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The Aztec Triple Alliance: A Postconquest Tradition

SUSAN D. GILLESPIE

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA—CHAMPAIGN

INTRODUCTION

IN ORDER TO INVESTIGATE HOW Amerindian peoples continued to use their preconquest traditions to adjust to Spanish conquest and colonialism, one must first be able to distinguish those traditions from their postconquest counterparts. The need to do so is especially pertinent when assessing the historical traditions—the precontact era histories of various peoples—that were written down after the Spanish conquest. Questions have been raised as to how accurately these documents portray the Pre-Hispanic past and to what extent they may incorporate non-historical elements as the result of Spanish contact, elements that cannot “easily be peeled away” (Burkhart 1989: 6).

This paper considers these questions in examining the Aztec histories recorded in the early colonial period. It takes the perspective that “remembrances” of the Pre-Hispanic past continued to play a role long after the conquest. “History” was a narrative charter for comprehending the world. After the conquest, “history” was necessarily modified as an adjustment to the new conditions of society. These modifications were actualized by their incorporation into the “historical traditions.” The metamorphosis of the past was not ad hoc, however, but was generated according to the principles of an underlying symbolic system by which people conceptualized both the cosmos and society.

A part of this process was the reworking of Pre-Hispanic political institutions—to conform to contemporary (colonial era) understandings—and their projection into the past. One such institution was the Aztec “Triple Alliance” that, according to interpretations of the documents, was the structure for shared imperial governance prior to the coming of the Spanish. Close examination of the evidence reveals the likelihood that the Triple Alliance, *as it appears in the postconquest historical traditions*, did not exist. Instead, the multiple manifestations of a “Triple Alliance” in the various documents represent colonial

reconfigurations of an original Mesoamerican tripartite construction of sovereignty that conformed to Spanish as well as Aztec conceptions.

Aztec Historical Traditions

The documents containing useful information on the Pre-Hispanic period include such things as wills, land records, court proceedings, letters, and petitions. More descriptive and comprehensive accounts of New Spain were written by Spaniards at the behest of the Crown. These include the *Relaciones geográficas* (which were replies to a 1577 questionnaire) and responses to other questionnaires, including the royal *cédula* of December 20, 1553 (Zorita 1965: 53); however, the type of document upon which scholars most often have relied to construct the history and culture of the indigenous societies belongs to a separate genre altogether—the “native historical tradition” (Cline 1972: 6–7)—although it may be included as part of these other documents. This genre is known as historiography.

Historiographies are retrospective historical accounts that relate such things as the migrations of peoples from an origin place to their capital city, their battles and conquests, the dynasties that ruled them, and similar events both before and after the conquest (see Carrasco 1971). These codified representations of the past were originally maintained in oral form. Some were sanctified by their representation in the indigenous pictographic records (the property of the elite stratum of society) and by their reenactment in major religious ceremonies. They were written down after the conquest by native authors as well as by Spaniards; most of the latter were clerics interested in the culture of the people to whom they ministered.

These traditional histories are especially abundant for the Aztecs of the Basin of Mexico, who headed a vast tribute-collecting “empire” that incorporated much of non-Maya Mesoamerica.¹ Understanding why there are so many Aztec historical documents and why they were written well into the colonial period requires an investigation of central Mexican society, both before and after the conquest, focusing on sociopolitical organization and its relationship to the historical traditions.

Before the arrival of the Spanish, the Basin of Mexico population was distributed among separate communities and organized into large and small polities on the mainland and islands within the basin’s lake system. Many of the

¹ Notwithstanding an early argument against the term “Aztec” (Barlow 1990a), the justification provided by Gibson (1971) for the use of this word and also for “empire” to describe the sociopolitical organization centered in the Basin of Mexico and extending outward into much of non-Maya Mesoamerica has not been superseded (see also Carrasco 1971: 459; Zantwijk 1990).

larger polities were nominally independent and centered on a larger town surrounded by smaller dependent communities. They thereby formed a system of “city-states” each ruled by a *tlatoani* (Nahuatl for “speaker”). In the late Aztec period, there were perhaps 50 *tlatoque* (plural of *tlatoani*) in the Basin of Mexico, who were served by the tribute and labors of the subordinate peoples of their town and their dependencies (Gibson 1964: 34).

The basin communities were well integrated socially and economically: exchanging each other’s raw materials and manufactured goods (Calnek 1982: 45), attending each other’s rituals, and so forth; however, they were strongly factionalized politically. Their interrelationships were marked by instability, competition, and rivalry manifested in threats and military conquest (Gibson 1964: 20–21). By 1519, conquest and intimidation had resulted in a larger political unit at the “imperial” level that united all these polities, and even more beyond the Basin of Mexico, under a single head of state.

When the Spaniards conquered the Aztecs, they in effect replaced the native “emperor” with the Spanish king. At a lower level of political organization, however, they ostensibly made use of the pre-existing polities in introducing the *cabecera-sujeto* institution. *Cabeceras* were district capitals, and their divisions and dependencies were known as *sujetos* (Gibson 1964: 33). The *cabeceras* should have overlapped with the towns that were ruled by a *tlatoani* in the preconquest era; however, problems immediately arose in the attempt to overlay this Spanish system onto the original political landscape. It was difficult to identify the Pre-Hispanic *tlatoani*-ruled towns. In large part, this was because the Spaniards did not use the term *tlatoani*, but instead designated the ruler as *señor* or *cacique* (a Caribbean term). As Gibson (1964: 36) noted, “Their failure to employ the local Nahuatl title in Mexico had important implications, for it meant that Indians might claim to be caciques, and that communities might claim to be cabeceras, without fulfilling original criteria.” This possibility for communities to change their dependent position to one of greater authority opened the door to numerous such claims, and these were buttressed by the use of “history” as the only means of determining the Pre-Hispanic status. This situation had a dramatic impact on the “memories” of the native peoples as they were recorded in court documents as well as in the historical accounts.

Furthermore, beyond the boundaries of the towns, the indigenous population was also segmented into larger descent or “ethnic” groups. They were composed of people who considered themselves to be descendants of named ancestral stocks and who maintained their distinctions from one another in various ways. Ethnic identity functioned to integrate the larger society. For example, armies were formed with cadres drawn from specific ethnic groups, and major public work projects were organized by assigning the separate tasks

to the different groups; there seems to have been a general division of functions according to ethnicity (Gibson 1964: 22). Evidence from the documentary sources indicates that at the time of Spanish contact there were nine major ethnic groups in the Basin of Mexico arranged in a hierarchy of importance or status as follows: Mexica (most powerful), Acolhuaque, Tepaneca, Chalca, Xochimilca, Mixquica, Cuitlahuaca, Colhuaque, and Otomi (Gibson 1964: 9). With the major exception of the Otomi, these ethnic groups dominated specific regions within the Basin of Mexico and beyond such that general boundaries can be drawn dividing them (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Location of major cities and ethnic groups around the Lake Texcoco system in the Basin of Mexico (after Gibson 1964: map 2).

Maintaining ethnic identity despite (or more likely because of) the close sociopolitical and economic ties that developed among the different communities required the use of symbolic markers, especially the historical traditions. The traditions detailed the individual histories of the major groups and included the events (such as divisions of ancestral stocks, battles, intermarriages) that symbolized in narrative form each group's perceptions of its relationships with the other peoples. Hence, the different ethnic groups and their subgroupings maintained their own historical traditions, and those of necessity contradicted one another in the relating of events, which typically occurs among such non-literate peoples (e.g., Leach 1965; Richards 1960). However, the Spaniards ignored these larger divisions in their subsequent reorganization of the political system, which was based on the *cabecera-sujeto* dichotomy. Consequently, within a little more than a century following the conquest, ethnic identities diminished, and the historical traditions that maintained them were lost to memory (Gibson 1964: 30–31, 34).

Nevertheless, during this first century of the colonial period, the historical traditions were continuing to play a role in the reconstruction of ethnic identity in order to accommodate the changed conditions of postconquest society, just as they had done in the Pre-Hispanic era. A major focus for the reconfiguration of the past for this purpose was the “Triple Alliance.” According to standard interpretations of documents written in this first one hundred years, the Triple Alliance ruled the Aztec empire as a form of power-sharing among the three major ethnic groups, each of whom had a distinct function. A re-analysis of these texts reveals how the “remembrance” of the “Triple Alliance” varied considerably along ethnic lines.

THE TRIPLE ALLIANCE: FACT OR FICTION?

In 1520, when Fernando Cortés recorded in his “Second Letter” to the king of Spain what had transpired during his *entrada* of the previous year, he stated that a single powerful ruler governed most of the territory from the Gulf coast to the central highlands. That ruler was known as Moctezuma (the Hispanicized form of Moteuczoma), and he ruled from the city of “Temixtitlan” (Tenochtitlan) located in “Mesyco.” His kingdom, founded on the conquest or forced incorporation of other polities, was known as “Culua” (Colhua) (Cortés 1971: 50, 74ff). As Cortés (1971: 173) explained, “. . . the name Culua comprises all the lands and provinces in this region subject to Temixtitlan.” Thus Cortés, writing before the conquest, observed that Moctezuma, ruler of Tenochtitlan, was the supreme head of the “Culua empire,” which later become known as the Aztec empire.

In contrast to this view, the indigenous historical traditions recorded decades later have been interpreted to indicate that a more complicated situation actually existed: the Aztec empire was governed by a triumvirate composed of the cities of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco (Tetzcoco), and Tlacopan (the modern cities of Mexico City, Texcoco, and Tacuba, respectively). These cities were located, respectively, at the center, east, and west sides of Lake Texcoco and were inhabited by peoples who differentiated themselves ethnically as Mexica, Acolhuaque (the inhabitants of the eastern part of the Basin of Mexico), and Tepaneca (the inhabitants of the west) (Gibson 1964: 17) (Fig. 1).

According to these modern interpretations, the triumvirate was established following the military overthrow of the Tepaneca capital of Azcapotzalco in ca. 1431 by an alliance of Tenochtitlan and Texcoco. Up to that time Azcapotzalco was said to have been the most powerful city and to have held hegemony over much of the Basin of Mexico. Its conquered lands were allegedly inherited when it defeated Xaltocan, head of an even earlier Otomi empire (Carrasco 1979: 258). Following their conquest of Azcapotzalco, the Mexica of Tenochtitlan allied with the Acolhuaque of Texcoco and another Tepaneca city, Tlacopan, to jointly expand and administer the tribute-collecting empire that eventually extended throughout much of Mexico to the east and south (Gibson 1971: 379; see also Barlow 1990b). Individually or jointly these three ethnic capitals fielded armies to conquer other peoples and then sent tax collectors to collect tribute from them, which they divided among themselves. This ruling triad has come to be known as the “Triple Alliance,” which is often used synonymously with the Aztec empire (Carrasco 1991: 93).

When historian Charles Gibson described the structure of the Aztec empire for the authoritative *Handbook of Middle American Indians* (Gibson 1971), he devoted a major portion of his chapter to the organization of the Triple Alliance. A significant problem Gibson encountered was that the documents on which our knowledge of this triumvirate is based provide contradictory information concerning the two ostensible functions of the Triple Alliance: joint military ventures and the formal distribution of the tribute gained thereby.

Like others before him (e.g., Barlow 1949), Gibson attempted to reconstruct the extent of Triple Alliance hegemony; however, the conquests undertaken by each of the three capitals as recorded in the native histories did not match the other colonial-period records indicating to whom the conquered towns were subject and paid tribute. In these other records, which especially include the *Relaciones geográficas*, communities stated to which primary centers they had been tributary, usually because of conquest. Most towns named only one city that had conquered them, not a Triple Alliance. Furthermore, towns

that were supposedly conquered by the Acolhuaque and Tepaneca according to the interpretations of the historical narratives frequently claimed instead to have been subjects of Tenochtitlan (Gibson 1971: 384–388).

Another difficulty noted by Gibson was the contradictory information on the distribution of tribute among the Triple Alliance members. A formula for this distribution found in the Acolhua traditions of Texcoco indicated that the received tribute was divided into fifths: Tenochtitlan and Texcoco each received two-fifths, while Tlacopan received one-fifth. However, other formulas are found in various non-narrative sources, including a division of tribute into thirds and the payment of some tributes exclusively to one of the three capitals (Gibson 1971: 383).

The most detailed tribute list appears in the pictographic Codex Mendoza and a parallel document, the *Matrícula de Tributos*. Once thought to have recorded the annual payments made to the Triple Alliance, these documents are now believed to list only the tribute received by Tenochtitlan (Berdan 1992: 63–64); however, two other documents outside of the historical traditions, dating to the mid-sixteenth century, have been used by scholars to determine the payment of tributes divided among the Triple Alliance capitals. These are the “Memorial de los Pueblos” (1939–42, 14: 118–122) and the “Motolinía Insert.” The latter is a document attached to the *Memoriales* of Fr. Toribio Motolinía (1970, pt. 2, chap. 28: 188–189; O’Gorman 1989: 627–629), which Pedro Carrasco (1991: 95) prefers to call “Motolinía’s Tetzco Memoirial,” although there is no evidence that Motolinía authored this document (Gibson 1956: 6). These records list the territorial possessions of Tlacopan and Texcoco respectively, and they indicate that some of these towns divided their tribute among more than one conquering city. The documents also employ the Spanish terms *cabecera* and *sujeto* in describing both the Pre-Hispanic and contemporary situations.

The “Motolinía Insert” is an explanation for a now-lost pictographic rendition of the towns tributary to Texcoco. It names the *sujetos* for the *cabecera* of Texcoco followed by three separate lists of towns that were tributary to the *señores* (rulers) of “Mexico” (Tenochtitlan), Texcoco, and Tlacopan. The three lists are distinguished by the different formulas used to divide the tribute. The first lists sixty-eight towns that divided their tribute into thirds with each capital getting one-third. The second lists thirty-three towns that divided their tribute in the 2:2:1 (fifths) formula described above. The third lists twelve towns that also divided their tribute, but no formula is given.

The “Memorial de los Pueblos” is similarly organized. It names the towns formerly subject to the *cabecera* of Tlacopan and indicates the general kinds of

tribute they paid. It also provides three separate lists of towns and provinces that were tributary to the *señores* of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan, with their tribute divided among these three cities. Unlike the “Motolinía Insert,” no formula for their division is given. Neither document explains why these three *cabeceras* received divided tributes from some *sujetos*; that is, they say nothing about an actual Triple Alliance.

The same lists of tributary towns contained in the “Motolinía Insert” were incorporated into the later (ca. 1570) historical tradition attributed to the people of Cuauhtitlan, the *Anales de Cuauhtitlan* (1975: 64–65). This document is known to have been used by the authors of other historical narratives such as those of the Texcocan native, Alva Ixtlilxochitl (Gibson 1956: 5). It is similar enough to the “Motolinía Insert” to suggest that one is the copy of the other, or that both are copies of a third source, possibly the pictographic record that the “Motolinía Insert” explicitly mentions (Gibson 1956: 7). However, the two documents contradict one another as to the groupings of the towns and the division of their tribute payments (Gibson [1956] analyzed these discrepancies). Thus, while the mention of tribute division does appear in some late native historical accounts, these data are actually derived from earlier colonial-period documents that belonged to a different category of writings.

Some possible solutions to the ambiguities posed by these contradictions concerning conquest and tribute division were suggested by Gibson (1971: 390, 392; see also Berdan 1992), including the likelihood that towns could be conquered by one group but pay tribute to another. Recent studies indicate that the boundaries of political groupings were not aligned with the tributary divisions of the empire (Carrasco 1991; Hicks 1992). Nevertheless, the problems inherent in attempting to match the Triple Alliance conquests and tribute division recorded in the historical narratives with subject status and tribute payments recorded in the other types of documents seemed ultimately unresolvable to Gibson. They led him to question the accuracy of the native histories, which were the sole source of information concerning the alleged creation of this alliance in the early fifteenth century. He consequently proposed what he called a “bold” hypothesis, namely:

... that the concept of a “Triple Alliance” was principally a *colonial historiographical invention* and that in fact Aztec practice witnessed many provinces and towns temporarily or permanently “allied” and sharing in the spoils of conquest. (Gibson 1971: 389; emphasis added)²

² Several scholars have proposed that in the Pre-Hispanic period, as a means of advancing state power, the ruling elites consciously “invented” religious forms and practices that

Investigating how the Triple Alliance came to be incorporated into the historical traditions requires a thorough reexamination of the salient documents—both the historical narratives and these other types of records—against the larger background of events that affected the sociopolitical organization of indigenous peoples in the first century after the conquest. A critical study of the historical information that scholars have already assumed refers to the Triple Alliance must be undertaken working with the possibility that there was no Triple Alliance *per se*, therefore to re-assess the significance of that information.³

Early Sixteenth Century: The Cities

While it is clear that Cortés considered Tenochtitlan and Moctezuma to have been supreme, there are clues in the early records to the importance of other cities in the Basin of Mexico. Did the Spanish recognize Texcoco and Tlacopan with Tenochtitlan as having a higher status than the other towns? Unfortunately, they ignored “ethnic” considerations—for instance, that Texcoco was the capital of the Acolhuaque—and concentrated instead on organizing communities into the asymmetric *cabecera-sujeto* groupings (Gibson 1964: 32). Nevertheless, the Spaniards did recognize a superior rank of *ciudad* (city); this was a designation based on both size and importance and extended to only a few towns. Tenochtitlan received its *ciudad* designation within a few years after the conquest and its coat of arms in 1523. Other *ciudades*, however, were designated much later: Texcoco in 1543, Xochimilco (not a Triple Alliance capital) in 1559, and Tlacopan (Tacuba) not until 1564 (Gibson 1964: 32, 474). The implication of this chronology is that the Spanish authorities did not rec-

subsequently appeared in the historical traditions (Brotherston 1974; Clendinnen 1991: 41; Conrad and Demarest 1984: 43; Florescano 1990a: 612ff). In contrast, Gibson’s hypothesis deals with the secular invention of a political organization in the postconquest era that was projected into the past by subjugated peoples rather than by the group in power.

³ Such a study relates to the larger issue in Mesoamerican ethnohistory of gauging the literal accuracy of these documents. A debate centering on whether the retrospective histories should be treated as “myth” or as “history” that began over a century ago (see summaries in Davies 1987: 3–19, 265–267; Graulich 1988: 21–31; López Austin 1973: 10–11) has continued to receive a great deal of recent attention (e.g., Baudot 1990; Carrasco 1990; Duverger 1983; Florescano 1990a, 1990b; Gillespie 1989; Graulich 1988; Lida 1990; López Austin 1990; Marcus 1992). Its lack of resolution likely results from the irrelevance of its guiding axiom—“history” is true or factual, and “myth” is false or fictional—to the actual production and maintenance of historical narratives in traditional societies. Here, the focus is different; it examines why the historical accounts concerning the Pre-Hispanic past continued to be actively manipulated well into the colonial period.

ognize some inherent superiority of Texcoco and Tlacopan before or soon after the conquest.

The relative authority of the different Basin of Mexico towns in the Pre-Hispanic period is a crucial point of variance among the documentary sources. This may add further doubt to the literal accuracy of the historical traditions, while at the same time indicating the significance of this issue to the indigenous peoples themselves as a key topic of contention. The only surviving contemporary eyewitness account of the Spanish *entrada* of 1519 is Cortés's letters to the king of Spain (Cortés 1971). Although he gave supremacy to Moctezuma, Cortés did mention other important cities and provinces in the Basin of Mexico. He devoted special attention to Texcoco, whose ruler, Cacamatzin, met Cortés just prior to the latter's arrival in Tenochtitlan and audience with Moctezuma. Cacamatzin was notable for his resistance to Cortés and was singled out as a rebellious ruler whom Cortés claimed to have taken some pains to kidnap so as to prevent him from causing the Spaniards further trouble. The account of the elaborate ruse by which Cacamatzin was captured is considered to be apocryphal (Cortés 1971: 470); nevertheless, Cacamatzin seems to have been remarkably independent of the Tenochtitlan ruler compared to the other subject *tlatoque*. According to Motolinía's *Memoriales* (1970, pt. 1, chap. 54: 82), all of the rulers whose towns were subject to Tenochtitlan were required to live part of the year in that city; the sole exception was the *tlatoani* of Texcoco.

Cortés (1971: 96–97) further noted that Texcoco was the important town of the Acolhuacan province, which bordered the independent and hostile Tlaxcallan province on the east and the province of Moctezuma (“Culua,” or Colhua) on the west. The similarity between the names “Acolhua” and “Colhua” may have caused confusion (Gibson 1964: 471), but it also may be a linguistic clue to a pairing of the two kingdoms (Gillespie and O'Mack n.d.). This pairing is manifested in a 1522 reference by the king of Spain to Cortés as governor and captain-general of “Aculvacan é Ulua” (Acolhuacan and Colhua) (Gibson 1964: 471). Cortés's remarks on the importance of both Tenochtitlan and Texcoco were echoed by a much later writer, the Dominican Diego Durán. Durán is considered to be biased toward the Mexica versions of history, but he nevertheless equated these two cities as superior to all others (Durán 1967, vol. 1, pt. 1, chap. 5: 47), and reported that their patron deities were deserving of equal reverence (1967, vol. 1, pt. 1, chap. 4: 37).

In contrast, Tlacopan received relatively little attention. Cortés made no note of any involvement by Tlacopan or the Tepaneca during his stay in Tenochtitlan until the eventual expulsion of the Spaniards on “La Noche Triste”

(1520) along the western causeway that led directly into Tlacopan (O'Mack n.d.). Coyoacan, rather than Tlacopan, seems to have been an important Tepaneca town. This is where Cortés assembled the native lords after the conquest (Zorita 1965: 201) and where the Spaniards stayed until Tenochtitlan-Mexico had been rebuilt following its razing (Motolinía 1970, pt. 1, chap. 53: 78). Coyoacan later became part of the Marquesado, Cortés's land grant (Gibson 1964: 445).

It has been suggested that Cortés was "unaware of the existence of the Triple Alliance" (Gibson 1964: 24). It may be significant, however, that Cortés took the *tlatoque* of these three cities with him on his Guatemalan expedition and executed them all in 1525 (Cuauhtemoc of Tenochtitlan, Coanacoch of Texcoco, and Tetelepanquetzal of Tlacopan; Cortés 1971: 518; Gibson 1964: 155). In addition, by at least the 1530s Tlacopan was being grouped with Texcoco and Tenochtitlan in several different contexts with the implication that these three cities were more important than others according to some criteria, not all of them political.

The writings of Motolinía are important in this regard because of their early date (ca. 1536–43 for the *Memoriales*, before 1552 for his now-lost *De moribus indorum* used by other chroniclers; Gibson and Glass 1975: 348–350) and his influence on other writers. As the *guardián* of Texcoco and Tlaxcalla and founder of the city of Puebla (Cuevas 1914: xxii), his works provide much information and the distinguishable point of view of peoples of the eastern basin and beyond. Wigberto Jiménez Moreno (1962: 83) assigned Motolinía's writings to the first definable phase of postconquest Texcocan historiography, suggesting that his investigations into the history and culture of the Acolhuaque stimulated the native nobility to create the later pictographic histories such as the Codex Xolotl. Spaniards who relied heavily on Motolinía's works included Las Casas, Zorita, Mendieta, and Torquemada (Gibson and Glass 1975: 349).

According to Motolinía's *Memoriales* (1970, pt. 1, chap. 53: 77–79; chap. 54: 82; O'Gorman 1989: 360–363, 369), the "gran señor de esta tierra" was Moctezuma; never before had a ruler been so feared and so obeyed. His city of Tenochtitlan, becoming known as Mexico, was the "cabeza y señora de toda la tierra." Motolinía also named and ranked other important cities in the Basin of Mexico: Texcoco was second, Tlacopan was third, Cuauhtitlan was fourth, Coyoacan was fifth, and in addition to these there were other cities that he named but did not rank. An additional hierarchy is seen in his summary statement: these important towns were governed by their own noble *señores*, but over them were the rulers of Texcoco and Tlacopan, and they all served Moctezuma as the *rey*, which in Spanish usage of that time referred more to an emperor than a king. In the second part of his treatise, however, Motolinía

(1970, pt. 2, chap. 15: 162) simplified this complex ranking by concentrating only on the top three cities of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan, while still indicating that Tenochtitlan was the “cabeza principal de todas.” It is this later section that seems to have been copied by subsequent writers, such that the other important towns named and ranked by Motolinía were dropped from consideration.

The three cities also appear as a group in a 1539 inquisitorial proceeding against Don Carlos, an idolator who claimed to be a descendant of Nezahualcoyotl (a Pre-Hispanic ruler of Texcoco), although there is no confirming evidence for this (Pomar 1986: 46). Don Carlos proclaimed himself *tlatoani* of Texcoco following the death of the incumbent, his putative brother (Gibson 1964: 170). In his rebuke of Christianity, and indeed the entire Spanish presence, Carlos (who shared his Christian name with the king of Spain) named himself, along with the *tlatoani* of Tenochtitlan and the *tlatoani* of Tlacopan, as evidence of a Pre-Hispanic continuity of native authority. He considered that while the three of them were alive they were in charge of the land left to them by their ancestors, and the Spaniards were interlopers lacking the right even to live among them (León-Portilla 1974: 28). His defiant statements reflect not a Triple Alliance as much as a more general notion that these three indigenous rulers, named along an east-west axis, encompassed the land and autochthonous legitimacy.

Mid-Sixteenth Century: The Payment of Tribute

Beginning in the 1550s and continuing into the 1560s, several kinds of documents were produced that provide a new context for the grouping of these three cities. This new context has to do with the payment of tribute, or more precisely, *rentas*, using the Spanish word. It appears first in petitions by native rulers for the redress of wrongs and in Spanish-authored responses to the Crown’s inquiry into tribute payments.

Because of concerns that the native peoples were being exploited by their Spanish overlords, the king of Spain issued a questionnaire on December 20, 1553, asking for information on Pre-Hispanic and colonial tribute payments. Several responses to the royal *cédula* of 1553 are known, including Zorita’s *Breve relación*, which was not written until 1566–70 in Spain. Four earlier replies, all written in 1554, have been published (Zorita 1965: 52–54, 277).⁴

⁴ The published response not described here was a report on the tribute paid to Tenochtitlan that contradicts some of the information in the Codex Mendoza and the *Matrícula de Tributos* (Zorita 1965: 285–286; see Scholes and Adams 1957).

One of the latter responses to the 1553 *cédula* is especially important because it was authored by Motolinía, writing from Cholula (Motolinía and Olarte 1914). Its information contrasts with his earlier statements, now giving much greater and shared authority to Texcoco and Tlacopan. In describing the Pre-Hispanic situation, Motolinía's response states that except for the towns and provinces not subject to Moctezuma (i.e., outside the Aztec empire), all the others served Moctezuma *and* the rulers of Texcoco and Tlacopan. These three *señores* were all "muy considerados," and, furthermore, they had divided up all the conquered lands among themselves (Motolinía and Olarte 1914: 228). The document also refers to these rulers as "tres señores universales" (1914: 229). As in his earlier statements in the *Memoriales*, however, Motolinía significantly referred to "Moctezuma" as a synecdoche for his city and empire while not naming the other rulers; uniquely, the Tenochtitlan *tlatoani* personally represented the polity.

Another response was written by Fr. Nicolás de Witte (1914) who was in Meztitlan, located in the Huastec region of northeast Mexico. He stated that there were three "señores universales" in New Spain (the same phrase used by Motolinía), but these three were the rulers of Mexico, Michoacan, and Meztitlan. Michoacan was the homeland of the Tarascan empire west of the Basin of Mexico, and both it and Meztitlan were independent of the Aztec empire (Barlow 1949; Berdan 1992; Gibson 1971). Thus, de Witte equated Moctezuma with the leaders of two equivalent autonomous states rather than with two rulers within his own domain.

In contrast to these two documents, the response by Fr. Domingo de la Anunciación (1914), written in Chimalhuacan, part of the province of Chalco to the south, mentions only one *señor* to whom tribute was paid. This was the ruler of Tenochtitlan, and the town to which Chalco had been subject. Thus, the view presented by Motolinía as to the organization of power and the denomination of "tres señores universales" was not shared by his cleric counterparts within and beyond the Basin of Mexico.

In addition to this royal questionnaire, native elites were writing letters to the king of Spain requesting favors as early as one generation after the conquest (Gibson 1964: 32–33). Among them were petitions for the return of *sujetos*. This concern was also the rationale for writing the documents known as the "Motolinía Insert" and the "Memorial de los Pueblos," which listed Pre-Hispanic tribute payments. It is important to realize that these latter two documents "were prepared in connection with simultaneous petitions to the Spanish Crown made in 1552 by the native rulers of the two capital cities" (Carrasco 1991: 95), that is, by the rulers of Texcoco and Tlacopan. They are so similar in

wording that there must have been collaboration among their authors (Gibson 1964: 51). Thus they cannot be used as independent confirmation of a Pre-Hispanic division of tribute obligations by subjugated towns. Furthermore, their creation (and hence that of the tribute-collecting Triple Alliance to which they may allude) can be attributed to this emergent mid-sixteenth-century phenomenon of maneuvering for advantage by claiming Pre-Hispanic *sujetos*.

Several of the petitions sent to the king by the indigenous rulers of the three Triple Alliance cities have been published. One was a 1562 letter jointly written by all three rulers. It does not mention tribute, but its authors refer to themselves as “los miserables y abatidos caciques y gobernadores de las tres provincias desta tierra a quien eran sujetas las demás que son México Tezcuco Tlacopa” (Guzmán, Pimentel, and Cortés 1939–42: 141). While thus indicating that all other towns had been subjects of these three cities, the letter goes on to state that Moctezuma was “nuestro príncipe y señor universal cacique de todas estas provincias” (1939–42: 141). As in Motolinía’s writings, Moctezuma (killed in 1520) looms larger than a mere *tlatoani*; he had become an anthropomorphic representation of the pinnacle of the Aztec state in the preconquest era.

Despite this joint petition, these three colonial rulers were not in agreement concerning their relative Pre-Hispanic statuses. The implication in the 1562 letter of a *primus inter pares* is lacking in a separate letter written the year before by the *cacique* of Tlacopan, Don Antonio Cortés, and other *principales* of his town (Cortés et al. 1939–42; Gibson 1964: 475). This letter asks the king for the title of *ciudad* (awarded in 1564) and the return of tributary *sujetos* that had been given to Spaniards. As justification, the authors explained how the people of Tlacopan had cared for Cortés and his men following their disastrous retreat from Tenochtitlan on “La Noche Triste.” They further stated that Tlacopan had been one of the original three *cabeceras*, along with Tenochtitlan and Texcoco. Moreover, the authors claimed, in the past Tlacopan had paid no tribute to any other *señor*; not even to Tenochtitlan, and instead received one-third of the tribute paid to these three *cabeceras*, as appears in a “memoria” (no longer attached, but possibly like the document now known as the “Memorial de los Pueblos”).

A similar, undated letter from the *cacique* of Texcoco, Don Hernando Pimentel (governed 1545–64; Gibson 1964: 171), outlines in great detail the extent of the original province of Texcoco. Among its subject towns, according to this document, only five divided their tribute among Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan (Orozco y Berra 1943: 509). This group of five is at odds with the lengthy listing of towns with divided tributes in the 1552 “Motolinía Insert,”

also from Texcoco. In a 1562 letter from Don Hernando, he asked specifically that four *sujetos* be returned to the *cabecera* of Texcoco because they had originally been its tributaries (Pimentel 1939–42). Unlike his contemporary in Tlacopan, Don Hernando made no reference in this petition to a Pre-Hispanic grouping of Texcoco with two other *cabeceras*.

In sum, during the middle decades of the sixteenth century several petitions and accompanying tribute lists were produced by native rulers contending that prior to Spanish contact only these three cities had been *cabeceras* and received tribute from dependent communities (Gibson 1964: 50). Of these documents, the Texcoco- and Tlacopan-authored petitions indicate that tribute was divided among the three, but this crucial point is missing from the Tenochtitlan-based documents, including the earlier (early 1540s) Codex Mendoza tribute list. Also absent from the Tenochtitlan materials is the insistence, included in the other petitions, that there had once been three equally powerful rulers. Furthermore, evidence of collaboration and copying in the Tlacopan and Texcoco listings of towns that divided their tribute payments is quite obvious, and such documents cannot be taken as independent or confirming evidence that something like a tribute-sharing Triple Alliance once existed.

Later Spanish chroniclers who concerned themselves with the issues of tribute payments and subjugated towns used many of the documents written by Motolinía (Motolinía 1970, pt. 2, chap. 10: 150, below), as noted above, and further reified these assertions. One of these authors was Alonso de Zorita, a judge in the Audiencia, whose *Breve relación* (ca. 1570) was a detailed response to the earlier 1553 questionnaire concerning tribute payments. It is known that he had access to both a Motolinía manuscript and Motolinía's 1554 response to that royal *cédula* (Zorita 1965: 62, 281). Probably copying from the latter document, Zorita stated that the three capitals were equal in power, that they were served by all the other rulers they conquered, and that they divided the material gains from these conquests among themselves. The only exception to their equality was that Tenochtitlan was supreme in matters of warfare. Zorita then apparently attempted to quickly summarize the disparate formulas for the division of tribute, possibly those contained in the detailed 1552 "Motolinía Insert." Rather than list the different towns and how they apportioned their tribute payments, he merely noted that in some cases communities divided tribute equally, and in others they divided it into fifths: two parts for Tenochtitlan and Texcoco to one part for Tlacopan (Zorita 1941: 74). Another chronicler, Fr. Gerónimo de Mendieta, similarly asserted in his *Historia eclesiástica indiana*, finished in 1596, that the rulers of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan were like kings (*reyes*) among the other rulers (Mendieta 1980, bk. 2, chap. 37: 154).

His statement appears to have been based on both Motolinía's *Memoriales* (1970, pt. 2, chap. 10: 150–153) and his 1554 response to the royal *cédula*.

These documents, dating after 1550 and indicating that the three cities individually or collectively were preconquest *cabeceras* (using the Spanish terminology), derive from a particular set of conditions in New Spain. There was a tremendous expansion of litigation beginning in the first few decades after the conquest as certain towns sought *cabecera* status over others, and those latter communities fought just as hard to seek or maintain their independence (Gibson 1964: 50–54). Indeed, there was so much legal wrangling that a “class of Spanish lawyers made its living by encouraging or provoking Indian litigation” (1964: 54). Texcoco and, to a lesser extent, Tlacopan were vociferous in fighting for the “return” of their *sujetos*, whereas Tenochtitlan, given over to the Crown soon after the conquest, presented far fewer claims (1964: 51).

Until new forms of evidence were developed, such cases were decided based on the conflicting “memories” of older people as to which towns had had *tlatoque*, making them eligible for *cabecera* status, and which other communities had previously formed their *sujetos*:

Pre-conquest relationships were repeatedly cited as precedents for post-conquest status, and “the memory of man” was appealed to. Traditions of local señorío were evoked in demonstration of *cabecera* rank, but Indian testimonies on the one side and the other took opposite positions on what the pre-conquest status had been. Fraud and perjury in Indian testimonies were common occurrences. (Gibson 1964: 54)

The oral history on which these “memories” were based was also being recorded in a different form: the native historical traditions. The earliest known surviving documents that contain these traditions date to the 1530s, but information on what is interpreted as the Triple Alliance is found only in the historiographies written closer to the end of the sixteenth century and into the early seventeenth century. The hypothetical invention of this organization can therefore be traced to the indigenous authors and Spanish compilers of those accounts, but it was surely a part of the same process of remembrance of the past and its sanctification in written form that was revealed in this mass of litigation starting in the 1550s.

Thus, these subsequent historical narratives continued the “arguments” begun by their mid-century predecessors. In his massive *Monarquía indiana* (dating to 1592–1613), Fr. Juan de Torquemada felt compelled to “correct” what he referred to as a common misunderstanding of the Spaniards, namely, that

the kingdom of Tenochtitlan was larger than others in New Spain. He claimed instead that the lands subject to Texcoco were equal to those of Tenochtitlan, citing Motolinía as his authority. He also suggested that it was only because Cortés happened to travel through lands conquered by “Moctezuma” that he did not realize that other provinces, equal in extent, were part of the *señorío* of Texcoco (Torquemada 1975, vol. 1, bk. 2, chap. 57: 175–176). At about the same time, Durán (1967, vol. 2, chap. 43: 335–336), speaking from a Mexica point of view, similarly “corrected” what he considered to be a misconception of that era, but he took the opposite point of view and indicated that Texcoco had been obliged to recognize the superiority of Tenochtitlan. These opposing opinions were further explained and justified by “history,” as revealed in the increasing elaboration of (contradictory) Pre-Hispanic historical events toward the end of the century.

Late Sixteenth Century: The Triple Alliance in the Historiographies

An examination of the various historical narratives derived from the different ethnic groups and communities in the Basin of Mexico (all of whom were subjugated by the Aztec state) reveals that a “Triple Alliance” is missing from the majority of them, and they give preeminence to Tenochtitlan. Significantly, it is not found in the various detailed accounts of the Chalco historian, Domingo Francisco de San Antón Muñón Chimalpahin, writing in ca. 1606–31 (Chimalpahin 1903, 1965, 1983, and the *Crónica Mexicayotl* misattributed to Alvarado Tezozomoc [1975; Gibson and Glass 1975: 330–331]). Chalco was an important province in the southern basin area conquered by Tenochtitlan after a long struggle, and Chimalpahin provided rich details on both its history as well as the history of the Mexica of Tenochtitlan. The Triple Alliance is also missing from the *Anales de Cuauhtitlan* (1975), a town in the northern lake area, which otherwise provides information on the war against Azcapotzalco and includes a list of towns with divided tributes similar to that contained in “Motolinía’s Insert.”

Nevertheless, something like the Triple Alliance does appear in both Mexica and Acolhua histories, but they exhibit a pronounced variation in the relative authority of Tenochtitlan and Texcoco. The fully developed Triple Alliance appears only in the Acolhua (Texcoco) traditions dating toward the end of the sixteenth century and into the early seventeenth century. This joint form of governance is presented quite differently in the Mexica versions of history (Durán 1967; Alvarado Tezozomoc 1980; Tovar 1972; Tovar’s *Codex Ramirez* 1980; Acosta 1962), which are similar in content and often referred to jointly as the “*Crónica X*” tradition (Glass and Robertson 1975: 223–224, 236–237).

Finally, concerning any Tlacopan or Tepaneca accounts, it is unfortunate (and possibly very significant) that there are no comparable historical traditions of Tepaneca authorship (Barlow 1949, 1990c; Gibson 1971: 386; Hicks 1992: 4). This is not a result of poor preservation; even Durán (1967, vol. 2, chap. 44: 473) writing in the sixteenth century noted with surprise the dearth of information in his sources concerning the Tlacopanec rulers, except when they interacted with Tenochtitlan.

The uneven treatment in the historical traditions—belonging to major as well as minor communities—of what should have been the dominant political organization in the Basin of Mexico for approximately ninety years before the conquest lends support to the supposition that the Triple Alliance was a colonial period invention. However, a closer investigation of the narratives that do group the three capitals indicates that it was not the creation of a single author or group who may have had some “axe to grind” or some glory to claim for themselves by doing so. Strangely, authors representing the two more powerful cities consistently included the least of the three, Tlacopan, into this relationship, and their motives for doing so are not readily apparent.

There are three major topics concerning the Triple Alliance in the native historical traditions: its founding after the defeat of Azcapotzalco in the early fifteenth century; the joint military campaigns; and the distribution of tributes. How these topics are treated in the different traditions varies in significant ways, as has already been demonstrated in the discussion of tribute distribution.

Durán, who recorded a Mexica version of history (in 1579–81), stated that a triadic scheme was created linking the three cities. This did not occur immediately after the defeat of Azcapotzalco, however, but in the context of a later event: the impending death of Itzcoatl (fourth *tlatoani* of Tenochtitlan and victor over the Tepaneca of Azcapotzalco). At this time Itzcoatl proclaimed that henceforth the ruler of Texcoco would be the second *rey* of the region and the ruler of Tlacopan the third, but Tenochtitlan’s ruler would be supreme: “casi como emperador y monarca de este nuevo mundo” (Durán 1967, vol. 2, chap. 14: 122–123). Thus he established a ranked triumvirate to take effect at the start of the reign of his successor, Moctezuma I. Durán’s text makes no mention of the distribution of tributes, joint military campaigns, or other attributes of an “alliance”; rather, the three capitals governed the region with the ruler of Tenochtitlan able to call upon the other two rulers when needed. For example, according to Durán, when Moctezuma II heard of Cortés’s imminent arrival, he sent for the rulers of Texcoco and Tlacopan so that together they could receive the “gods” who were coming (Durán 1967, vol. 2, chap. 73: 535); however, this account does not match Cortés’s description of the encounter.

The story of the creation of a tripartite hierarchy is missing from the homologous Mexica versions of history written in 1583–87 by Fr. Juan de Tovar and known to have served as a source for the 1590 account by Fr. Joseph de Acosta (Acosta 1962: xxiii; Glass and Robertson 1975: 223–224). Instead, these texts indicate that Itzcoatl established a system for electing future *tlatoque* of Tenochtitlan by a council composed of four Mexica electors plus the rulers of Texcoco and Tlacopan (Tovar 1972: 53), who were both subjects of Tenochtitlan (Acosta 1962, bk. 6, chap. 24: 311). Tovar (1972: 53) emphasized the supremacy of Tenochtitlan by recording that the Tenochca defeated the Tepaneca of Azcapotzalco alone, without outside help from Texcoco, and also by having the Texcocan ruler's ambassadors address the Tenochtitlan *tlatoani* as "Supremo y Soberano Señor" and "monarcha y Señor de todo el mundo."

Hernando Alvarado Tezozomoc, who claimed descent from the Tenochtitlan dynasty and whose history (*Crónica Mexicana*, ca. 1598) closely parallels Durán's, also did not record the creation of any kind of governing triumvirate. However, he did link the rulers of Texcoco and Tlacopan with the ritual and military activities of the Tenochtitlan *tlatoani* by explaining that the former two rulers had to obey the *llamamiento* of the Tenochtitlan ruler (Alvarado Tezozomoc 1980, chap. 95: 627). The institution of *llamamiento* ("calling") in colonial Mexico was a survival of a Pre-Hispanic practice, expressed by a Spanish word, "to be understood in the meaning of convocation, specifically for labor, or to the region occupied by the workers under the authority of an individual official or town" (Gibson 1956: 2). This meaning indicates that the Tenochtitlan *tlatoani* could call on the other two rulers for specific purposes, and as his subordinates, they were obliged to obey him.

An example of the convoking of the other two rulers by Moctezuma II for non-military or apolitical purposes occurs in Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún's Florentine Codex (the final version of his *Historia General* written in 1578–79). His lengthy description of the Tlacaxipehualiztli ceremony in Tenochtitlan includes a dance in which Moctezuma and the rulers of the other two cities participated (Sahagún 1950–82, bk. 2, chap. 21: 55). Despite Sahagún's statement that the two men who danced with Moctezuma were "great rulers," he failed to provide a dynastic history for Tlacopan in his eighth book, concerning rulers and lords, while presenting the lists of *tlatoque* for Tenochtitlan, Tlatelolco, Texcoco, and Huexotla.

In contrast to these Mexica accounts of the past, the Acolhua traditions recorded by Alva Ixtlilxochitl (writing ca. 1600–1640), Pomar (in 1582), and Torquemada (1592–1613) give a larger role in the empire and much more extensive conquests to Texcoco. Many of these claims, which are at variance

with the other accounts, are considered exaggerated by modern historians (Davies 1987: 43, 267; Gibson 1971: 385; Jiménez Moreno 1962: 84–85). The *Relación de Tezcoco* of Juan Bautista de Pomar is described here with the historical traditions rather than with the other kinds of documents, although it is one of the *Relaciones geográficas*, written in 1582 in response to the 1577 royal questionnaire (Gibson and Glass 1975: 355). Pomar claimed descent from Nezahualpilli, a late *tlatoani* of Texcoco (Pomar 1986: 33), and his response includes detailed information on Texcocan history, customs, and religion. His manuscript, surviving only in a copy, was used by both Torquemada and Alva Ixtlilxochitl in compiling their historical accounts. There is some evidence to suggest that Alva Ixtlilxochitl himself copied Pomar's lost manuscript and apparently adulterated it (Pomar 1986: 27–30).

In his accounting of the origin of the “Triple Alliance,” Pomar gave credit for the defeat of the Tepaneca of Azcapotzalco to Nezahualcoyotl of Texcoco (father of Nezahualpilli), together with his uncles, Itzcoatl and Moctezuma (I) of Tenochtitlan. These two cities thereby took possession of all the land, but in the process they created three *cabeceras*: Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and also Tlacopan. They all joined their armies to conquer other towns and established garrisons with men representing all three groups, becoming thereby “señores de toda la tierra” (Pomar 1986: 93). When subsequent battles were waged, they were fought by armies raised from all three cities (Pomar 1986: 92–93, 95). This late manuscript contains the strongest assertion of joint conquests by the “Triple Alliance.”

In contrast to the other historiographies written at this time, Torquemada's *Monarquía indiana* is a “major synthetic work” drawing on the writings of Motolinía, Sahagún, Mendieta, Pomar, Las Casas, Alva Ixtlilxochitl, Muñoz Camargo, Tovar, and many other sources (Gibson and Glass 1975: 376). The composite nature of Torquemada's history may be seen in his recounting of the events giving rise to the Triple Alliance. He credited Itzcoatl of Tenochtitlan for the defeat of Azcapotzalco and the creation of the “alliance” as well as for helping Nezahualcoyotl to become ruler of Acolhuacan; such details were more in keeping with Mexica than Acolhua versions of the past. He also explained how Itzcoatl and Nezahualcoyotl together decided to elevate the status of the *tlatoani* of Tlacopan to their own level. The three rulers then agreed to help one another in their conquests and to divide their gains: one-fifth to Tlacopan, one-third of the remainder to Texcoco, and the balance (seven-fifteenths) to Tenochtitlan because it was the “cabeza mayor y suprema.” This last fact, Torquemada explained, is the reason that only the Mexica were credited with conquests which, in his understanding of the various accounts, should all have

been shared among the three cities (Torquemada 1975, vol. 1, bk. 2, chaps. 37–40).

Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, who claimed descent from Nezahualcoyotl, was the most prolific chronicler of Texcocan history. In his *Historia de la nación Chichimeca* (early seventeenth century), he credited only the Texcocan *tlatoani*, Nezahualcoyotl, with the creation of the alliance following the defeat of Azcapotzalco. The newly enhanced status of the three *tlatoque* of these cities was indicated by their acquisition of parallel titles in his account: Acolhua Teuctli (lord of the Acolhuaque) and Chichimeca Teuctli for the ruler of Texcoco; Colhua Teuctli for the ruler of Tenochtitlan; and Tepanecatli Teuctli for the ruler of Tlacopan (Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1977: ch. 32; note that the Tenochtitlan ruler is called lord of the Colhuaque, not lord of the Mexica). Unlike Torquemada, Alva Ixtlilxochitl equated the power of Tenochtitlan and Texcoco: “es verdad, que siempre el [señor] de México y Tetzcuco fueron iguales en dignidad, señorío y rentas, y el de Tlacopan sólo tenía cierta parte como la quinta en lo que eran rentas, y después de los otros dos” (1977, chap. 32: 83). Another of Alva Ixtlilxochitl’s accounts (1975, pt. 11: 444) clarified the division of incoming tributes among the three rulers after the defeat of Azcapotzalco, using the 2:2:1 formula.

As for joint conquests, with the exception of Pomar’s text, the historical narratives concerning Tenochtitlan and Texcoco do not indicate a consistent pattern. While there were some ad hoc instances of warfare waged by only the “Alliance” cities, the sources are contradictory regarding which battles were so fought. Sahagún, in his Florentine Codex, discussed the role of the *tlatoani* as a war leader and described a formal organization for warfare when undertaken by the Tenochtitlan ruler. When battle against a particular town was decided upon, the Tenochtitlan *tlatoani* called on the rulers of Texcoco and Tlacopan to declare war, but he also called on the rulers of the other polities to do likewise; this action indicates that this was not solely a “Triple Alliance” enterprise. The armies then marched in sequence organized according to their city/ethnic group: first the warriors of Tenochtitlan, then Tlatelolco (another Mexica city), then Acolhuacan (a region), then the Tepaneca (an ethnic group), then Xilotepec, then Quaquata, and finally the other, unnamed groups (Sahagún 1950–82, bk. 8, chap. 17: 51–52). This description contrasts with Pomar’s account which indicated that such conquests involved only the armies of the three Triple Alliance capitals.

The detailed *Crónica Mexicana* written by the Mexica author Alvarado Tezozomoc (1980, chap. 75: 538; chap. 78: 551) makes no reference to an institutionalized form of joint conquest. However, he did relate that on two occasions when Ahuitzotl, the *tlatoani* of Tenochtitlan who preceded Moctezuma

II, wanted help in fighting distant provinces, he sent word to the Acolhua and Tepaneca rulers, and they were compelled to obey and assist him because of the *llamamiento* institution described above (and not because of some right to joint conquest). Torquemada (1975, vol. 1, bk. 2, chap. 42) gave a lengthy account of the war against Cuauhnahuac waged by Itzcoatl of Tenochtitlan, who asked the rulers of Texcoco and Tlacopan to send their armies as well. The Texcocan Alva Ixtlilxochitl (1977, chap. 39: 106), however, mentioned this joint effort to conquer Cuauhnahuac only in passing, following a list of conquests carried out by Nezahualcoyotl of Texcoco alone. The *Anales de Cuauhtitlan* (1975: 48), on the other hand, credits the ruler of Cuauhtitlan with assisting Tenochtitlan and Texcoco in the defeat of Cuauhnahuac and (uniquely) also of Azcapotzalco; this demonstrates very well the ethnic bias present in many of these accounts. Thus, the data contained within the native historical traditions—the ultimate category of documents manifesting ethnic identity in the Basin of Mexico—do not support the notion that a formal Triple Alliance was created in the mid-fifteenth century and regularly engaged in joint military ventures any more than they support a three-part distribution of tributes.

CONCLUSION

This lengthy investigation of the extant historical evidence continues to cast doubt on the Pre-Hispanic existence of the “Triple Alliance” as it is currently understood. The consistent ethnic-oriented patterns of variation in the documents concerning the relative statuses of the three cities, the size of their conquered provinces, and the share of tribute due to them indicate the persistence of factionalism among interest groups in the colonial period. Factionalism is always present in complex societies and is frequently manifested in the owning and telling of disparate versions of “history.” Indeed, this is a salient function of the possession and performance of such traditions as demonstrated ethnographically in other parts of the world. From his classic study of the Kachins of Burma, Edmund Leach (1965: 277) concluded: “Since any social system, however stable and balanced it may be, contains opposing factions, there are bound to be different myths to validate the particular rights of different groups of people.” Similarly, Audrey Richards’s (1960: 177) summary of African oral traditions found that “since myths and legends are used to support political claims it follows that they are most numerous and complex where the claims are contested or the population mixed.” The oral traditions are part of a shared symbolic system, a common language in terms of which “claims to rights and

status are expressed, but it is a *language of argument*, not a chorus of harmony” (Leach 1965: 278; emphasis added).

Even before Spanish contact, the traditional histories were a medium for signifying disputation and rivalry as central Mexican peoples maneuvered for a share in state power; this share was manifested as a separable identity, role, or category claimed by their ethnic group, city, or lineage. The Europeans upset this already unstable and contentious situation and further confounded the “language of argument” with their own concepts of the division of royal power and authority. It is conceivable that the first group in the Basin of Mexico to regularly pool incoming tribute and divide it into fifths for distribution was the Spaniards (the Crown took one-fifth, Cortés one-fifth, and his men divided the remainder; Cortés 1971: 451, 470–471). Spanish practice thus contributed the vocabulary—the three *cabeceras* with their *sujetos* who paid them *rentas*—and possibly a rationale for the creation of the Triple Alliance—the division of tributes.

The conclusion that the Triple Alliance was probably “invented,” to use Gibson’s term, is not in itself sufficient, however. The evidence suggests that the Alliance appears most prominently and formally in the late-sixteenth-century Acolhua historical accounts, whose authors insisted that Texcoco was on par with Tenochtitlan and came up with a “historical” justification for that assertion. Both Tenochtitlan and Texcoco were important cities with powerful rulers, but Tlacopan apparently was not; so it is somewhat paradoxical that this third city was included. Furthermore, it is not from Tepeaneca historical traditions that we learn about a Triple Alliance (since these are lacking), but from the accounts of peoples who, one would think, would have little to gain by inventing Tlacopan as a third partner. The chronological and ethnic-oriented patterns in the documentary evidence can indicate how the Triple Alliance was constructed over time in the colonial period, for what material purposes, and by whom. Nevertheless, without some further analysis using a different approach, the documents do not reveal why this specific triadic organization was created in the native historical traditions.

When Mesoamerican scholars suggest that phenomena were “invented” (besides Gibson, see Florescano 1990a: 635), “concocted” (Uchmany 1978: 233), “fabricated” (Lida 1990: 604; López Austin 1990: 669), or “innovated” (López Austin 1990: 673) in the native historical traditions, the implication often is that they are “fiction” disguised as reality, hence beyond the realm of actual facts or “history” (Carrasco 1990: 677). However, any purely fictional inventions added to the original historical traditions would not have been comprehensible or acceptable in the absence of some relationship to pre-existing

conditions and conceptual frameworks for understanding the world. Because this investigation focused exclusively on the colonial period, the time frame in which the historical traditions were written down, the larger issue raised at the beginning of this paper looms once again: how to investigate the survival of preconquest traditions in the colonial period without first distinguishing them from their postconquest counterparts.

Even in the earliest documents, the same three towns are consistently grouped together which indicates that they were probably linked to one another for some other prior purpose even if it was not the later manifestation now known as the Triple Alliance. The Triple Alliance is therefore not an invention as much as a transformation of an earlier phenomenon. It appears in the historical accounts and other documents as a manifestation of state “power” or “sovereignty.” Understanding its precontact counterpart requires a different investigation into Mesoamerican conceptions of sovereignty. A symbolic approach is needed since, as noted above, the historical narratives themselves compose a symbolic system. As was true of some Old World civilizations (Littleton 1982: 68–69, citing Georges Dumézil), sovereignty in Mesoamerica had a tripartite structure. Furthermore, the values and qualities associated with the three categories in the construction of state power were assigned to the Mexica of Tenochtitlan, the Acolhuaque of Texcoco, and the Tepaneca of Tlacopan in both their historical traditions as well as the related religious ceremonies.⁵

The ultimate conclusion is that the disruption of the conquest required a response, a re-argumentation with remodeled (not “invented”) history as people jockeyed for positions of status in the construction of a new society. The past was transformed, but it is yet possible to discern in the reconfigured past the preservation, perhaps for the first century, of the indigenous symbol system that structured the Aztec world. Its expression and manipulation in the native traditions persisted in the colonial era in the guise of “history” (a form acceptable to and encouraged by the Spanish) because of the advantage it conferred in arguing for an identity and legitimacy in the search for order out of disorder.

⁵ In the original version of this paper (“Completing the Past: Triples in Aztec Tradition”) given at the Dumbarton Oaks symposium, I presented the evidence for the triadic model as well as the semantic content of the three-part framework underlying Mesoamerican sociocosmic principles in the construction of “sovereignty.” It was this framework that subsequently generated the “Triple Alliance” in the colonial period. That material is omitted here due to space limitations. Other scholars have also investigated the symbolic or functional values associated with the Triple Alliance and its three members (especially López Austin 1987; also Carrasco 1976: 218; Davies 1987: 267), although without doubting its Pre-Hispanic existence.

Susan D. Gillespie

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