system of duality existing between men and women in Aztec life and religion, the rate of acculturation of Spanish patriarchal structures by native peoples, and two contemporary Aztec case studies that exhibit differing levels of acculturation, traditional sustainability, and religious preservation. These scenarios will illustrate the various factors contributing to the transformation and, in some cases, the preservation of pre-Columbian female Aztec roles.

### **Introduction**

The patriarchal nature of Spanish thought and the justifiable elements of New World domination transformed the colonial Aztecs into a culturally exploitable society. Utilizing religion as a imperialistic tool, the Spanish were able to effectively dominate the Aztecs through the demonization of their religious and cultural practices. Additionally, Spanish theologians and conquerors justified implementing new systems of governmental and societal control, deeming them as necessities of conquest and as a way to save the "heathens" from their inevitable demise.<sup>1</sup> The forced implementation of Christian ideals, as dictated by Spanish colonialism (i.e., militaristic religious domination), reflected both a Eurocentric interpretation of proper religion as well as a blatant disregard for traditional Aztec beliefs. Combined with Spain's persistence at imposing a patriarchal structure for all indigenous peoples, conquest and colonialism in the New World ultimately led to dramatic role changes for both Aztec men and women.<sup>2</sup> In many cases, Spanish andocentric ideologies of proper societal roles limited female access to power in the public domain (i.e., politically, religiously, and socially,) and restricted them to activities in the private domain (i.e., housework and childrearing.) Despite these occurrences, Aztec women were, in some cases, able to resist Spanish subjugation and retain certain aspects of their pre-Columbian power in the colonial era. As the rest of this paper suggests, Aztec females were able to create avenues for societal success and power through the manipulation of the colonial Spanish patriarchy and Christian theology.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ignacio Bernal, *A History of Mexican Archaeology: The Vanished Civilizations of Middle America* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1980), 19-34.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that male Aztec roles were also drastically changed under the colonial Spanish regime. Aztec men were not only prohibited from places of power in the Spanish government, they were restricted from practicing traditional religious, political, and cultural activities in local settings as well as reduced to subordinates of Spanish provincial lords. Although this topic is an interesting one, due to time restraints, the transformation of male roles will not be discussed in this paper.

<sup>3</sup> **Note on Nomenclature:** When referring to "Aztec women" the author of this paper is looking at the specifically defined elite sect of pre-Columbian Aztec society living within the capital, Tenochtitlan. Aztec imperialism demanded that conquered communities incorporate their interpretations of life and society. The implementation of religious and cultural ideologies as well as demands for labor and tribute enabled Aztec hegemony in peripheral regions. This encouraged complementary gender practices and increased women's ability to actively function in and out of Tenochtitlan.<sup>3</sup> Specifically within the Aztec capital, wealth, trade, and tribute resulted in a continuous rise in both local industry and cultural influence, which ultimately caused the inhabitants themselves to spread ideas about gender and cosmic duality.

## Pre-Columbian Aztec Women (ca. 1450-1519)

In the pre-Columbian era, Aztec social, political, and religious customs mimicked already established Mesoamerican gender practices. Following acculturated ideas of female power from their native predecessors, the Aztecs believed women's involvement was essential in creating a well-balanced and ordered society. Based on archaeological and historical information compiled from codices and excavations, scholars believe the Aztecs practiced what this author refers to as a reciprocating system of gendered, cosmic duality<sup>4</sup>. Believing the balance between men and women was essential to a well-functioning society, pre-Columbian Aztec communities provided women with social, religious, and political power, making them significant and, in many cases, equal contributors to Aztec social world.<sup>5</sup>

One can assume that the need for duality in life and the practice of reciprocity between the genders helped women to excel in the pre-Columbian Aztec world. Historical documentation compiled by Susan Kellogg has illustrated that under the Aztec cognatic system of descent,<sup>6</sup> both men and women were entitled to own and inherited property as well as enjoy social status based on kinship and lineages. Women could acquire wealth through various social and economic activities based on their genetic affiliations to culturally important ancestors.<sup>7</sup> Feminine independence brought about by monetary affairs and kinship ties also facilitated access for women to acquire skills necessary for various occupations and specialized trades. As such, women were able to achieve social and economic success by generating their own assets and personal wealth. As friar Bernardino de Sahagún observed in the early 1500s:

[Aztec women] would have food and drink available. She would have [surplus] food for others to eat; she would invite others to feast. She would be respectful. She would be invited by others...success would be her dealings around the marketplace [and] in the place[s] of business.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, historian Inga Clendinnen argued that the vastly complex reciprocating patterns of native society enabled Aztec women to exercise individual autonomy and liberties on a daily basis.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, one can assume that women were able to achieve higher levels of success within predetermined Aztec socio-cultural positions. Based on Clendinnen's research with Aztec codices, women were able to study in religious schools, as well as be avid members of market

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While women of the periphery experienced various levels of socioeconomic success, the women of Tenochtitlan received more economic benefits than other women in the Mexican Valley. Living in a highly populated and wealthy urban center enabled native women of Tenochtitlan to have access to more opportunities and occupations, unlike their non-urban female counterparts. In spite of these differences, women of Tenochtitlan maintained similar social-cultural roles as other women in the Valley. In both rural and urban settings, women were expected to regulated activities within the private domain, (e.g., raising children, getting married, and paying imperial tribute.) More specifically, all women were required to pay tribute in the form of cloth and woven goods to the imperial Aztec state. Researchers Karen Olsen Bruhns and Karen E. Stothert argued that as society became more complex, the Aztecs increased the demands of female tribute, which caused women on both the local and national level to pay more taxes through the production of woven goods.<sup>3</sup> As this example illustrates, in spite of existing at a higher economic level, women of Tenochtitlan shared similar cultural roles with women of the Mexican periphery. Therefore, this paper will use the women of Tenochtitlan to illustrate a general pattern of women's roles under the Aztec imperial state. See Eduardo Matos Moctezuma and Felipe Solís Olguín, "Introduction," in *Aztecs*, ed. Warwick Bray (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002); Ross Hassig, *War and Society in Ancient Mesoamerica* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Susan Kellogg, *Law and the Transformation of Aztec Culture, 1500-1700* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Cosmic dualism is the idea that for society to work harmoniously, both males' and females' existences were complementary, both feeding off each other's reciprocity and paralleling values.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that not all Aztec communities were able to retain the pre-Columbian system of cosmic dualism. Fluctuating mortality rates, imbalanced sex ratios, warfare, and Hispanization hindered many communities from implementing more balanced gendered societal roles.

<sup>6</sup> Cognatic descent units, generally known as *tlacamecayotl* in Nahuatl, provided Aztec descendants with the means by which to trace their lineage back four or five generations in order to structure "households, marriages, neighborhood groupings, property ownership, work relations, ritual practices, and political activities." Kellogg, 126.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>8</sup> Bernardino de Sahagún, "Florentine Codex Book IV:1:2," in Susan Kellogg, *Law and the Transformation of Aztec Culture, 1500-1700* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 95.

<sup>9</sup> Inga Clendinnen, *Aztec: An Interpretation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 206-209.

and merchant trades. Thus, pre-Columbian Aztec women were able to advance themselves on both religious and social levels.

Women performed many essential productive tasks in the household including cooking, cleaning [which had both sanitary and religious implications], caring for children, marketing, spinning, weaving, and carrying out the daily round of household rituals. [Outside of the household] women partook in activities in palaces, temples, markets, schools, and crafts workers' organization. They served as priestesses, teachers, merchants, healers and midwives, professional spinners, weavers, and embroiderers.<sup>10</sup>

As Kellogg emphasizes, both archaeological and historical evidence of economic endeavors outside of the house provide proof of women's ability to effectively organize various female-run coalitions.<sup>11</sup> Taking part in administrative positions in the marketplace as well as in the individual *calpolli* (community) enabled women to function independently of men and with a certain level of authority within Aztec society. One can argue that Aztec acceptance of strong female roles encouraged women to take part in activities outside the home as well as to regulate activities among themselves, thus contributing to the tremendous power and prestige they held in pre-Columbian times.

Moreover, Aztec beliefs in gender balances and strong female roles encouraged women to take part in important social positions outside of the household. For example, Kellogg suggests that women held administrative positions in the *cuicacalli*, houses of songs (referring to activities based on both religion and social life), in the *tlaxilacalli* as wards of others, and in the *tainquiztli*, or marketplace.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the Nahuatl Codices suggest that women, as long distant merchants, known as *pochtea*, could acquire wealth, riches, and learn foreign languages and cultures.<sup>13</sup> Therefore women, like men, took part in essential tasks that not only sustained their families' position in society but also acquired social status for themselves as individuals. Also, the presumed absence of men during war times and the recognition and significance of the female line of descent already mentioned in the previous paragraph could have easily supported women's ability to achieve power in and out of the home.

Supported by an engrained sense of cosmic duality, women could occupy significant positions in Aztec religion. Resulting from beliefs in complementary gender roles and the necessity of gender parallelism, Aztec women had the opportunity to achieve social success through various religious practices.<sup>14</sup> A historical account of an Aztec creation story clearly illustrates how women's involvement in the pre-Columbian world was viewed as a necessity. "The supreme couple, Ometecuhtli and Omecihuatl, [also jointly known as Ometeolt, the bisexual creator god] were thought to have given birth to the four Tecatlipocas [the four quarters of the Aztec region], an act that resulted in the division of the cosmos into four parts [and the formation of the Teotihuacán, Tula, and Tenochtitlan]."<sup>15</sup> Mimicking the construction of both Teotihuacán and the Toltecs' capital Tula to achieve power and to establish their historical claims to rule,<sup>16</sup> the Aztecs structured their capital city Tenochtitlan into four quarters, each representing the four cardinal directions and four children of Ometecuhtli and Omecihuatl. The Codex Mendoza, written in the

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<sup>10</sup> Kellogg, 127.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 94-99.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 91.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 132-133.

<sup>14</sup> By 1344 or 1345, the Aztec tribe was divided into two groups, one following their chief Tenoch and settling in Tenochtitlan, and other group settling in Tlatelolco to the north. The term Tenochcas, another name for the Aztecs, was derived from the leader Tenoch after safely guiding them through the last stages of their migration. See Moctezuma, and Olguín, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Felipe Solís Olguín, "Religion," in *Aztecs*, ed. Warwick Bray (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 225; Cecelia F. Klein, "None of the Above: Gender Ambiguity in Nahua Ideology," in *Gender in Pre-Hispanic America: A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks 12 and 13 October 1996*, eds. Cecelia F. Klein, and Jeffery Quilter (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection), 186.

<sup>16</sup> The Aztecs believed that their ancestral right to rule came from their cultural affiliations with both Teotihuacan and Tollan. Both places were considered religiously important and political powerful. As such, the Aztecs felt it necessary to establish their cultural affiliations with them in order to substantiate their power in pre-Columbian times.

early colonial period, described the Aztecs' division of power in each of the four *calpoltin* suggesting the Aztec's need for cosmic balance and dualism. Constructing their beliefs around the idea that both men and women were involved in the creation of the universe leads one to believe that the balance of gender roles were viewed as essential components in well-ordered Aztec community. Building on this principle, within the calpolli, the leader or *calpollec*, regulated the activities occurring within each of the four sociopolitical systems. Based on gender parallelisms, titles were created for both men and women and each had the ability to work in these administrative positions.<sup>17</sup> One can presume that the Aztecs balanced life into four corners and created balanced, gendered administrative positions in order to illustrate the importance of parallelism and duality in their society. Clendinnen's research supports this notion by showing gender parallelism within the Aztec codices. Her findings showed that the Aztecs created images of men and women with equal power and importance.<sup>18</sup> In the Codex Borgia and the Codex Borbonicus, men and women were clearly depicted facing each other, a sign of equal status, respect, and importance. In addition, both men and women were constructed of equal size and shape, possibly illustrating their equality and life and paralleling social power. As Cecelia Klein's analysis of Aztec gender further illustrates, "the bilateral symmetry and similar dress characterized in Aztec artwork and manuscripts reflects the harmoniously workings between males and females".<sup>19</sup>

In sum, Aztec women held significant positions in pre-Columbian society and were perceived as facilitators of knowledge and power by their communities. Thus, elite Aztec women occupied a social, religious, and political space separate from, but very much complementary to, that of their male counterparts. In addition, the acculturated concepts of cosmic dualism, gender parallelism and reciprocity allowed Aztec women to be considered essential components of society, making them valued in all aspects of the Aztec social world. Able to regulate activities in the socioeconomic market place, and to occupy positions of leadership in politics, religion, and society; pre-Columbian Aztec women lived and worked in a social context that allowed semi-equitable avenues for female achievement and sociopolitical success.

### **Aztec Women in the Early Colonial Era (1521-1550s)**

Beginning in the colonial era, demographic imbalances and malleable Spanish legal codes helped facilitate the survival of pre-Columbian gender relations and societal roles. Due to constant warfare and the spread of Old World diseases, Aztec women outnumbered Aztec men in the colonial era. This imbalanced sex ratio allowed Aztec women to initially retain some positions of power and continue their traditional beliefs and practices.<sup>20</sup> The implementation of a pliable Spanish legal code also secured some political and social authority for women.<sup>21</sup> As the remainder of the section illustrates, having the ability to practice traditional religious, social, and ideological customs in local Aztec *calpoltin* allowed native women to maintain aspects of their pre-Columbian power and autonomy with men.

The depopulation of Aztec men contributed to Aztec women's retention of roles both in and out of the home. At the same time, this phenomenon enabled women to participate in social, political, and religious occupations usually privy to men. As warriors, the Aztec men had more frequent contact with the Spanish and became more likely casualties to both disease and warfare. Analyzing the demographics of colonial Mexican society and its influence on Aztec female roles illustrates how Aztec women were able to maintain social importance in the post-Conquest era. López de Velasco's 1570 census of the Valley of Mexico determined that the native population had decreased to approximately one half its former size since the Spanish arrived.<sup>22</sup> The official

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<sup>17</sup> Kellogg 1997b, 125-133.

<sup>18</sup> Clendinnen, 231-235.

<sup>19</sup> Klein, 187.

<sup>20</sup> Kellogg, 104-105.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Gibson, The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule: A History of the Indians of the Valley of Mexico, 1519-1810 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964), 137.

Spanish demographer of the Valley of Mexico, Velasco calculated the ratio of native men to women within the valley. The census data confirmed that the native male population had decreased at a much higher rate than the native female population.<sup>23</sup> The imbalance of the native sex ratio allowed Aztec women to obtain significant positions of authority in and out of their traditional pre-Columbian spheres, which initially provided them with more power.<sup>24</sup> By outnumbering the Aztec men, women gained access to positions within kin groups, in political offices, and on the home front, which enabled them to excel in early colonial society.<sup>25</sup>

Although friars and theologians of the early sixteenth century encouraged the transformation of female roles, knowledge of Spanish law allowed Aztec women to avoid limitations in both the public and private domains. The Castilian legal codes, (e.g., the *Leyes de los reynos de las Indias*, *Siete Partidas*, and *Leyes de Toro*,) did not include stipulations regarding native women's actions or roles. As such, native women could retain their traditional social status and power because Spanish law lacked regulations preventing them from doing so.<sup>26</sup> In essence, while the Spanish codes placed men in a position of authority over women and children, by granting him exclusively the *patria potestas* (parental authority), it guaranteed all women in the empire the same rights. From the 1520s to the 1550s, Spanish law allowed Aztec women to retain social, religious, and political authority on the local level. This gave them access to authority and power in local native settings.

Spanish bilateral inheritance laws reinforced [women's authority]. According to the *Leyes de Toro* and the *Siete Partidas*, the spouse and children were the preferred heirs whose claims had to be satisfied before those of parents, siblings, or others. While testators could leave one-fifth to one-third of their estates to spouses or children through a *mejora* (specific bequest), the law protected the inheritance rights of both male and female children. A significant feature of Spanish inheritance law, however, was that "wom[e]n in practical terms [had] an economic edge over the potential rights of children."<sup>27</sup>

Under this civil code, Aztec women could regulate not only their own inheritance but also their children's inheritance. As such, native women were provided with a powerful asset in the local community. Regulating family funds and wealth provided Aztec women with the opportunity to influence economic activities and establish their own importance in local Aztec society. Susan Kellogg has argued, Aztec women's access to inheritance rights constituted a major avenue for female colonial success.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Spanish law allowed women to regulate activities within the home, giving them the opportunity to promote traditional values and social practices, such as cosmic dualism and gender parallelism.<sup>29</sup> Having access to regulatory controls over production in and out of the home allowed Aztec women to influence the mentalities of those surrounding them, which allowed them to perpetuate pre-Columbian Aztec ideas of gender balance and reciprocity in the colonial era.

In addition, other regulations in Spanish law enabled native women to create more avenues for societal success. The Viceroyalty of New Spain was subdivided into provincial units known as *alcaldías mayores*. To ensure regulatory controls over each of these units, the office of the

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<sup>23</sup> Velasco surveyed not only the Aztecs but also all natives inhabiting the region. For this reason there is the possibility that the Aztecs, because they had been the imperial elite, experienced different ratios than the rest of the region. In his analysis of this document, Charles Gibson concluded that the surveys' initial takings were not completely accurate, and indicated that more precise calculations of native populations were not computed until the late 1500s when political jurisdictions took over the census duties. See *Ibid*, 137-145.

<sup>24</sup> Kellogg, 134.

<sup>25</sup> Louise M. Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth: Nahuatl-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989), 52-54; Kellogg, 134; Gibson, 137-147.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>27</sup> Asunción Larvin, and Edith B. Couturier, "Dowries and Wills: A View of Women's Socioeconomic Pole in Colonial Guadalajara and Puebla, 1640-1790," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 59, no. 2 (1979): 287, quoted in Susan Kellogg, *Law and the Transformation of Aztec Culture, 1500-1700* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 105-106.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*.

provincial administrator, known as the *alcalde mayor*, was created. The Spanish recognized that the native population, although depleted, still outnumbered the Spaniards in the New World. Realizing they needed native labor and assistance to sustain the colonial order, the Spanish selected natives to govern Indian municipalities and villages within New Spain.<sup>30</sup> The Spanish understood that appeasing the natives would ensure colonial peace and longevity. They encouraged natives to regulate activities on the local level and continue practicing aspects of their traditional cultural life as long as they did not challenge Spanish religious and social customs, indicating that the Crown was aware that it needed to apply benevolence to achieve its goals.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore,

[t]he Crown confirmed the existence of the native municipalities and their dependent villages (*cabeceras* and *sujetos*) and emphasized their central role...[and] within [these] native municipalities, Indian officials handled administrative matters and served as essential links with the Spanish overlords (*encomenderos*) and royal officials.<sup>32</sup>

By allowing native participation in Indian enclaves, Spanish officials inadvertently provided the Aztecs with another way of maintaining gender parallelism.

In a similar regard, the condescension toward women in Spanish law left space for Aztec women to regulate activities within the private domain. Although the Church and the legal order encouraged Aztec men to take over all functions of the private domain the enforcement of this practice was impossible. Encouragement by both the Church and Spanish government to practice roles reflecting female subservience did little to change Aztec women's actual control in the home. This is not to say that the Aztecs did not incorporate Spanish and Christian practices, but that they often did so at their own pace. Instead of relinquishing their traditional social practices and beliefs, the Aztecs incorporated aspects of Christianity to serve the traditions already in place. While some may have done so to appease the Spanish, others may have simply incorporated the additional belief system into their already syncretic worldview. As Linda A. Curcio-Nagy has explained:

Because of the natives' ability to assimilate external religious concepts, a parallel religious system developed in many native communities. They worshipped their old gods as well as the new Christian deity and the saints. Some friars were furious with this and felt betrayed when it became clear to them that the traditional native religions were continuing.<sup>33</sup>

Carrying out traditional rituals within the home as well as in the local *calpoltin*, Aztec women retained elements of their social importance and authority. Due to the slow infiltration of Spanish religious and gendered practices in Aztec society and the malleability of colonial law, Aztec women were able to retain aspects of their pre-Columbian roles and beliefs as well as continue gender practices contrary to the Spanish patriarchal agenda.

### **Aztec Women in the Late Colonial Era (1540s-1590s)**

Towards the end of the sixteenth century Spanish law became more specific in regards to native peoples and their gender practices. This allowed both the patriarchal Spanish mentality and Christianity to better control the institutions of colonial Mexico. Regulatory controls enacted

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<sup>30</sup> Mark A. Burkholder, and Suzanne Hiles, "An Empire Beyond Compare," in *The Oxford History of Mexico* eds. Michael C. Meyer, and William H. Beezley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 118.

<sup>31</sup> Historian Kevin Gosner states, "...based on principles of limited reciprocity in which the crown recognized (with the exception of the shamans, of course) the legitimacy of local indigenous elites [and rulers]." See Kevin Gosner, "Women, Rebellion, and the Moral Economy of Mayan Peasants in Colonial Mexico," in *Indian Women of Early Mexico*, eds. Susan Schroeder, Stephanie Wood, and Robert Haskett (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 222.

<sup>32</sup> Burkholder, and Hiles, 118.

<sup>33</sup> Linda A. Curcio-Nagy, "Faith and Morals in Colonial Mexico," in *The Oxford History of Mexico*, eds. Michael C. Meyer, and William H. Beezley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 159.

by the Council of Trent (1545-63), the Spanish Inquisition, and the encomiendas caused an acceleration of Aztec acculturation.<sup>34</sup> By the late 1500s, the ratio of native men to women began to equalize. This increased Aztec women's loss of religious and social importance. Church and Spanish laws became more rigid regarding gender practices, which forced many Aztec women to adapt to the patriarchal religious and social customs of the governing institutions.<sup>35</sup> Christianity instructed native women to submit to men and marry early to promote female chastity. It restricted women's activities outside of the home in hope of preventing temptation and sin with men.<sup>36</sup> Spanish law and governmental agencies also sought to regulate native female activities. Aztec women began facing numerous restrictions, many specifically set in place to limit their access to authority and power.

As the rigidity of Spanish institutions set in, the Aztecs' conditions deteriorated as a result of Spanish exploitation and mistreatment.<sup>37</sup> The personal labor service clause of the encomienda, a bylaw which sixteenth-century theologian Bartolomé de Las Casas equated to native slavery, forced the Aztecs into grueling work conditions, and unbearable treatment.<sup>38</sup> Forced to work under these conditions for little or no monetary compensation, the Aztecs became dependent on the Spanish for subsistence and security. Fearing further social and economic distress, many Aztecs began to publicly accept Spanish law and gender practices, in hope of a more stable future and the opportunity for better treatment. Possibly done as an attempt to make the Spanish aware of their compliance with and acceptance of Christian beliefs and practices, native testaments and codices in the colonial era incorporated Spanish and Christian ideologies of proper social actions. As the native codex *Doctrina Cristiana* (1714) illustrated, the Aztecs began practices the religious customs of Christianity.

These documents...were produced by native painter-scribes (tlacuiloque, sing. tlacuilo) in Mexico from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century to instruct young indigenous neotypes in the doctrine of Catechism [and prayers] of the Catholic Church... [Incorporating Christian symbols and native pictorial symbols] suggests that the pictorial system used to convey information is closely linked to Pre-Hispanic iconic script...<sup>39</sup>

The Aztecs incorporated aspects of Christianity to adjust to the dominating Spanish cultural and religious practices. Yet, in spite of this public display of Spanish and Christian beliefs, some Aztecs were able to continued to practice pre-Columbian cosmic dualism and gender reciprocity. Specifically, certain Aztec communities reconfigured their traditional customs and values to incorporate Christian ideologies publicly while they continued the worship traditional Aztec gods privately. As such, colonial Aztecs were able to resist Spanish religious authority and retain aspects of their traditional religious system.

In addition, Church practices, either inadvertently or intentionally, encouraged the preservation of native beliefs and practices in order to more effectively reach the natives and teach them Christianity. According to Linda Curcio-Nagy:

The missionaries taught Christianity in terms of what was already familiar to the indigenous people. In other words, the friars not only allowed but also purposely encouraged the correlating of native deities, symbols, and rituals with their European counterparts.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Curcio-Nagy, 153.

<sup>35</sup> Burkhart, 99; Kellogg, 70-84.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>37</sup> Las Casas in many of his works condemned the activities of the encomienda, arguing that they were not created for the benefit of the Indian but as an institution of control and exploitation. He believed that the work the Indians were required to do reduced them to nothing more than slaves. See Bartolomé de Las Casas, *An Account, Much abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies with Related Texts*, ed. Franklin W. Knight, trans. Andrew Hurley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2003), xx.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Joanne Harwood, "Codices," in *Aztecs*, ed. Warwick Bray (Mexico: The Royal Academy of Arts, 2003), 396-397, 494.

<sup>40</sup> Curcio-Nagy, 157.

As alluded to earlier, many Aztecs publicly practiced Christianity, adopted patron saints, and incorporated Christian figures and ideologies into their codices, writings, and many of their social and religious customs while, at the same time, continued to worship pre-Columbian deities. Although the Aztec reaction to Catholicism in many ways fit the Spanish and Christian demands of native assimilation, the way they incorporated and manipulated European thought and religion provided the Aztecs with a means to resist complete societal transformation. As R. Douglas Cope indicates:

Indeed, the Indian's response to Catholicism, which ranged from acceptance to rejection to anomie but was most characterized by creative adaptation, the selective incorporation and reworking of those elements of Christianity that made sense to them, has much to tell us about the difficulties of imposing the ruler's ideology on the ruled.<sup>41</sup>

By preserving traditional beliefs and practices, even if through the manipulation of European customs, the Aztecs helped to ensure the preservation of their traditional culture and gender practices.

Although faced with the reduction of significant societal roles in New Spain, colonial Aztec women refocused their efforts on maintaining importance at the local level and within the home. As wives and mothers, they could teach their children and reinforce the traditional cosmological idea of cosmic dualism and gender reciprocity. Since the Aztecs believed that balances between men and women promoted harmony within society and allowed it to properly function, one could presume that colonial Aztec women were able to reinforce this concept with their children. Therefore, they were most likely able to continue strengthening their importance in the later half of the colonial era.

Maintaining pre-Columbian religious and social ideas at the local level also contributed to an increase in female influence and authority in religious and government activities. Within local Indian politics, Spanish law enabled Aztec women of royal lineage and noble birth to maintain their authority and power. For example, in the colonial era, Tecuichpo, also known as Doña Isabel de Moctezuma, the last Aztec Queen and legitimate offspring of Moctezuma II, maintained her power until her death in the mid 1500s. Able to survive the Conquest and manipulate the Spanish patriarchal order, Tecuichpo maintained her own royal authority, wealth, and power.<sup>42</sup> After her husband King Cuauhtemoc died in battle against the Spanish, Tecuichpo married a series of Spaniards in order to keep her property.<sup>43</sup> Male heirs in the Moctezuma line demanded their share from Tecuichpo, arguing she should not be allowed by Spanish law to accumulate the family's wealth since she was a woman. Following what they perceive as their rights under Spanish law, these male heirs believed they had the power to confiscate the lands from Tecuichpo and all of her wealth. Taking her case to court, Tecuichpo effectively argued for the retention of her lands and wealth, and the Spanish courts agreed that the property belonged to her.<sup>44</sup> As this example illustrates, Tecuichpo was able to use Spanish law in her favor and establish her own authority and power in spite of the andocentric Spanish system in place. Anthropologists Karen Olsen Bruhns and Karen E. Stothert state:

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<sup>41</sup> R. Douglas Cope, *Limits of Racial Domination: Plebian Society in Colonial Mexico City, 1660-1720* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 5.

<sup>42</sup> Karen Olsen Bruhns, and Karen E. Stothert, *Women in Ancient America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 235.

<sup>43</sup> Spanish patriarchal law transferred the authority over the woman's property and assets to the husband; in case of a deceased husband, wealth he left to his widow and heirs would be administered by a new husband. While this condescending condition could be disadvantageous and clearly showed Spanish discrimination against women, it, nevertheless, kept the property from being divided by other members of the family. Tecuichpo used this provision to her advantage by keeping her male relatives out of her estate. She further added to her personal wealth by marrying Spaniards.

<sup>44</sup> Bruhns, and Stothert, 235.

Many noble and royal women [in the colonial era] undertook litigation [in Spanish courts]. These ladies were not passive pawns of their male relatives or the conquering Spaniards. They were reared in the full knowledge of their own superiority, and they were experienced in Aztec power and politics.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, colonial Aztec women learned to use Spanish patriarchal institutions and laws to their benefit.

Praying to female Christian figures (i.e., female saints and the Virgin Mary) also allowed Aztec women to establish the importance of females in colonial New Spain. In an attempt to implement Christianity, sixteenth-century theologians destroyed icons reflecting dominant female religious roles, (e.g., statues of priestesses and pre-Columbian deities.) The Church hoped this action would cause Aztec women's roles to decrease and male authority to be strengthened. Much to the dismay of the Spanish, the Aztecs incorporated Christianity and its emphasis on gender inequality in ways relative to their traditional beliefs and religious needs instead of replacing them entirely. Aztec women were sufficiently resilient to reemphasize the Aztec importance of female religious authority and power. For example, Catholics regularly worship and pray to one god (latria) and invoke both male and female saints asking that they, in turn, pray to God for them (dulia). They believed that saints, friars, and the Virgin Mary interceded before God on their behalf. Through prayer to specific religious entities, problems and situations in life could be resolved. In an attempt to encourage Aztec conversion, the colonial Church used the intermediary role of religious entities to promote Aztec religious acculturation. More specifically, the Church encouraged natives to incorporate specific characteristics of pre-Columbian deities into Christian saints and the Virgin Mary in order to promote conversion and the adoption of Christian societal roles.<sup>46</sup> Viewing these practices and perhaps not fully comprehending the intent of the theologians and friars or choosing to draw their own interpretations, the Aztecs acculturated the veneration of Catholic saints as worship (i.e. latria) quite easily by establishing parallels with their pre-Columbian deities who also acted as intermediaries. The devotion of saints allowed the Aztecs to reincorporate the worship of both significant male and female figures in religion.

Coinciding with the fact that many Aztecs practiced their traditional beliefs within their home and practiced Christianity in public, Aztec women had the possibility of resurrecting both male and female deities of the past as well as incorporating the worship of Christian male and female saints. Believing that both religious practices could benefit their local community, the Aztecs encouraged each other to practice both traditional and Christian religious customs, contributing to the re-implementation of paralleling gender values. "The possibility of divine retribution by either the Christian god or native deities bolstered the necessity of constructing a parallel religious system with offerings and rituals for both Christian and pre-Columbian deities."<sup>47</sup> Within the home, the Aztecs could worship significant pre-Columbian gods such as Huitzilopochtli, warrior god and protector of the home, Coatlicue, the guarding of life, death, and war. In addition, the Aztecs could pray to Christian figures and saints, particularly the Virgin Mary, in order to meet the needs of practicing significant female worship. Therefore, the Aztec tradition of syncretic religious practices, encouraged by the Church in the colonial era, help justify the retention of pre-Columbian Aztec traditional religious beliefs and gender practices.

Not only did the incorporation of pre-Columbian female deities with colonial Christian figures enable Aztec women to continue their dualistic practices, but it also allowed them to create new female religious figures with both Christian and pre-Columbian traits. As the Mother of God, Catholics believe that the Virgin Mary oversees all Christians and is the major source of Catholic devotion (hyperdulia); she is believed to be the most exalted saint and intercessor before God. In colonial times, the Virgin Mary was one of the first Christian saints the Aztecs were able to

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Rhianna C. Rogers, "The Spider Woman Rules No More?: The Transformation and Resilience of Aztec Female Roles" (M.A. Thesis, Florida Atlantic University, 2004), 150-151.

<sup>47</sup> Curcio-Nagy, 161.

incorporate as a significant female religious figure. Prayers, rituals, and ceremonies dedicated to Mary and her life allowed the Aztecs to once again see women in positions of religious authority. "Natives, Spanish, and casta (individuals of mixed racial ancestry) [believed that] devotion to the Virgin would prevent drought, illness, epidemics, and other natural disasters."<sup>48</sup> Relying heavily on the Virgin Mary and her power, the Aztecs were provided with another opportunity to practice significant female worship through devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe, a manifestation of the Virgin Mary.<sup>49</sup> Tradition holds that the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared on December 9, 1531, before a native named Juan Diego. She asked him to instruct Bishop Juan de Zumárraga to construct a church on the spot of her apparition, at the site of Tepeyac Hill. The significance of this site held a two-fold purpose: one, it was located on an old Aztec temple dedicated to the female deity Tonatzin, and two, it was constructed for the purpose of worshipping a Christian saint.<sup>50</sup> Encouraged by the colonial Church, the Aztecs increased their devotion to Guadalupe/Virgin Mary throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries.<sup>51</sup> This incorporation of both pre-Columbian native and Christian ideologies allowed Aztec women to reestablish not only their own social status, but also the importance of female religious authority and worship within Mexican colonial society. As such, Our Lady of Guadalupe became a strong religious female role that native men and women could use to once again manifest devotion to a female intercessor.

As alluded to in the previous sections, the degree to which various communities incorporated Spanish and Christian practices affected their interpretation of colonial gender roles. In many cases, Aztec women manipulated gender assignments and Spanish customs to retain aspects of their pre-Columbian power and status, but this was not always the case. Many factors affected the degree of Aztec acculturation, which can be seen well into the modern era. The rest of this paper illustrates some of those factors through a detailed analysis of two contemporary case studies. In essence, this section shows how the issues discussed in the previous sections manifested themselves in two modern Aztec societies.

### **Case Study of Two Aztec Communities (1980s)**<sup>52</sup>

In the 1980s, anthropologist James Taggart's case study of two Aztec communities, Santiago Yaonáhuac and Huitzilán de Serdán, showed both the transformation and resilience of Aztec communities after a prolonged period of Spanish societal occupation.<sup>53</sup> Through his anthropological research, which included oral history and daily contact with both communities, Taggart showed that the acculturation of restrictive patriarchal practices and Christian constructs had the ability to restrict traditional religious practices and gender roles. He also showed that native resistance to Christianity and Hispanization enabled groups to maintain their importance and authority and traditional concepts of religion. However, his research did not explain the way specific ways cosmic dualism and colonial resistance factored into the retention and/or destruction of gender balances in these Aztec societies. Building on these concepts, the rest of this paper addresses the ways both religion and gender factored in to the creation of contemporary female roles in these two modern communities.

Taggart's work established a relationship between the acculturation of Christian and Spanish ideals and Aztec women's access to dominant societal roles. Located in the Valley of Mexico, the community of Huitzilán de Serdán, a society that acculturated Spanish patriarchal customs and Christianity, women are viewed as evil and in need of male authority.<sup>54</sup> Having little say in the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 165.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 166.

<sup>52</sup> The analyses of the four stories included in this article are based on the author's personal interpretations of the stories and in no way reflect the original thesis of James Taggart's book.

<sup>53</sup> James Taggart, *Nahuat Myth and Social Structure* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 32-33.

social, religious, and political activities of their community, Aztec natives of Huitzilán can do little to increase women's place in society.

The Nahuatl of Huitzilán are blocked from gaining control of the secular offices in civil-religious hierarchy. Hispanics control the nominating process for candidates on the slate...they occasionally nominate the Nahuatl for seats in the council itself, but Hispanics control all aspects of the *municipio* government. The [Aztecs] have little to say about administering Hispanic laws, deciding who will serve as judges to settle disputes and punish them [Aztecs] for minor crimes...Hispanics [as well] make decisions about the religious side of the civil-religious hierarchy. [For example,] Hispanic presidents have jailed [Huitzilán native] dance groups for failing to perform at the patron saint festival...and Hispanic communities have exerted a heavy hand in selecting [Aztecs] for saint's day celebrations.<sup>55</sup>

Christianity, Spanish law, and the Spanish policy of patronage<sup>56</sup> forced Huitzilán to function as a male-dominated community.

In essence, Spanish religious, social, cultural domination forced the Aztecs of Huitzilán to reconfigure their traditional social and gender practices. Women of Huitzilán lost their societal status and their ability to maintain authority and power; they were reduced to a condition of subservience to men. In this community, Aztec followed the Spanish mentality of male patriarchal dominance, which negatively affected women's ability to function in both the public and private domains. Unlike their pre-Columbian ancestors, the Aztec women of Huitzilán were no longer viewed by native men as facilitators of great worth and knowledge. Rather, the incorporation of Spanish social and religious practices caused women to be viewed as weak, unintelligent, and in need of male control.<sup>57</sup> As a result, Huitzilán's native women were reduced to low-level occupations, primarily within the home and private domain.

The inheritance of land and its locality, a status symbol used by Aztec women in both pre-Columbian and colonial times, was almost completely lost in the modern community of Huitzilán. "Huitzilán men control more land than women because inheritance is almost exclusively patrilineal [and partilocal] both as a norm and as practiced in this community. [Men] expect land to pass from father to son."<sup>58</sup> Even if a native woman's family was wealthy and her husband did not have access to land, her parents would not provide her with either land or money, because Spanish patriarchal standards would not view it as culturally correct.<sup>59</sup> Women's inability to control wealth and land ultimately negated their ability to regulate matters in both the private and public domains, which prohibited them from significantly impacting Huitzilán society.

A more important result of patrilineal land inheritance is the power it gives to men in the family decision-making process. "The major family decisions hinging on land involve utilizing the family estate, marketing crops, selling or pawning land to meet ceremonial and every day expenses, initiating marriage negotiations...and bequeathing land in inheritance. Women most assuredly can exert some influence in family decisions, but men have a stronger structural position to dominate the decision-making process."<sup>60</sup> Within the Huitzilán community, women lost their significance and were unable to: regulate and own property, to function as the leading care providers in the home, or to act as facilitators of knowledge and wealth. Based on the adoption of Spanish ideas of male dominance and Christian patriarchy, female roles in Huitzilán were marginalized and confined to positions without any major societal significance.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>56</sup> Patronage is based on the idea that the elite or higher class, in this case the Spanish, could exercise hierarchical controls over lower members of society, the natives, to ensure proper social workings and cultural practices. Ibid, 32-33.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 30-33.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 35.

In contrast, within the geographically more isolated community of Santiago Yaonáhuac, Taggart found that Aztec women still occupied positions of social, religious, and political importance. Maintaining their traditional beliefs and views of women, the community of Santiago viewed native women as bringers of knowledge and power. Unlike Huitzilán, Santiago is located in a remote, circumscribed highland region of Mexico, in a place where the Spanish were unable to effectively dominate activities and local practices.<sup>61</sup> As such, the community of Santiago still maintains (in 1980) the pre-Columbian beliefs of cosmic dualism, gender parallelism, and egalitarianism. This is not to say that they were able to completely avoid Spanish influence, rather, they used Spanish ideas to reinforce their own beliefs and practices, as their ancestors once had. Unlike Huitzilán, both males and females in Santiago occupied local positions of importance.

The Nahuatl of Yaonáhuac [dictated their community's actions by] participating fully in both secular and the religious offices of the civil-religious hierarchy. Almost all *municipio* presidents and council members ...have been Indians...[and] groups of several Nahuatl families form the prominent political faction [in Santiago's government.]...Nahuatl participate in planning and administering public works projects, in directing the activities of the schools, and organizing numerous church committees. [Overall] political power and authority... are more concentrated [with the native people of] this community.<sup>62</sup>

Unlike Huitzilán, the community Santiago de Yaonáhuac has allowed women to inherit wealth and property. They divided lands based on bilateral, gendered inheritances and distributed money based on an individual's status instead of their gender.<sup>63</sup> Rights to land inheritance allowed the Aztec women of Santiago to increase their status in both the public and private domains by providing them with authority and economic status. Bilateral inheritance also strengthened women's status through its influence of family locality. Rather than living patrilocally as the community of Huitzilán did, natives of Santiago moved their families based on which spouse had the larger amount of land and wealth.<sup>64</sup> Many families lived matrilocally which increased native women's power and social status in and out of their family. Land ownership also allowed Santiago women to regulate funds in both the public and private domain, influence daily decision-making, and establish their influence and authority in communal social and religious activities.

Contrasting the marriage practices in Huitzilán, the women of Santiago usually married men around their same age. Aztec men in this community viewed women more so as their equals than as subordinates and, as such, they choose to marry based on a woman's ability to independently function rather than how easily she could be controlled or dominated. "[Yaonáhuac] women probably have a stronger position in the family when they are closer in age to their husbands because they have had about equal time to learn habits of independence and responsibility."<sup>65</sup> Like their pre-Columbian predecessors, Santiago practiced traditional gender based roles, which has enabled the Aztec women of Santiago to excel in both the public and private domains.

As Taggart's ethnographic work illustrates, the degree to which Aztec societies were exposed to and incorporated, Spanish cultural and religious practices determined how much native women could exhibit power within their local community. By reconfiguring traditional gender practices and implementing Spanish patriarchal customs and gender roles in the community of Huitzilán, native women were restricted from significant occupations and activities in both publicly and privately. Conversely, by limiting Spanish social and religious practices to ways that could enhance their own traditional beliefs, the native community of Santiago allowed women to excel in both domains and function in positions of power and authority.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 44-45.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 47-48.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 48.

Generally speaking, both of these Aztec communities shared common historical and religious backgrounds.<sup>66</sup> Each community cherishes its traditional native stories and beliefs as well as acculturated Spanish religious and social practices. Using the stories existing in each community, Taggart analyzed the rate at which the acculturation of Spanish beliefs facilitated a change in traditional narratives. His evidence indicates that both Huitzilán de Serdán's and Santiago Yaonáhuac's oral narratives share similar mythical tales and histories, but vary based on the degree to which each community historically acculturated Spanish cultural beliefs, religious traits, and patriarchal practices.<sup>67</sup> In reference to each community's representation of women:

[Huitzilán] men, heavily dependent of Hispanic patronage, developed a sexual ideology that compensates men for their weak position relative to the dominant ethnic group [the Spanish.] They depict women as the morally weaker and more dangerous sex, who should submit to control by men... Storytellers from Yaonáhuac, where the Nahuatl have more autonomy relative to the dominant ethnic group, [they] depict more intimacy between [women] and [men]... [and portrayed women as] less threatening and more supportive of the moral order.<sup>68</sup>

In essence, the differences within each community's relation to the Spanish, as Taggart illustrated, caused the representation and view of women to differ greatly.<sup>69</sup>

### Story #1

The comparison of similar oral stories in both communities further illustrates the differences between their interpretations of female roles. In Aztec oral tradition, many of life's lessons are communicated through animal and human interactions. Through these interactions, Aztecs are taught proper societal roles, gender practices, and traditional customs. In the modern adaptation of a traditional Aztec story, both communities describe the plight of a man entering a forest and his contact with natural forces in the area.<sup>70</sup> Both stories convey each community's perspective on proper societal roles and gender practices. After each story, a brief synopsis of what occurred will be used to express the impacts of Spanish patriarchy on both communities' mythical interpretations of life.

### The Huitzilán Version

There was a boy who grew up to be lazy. [He was viewed as lazy because] his mother supported him by weaving blankets for him to sell...[One day] when he came to the top of a hill, he found a girl standing there. She was very ill...The girl asked the boy, "Would you take me home? I can't go by myself." [The boy took her home and was given a ring which produced a lot of money]...The boy built a big house and asked for the hand of a girl in marriage...The lazy boy said to the girl's father, "Well, I want you to give me your youngest daughter." That is just what the girl's father did. One day some foreigners came selling clothes, and found the boy's wife sitting alone in front of the house...so the foreigners asked the girl to buy some dresses and pants. But she refused, saying, "There isn't any money. The man of the house isn't here. He has the money. I don't." But the foreigners saw the money... the girl heard a "clink." She realized they had taken the gold. She saw it wasn't there anymore, and went outside to cry. The boy returned and asked her what had happened. She said, "Well, it wasn't a good thing that you went away because they took what you had inside the house." [The boy became angry, traveled into the forest and found the foreigners. With the help of a hawk and a mouse, the boy retrieved the ring and money and returned to his home.]<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 111-113.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 114-115.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 98-99.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 114.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 117-119.

In the Huitzilán version of the story, the community depicts women as foolish and incapable of making rational decisions without her man. Her actions reflect this mentality because, in her husband's absence, the wife could not take care of affairs while he is away. Lacking her husband's knowledge and rationale caused the woman to act foolishly and to lose her husband's wealth. As the story continues, the husband retrieved the wealth, ultimately bringing order back to his and his wife's life, a role which the woman is incapable of handling herself.

### The Santiago Version

A traveler was walking along the road and heard someone call to him from under a rock. He looked around and found a snake...The snake offered to pay the man, [and] the man agreed to remove the snake from the rock crushing it...Then the snake asked to be carried home...and [the man] carried it...The snake removed a ring and gave it to the man, telling him... "Do not let your wife have it because she'll sell the ring to anyone." The man did as he was told and he became rich... Foreigners came in a ship guided by the brilliance of the ring. They came to the man's house, where they found his wife alone. They offered to sell her one of their rings and told her that it would produce money. But she told them, "My husband also has one." [The foreigners had a lot of rings and they tricked the woman by taking the real ring and replacing it with a fake one.] The man returned home... and found there was no money. [The man became furious and went in search of the foreigners in the woods. While in the woods the man ran into a hawk and a mouse who helped him retrieve the ring from the foreigners and the man, the hawk, and the mouse returned to his home.] When they arrived, the man asked, "Now what do you want for your reward?...The hawk replied, "I want your chicken coop."...The mouse said, "I want the corn bin." The request was granted and the man's wife asked, "But what should I eat?" Her husband replied, "Well, you have money,...you are very untrustworthy you will sell it from me again." But she replied, "Well, if you don't want to leave it with me, I am going to leave you"...Then they quarreled. Who knows what happened from there.<sup>72</sup>

In the Santiago version of the same tale, the community portrays women as opinionated, strong-willed, and able to make their own decisions without male guidance. Although the woman was still fooled by foreigners, she, unlike the woman in the first story, had the ability to speak her own mind. Having access to money and the ability to regulate activities in the home illustrates women's increased positions within this community. Unlike Huitzilán, the community of Santiago presents native women as important societal members, and portrays them with strong personalities and free will.

### Story #2

The acculturation of Spanish ideas and religious beliefs was pervasive throughout the colonial empire but it varied between communities, depending on the length of contact with the Spanish. This point is evident in both communities representation of Creation. In Huitzilán, Christianity became the dominant religion as reflected in their version of the Christian creation story. In this version, they depicted women as the originators of sin and evil, and in need of male control. Conversely, in Santiago, aspects of Christianity were incorporated to promote their own tradition pre-Columbian beliefs in cosmic dualism. In their version of the creation, both men and women are presented as relatively of equal value in society. The first woman is not depicted as the sole originator of sin and evil, but as equal participant (with man) in the act of bringing sin to the world. As with the previous stories, a brief synopsis of what occurred will be used to express the impacts of Spanish patriarchy on both communities' interpretations of creation.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 124-126.

### The Huitzilán Version

Adam was the sole survivor after the flood. When he made a fire to heat his tortillas, smoke rose to the heavens and reached Jesus... Jesus sent the humming bird, who found Adam alone, without a wife to make his tortillas... Jesus felt sorry for him, and so he told Adam to sleep, and he made Eve out of Adam's rib. When Jesus presented Eve to Adam, he said to Adam, "Have only one woman. And you, Eve, have only one man." Jesus told Adam, "I didn't really want to give you a wife because that will mean many will be planted, causing me to bear a lot of sin, and I won't be able to endure it." Adam replied, "I don't want to sin. I just want to eat, to have clean clothes, and to have someone to keep me clean." [One day Eve went to wash clothes in the river and a muleteer asked her to run away with her.] ...She told the muleteer that Jesus told her not to have two men and that if she did, she would be punished. But she deceived Adam and had the muleteer's child. Within a year, Jesus came to tell Eve that she behaved badly and he was bearing her sin... Jesus returned to the heavens, and after that, Eve had a child every two years until she couldn't plant anymore...<sup>73</sup>

As this story of creation illustrates, the dominant patriarchal order within the community of Huitzilán portrayed women as sinful beings who intentionally broke God's mandate and cause chaos to enter into the world of men. Huitzilán presented women as deceivers and sinners, deserving punishment and to be controlled by men in order to prevent more problems and chaos.

### The Santiago Version

One time God our father had a fruit orchard... He left Adam there to care for it... Adam was alone and had no one to talk to. So he just sleep all day long... So the devil told God that Adam wasn't a caretaker because he just slept. The devil said that was because he needed a woman companion to talk to... so God came to the orchard and found Adam fast asleep. He removed a rib and formed mother Eve and laid her to one side of Adam... Before, Adam's ribs where complete but now our rib is cut in half because mother Eve came from there. Adam and Eve lived together, they talked to each other, and they looked after the orchard. Then the animal went to the orchard and told them to eat the fruit telling them that it was very good. But [Adam] said no because God our father told him not to eat it... The devil said that God didn't want them to eat it because if they did, then they would win over him by a degree. And he cut it for them to eat. Mother Eve ate it but secretly. They both ate it. She was in the middle of eating it when God found her. So mother Eve swallowed it. And father Adam swallowed it. He tried to put a big one in his mouth, but he couldn't... God shouted at them. ...God said that now they had eaten it, they had to work. [The animal returned and taught Adam and Eve to have sex] ...God caught them giving sin to the world. Before, the world was clean. Adam said to Eve that they should ask their father for forgiveness. But [God] hit Adam with his sword and made him swollen. He told him that he was not going to help them anymore because they had given sin [to the world]...<sup>74</sup>

In this version, the community of Santiago introduced sin as a mutual occurrence between men and women, meaning that each had to bear the burden of its occurrence. As the story continued, Adam asked Eve for her opinion in regards to asking God for forgiveness, illustrating Santiago's encouragement and value of women's judgment. Unlike the Huitzilán version, women in Santiago are cunning, hiding from God and letting Adam take the blame for eating the apple. In addition, by calling the protagonists Father Adam and Mother Eve, this story illustrates Santiago's practice of gender parallelism and their incorporation of cosmic dualism.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 178-179.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 180-181.

### Case Study Conclusions:

The implementation of Spanish patriarchal customs and Christianity during the sixteenth century redefined Aztec women's roles in colonial Mexico and beyond. As such, many native communities, such as Huitzilán, placed limitations on Aztec women in both the public and private domains. As in contemporary Huitzilán, women's roles were severely reduced. As the stories illustrated, patriarchal institutions and Christianity limited native women's position and importance within Huitzilán's myths. The Spanish believed that proper female roles revolved around activities within the home. As such, this contemporary Aztec society confined women to occupations within the home and away from positions of importance. As Taggert stated the interpretation of female roles in Huitzilán "reinforc[ed] the centrality of the conjugal couple and the nuclear family, [which caused] Spanish practices [to] erode [Aztec] women's independency and identity."<sup>75</sup> The modern Aztec community of Huitzilán illustrates that Aztec acculturation of Spanish and Christian andocentric ideas of native women during Spanish colonial rule reconfigured contemporary society to reflect a patriarchal interpretation of women's roles.

The Spanish hoped that the process of destroying traditional Aztec social practices, including gender parallelism and cosmic dualism, would bring about the eradication of improper and irrational native customs. As the contemporary Aztec community of Santiago illustrates, in spite of the adverse circumstances, Spanish law and customs were not sufficient, in some cases, to counteract the native's ability to resist cultural annihilation and the transformation of their beliefs, customs, and gender practices. Existing in a remote geographical location, away from Spanish cultural and religious authorities, Santiago could resist the destruction of traditional gender roles and maintain balances between the sexes well into the modern era. The community's ability to counteract social, religious, and gender-based cultural transformations provided Santiago native women with a means to validate their societal importance and influence. This societal resistance may also have encouraged these women to retain autonomy with their male counterparts and aspects of their pre-Hispanic authority and power in the modern era. By continuing to hold onto traditional beliefs, (e.g., cosmic dualism and equitable customs), both on the local level and at home, native women found an avenue to preserve their societal importance and status.

### **The Role of Aztec Women: Conclusion**

Taggert's case study suggests and as this paper argued, the way in which Aztec communities implemented Spanish and Christian customs resulted in either the transformation or the retention of religious and gender roles. Based on the natives' interactions with the Spanish, their acceptance of Christian practices, the retention of traditional beliefs, and their community's locality, Aztec women experienced various levels of societal success as well as limitations. The case study of Huitzilán illustrated how the acculturation of Spanish practices and the acceptance of Christian customs meant the reduction of native female roles and the limitation of communal involvement. Conversely, the community of Santiago illustrated how the adaptation of traditional values and the incorporation of both Christian and Spanish traits into the syncretic, pre-Columbian cosmos allowed for the retention of traditional gender practices and the promotion of significant female roles. Although more work needs to be conducted in this area, it is the hope that this paper illustrated, how Aztec acculturation of Spanish and Christian gender practices varied based on individual communities were ability to resist colonial and contemporary transformation in order to retain aspects of traditional Aztec religion and gender roles.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Kellogg, 104.

<sup>76</sup> **Special Thanks to:** The University of Texas at Austin: Benson Latin American Library, my mentor Dr. Graciella Cruz-Taura, Dr. James Taggert, Dr. Sandra L. Norman, Dr. Clifford T. Brown, Dennise Rodriguez-Avila, Victoria Beltran-Kuhn, and Nicole Jastremski for her gracious editing.

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