POWER DIFFERENTIALS IN EARLY MESOAMERICAN GENDER IDEOLOGY: THE FOUNDING COUPLE

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Introduction

Post-Classic and Colonial Mesoamerican memories of human origins, migration, and town founding accord women a prominent place alongside men and, by many indications, as figures sharing a balance of power and authority with those men. Often we see evidence of a reverence for an autochthonous pair or founding couple written into national and local histories. Classic examples are the divinitory pair Oxomoco and Cipactonal, who launched the human race and initiated the Aztec calendar, or the couple seated inside the cave on the island of Aztlan. In these examples, the presence of male and female, equally vital in sacred memory, would suggest a possible gender complementarity, at least with regard to the contemplation of human origins. Similarly, women figure in lore about early migrations and town foundings, as essential players along with the men (Wood 1998). To what extent might this symmetry have characterized Mesoamerican politics?

When one reads the political histories of empires and city-states in Post-Classic Mesoamerica, males clearly enjoy the limelight. They had the greater voice and decision-making power, getting to hold the highest offices the vast majority of the time. Joyce Marcus (2001) has shown that even though Mixtec codices identify 951 noble women, more than 70 royal Maya women appear on stone monuments, and some notorious Aztec women broke through the glass ceiling to become regents, men dominated political office across Classic and Post-Classic Mesoamerica. Does this suggest a political hierarchy, with men having assumed (or usurped) near total authority after lineages and towns were founded?

Again according to Marcus (*ibid.*: 335), a great many ruling Mesoamerican males gained access to their positions by marrying women of higher rank (hypogamy). She also proves how men could derive ruling

paired with Cortés as a fundamental member of a pareja primordial (see figure 1, at the center-bottom of the scene, Cortés paired with doña Marina).[1]

Spanish colonial contexts have obfuscated indigenous female political power. By the mid-sixteenth century, Spanish law and colonial practice excluded women from the daily operations and decision-making of the town councils (*cabildos*) in indigenous communities, and therefore they rarely appear as major political players in the formal written record, such as cabildo minutes.[2] As a result, we have to locate and sift through less obvious written records to identify the ways of thinking that were evolving with regard to indigenous women's power and authority over time. In criminal records from the second half of the Spanish colonial era, William B. Taylor (1993: 116) finds women especially numerous and vociferous in community uprisings. One may logically argue that these women felt it was within their purview to rise up about political, religious, and economic conflicts in their towns. They felt empowered to defend their communities and to try to ward off perceived threats.

Primordial titles, pictorial mapas and lienzos, most from the seventeenth century or later (even if they stem from earlier oral or written traditions), represent critical sources for trying to assess the state of thinking about woman's continued status and vital importance at the heart of a town's origin and continued survival. In this study, I will explore some of the evidence that suggests the longevity of the *pareja fundadora* long into the Spanish colonial era.

Even in such an unlikely place as a church sermon, as will be demonstrated below, we may also find clues to native ways of perceiving potent women and their place vis-a-vis powerful men. As Louise Burkhart (2001: 88; and see Burkhart 1996) has already demonstrated, Nahuas adapted Christian discourse, bestowing upon Mary more deference and granting her more prescience about forthcoming events than Europeans normally did. Further evidence may suggest a view of Mary as half of an autochthonous pair–giving her a status and importance in symmetry with God's.

[1] The image is a drawing made from the *Mapa de San Pedro Tlacotepec* by César J. Meléndez Aguilar, published in Luis Reyes García (ed.) (1993). See also the way she is presented in reproductions of manuscripts at the Museo de la Memoria in Tlaxcala today.

[2] See, for example, the disappearance of doña Catalina from the political scene in Santa Catalina Texupa, Mixteca Alta, after 1554 (Terraciano 2001: 187-188). Terraciano cites Woodrow Borah and Sherburne Cook who saw the eclipse of the *cacica's* (indigenous noblewoman's) authority with the rise of the cabildo at mid-century.

authority from powerful mothers. And, for those men marrying within rank, might their authority have been crucially bolstered by their choice of an appropriate bride? What influence might these socially powerful women have held over the ruling men behind the scenes, even if they were not the ones with the public voice? Marcus suggests how, like Zulu women, ranking Mesoamerican women may have had *power over* the reigning men. Theirs may have been a voice to be reckoned with behind the more public arenas.

Is this wishful feminist thinking, or can we find historical evidence to support the idea that women may have continued to have an important presence in Mesoamerican politics as social partners of men even when largely excluded from the highest public offices, a phenomenon that became more exaggerated after the Spanish occupation? What became of the ideology of the founding couple (rendered in modern Spanish scholarship as the *pareja primordial*, *pareja creadora*, or *pareja fundadora*) who settled communities and gave birth to lineages, ethnicities, and nations? Could this ideology have continued to bestow upon women a deep respect, a recognition, and an unspoken influence during the rise of empires in the Post-Classic period and on into the Spanish colonial period despite its patriarchal influence?

Methodological Considerations

Because histories have largely been written by men, favoring the political roles of other men, texts alone will not characterize the full thrust of women's presence and probable contribution to important events in community history. Images are a vital addition to our primary resource base. The pictorial nature of prehispanic record keeping, which lived on long after the Spanish invasion, occasionally captures the fundamental and central presence of women at important political events. These sources raise the question, if such women had no say and no influence, why would they attend these events? Why would they be essential figures on the landscape, people whom the painter of the scene could not ignore?

Doña Marina had a rare voice, as interpreter for Hernando Cortés, and therefore a prevalent spot in documents of conquest-era events. In textual Spanish records of the conquest, she was a slave girl promoted to linguistic assistant, and, eventually, demoted as a scapegoat for a massacre and a concubine. But in indigenous pictorial records, such as the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* and the *Florentine Codex*, she is a powerful communicator and negotiator, even a leader of the stature of Cortés himself. We might go so far as to say that, for Tlaxcaltecas, she was

Early Pairings

The line between creator deities and ancestral figures will blur in the Mesoamerican record, although both will often take human shapes and they will regularly be paired into a male-female originary couple. Nahua stylistics for seated posture help us identify the male (knees up) and female (legs folded beneath the body). The two figures in the primordial duo of the *Codex Vienna* (figure 2) both bear the glyphic name One Deer, suggesting a possible interchangeability.[3]

In the *Codex Borbonicus*, Oxomoco and Cipactonal (figure 3) have very different names, with only Cipactonal's being represented in a glyph (suggestive of the head of crocodile, *cipactli*). But in different sources the identities of these two figures are known to reverse (Joyce 2001: 109; and see López Austin 1988). In the *Codex Chimalpopoca*, for instance, the Nahuatl text aims to correct such confusion, emphasizing that "Cipactonal is the woman of Oxomoco, for Cipactonal is a woman."[4] Perhaps time had eroded the memory of who was who, or perhaps the gendering of male and female was more fluid as long as both the male and female principles were represented.

This fluidity is what comes to mind as a possibility when reading the meaning behind Ometeotl. Scholars have decided that this deity, here pictured as male (figure 4), was really a dual god, as the name suggests, encompassing Ometecuhtli (Two Lord) and Omecihuatl (Two Lady).[5] What is less clear is why his representations emphasize the male posture and beard.

The architectural rectangle that encloses Oxomoco and Cipactonal suggests a room or temple, but the water that emerges from the base and the blood-red color of the interior calls to mind the concept of the cave-womb origin.[6] The enclosure (figure 5) where the Aztlan couple sits in Fray Diego Durán's *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e Islas de la Tierra Firme* (1967: fig. 1), also recalls a cave-womb structure, linking human beginnings with a feminized earth.

In these few examples alone, we can already see that the male-female coupling not only reproduced offspring and launched a lineage, it did so

[3] See Joyce (2001: 109-141, especially p. 109). She also cites Jill Furst (1982). Source of the image: Marcus (1992: 277).

[4] *Codex Chimalpopoca: Leyenda de los Soles*. Paleography by Marc Thouvenot. <http://www.sup-infor.com/ultimes/P312B/P312B-txt.htm> 1990. My translation. The phrase in Nahuatl is: *in Cipactonal inicihuauh Oxomoco ca cihuatl in cipactonal.*

[5] Source for the image of Ometeotl: <http://www.bruisvat.nl/nummer6/tolkien.htm> See also Klein (2001: especially 186).

[6] See also Miller and Taube (1993: 41), and see the discussion of this image in Florescano (1987: 12-13). The photograph here, by the author, is not from the codex but from Diego Rivera's mural in the Palacio Nacional.

in strong association with a physical place on the earth. The *altepetl* of Nahua culture inherently links the socio-political unit (town, city-state) with the landscape (with *altepetl* meaning literally "water-hill"), in a similar way. The structures that enclose Oxomoco and Cipactonal and the Aztlan couple are not terribly far from *altepetl* symbols. The representation of the originary cave called Chicomoztoc in the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (figure 6; from Townsend 1992: 178) almost evokes an *altepetl* symbol.[7] The cacti that cover it are also reminiscent of the depiction of the Aztlan cave, in another *altepetl*-like shape, enclosing a Chichimec ancestral couple in *Mapa Quinantzin* (figure 7; from Aguilera 1979: 97).

Mesoamerican *lienzos*, *mapas*, and other pictorial records regularly unite genealogy with cartography, as we see in the *Lienzo de Ihuitlan* (figure 8; from Parmenter 1994: 109), a further demonstration of this critical link between lineage and territory. Woman's body is not essentialized as simply a vessel for carrying a fetus (in fact, we rarely see pregnant women, although we do see post-partum stomachs with multiple folds, as in the *Mapa Quinantzin*), rather, she and the male are inseparably linked to each other, to the earth (feminized), and are recalled as essential foundational elements for the existence and legitimacy of the community that resulted from their union.

The Autochthonous Pair in Colonial Landscapes

One of the best examples of late-colonial representations of women's prominence in local political affairs comes from the *Lienzo de Malinaltepec* (Sierra de Tlapa, Guerrero, n.d., 18th-c.). Here (below, left; from Dehouve 1994, and see Oettinger 1983: 27) we see a number of named *caciques* and *cacicas*, or indigenous leaders (male and female, respectively), bearing the honorific colonial titles of nobility, *don* and *doña*. They all have the name Temilitzin. These may be couples or siblings. Contrary to the old pattern, we do not see just one couple presiding, and these figures are not paired, either. The men sit at a table, and the women sit to one side, on the ground. Given their less central location, a modern reading might lead one to jump to the conclusion that the women were less important or even subordinate. But, on the other hand, their seated posture, on the ground with legs folded under them, was the preferred posture for women, in close proximity to the sacred earth, from pre-Columbian times.[8] A similar scene

[7] Townsend relays a fascinating story about a sexual rite that makes the opening of the cave into a vagina.

[8] Rosemary Joyce, in a personal communication, suggested to me that the women were to be nearer the sacred earth and the men, slightly elevated, closer to the sacred heavens. We must remember that Chalchiuhtlicue was the goddess of groundwaters (springs) and Tlaloc the god

from the Techialoyan *Tolcayuca map*,[9] (figure 9) has the local priest standing next to a cacique in a chair, while females sit on the ground in front of the table.

The occasion for the Malinaltepec gathering (figure 10) was the examination of the documents associated with the town founding and the records of its territorial dimensions. This came in the midst of litigation with a neighboring *hacienda* (private estate). Two of the caciques in this gathering are touching the precious manuscripts that support the antiquity of the pueblo and its land holdings. Present are two Spaniards, the local priest and the Alcalde Mayor, the highest regional civil authority. For those present and witnessing such events, particularly the local indigenous people, this was a momentous occasion that could determine the survival of the town. It might not have mattered to them that the women near the table were not members of the *cabildo* (town council), the exclusive domain of men. The women's absence, in fact, might have undermined the legitimacy of the event and its pictorial record.

In another example from the same era (figure 11), the *Pintura de San Lucas Tecopilco* (Tlaxcala, 1774), where we again see the reading of important local records, only one *cacica* presides, in the company of three men. Again, all have the honorific titles of Spanish nobility (*don, doña*), supporting their membership in the elite class. The woman, doña Beronica, sits at the table this time, unlike her counterparts in Malinaltepec and Tolcayuca. She is also more clearly paired with one of the males. This man has his hands on the manuscript, while she seems to hold a cup (containing the ceremonial drink, chocolate atole, perhaps, which another person at the table also seems to hold).

In all of these scenes from Malinaltepec, Tolcayuca, and Tecopilco, local authorities read crucial manuscripts in the proximity of a table, positioned in the out of doors, usually near the church and in the main plaza. The repetition of this arrangement in three disparate pueblos (in the modern states of Guerrero, Hidalgo, and Tlaxcala, respectively) suggests a pattern that may have been general to Mesoamerica, or at least the Nahua sphere. Do we have here local variations on the *pareja fundadora*, legitimizing the proceedings with their presence? We do seem to have evidence of women determined to play a role (and welcomed) in local events central to the town's survival.

of water from the sky (rain). Cecelia F. Klein (2001: 187) also writes: "In many places, for example, the cosmos and its contents are believed to be composed of two discrete but complementarily gendered aspects. Among the Otomi and the Mixtec, the sky tends to be gendered male, and the earth female."

[9] Photo is in author's possession, a gift from the Kraus Rare Books and Manuscripts of New York. The original is now part of the Kislak Foundation holdings in Florida. It seems to come from San Juan Tolcayuca, near Pachuca, in the modern state of Hidalgo.

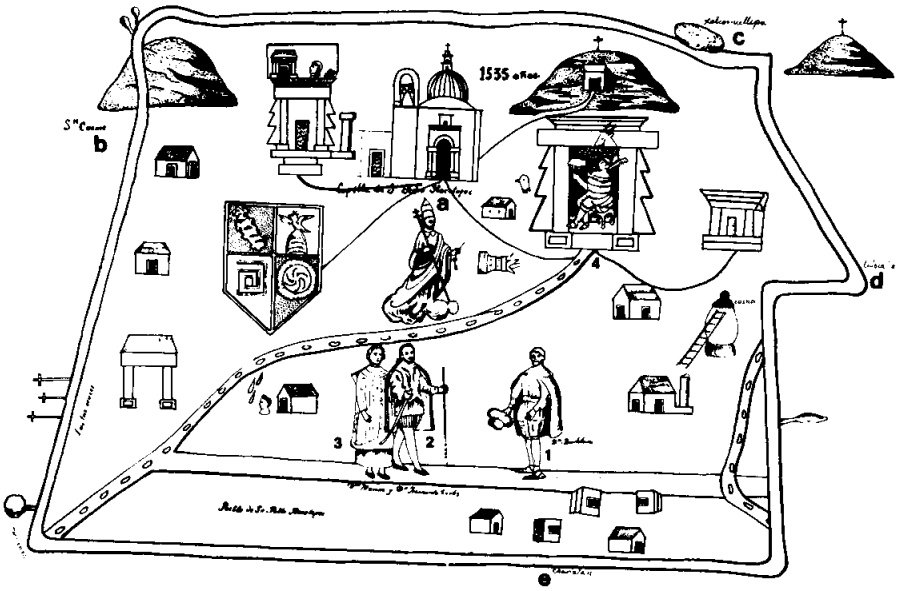

Figure 1

Figure 2

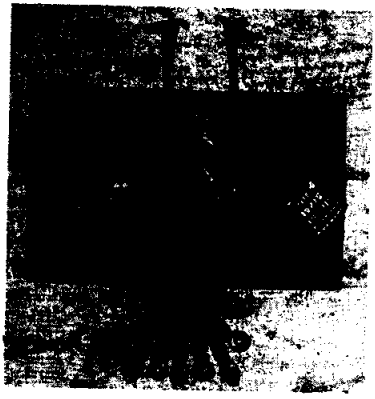

Figure 3

Figure 9

Figure 10

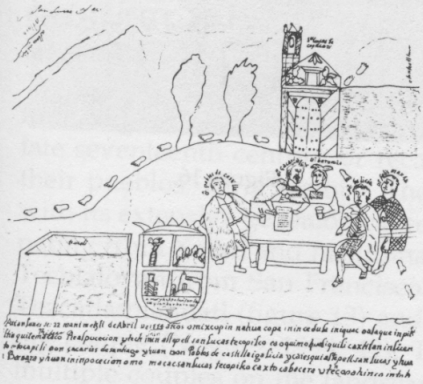

Figure 11

Figure 12

Figure 13

Figure 14

Figure 15

Figure 16

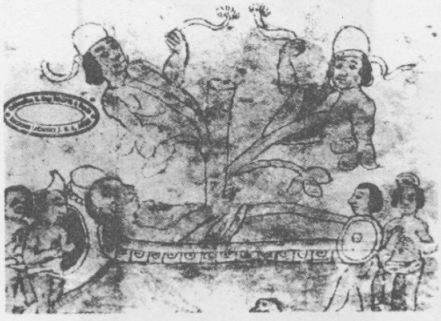

Figure 17

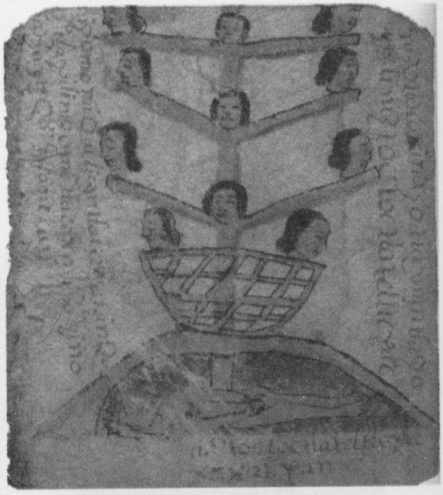

Figure 18

Figure 4

Figure 5

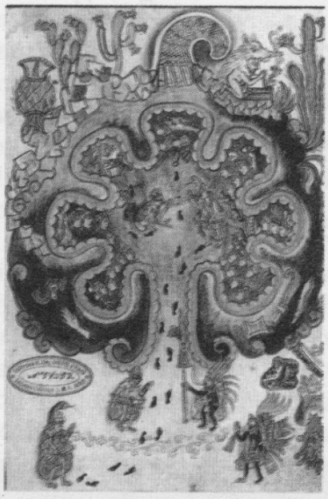

Figure 6

Figure 7

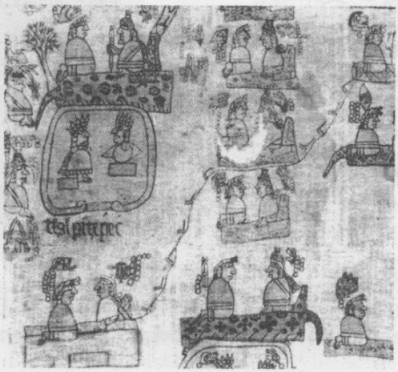

Figure 8

The primordial titles of central Mexico describe and depict a number of women in prominent town-founding roles (see Wood 1998: 253-255). The widow doña Ana Corteza (figure 12) plays the dominant role in her community's settlement. The Chalco region, state of Mexico, provides a variety of examples. The symbolic grandmother and grandfather, Miguel Quauhcapoltecatl and Juana Acachiquiuhtecatl, of the pueblo of San Miguel Atlauhtla tell the story of the town's founding in its primordial title (Lockhart 1992: 46). One of the founders of the *San Antonio Zoyatzingo title*, Huehue Xohueyacatzin, shares the name of an important local mountain (*ibid.* 1992: 47), another example of the founding figures' strong link to the land. In the *Title of Santiago Sula* two women are prominent leaders of a migration party (*ibid.* 1992: 51).[10]

Many Techialoyan manuscripts mention and provide illustrations of founding couples, either capturing a practice that remained alive into the late seventeenth century or recalling the importance of such figures in their pueblos' early history. The *García Granados Codex* is one of these, with its extensive genealogical record in the form of a nopal cactus emanating from Xolotl and his (unnamed) wife (see Noguez 1999: 40).[11] The Techialoyan from San Francisco Apazco (1717, state of Mexico) shows Tezcatlamiahuatl (figure 13) and Acamapichtli (figure 14) as the founding couple (Noguez 1999: 42). The Techialoyan *Codex of Zempoala* has multiple couples on the landscape (figures 15 and 16); from Robertson 1994: figs. 87 and 88).

Somewhat puzzling are the genealogical trees or cacti emanating from a reclining male body, absent any sign of a female partner, which we find in Techialoyans pertaining to Tepozotlan (figure 17; from Brotherston 1995: 98) and Huixquilucan (figure 18; from Noguez 1999: 41). One reading is that these are expressions of a growing patrilineal view of human origins that came with increasing contact with European ways. But we can also recall how Ometeotl, in a male guise, represented both the male and female principles.

Another indigenous antecedent for this way of thinking resides in the political office of the *cihuacoatl* (woman-serpent), linked particularly with the Aztec administrator, Tlacaelel. As *cihuacoatl* Tlacaelel apparently held power equivalent to that of *tlatoani*, and the two offices represented a duality at the pinnacle of power. Is it merely a coincidence that Cihuacoatl was also a goddess figure popular in the Valley of Mexico and associated with Quetzalcoatl?[12] Might the political office held by Tlacaelel

[10] Like female founding figures, female migration leaders are not as unusual as they may seem. Chimalma is a classic example. See Wood (1998: 251-253).

[11] See also *Códice Techialoyan García Granados* (1992).

[12] Bunson and Bunson (1996: 59); Juan Adolfo Vazquez, review of *Four Masterworks of American Indian Literature: Quetzalcoatl, The Ritual of Condolence, Cuceb, The Night Chant*, edited

have had roots in an older concept of political power sharing between male and female figures, divine if not human?

Concluding Remarks

Gendered symbols of power and authority in early Mesoamerica indicate both a degree of symmetry and a tendency for a greater male voice. Avenues existed for male ascendancy, particularly with the rise of imperialism and a warrior society, given the greater masculine role in warfare. At the same time, the balance of power in the ancient ideology of symmetrical gender status may have lived on in people's minds even if it was suppressed through legal constraints and in the official record.

Joyce Marcus (2001: 324) finds, "When a Maya woman is mentioned in texts, it is usually because of her relationship to a man." For second-wave feminists this could be distasteful. A film-maker colleague who was studying "First Ladies" (wives of U.S. presidents) was apologetic about having to focus her lens on the women who were only famous for being attached to famous men. But as Marcus shows, in Mesoamerica at any rate, it was often the men who sought to attach themselves to the women of more important dynasties. What may have resulted was some kind of image in people's minds of a proper pairing, balanced and symmetrical, since she had higher social prestige but he had the ruling authority. Forces were at work eroding the symmetry that underlay the legitimacy of the Mesoamerican couple and elevating the power and authority of the male over time. But it did not fade away easily or entirely. Still today, modern ethnography reports the use of terms such as "mothers-fathers" to refer to community leaders and ancestral figures (see Klein 2001: 188, note 10; and Joyce 2001: 110). It behooves us to keep the *pareja fundadora* in mind and watch for its survival as an entity that recognized the male-female union and gave a prominent place to specific elite indigenous women in local history and politics, thereby granting agency and respect to woman's role in more general terms.

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