Corporate Community or Corporate Houses?: Land and Society in a Colonial Mesoamerican Community

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Abstract

An ethnohistorical investigation of Santa Cruz Tlacotepec (Puebla, Mexico) reveals how indigenous nobles, called caciques by the Spanish, continued to dominate local land tenure throughout the Spanish colonial era. What basis did their landholdings have in older pre-Hispanic institutions, and how did these institutions interface with received Spanish ideas of landholdings? How did nobles retain property and power as Spanish officials enacted programs explicitly designed to reorganize and strengthen Tlacotepec’s community institutions? As I discuss, answers to these questions challenge our older ideas of the Mesoamerican closed corporate peasant community. Evidence from Tlacotepec suggests that caciques defended older privileges even as they transformed their organization to accommodate imposed Spanish institutions and jural beliefs about landholding. In so doing, they structured life and landholding in Tlacotepec throughout colonial years and possibly beyond. [Keywords: closed corporate peasant community, cacicazgo, ethnohistory, Nahuas, Mesoamerica]

Introduction

Fifty years ago, Eric Wolf began exploring how modern Mesoamerican community organization originated not from a history of isolation but from capitalist integration, in a model he termed the “closed corporate peasant community” (Wolf 1955, 1956, 1957, 1959, 1960, 1986). He envisaged communities as enduring reactions to wider political and economic fields initiated under Spanish mercantile capitalism. Weaving together historical and ethnographic investigations, he injected a historical dynamic into ethnographic studies, a field that had all too often been static and ahistorical. Wolf insisted that anthropologists use history to investigate the articulation of local peoples with global capitalism, an agenda he was to pursue his entire career (e.g., Wolf 1982).

Ironically, while Wolf articulated a powerful argument for historically informed investigations, today many ethnographers in Mesoamerica, trained and focused on modern peoples, remain less inclined to empirically explore the past. And even fewer ethnographers question, much less investigate, the historical veracity of his theory. Instead, they sometimes rely on sketches by Wolf or others to historicize their studies, leading to what John K. Chance (1996c:391–392) terms “the anthropological invention of tradition,” in which a reified theory substitutes for actual empirical inquiry.

Ethnohistorians, on the other hand, do reconstruct histories of indigenous communities. In Mesoamerica they increasingly use indigenous-language documents to reveal how pre-Hispanic institutions influenced 16th-century colonial society. How, for example, native city-states—like the Nahua altepetl of Central Mexico, the Yucatec Maya cah of the Yucatán Peninsula, or the Mixtec siñua of Oaxaca— influenced later colonial community organization (Lockhart 1982, 1992; Restall 1997; Terraciano 2001). Ethnohistorians also find significant organizations intermediate between household and community, like the Nahua teccalli (Carrasco 1976) or the Mixtec siñua or dzini (Terraciano 2001:105–116). These organizations, they discover, could remain influential in structuring colonial (and even postcolonial) indigenous society (Chance 2000; Hill and Monaghan 1987; Hill 1989; Monaghan, Joyce, and Spores 2003). In a later critique of his original
model, Wolf (1986:327) recommended further study of such entities.

The present article discusses my findings from an ethnohistorical investigation of indigenous land tenure and society in Santa Cruz Tlacotepec (modern Tlacotepec de Benito Juárez, state of Puebla, Mexico), located in Central Mexico’s Valley of Puebla. The primary data come from Spanish-language documents housed in Mexico’s national archive, the Archivo General de la Nación (hereafter cited as AGN), and in Puebla’s state notarial archive, the Archivo General de Notarías del Estado de Puebla (AGNP). I find that even after Spanish colonial officials reorganized Tlacotepec, smaller, intermediate-type units remained pivotal to community organization. Initially termed teccalli or “noble houses” by Nahuatl-speakers, these house organizations structured the land tenure, intergenerational transfer of wealth, and social identities of Tlacotepec’s inhabitants.

In light of this evidence I will argue that a second model, Claude Lévi-Strauss’s (1982, 1987) “house model,” more effectively explains Tlacotepec’s community organization than does Wolf’s construct. Ethnographers and ethnohistorians working in various world regions—including colonial Puebla (Chance 2000)—have applied Lévi-Strauss’s perceptive ideas about houses (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Joyce and Gillespie 2000). The model helps me to understand how multiple corporate entities could adapt and function even after Spanish officials instituted local community-based institutions, such as a municipal council and community landholdings—organizations that supposedly led to colonial corporate communities.

Lévi-Strauss (1982:174) defines a house as “a corporate body holding an estate made up of both material and immaterial wealth, which perpetuates itself through the transmission of its name, its goods, and its titles down a real or imaginary line, considered legitimate as long as this continuity can express itself in the language of kinship or of affinity and, most often, of both.” He emphasizes how house members create an in-group identity based on estate preservation and transmission, rather than mechanically adhering to kinship principles such as patrilineal or matrilineal descent or other rules: “Patrilineal descent and matrilineal descent, filiation and residence, hypergamy and hypogamy, close marriage and distant marriage, heredity and election: all these notions which usually allow anthropologists to distinguish various known types of society, are reunited in the house” (Lévi-Strauss 1982:184). More often than not, people in these societies term their organizations houses, not lineages or clans (Gillespie 2000:6–7). House members use kin terms to embrace one another, sometimes making houses appear more rooted in kinship than actually may be the case. Nevertheless, societies with house organizations do often practice cognatic descent (Lévi-Strauss 1982:168, 180).

I begin by briefly sketching Wolf’s historical scenario. Then I summarize what little we know of the pre-Hispanic organizational history of the southeastern Valley of Puebla (hereafter denoted as Puebla) and discuss how early Spanish officials recognized and validated to an extent Tlacotepec’s teccalli as they resettled the community in its congregación of 1604–1605. After exploring why nobles (caciques) in Tlacotepec retained land while those in nearby communities did not, I describe the elite tenure patterns that persisted in Tlacotepec up to Mexican Independence (and presumably beyond). While community land did exist, caciques monopolized and used it much like their own cacicazgo property. Finally, I focus on the Cruz cacicazgo, the dispersed holdings of the largest cacique faction in Tlacotepec. To conclude, I argue that Puebla’s countryside under Spanish colonial rule remained heterogeneous and not easily explained by any single model.

**Wolf’s Historical Hypothesis**

Eric Wolf brought history to his ethnographic project. He did so by synthesizing the relatively small corpus of historical studies that existed 50 years ago with an even smaller body of ethnographic studies. More specifically, he used Woodrow Borah’s (1951) influential “century of depression” thesis to argue that modern corporate communities originated during the 17th-century depression in colonial New Spain (Mexico and Guatemala). Borah posited that the precipitous decline of Mesoamerica’s indigenous population over the 16th and 17th centuries resulted in a sustained economic depression. It weakened the colony’s linkages with the wider world and disrupted urban commerce and industry: “After the initial energy of the Spanish conquest had been expended, the country doubled back on itself in an effort to achieve peace and order and virtually abandoned all outside contact for a century” (Wolf 1960:3).
In Wolf’s (1959:213–232) thinking, indigenous peoples used Spanish-instituted corporate communities to retrench. In rural areas, strong community structures flourished, meeting the limited demand of the larger society for labor and products without surrendering local autonomy to external middlemen or commercial firms. Spanish haciendas competed with Indian communities for land and water, dualizing the 17th-century countryside between the two institutions (Wolf 1956:1069–1070, 1959:202–211). To prevent intrusion, communities tenaciously enforced corporate controls: While individual members used land and other resources for their own purposes, the land could not be sold or transferred to outsiders. Community officials, elected by the community’s adult males, oversaw and protected these insular privileges (e.g., Wolf 1955:457–458).

By explaining community closure to outsiders, corporate land tenure, community identity, and other cultural traits as reactions to wider political and economic fields, Wolf hypothesized the historical processes and variables leading to modern communities. However, as I will discuss using data from Tlacotepec, he lacked sufficient information to treat three important issues. First, along with historians of his day (e.g., Gibson 1964:165), he assumed that colonization compressed indigenous society into a single impoverished stratum (Wolf 1959:212–213). Consequently he saw postconquest communities as egalitarian. Later investigations demonstrate how indigenous caciques, in fact, remained major actors in many colonial, and even postcolonial, indigenous communities (Chance 1996b; García Martínez 1987; Gruzinski 1989; Haskett 1991; Monaghan, Joyce, and Spores 2003; Stern 1983; Van Young 1984). Secondly, he believed Spanish-imposed structures—municipal councils and community landholdings—largely structured postconquest communities. Lacking data, he overlooked “territorial entities and kinship structures intermediate between household and community” (Wolf 1986:327). Finally, he glossed quite a bit of rural heterogeneity: More fine-grained analyses of rural land tenure in Mesoamerica reveal quite different historical trajectories, even for adjacent indigenous communities (e.g., Alexander and Kyle, eds. 2003; Dyckerhoff 1990). The data challenge us to explain these differences.

Overall, my findings will modify, but not invalidate, the closed corporate peasant community model. I will emphasize how we should restrict its application and more rigorously investigate its associated historical processes. Elsewhere I propose one process whereby certain communities in Puebla did come to approximate Wolf’s model (i.e., Perkins in press). I will summarize those findings in the conclusions. Here, however, I wish to focus on Tlacotepec, a community composed of powerful noble houses that never conformed to Wolf’s tenets.

**Tlacotepec’s Early History and Organization**

Sources say little about Tlacotepec’s establishment in the southeastern Valley of Puebla. Speakers of Nahua and Popoloca occupied the general area by the 12th century. Nahua-speakers (Nahuas) moved south. Popoloca-speakers migrated north from areas of Oaxaca. Eventually two powerful city-states, Tecamachalco and Quecholac, developed and instituted shared dominion over Tlacotepec’s presumably small population. In 1466 the Aztecs of the neighboring Valley of Mexico conquered southeastern Puebla and incorporated the region into their empire: In assigning imperial tribute, they reaffirmed Tlacotepec’s households as subject to either Tecamachalco or Quecholac (Martínez 1994:35).³

Reconstructions of pre-Hispanic Central Mexican society see a landscape organized by altepetl. “The word itself is a slightly altered form of the metaphorical doublet in atl, in tepetl, “the water(s), the mountain(s),” and thus it refers in the first instance to territory, but what is meant is primarily an organization of people holding sway over a given territory” (Lockhart 1992:14). We typically translate altepetl as “city-state,” or simply “state.” Yet in Puebla, each altepetl really represented a confederation of teccalli, or “noble houses” (e.g., Carrasco 1963, 1969, 1976; Chance 1998, 2000; Martínez 1984; Olivera 1978; Reyes García 1977). Smaller states might have three or four teccalli, while larger states could contain a dozen or more. The lord of one powerful teccalli ruled the entire state, or multiple lords of different teccalli might share power through joint rule.⁴

Each one formed a hierarchical and corporate body: hierarchical because each one encompassed two hereditary estates or classes, nobles and commoners; corporate in that all nobles and commoners participated as members, albeit in very different manners. Nobles do not appear to have been genealogically related to commoners. The most important historical account of the region, the *Historia tolteca-chichimeca* (Kirchhoff, Odena Güemes, and Reyes García 1989) describes how Nahua immigrants subded local populations as they established teccalli and altepetl in the 12th century.
A lord, the leader of the teccalli, maintained relations of authority and reciprocity with his nobles. He granted them rights to the labor and agricultural products of specific commoner households. In return, nobles compensated him with commoner tribute. Upon his death, teccalli nobles selected another lord from within their ranks.

Commoners provided nobles not only tribute from agricultural surpluses and other products but also labor and personal service. They worked land plots that were small, scattered, and probably intermixed with a state’s other teccalli (Chance 1996a:110; Martínez 1984:53). Evidence suggests that commoners controlled land, even bequeathed it to heirs, so long as they remitted tribute to nobles at stipulated intervals. At the time of the Spanish conquest, Tlacotepec’s commoner households participated in teccalli whose nobles lived in either Tecamachalco or Quecholac. These elite, in turn, apparently maintained strong ties of loyalty and fealty with the Aztec imperial elite of the Valley of Mexico.5

Beginning in August of 1520, Fernando Cortés’s Spanish conquistadores and Indian allies found themselves in virtual disarray after fleeing the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan. In Puebla they regrouped and brutally vanquished the region’s altepetl (e.g., see Thomas 1993:394–436). With Tecamachalco’s fall, one of its kings, Quetzalehcatzin, fled with other nobles to Tenochtitlan where he eventually participated in the capital’s last stand. Captured and enslaved in 1521, Quetzalehcatzin perished on Cortés’s disastrous march to Honduras in 1524–1526 (Licate 1981:55–56).

With colonization, Spaniards used altepetl to transform Central Mexico (Haskett 1991; Hoekstra 1993; Horn 1997; Lockhart 1992). In Tlacotepec as elsewhere, they followed pre-Hispanic precedent in recognizing the tributary obligations between its commoner households and nobles residing in Tecamachalco or Quecholac (Licate 1981:61–65). Tlacotepec’s double bind extended to early encomienda grants; Cortés or his lieutenants assigned indigenous communities to a meritorious Spaniard, often a conquistador, who oversaw the well-being of his charges in exchange for tribute payments. Following historical precedent, officials assigned Tlacotepec’s households to the encomienda of either Tecamachalco or Quecholac (Licate 1981:74–75).6

As they conquered New World societies, Spaniards designated indigenous nobles as caciques (females as cacicas) and their landholdings as cacicazgos. They applied the terms indiscriminately, ignoring wide variations in native social organization, terminology, and land tenure regimes. They conceived cacicazgos as the New World counterpart of their own mayorazgo (hence, the similarity in terms). Spanish nobles used mayorazgo legislation to protect their landed estates: The laws entailed an estate thereby prohibiting its division. It then passed impartially from father to eldest son, protected and preserved from one generation to the next. Only a special jural dispensation permitted a noble to divide and sell his property. By the time Spain colonized the Americas, Spanish law had clearly defined mayorazgo (Clavero 1974:211–221).

Did Mesoamerican cacicazgos strictly conform to Iberian mayorazgos? The answer, I suspect, varies by region. In Tlacotepec, at least, the name change from teccalli to cacicazgo did include tangible changes. Spanish bureaucrats officially privatized teccalli as an estate “owned” by a single cacique. Yet as I describe below, evidence suggests that privatization did not lead to the sort of strict entailment seen in Spain’s mayorazgo. By the 18th century, many individuals laid claim to each cacicazgo. In practice, Tlacotepec’s cacicazgos came to embody both Nahua and Spanish principles and resembled the teccalli from which they originated. In this regard, Tlacotepec’s resettlement and reorganization constituted a watershed moment in these organizations’ histories.

Congregación, 1604–1605

Tlacotepec’s stature grew during the late 16th and early 17th centuries. First, ecclesiastical officials designated it the headtown (cabecera) of a parish (doctrina). Then government authorities designated it the headtown of its own municipality. The latter promotion occurred with its civil congregación. Viceregal authorities initiated congregaciones all over New Spain during the 16th and 17th centuries (e.g., Cline 1949; Gibson 1964:282–287). These resettlement programs usually involved aggregating scattered indigenous populations into nucleated settlements. For each congregación, officials designated a specific settlement the headtown with its own municipal council (cabildo) charged with governing specific subject communities (sujetos) (Cline 1949:349–350; Licate 1981:91). It laid the groundwork for a Spanish-style corporate community organization. It also ended Tlacotepec’s encomienda obligations. Henceforth, macehual households paid tribute via their government to the Spanish Crown.
We often assume congregaciones disrupted indigenous society. But did Tlacotepec’s congregación wrench apart teccalli social relations? The meticulous daily record kept by Spanish authorities actually highlights how these officials recognized and preserved relations between teccalli nobles and commoners.\(^7\)

The colonial government appointed Francisco de Valderrama Padilla to coordinate Tlacotepec’s congregación, and Baltasar Holguin, fluent in Nahuatl and Popoloca, as official interpreter.\(^8\) Resettlement occurred during the dry season between December of 1604 and May of 1605. Valderrama Padilla concentrated on four settlements, as summarized in Table 1. The entire effort involved 2,719 individuals from 22 outlying locations. The largest effort occurred in Santa Cruz Tlacotepec. The document enumerates how some 345 Indian tributary household heads and uncounted family members resettled there. Valderrama Padilla designated three settlements subject to Tlacotepec’s government: Santa María Xaliipixahuiyan (or Xali; later called Santa María la Alta) with 196 tributary household heads; San Gabriel Tezoyuca with 230; and San Simón Yehualtepec (or Ehcatepec) with 200.

He settled the four locations simultaneously. But the congregación record is almost singularly concerned with Santa Cruz Tlacotepec. It describes the daily progress in measuring and clearing the plaza and house plots of brush, manufacturing adobe bricks, constructing buildings, and so forth. It also lists the commoners (termed *macehual*, sing. *macehual*) identified for removal. Previously subject to either Tecamachalco or Quecholac, these families joined Tlacotepec’s new municipality.

More importantly, as represented in Table 2, Valderrama Padilla carefully recognized, recorded, and honored Tlacotepec’s teccalli social relations. He recognized that particular macehual households owed allegiance to certain caciques. In particular, the cacicas doña María Valiente and doña Agustina de la Cruz received a substantial number of lots for their macehual households. Doña María Valiente received 66 lots for 55 household heads. Doña Agustina de la Cruz received 61 lots for 53.5 heads. As discussed below, both women later became key figures in the politics of Tlacotepec’s 18th-century land tenure: Caciques claimed descent from doña María Valiente and doña Agustina de la Cruz to validate or assert rights to cacicazgos. Valderrama Padilla also recognized the more modest claims of other caciques who received fewer lots for fewer tributaries.\(^9\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pueblos</th>
<th>Tributary Population</th>
<th>Estimated Total Population(^a)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>First Resettlement to the cabecera of Santa Cruz Tlacotepec:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Cruz (cabecera)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Joseph</td>
<td>144</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Juan</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Martín</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Lucas</td>
<td>57</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Marcos</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Lorenzo</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Luis</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Mateo</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subtotal:</strong></td>
<td>345</td>
<td>973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Second Resettlement to Santa María Xaliipixahuiyan (later known as Santa María la Alta):</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa María</td>
<td>152</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Andrés</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santiago</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Miguel</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subtotal:</strong></td>
<td>196</td>
<td>553</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Third Resettlement to San Gabriel Tezoyuca:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Gabriel</td>
<td>75.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Pedro</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Juan</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santiago</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todos Santos</td>
<td>63</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Gerónimo</td>
<td>41</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subtotal:</strong></td>
<td>230</td>
<td>649</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fourth Resettlement to San Simón Yehualtepec:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Simón</td>
<td>158</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santo Tomás</td>
<td>42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subtotal:</strong></td>
<td>200</td>
<td>564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td>971</td>
<td>2,719</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: AGN, Tierras, vol. 73, exp. 3, fols. 7r.–7v.\(^a\) I obtained an estimated total population by multiplying the number of tributaries by 2.8 following Cook and Borah (1960:38).

The congregación simultaneously preserved ties between indigenous lords and tributaries while legally privatizing the house by granting each one to a single individual. A sole cacique now owned the bundle of tributary rights and lands formerly held by the house as a corporate entity. Secondary nobles receive no
mention in the congregación document. But even if Spanish officials and courts viewed it in this manner, it is not at all clear that the nobles themselves did. As discussed below, in later years Spanish notions of private property sometimes clashed with indigenous notions of corporate house property, leading to legal confusion and controversy.

Finally, the 1604–1605 congregación apparently initiated a voluntary relocation of nobles to Tlacotepec from nearby Tecamachalco and Quecholac. In relocating, nobles remained in closer physical proximity to their tributaries, dominating land and labor. They could now serve in Tlacotepec’s government, thereby controlling municipal affairs. Thus, the congregación transformed Tlacotepec from a small macehual settlement to a colonial headtown with a resident elite.

### Spanish Encroachment

Various scholars argue that congregación programs facilitated Spanish land acquisition: They resettled inhabitants in tightly nucleated settlements, thereby opening up lands for usurpation (Gibson 1964:284–288; Martínez 1994:151). In Tlacotepec’s case, however, the area remained relatively free from this type of invasion. “Documentary evidence shows no

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noble</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>No. of Assigned Lots</th>
<th>No. of Tributaries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>doña María Valiente</td>
<td>Santa Cruz</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Santa Lucía</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>San Marcos</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>San Luis</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>San Martín</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>doña Agustina de la Cruz</td>
<td>Santa Cruz</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>San Martín</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>San Marcos</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>San Luis</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joachin Hernández</td>
<td>Santa Cruz</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>don Diego Velázquez</td>
<td>Santa Cruz</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>San Jose</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>San Juan Cabezavasco</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diego de Meneses</td>
<td>San Jose</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>doña Francisca de Mendoza</td>
<td>Santa Cruz</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juan Romano</td>
<td>San Juan Cabezavasco</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>don Juan de Mendoza</td>
<td>Santa Cruz</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melchor de Santiago and</td>
<td>Santa Cruz</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>don Juan Bautista</td>
<td>Santa Cruz</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>don Baltasar de Morales</td>
<td>San Lorenzo</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>San Lucas</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>45.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>don Gerónimo de Ávila</td>
<td>Santa Cruz</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juan Perez</td>
<td>San Mateo</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gobernador de Quechula (Mateo</td>
<td>San Mateo</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juárez)</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>258.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: AGN, Tierras, vol. 73, exp. 3, fols. 71r.–87v.*
rush to obtain *mercedes* or increased land sales following the resettlement of 1604–1605 in Tlacotepec and the other southern *pueblos* as was the case in the rest of the Tecamachalco-Quecholac jurisdiction after the resettlement campaign of 1557–1558” (Licate 1981:116).

Tlacotepec’s immediate region remained predominantly Indian in composition throughout the 17th century (Table 3). Available estimates suggest the indigenous population of Tlacotepec experienced the same pattern of decline and recovery seen throughout Mesoamerica during the Spanish colonial era. Unfortunately, the wide temporal gaps in Tlacotepec’s population data poorly represent its population nadir in the 17th century and its maximum recovery prior to the notorious 1737 typhoid epidemic. Overall, however, by the mid–18th century Tlacotepec’s population apparently oscillated widely before steadily ascending during the last years of the century.

Both before and after the pueblo’s congregación, small numbers of Spaniards settled in Tlacotepec’s municipality and sought lands. Population data from Tlacotepec attest to the presence of a few nonindigenous persons in Tlacotepec during the 17th century (Table 4). During the 18th century, the pueblo gradually became more Hispanic. Even so, compared with Central Mexican zones such as Chalco, Morelos, or even nearby

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### Table 3

**Estimates of indigenous population, Tlacotepec**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Unit of Analysis</th>
<th>Enumerated</th>
<th>Multiplier</th>
<th>Estimated Population</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1570s*</td>
<td>Tlacotepe and 13 <em>estancias</em></td>
<td>2,820 tributaries</td>
<td>2.8a</td>
<td>7,896</td>
<td>Paso y Troncoso, ed. (1940:83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1605</td>
<td>Pueblo</td>
<td>971 tributaries</td>
<td>2.8c</td>
<td>2,719</td>
<td>AGN, Tierras, vol. 73, exp. 3, fols. 7r.–7v.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1681</td>
<td>Municipality</td>
<td>1,500 indios</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>Gerhard (1981:544)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1742</td>
<td>Pueblo</td>
<td>154 familiesd</td>
<td>4.9a</td>
<td>755</td>
<td>Villaseñor y Sánchez 251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1777</td>
<td>Pueblo</td>
<td>1,900 personsf</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,900</td>
<td>AGI, México, vol. 2578, fols. 778r., 808v.–810v.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1781</td>
<td>Pueblo</td>
<td>1,352 persons</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,352</td>
<td>AGNP, Tepeaca, caja 119, exp. 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1785</td>
<td>Pueblo</td>
<td>1,665 persons</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,665</td>
<td>BL, Mexico, vol. 225, f. 113r.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820</td>
<td>Pueblo</td>
<td>4,310 personsg</td>
<td></td>
<td>4,310</td>
<td>AMT, caja 2, exp. 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Tlacotepec de Benito Juárez</td>
<td>6,660 personsh</td>
<td></td>
<td>6,660</td>
<td><em>XI Censo 222</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Municipality</td>
<td>32,000 personsi</td>
<td></td>
<td>32,000</td>
<td><em>XI Censo 222</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Figures date from the 1570s based on associated data.
  a Cook and Borah (1960:38).
  c Cook and Borah (1960:38).
  d I follow Cook and Borah (1968:46) in reducing the 167 enumerated families by 5 percent (or approximately 8) to account for widows and widowers.
  e Cook and Borah (1968:46, 50).
  f Figure includes 305 caciques for the entire parish, enumerated separately.
  g Figure includes both Indians and non-Indians.
  h Census did not enumerate ethnic or racial differences.
  i Census did not enumerate ethnic or racial differences.

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areas within Puebla (Gibson 1964; Tutino 1975; Martin 1982; Martínez 1994; Garavaglia and Grosso 1990a), the municipality of Tlacotepec remained of little interest.

The area’s past and present ecology suggests a major reason why. At an elevation of approximately 1,950 meters, Tlacotepec lies in a transitional zone between the more moist central areas of Puebla and the lower, more arid steppe region of the Valley of Tehuacán (1,640 meters), further southeast. Its modern yearly precipitation averages only 500.6 millimeters (19.7 inches) (Jáuregui O. 1968:12). Owing in part to the small amount of rainfall received and the resulting plant growth, the soils around Tlacotepec are today classified as a variation of the Chernozemic class, known as Chernozemic-desertic (frequently referred to in the past as Chestnut soils). These soils contain carbonates encountered very close to the surface, so that upper layers of soil have notable amounts of alkali. Chernozemic-desertic soils are very often associated with livestock grazing, as with the Great Plains of the United States. With irrigation they can be successfully cultivated, but owing to the thin topsoil, erosion constantly threatens to reduce its productivity.

Tlacotepec’s scarcity of available water made irrigation problematic. One solution was to construct *jagüeyes*, man-made catchments to collect summer rainfall for irrigation, livestock, and human consumption. During colonial years, Tlacotepec’s most successful agricultural ventures relied on catchment water.

Even so, Spaniards found Tlacotepec inadequate for their staple crop, wheat. Native maize adapted to a wide variety of climates, while European wheat demanded more specific conditions for successful cultivation (Dunmire 2004:113–117; Warman 2003:12–13). To the Spanish eye, Tlacotepec’s rugged and arid environment was well suited to livestock husbandry, especially sheep and goat ranches (*estancias de ganado menor*). It remained marginal as a prime agricultural area.

The timing and location of Spanish acquisitions can be reconstructed using records of colonial land grants. Examined from the perspective of the larger region, these grants form a clear pattern, clustering initially in northern areas, especially in the Valleys of Ozumba and San Pablo (Licate 1981:114–117; Martínez 1994:150–152, 255–267). From the 1540s until the 1580s the hinterlands of Tlacotepec, well removed from these northern valleys, remained free of grants awarded to Spanish colonists. Later, Spaniards became interested in the area’s potential for livestock grazing.

### Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Unit of Analysis</th>
<th>Enumerated</th>
<th>Multiplier</th>
<th>Estimated Population</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1681</td>
<td>Municipality</td>
<td>26 persons</td>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Gerhard (1981:544)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1742</td>
<td>Pueblo</td>
<td>43 families</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>Villaseñor y Sánchez (1952:251)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1777</td>
<td>Parish</td>
<td>1,007 persons</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,007</td>
<td>AGI, México, vol. 2576, fol. 778r.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1781</td>
<td>Pueblo</td>
<td>960 persons</td>
<td></td>
<td>960</td>
<td>AGNP, Tepeaca, caja 119, exp. 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1785</td>
<td>Pueblo</td>
<td>978 persons</td>
<td></td>
<td>978</td>
<td>BL, Mexico, vol. 225, fol. 13r.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1791</td>
<td>Municipality</td>
<td>1,817 persons</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,817</td>
<td>AGN, Padrones, vol. 38, exp. —, fols. 450v., 574v.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a* Six Spaniards and 20 Mestizos and Mulattos were enumerated.

*b* Eighteen Spanish families and 27 Mestizo and Mulatto families were enumerated. Following Cook and Borah (1968:46), I reduced the total number of families enumerated (45) by 5 percent (or approximately 2) to account for widows and widowers.

*c* Cook and Borah (1968:46).

*d* The Parish of Tlacotepec included the cabecera of Santa Cruz Tlacotepec, Santa María la Alta, San Marcos Evangelista, and the Hacienda of San Lucas.
Between 1589 and 1607, some 17 mercedes were granted to Spaniards in locations eventually included in Tlacotepec’s municipality.10 These sheep or goat ranches typically measured 780.27 hectares, though the size of these particular grants is unknown (Martínez 1994:263, 265–266; Carrera Stampa 1949:19). Caciques increasingly sold land to Spaniards. For example, the Hacienda de San José, specializing in small livestock, originated from six separate sales of land by caciques to Spaniards between 1617 and 1623, with a final parcel added in 1706.11 During these years, several other ranchos (small enterprises) and haciendas developed in the municipality of Tlacotepec. They all specialized in livestock husbandry and came into existence through noble sales or transfers to Spaniards.12 Land litigation concerning Spanish encroachment on noble properties also began.13 Some disputes during the 18th century would also be rooted in the transactions of this period.14

Yet, later 18th-century accounts reveal only a limited number of haciendas and ranchos. One survey in 1742 identified 13 haciendas in the municipality (Villaseñor y Sánchez 1952:251). Later censuses counted eight.15 Of the municipality’s 12 ranchos enumerated in 1791, caciques owned six. They profited from the rent paid by either macehuales or Spanish tenants.

With its hilly terrain, poor soils, and water scarcity, Tlacotepec’s municipality lacked the essential qualities sought by Spanish agriculturalists. Its agricultural regime escaped the overwhelming incursions occurring elsewhere. Even so, in the 17th century a few Spaniards did move to the area and expropriate Indian lands, primarily those of the indigenous elite. And by the late 17th and 18th centuries, as in many locations, Indian governments or caciques squatted off in court against Spanish agriculturalists over land ownership and boundary demarcations.16 However, on the whole, Indian agriculture remained far more viable throughout Tlacotepec’s municipality than it had in other Central Mexican places: Many Spaniards achieved access through rent, rather than actual possession. And for caciques who did initially lose property, some of it was eventually reacquired, though under unusual tenure arrangements, as described next.

Community Property and Cacique Officeholding

Generally speaking, the origin, size, and tenure arrangements associated with officially designated community property in Puebla have been difficult to assess. Little evidence exists to suggest that Puebla’s altepetl originally possessed community property (e.g., Chance 1996b:485; Martínez 1984:58–60; Olivera 1978:195–196). In western Puebla, around Huejotzingo, Hanns Prem argues that a certain amount of communally held land existed in the pre-Hispanic era, though Rik Hoekstra disputes these data (Prem 1988:50–71; Hoekstra 1993:66–68). The hegemony of the teccalli as the central economic and political institution in the Valley of Puebla precluded altepetl property or possibly led to its alienation if it did exist for a time, as Luis Reyes García found in his history of Cuauhtinchan (Reyes García 1977:114).

For later colonial years, community property must have been designated as such following the conquest, but the process by which it came into being is often difficult to uncover. For example, I have not been able to elucidate the process by which the municipal government in nearby Tepeaca acquired its property (commonly referred to in Spanish as propios, tierras de comunidad, or bienes de comunidad), though I know of cases where municipal officials defended it from outside encroachment (Perkins 2000:111–117). In Santiago Tecali, Chance (1996b:485–486, 2003:26–27) notes the existence of such land in the 17th century but is unsure of how it moved from cacique to community control. Dyckerhoff (1990:48–50) concludes that Indian governments might purchase it from Spaniards or secure it through royal grants (mercedes). But just as often, the origin of community property remains unknown or ambiguous.

For Tlacotepec, thanks to a series of land compositions (composiciones) in 1717, I can reconstruct the origin and size of its community landholdings.17 By the early 18th century some ten livestock sites existed, along with another three caballerías of land, possibly constituting as much as 7,931 hectares in all, located in various locations within the municipality. Significantly, Spanish officials had not granted these lands at the time of Tlacotepec’s congregación, nor at any later date. Aside from Tlacotepec’s urban grid and ecclesiastical and government buildings, congregación officials did not allocate any community lands, in all likelihood because they acknowledged and approved of the land monopoly held by those indigenous nobles whom they had so carefully enumerated.

Rather, the community owed its property to the efforts of its own government officials who purchased parcels previously alienated from caciques. These pur-
chases reversed to a degree the usurpation of land by early colonial Spanish speculators.

Five of Tlacotepec’s livestock properties originated as part of doña María Valiente’s estate. She bequeathed two properties, Santa Lucía Tecoyuco and Santiago Tepetlacolco, to the pueblo’s church and its Catholic confraternity, the Cofradía de Nuestra Señora, in her last will and testament made in 1606. A decade later church officials sold the properties along with the jagüey of Santa Lucía for 400 pesos to a Spaniard from the city of Puebla. By 1683, however, Tlacotepec’s government purchased the lands for 600 pesos from the Spaniard’s heir.

A more circuitous chain of events unfolded when doña María Valiente’s descendants sold three other properties in 1665 to the Spaniard Andrés Nieto de Alvarado. Two years later Nieto de Alvarado transferred them to Luis Cansino de Riojas, a Spanish scribe living in Tepeaca and one of the district’s most notorious and unscrupulous 17th-century land speculators. Cansino de Riojas then swapped the lands with a Tepeaca cacica to gain more fertile fields located closer to Tepeaca. On February 1, 1673, the new owner, doña Isabel Moctesuma y Mendoza, sold the now consolidated property—called in both Nahuatl and Popoloca “Indaningo Istatechosta,” to the officials of Tlacotepec’s government for 400 pesos.

Overall, Tlacotepec’s indigenous municipal council purchased five livestock properties, potentially measuring as much as 3,900 hectares.

Other lands alienated from indigenous nobles also returned to indigenous control under the aegis of the community. Three livestock properties were purchased from the countess of the Valley of Orizaba. The land had originally been acquired by her husband, the count, in 1666 when don Luis Cortés de las Nieves and his mother doña Josefa de Luna, heirs of don Pedro de San Juan (one of Tlacotepec’s earliest Indian governors), failed to remit 400 pesos owed in royal tribute stemming from don Pedro’s time in office. To satisfy the debt they sold the three properties to them. In 1695 Tlacotepec’s government paid the countess 1,000 pesos for the land.

In another transaction, Tlacotepec’s government purchased land in 1688 that had allegedly been usurped by a 16th-century Spaniard. The latter received a royal grant in 1598 to legitimate his acquisition. He then sold the land to another Spaniard, Gaspar de Rivadeneira. Officials paid 1,320 pesos to acquire it.

In all, between 1673 and 1695 Tlacotepec spent some 3,320 pesos in purchasing community property. How did the government raise such sizeable sums? No record exists. In later years, however, caciques insisted that their forefathers had individually contributed large sums toward their purchase. It certainly seems true that profiting as certain caciques did from the agricultural production of commoners, they might have the wherewithal to pay the amounts demanded.

Why would caciques buy lands as community property rather than as private holdings? Documents from Tlacotepec offer no definitive answer. Perhaps caciques pooled their contributions with community funds to raise the necessary amounts. At this time, indigenous society all over Central Mexico continued recuperating from the population decline and social turmoil of the 16th and 17th centuries. The structure of the municipal government might also have encouraged caciques from different, even rival, families to pool money with less fear of its misappropriation. Once purchased, they perhaps saw community lands as better protected from Spanish usurpation than private property.

Tlacotepec’s caciques could appropriate and use community land because they thoroughly monopolized municipal government. Scholars increasingly appreciate how indigenous elites in Central Mexico and elsewhere could dominate municipal government well into the colonial era (e.g., see Chace 1989; García Martínez 1987; Haskett 1997; Ouweneel 1995; Spores 1984). In many municipalities only noble males constituted the electorate. Limited enfranchisement permitted elites to choose and elect their fellows. Macehuales, meanwhile, remained disenfranchised.

In Puebla, for example, a fine-grained study of Tepeaca’s voting patterns during the 16th century demonstrates how the most powerful teccalli factions dominated the city’s municipal offices (Martínez 1984:125–165). Similarly, in nearby Santiago Tecali caciques maintained absolute control throughout the entire colonial period (Chace 1996b).

My investigation of Tlacotepec’s elections from the 17th through early 19th centuries reveals that caciques associated with the town’s largest cacicazgos constantly participated in, and often contested, municipal elections. For example, a particularly acrimonious dispute occurred in the early 1700s between the Cruz and Cortés de las Nieves cacicazgos. The members of both houses traced descent to the town’s earliest caciques. Disputes between candidates widened as
### Table 5
Indigenous testaments (written in Spanish): Santa Cruz Tlacotepec

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>AGNP, Tepeaca, caja (box)/expediente, folios</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>1597</td>
<td>Martín de la Cruz</td>
<td>AGN Vínculos 73/3, 40v.–43v.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>1619</td>
<td>Agustina de la Cruz</td>
<td>AGN Vínculos 73/3, 34r.–35v.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>1665</td>
<td>María Ana de la Cruz</td>
<td>AGN Vínculos 73/3, 48r.–50r.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>1675</td>
<td>Esteban Valiente de Meneses</td>
<td>cacique y principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>1740</td>
<td>Pedro de Luna y Moctesuma</td>
<td>cacique y principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>1741</td>
<td>Diego de Luna</td>
<td>cacique y principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>1748</td>
<td>Diego Lorenzo</td>
<td>cacique y principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>1748</td>
<td>Joseph de Luna</td>
<td>cacique y principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>1750</td>
<td>Juan Cortés de las Nieves</td>
<td>cacique y principal, gobernador pasado</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>1750</td>
<td>Felix de Luna</td>
<td>cacique principal</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>1752</td>
<td>Phelipa Sánchez Cabrera</td>
<td>44/37, 39r.–41v.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>1757</td>
<td>Joaquín de la Cruz</td>
<td>indio</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>1758</td>
<td>Carlos de Castañeda</td>
<td>cacique y principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>1758</td>
<td>Domingo Flores</td>
<td>cacique y principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>1758</td>
<td>Eduardo Merino</td>
<td>cacique y principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>1760</td>
<td>Miguel de la Cruz</td>
<td>cacique y principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>1760</td>
<td>Juana de Luna</td>
<td>cacica</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>1761</td>
<td>Miguel Isidro de la Cruz</td>
<td>cacique principal</td>
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<td>19.</td>
<td>1762</td>
<td>Juan Martínez</td>
<td>cacique principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>1763</td>
<td>Manuel Martínez</td>
<td>cacique principal</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>1768</td>
<td>Bartólome Alonzo de Luna</td>
<td>cacique principal</td>
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<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>1769</td>
<td>Joseph Antonio</td>
<td>cacique</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>1770</td>
<td>Isidro de la Cruz</td>
<td>cacique</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>1771</td>
<td>Inés de Luna</td>
<td>cacica principal</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>1771</td>
<td>Miguel de Luna</td>
<td>cacique principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>1773</td>
<td>Ana María Castañeda</td>
<td>cacica principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>1774</td>
<td>María Gertrudis de Porras</td>
<td>cacica principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>1775</td>
<td>María de Castañeda</td>
<td>cacica principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>1775</td>
<td>Juana de la Cruz Beristain</td>
<td>española</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>1775</td>
<td>Antonio Cayetano de Luna Velásquez y Castañeda</td>
<td>cacique principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31.</td>
<td>1775</td>
<td>Manuel Trinidad Rodríguez</td>
<td>mestizo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.</td>
<td>1778</td>
<td>Antonio Josef Martín</td>
<td>indio tributario</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.</td>
<td>1779</td>
<td>María de la Soledad y Luna</td>
<td>cacica principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td>1780</td>
<td>Jacobo de Castañeda</td>
<td>cacica principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35.</td>
<td>1780</td>
<td>Josefa de la Encarnación de Porras y Luna</td>
<td>cacica principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36.</td>
<td>1785</td>
<td>Manuel de Castañeda</td>
<td>cacique principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37.</td>
<td>1785</td>
<td>Antonio Lorenzo Guzmán</td>
<td>cacique principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38.</td>
<td>1792</td>
<td>Alberto de Luna</td>
<td>cacique</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.</td>
<td>1792</td>
<td>Ignacio Martínez</td>
<td>indio cacique</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40.</td>
<td>1793</td>
<td>María Teresa de la Cruz</td>
<td>cacica principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41.</td>
<td>1800</td>
<td>Andrés Nicolas de Luna</td>
<td>cacique</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42.</td>
<td>1805</td>
<td>Cristóbal Gerónimo Cortés</td>
<td>A.M. Tlacotepec, 2/5, —</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CACICAZGO MEMBERS SUPPORTED THEIR REPRESENTATIVE. AGGRAVATING THE SITUATION, THE LOCAL SPANISH MAGISTRATE (THE ALCALDE MAYOR) USUALLY FAVORED ONE CANDIDATE OVER ANOTHER STEMMING FROM HIS OWN SELF-INTEREST. ELECTORAL DISPUTES AND POLITICAL MANEUVERING BETWEEN HOUSES PERSISTED UNTIL IN 1767 THE COLONIAL GOVERNMENT BANNED ALL CACICES IN TLACOTEPEC FROM HOLDING PUBLIC OFFICE. JUDGING BY THE STRING OF COMPLAINTS INTO THE 1770S, HOWEVER, THIS MANDATE HARDLY ALTERED THE SITUATION. MACEHUALES REMAINED CONSPICUOUSLY ABSENT FROM THESE AFFAIRS.22

DOMINATION OF MUNICIPAL OFFICES GUARANTEED THAT CACICES AS A CLASS WOULD DICTATE USE OF TLACOTEPEC'S COMMUNITY PROPERTY. YET, IN THE DIVISIVE POLITICAL Landscape OF THE 18TH CENTURY, INDIVIDUAL CACICES ALSO EXPRESSED APPREHENSION ABOUT "THEIR" COMMUNITY PROPERTY. TO DEMAND PRIVILEGED ACCESS, THEY FREQUENTLY REITERATED AN ANCESTOR'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE PROPERTY'S PURCHASE. DON MANUEL MARTÍNEZ, FOR EXAMPLE, DECLARED IN HIS 1763 WILL:

I have a rancho founded on community land in this pueblo, named Santiago Tepetlaculco where approximately five funegas of crops are sown. I have this land because my ancestors contributed money for the purchase of the nine sites that this pueblo has for ganado menor. Therefore my heirs should enjoy possession of this land as my ancestors have, without the governor nor the citizens of this pueblo disposessing them of it.23

In his 1750 will, the wealthy cacique, don Juan Cortés de las Nieves, great-grandson of the aforementioned don Pedro de San Juan, recalled the loss of his ancestor’s land to the Conde del Valle de Orizaba and how he and his father, don Luis Cortés de las Nieves, contributed funds to repurchase it. While recognizing community jurisdiction over the property, he also strongly asserted his right to use it privately: “and with respect to the help that my father and I have given in buying these lands for the good of the community, I accordingly sustain myself by planting a portion of these fields and my son don Luis [the younger] has founded his ranch on them with a jagüey and two large barns built at his own expense.”24 In a later passage don Juan more boldly states his rights:

I declare that all the community lands possessed by this pueblo and its citizens were purchased with funds from the assets of my parents and grandparents and those of my wife, doña María Martínez, and therefore in good faith we profit from them and my heirs and successors should continue to do so. If at some time in the future the governors or other individuals attempt to impede my successors from profiting from these lands, the reason and merit of why my heirs do so should be made clear and all resources should be used to defend that right.25

CACICES PRIVATIZED PUBLIC PROPERTY, TREATING IT NO DIFFERENTLY FROM CACICAZGO LANDS. THEY USED MUNICIPAL OFFICES, NO DOUBT, TO GUARD RIGHTS TO THEIR COMMUNITY PROPERTY.

THE CRUZ CACICAZGO

FOR MANY TLACOTEPEC CACICES, HOWEVER, COMMUNITY HOLDINGS REMAINED SECONDARY. THOSE ASSOCIATED WITH PROMINENT FAMILIES RETAINED RIGHTS TO NUMEROUS TRACTS OF CACICAZGO PROPERTY. ELSEWHERE I EXPLORE MORE FULLY THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE INTERRELATIONS BETWEEN THE PUEBLO’S PROMINENT 18TH-CENTURY FAMILIES AND THEIR CACICAZGOS (PERKINS N.D.). HERE I FOCUS ON ONE CACICAZGO HELD BY THE HEIRS OF DOÑA AGUSTINA DE LA CRUZ, TLACOTEPEC’S LARGEST CACICAZ family.

As recounted above, we first learn of doña Agustina’s importance during Tlacotepec’s congregación in 1604–1605. At the time of her death in 1619, her cacicazgo consisted of multiple parcels of property scattered throughout the municipality. It included properties inherited from her father, don Martín de la Cruz
Ines and doña María de la Cruz.” They jointly di-
sort, as descendants and legitimate heirs of doña
Luna, don Miguel de la Cruz . . . along with other con-
descendants of Moctesuma (d.1740) reported co-ownership with “don
Huerta 1,292 pesos borrowed to defend other parcels.

Following Catholic custom, he created his last will and ancient
property, he had no right to uni-
laterally sell any property inherited from doña María
Ana de la Cruz. Clearly chastened, don Pedro re-
anted. He agreed to amend the will as soon as his health improved.27

This episode demonstrates how no one group, nor
a single individual, controlled the 18th-century cac-
cagzo. Multiple claims existed. It consisted not of a con-
tiguous expanse of land but of a collection of scattered parcels located in various parts of Tlacotepec’s munici-
pality. For any given parcel, a different coterie of Cruz descen-
dants claimed ownership through inheritance and the right to receive rental proceeds. While descend-
dants frequently cited Cañada Blanca in their wills, clearly not every member enjoyed rights to it. The same
held true for other parcels. In fact, some individuals claimed Cruz membership but had no property at all. Don Felix de Luna lamented in 1750 that from “the
goods of the cacicazgo of my father I have received nothing.” He called on his heirs to recover his claims.28

Others found themselves in similar straits.

The evidence from these last wills and testaments and other documents suggest that Tlacotepec’s caciques traced descent cognatically, as they had prob-
ably done during pre-Hispanic years (Kellogg 1995; discussed in Perkins 2000:40–45).29 Cognatic descent served two purposes under colonial rule: It demon-
strated an individual’s filiation with certain founders to validate land claims, and it permitted emphasis of “authentic” heritage, downplaying any genealogical connection to non-Indian, Spanish ancestors. Cognatic descent may have actually increased in importance dur-
ing colonial years, as individuals traced back to early colonial ancestors to prove their social status.30

A testator used partible inheritance to divide and bequeath lands to all his or her offspring. In their wills, Tlacotepec’s caciques illustrated partibility through the curious use of the Spanish term heredero universal. As a jural concept, it should have applied to a single heir of an estate. Caciques, however, simultaneously applied it to all their children, and often to spouses too.

With so much ambiguity, members could and did use Spanish courts to resolve disputes over ownership and to authenticate heritage. For example, don Pedro de Luna y Moctesuma took his cousin, don Diego de Luna, to court accusing don Diego of denying him ac-
access to lands as coheir of their common ancestor don Martín de Luna.31 In Santiago Tecali, Chance (2000:490) describes a court case where frustrated 18th-century Spanish officials heard the demands of 48 claimants to a single cacicazgo.
Given this type of evidence, Chance (1998) characterizes Santiago Tecali’s 18th-century houses as dispersed cacicazgos.

In contrast to entailed, “consolidated” cacicazgos where succession occurred through a designated heir each generation, the Tecali estates after 1660 may be called “dispersed” in the sense that each generation brought multiple heirs and a more extensive reshuffling of usufruct rights, yet the estates as wholes remained legally and culturally distinct entities. [Chance 1998:728–729; translation my own]

As in Tecali, Tlacotepec’s dispersed cacicazgos differed radically from Spanish ideas embodied in mayorazgo. In lieu of entailment, caciques traced descent from founding ancestors to justify access to a cacicazgo. Doña Agustina de la Cruz and doña María Valiente remained especially important ancestors in this regard.

But even with fragmented claims, cacicazgos as abstractions remained a basis for group solidarity. Small coteries of co-owners rallied to defend their property. Or faced with a larger crisis, Cruz members as a whole could unite—at least temporarily—to meet challenges from outside. If not everyone claimed property in common, they no doubt understood the common basis of their different claims. In this sense, the cacicazgo remained a fulcrum for group identification.

Conclusion

If we step back to survey the Valley of Puebla as a whole, we can see how complex its rural landscape had become. How many communities in Puebla resembled the organization of Santa Cruz Tlacotepec or Santiago Tecali? It is difficult to say. I would hypothesize, however, that others existed in microzones initially deemed unsuitable for agriculture by early Spaniards. In these niches, caciques had time to secure legal titles before economic expansion began anew in late colonial years. William Taylor (1974:409) finds in his investigation of southern Mexican land tenure that where Spanish estates “had not matured in populous Indian zones by about 1650 when the Indian communities were growing again, haciendas would not gain the upper hand in the eighteenth century, in spite of increasing colonization.” Taylor’s argument appears equally valid for Puebla. Initially, Spanish entrepreneurs ignored municipalities like Tlacotepec and Santiago Tecali. By the 18th century when they did seek access for livestock pasturing and limited cultivation, caciques effectively dictated the terms, often through lease agreements. Leases sometimes resulted in small ranchos developing (Chance 2003).

In contrast, important pre-Hispanic altepetl like Tepeaca (Perkins 2000:58–123), Tecamachalco, Quecholac (Martínez 1994), and Huexotzingo (Prem 1988) experienced early on the full-blown impact of large-scale Spanish estate agriculture, the classic hacienda. During the 16th and 17th centuries, estates grew rapidly in these fertile and well-watered agricultural zones, earning Puebla its early colonial reputation as New Spain’s breadbasket. Hacienda growth came at the expense of noble houses. By all accounts, cacicazgos ceased to exist in these areas. Although agricultural production stagnated in the 18th century (Garavaglia and Grosso 1986, 1990b; Lipsett-Rivera 1990), haciendas remained powerful entities in these zones.

Finally, a new type of Indian community developed alongside—sometimes in competition with—haciendas and communities like Tlacotepec and Tecali during the 18th century. I argue elsewhere that these newly designated pueblos approximate more closely the closed corporate peasant community model, though they developed later and through an entirely different process than Wolf envisaged. Macchuales in municipal subject towns, or gañanes (estate laborers) living on haciendas, petitioned colonial officials to “secede” from their municipality or hacienda. They sought designation as an official pueblo. The designation carried a number of privileges. Most importantly, it established a newly independent town council (cabildo). It also frequently led to the measurement of a community townsite (fundo legal) that could also be used for agriculture (Perkins, in press).

These pueblos, I believe, ultimately resulted in communities stratified along lines more familiar to ethnographers of modern Mesoamerica. They offered an escape from the hereditary privilege that caciques enjoyed in places like Tlacotepec. Pueblos opened opportunities for macchuales to directly participate in local government as electors and officials. Each one possessed a council made up of officials elected by all adult male members of the community, not just caciques. Absent the older status system, town officers could more fully represent the will of its members. The bestowal of townsites permitted macchuales to cultivate crops on lands not owned by caciques—ofentimes for
the first time in recorded history. Of course, it also opened opportunities to establish wealth inequality outside the hereditary estate division between caciques and macehuales. Overall, I argue that through secessions, these pueblos developed the sort of corporate community organization summarized by Wolf (1955) and familiar to modern ethnographers (Perkins in press).

Based on evidence from Puebla, it appears that the origin of corporate communities depended on the destruction of noble houses. Pueblos often arose where the indigenous elites’ monopoly on land and political power had been weakened or destroyed by Spanish agriculturalists. Where caciques maintained effective monopolies into the 18th century, macehuales might gain autonomy as political corporations but still lack any landholdings, as in the case of Tlotepec discussed by Chance (1996b:493–494, 499–500). At the other end of the spectrum, in locations like Tepeaca where 18th-century caciques controlled the municipal cabildo as the last bastion of power, the proliferation of pueblos governed by macehuales further diminished cacique standing. Shorn of lands by haciendas, then of political power by newly created pueblo governments, cacique identity brought little more than an exemption from royal tribute.

On the eve of Mexican independence in 1821, three hundred years of colonization left Puebla’s rural zones diverse and complex. Unfortunately, we lack strong empirical accounts of Puebla’s indigenous communities and their intermediate entities during the 19th and early 20th centuries as they confronted the challenges of nationhood. What occurred to Tlacotepec’s noble houses, for example, or the region’s newly created pueblos? To what extent did the national government’s liberal reforms penetrate the countryside and modify these arrangements? This epoch remains little investigated at the local level, yet it will be equally critical for our understanding of modern community organization.

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Notes

1. Mesoamericanists had already published empirical investigations that used history (or pseudo-history) to help understand modern social phenomena (e.g., Aguirre Beltrán 1967; Gamio 1922; Lewis 1951; Redfield 1941; Tax 1937; among others). But no one had theorized the analytical role of history as explicitly as Wolf. His orientation contributed to the development of both peasant studies and the theoretical tenets of anthropological political economy. “By the late 1960s,” in the words of William Roseberry, this alternative tradition of peasant studies had developed a distinctive and coherent perspective, one that stressed (a) the placement of peasant populations within wider “fields of power,” (b) an analysis that links local and wider levels by concentrating on connecting relationships, within a “web” of relations, and (c) an understanding of relations and fields historically, in terms of the differential consequences of colonization, state formation, and capitalist development. [1995:161]

2. The severity and duration of this depression have been questioned (e.g., see Tepaske and Klein 1981).

3. Linguists place Nahuatl in the Uto-Aztecan language family and Popoloca in the Otomanguean family. We associate Nahuatl with “Aztec” people. However, ethnohistorians use the indigenous term Nahuas to identify Central Mexico’s widely dispersed speakers of Nahuatl (see Lockhart 1992). I restrict my use of Aztecs to members of the Valley of Mexico’s imperial altepetl (i.e., citizens of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan). On the other hand, Popoloca-speakers share strong linguistic affinities with Mixtec- and Zapotec-speakers in Oaxaca (e.g., see Josserand, Winter, and Hopkins 1984). A 1980 survey found 3,055 speakers of Popoloca and 1,528 of Nahuatl in Tlacotepec’s municipality (Barbosa Cano 1980:74–77).

4. In Nahuatl, singular and plural forms of tlaxcalli and altepetl are identical. The same holds true for other terms denoting organizations. Pluralization denotes members.

5. Although these complex issues remain beyond the present article’s scope, we certainly need further comparative investigations of the intermediate institutions structuring pre-Hispanic altepetl in the Valleys of Mexico and Puebla. The enigmatic Aztec calpulli (big house) of the Valley of Mexico will figure in the discussion, as will its lesser-known synonym, tlaxilacalli. In an important summary statement, James Lockhart (1992:104–108) points to the virtual absence of the term calpulli or tlaxilacalli in native language documents from Puebla. Meanwhile, the term tecalli (noble house) is entirely absent from documents emanating from the Valley of Mexico—though tecpan (palace) does appear. In my view, we have yet to satisfactorily address whether terminological variations reflected merely regional Nahuatl nomenclature or actual organizational variation between the altepetl of Puebla and Mexico.

6. Alonso Valiente, a kinsman and secretary of Cortés, received Tecamachalco’s encomienda. His wife, Melchora Pellicel Alberrucia, assumed its control after his death in the early 1560s. Their eldest son, don Rodrigo de Vivero Alberrucia, became the first Conde del Valle de Orizaba in the Valley of Mexico—though tecpan (palace) does appear. In my view, we have yet to satisfactorily address whether terminological variations reflected merely regional Nahuatl nomenclature or actual organizational variation between the altepetl of Puebla and Mexico.
Meanwhile, two brothers, Pedro and Fernando Villanueva, acquired Quecholac’s encomienda. Fernando died in the 1530s. Gonzalo Rodríguez de la Magdalena replaced him, after which time descendants of both men shared the encomienda until it reverted to the Crown in the later 16th century (Himmerich y Valencia 1991:224, 262).

My information comes from the official congregación report, reposed in the Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City (hereafter AGN), Tierras, vol. 73, exp. 3, fols. 1r.–122v.

Don Baltasar Morales remains enigmatic. As indicated in Table 2, he received many house lots for tributaries outside of Tlacotepec, in addition to 68 lots for 62.5 tributaries in Tlacotepec. Nevertheless, Tlacotepec’s 18th-century caciques did not memorialize him as they did doña María Valiente or doña Agustina de la Cruz. Perhaps he left no descendants, or none survived. Or perhaps closer attention to caciques in nearby Santa María la Alta or San Simón Yehualtepec would reveal his historical significance there.

The colonial government sold composiciones (land compositions) to generate revenue in exchange for confirmation of properties held without title or with a suspect title. Indian communities did not participate in the mid-17th-century composiciones, but they did in the early-18th-century program (Wood 1992:388–389). Tlacotepec’s municipal officials paid 300 pesos in 1717 to compose the titles: 100 pesos paid by the headtown; 200 pesos paid by subject communities.

“Societies with cognatic descent have concepts of descent-based entitlement, and descent-based corporate units can be formed by tracing descent through male and/or female links” (Kellogg 1995:161n.1).

For example, as discussed above, doña María Ana de la Cruz first married a Spaniard, Juan de Vizcayno. According to Spanish law her heirs by Vizcayno should have been disqualified from cacicazgo claims. But using cognatic descent, descendants emphasized their cacique heritage, ignoring (or hiding) their Spanish ancestry.

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