

IDEOLOGY AND HISTORY IN THE PICTORIAL NARRATIVES OF ANCIENT MEXICO

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In 1519, at their arrival in what is now Mexico, the Spanish conquerors encountered an original and sophisticated civilisation, shared by dozens of American peoples. Dominant in Central Mexico was the Aztec agrarian tribute-state, created in a mere hundred years of military and commercial expansion, but there were also many smaller polities, partly subdued and/or incorporated by the Aztec realm, partly independent. Although there are many interesting regional variations, the native civilizations of this huge region are to be seen as parts of one single cultural continuum or co-tradition, known as “Mesoamerica”.¹

Archaeologically it can be shown that in 1519 Mesoamerican civilisation had already passed through a complex development of at least two and a half thousand years. In the second millennium B.C. a process of state-formation had been initiated. Since those early days, the varied, abrupt landscape, with its many mountain ranges, had determined a fragmented political organisation: Mesoamerica was a mosaic of small polities, based on agriculture (mainly maize), and governed by hereditary rulers who formed alliances (e.g. through marriage) or waged wars with each other. Such a small kingdom was designated in the Mesoamerica language with the poetical hendiadys “mat and throne” (*petlatl iopalli* in nahuatl, the language spoken by the Aztecs; *yuvui tayu* in Mixtec, etc.).

In an evolutionary perspective, one can follow the development of these polities from an early chiefdom-like structure with a strong emphasis on shamanistic, *nahualistic* leadership,² to the “classic” urbanisation and

¹ The concept “Mesoamerica” was coined by Paul Kirshoff in the early ‘40s and since has proved to be of a great theoretical and practical value (see the comment by Gordon R. Willey, “Recent Researches and Perspectives in Mesoamerican Archaeology: an Introductory Commentary.” *Supplement to the Handbook of Middle American Indians: Archaeology*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1981. p. 4). The great area reaches from the northern desert of Mexico to the Nicoya peninsula in Costa Rica.

² Nahualism, briefly said, is an ancient Mexican concept according to which each human being has an *alter ego* (nahual) in nature, an animal or natural phenomenon, with which he

early statehood with its elaborate elite court-life and its great monuments, that indicate a hierarchical organisation based on tribute of goods and services as well as the symbolic construction of a community through collective self expression. Hereditary lineages developed, controlling the small states as rulers and tribute receivers, adding military powers to their traditional religious power.

Only some of the city-states succeeded in permanently enlarging their territory at the expense of others (through conquests and alliances), and developing into empire-state realms which made their influence felt throughout the whole of Mesoamerica. These were successively:

- 1) Teotihuacan (in the early Classic period, i.e. ± 250 - ± 650 A.D.)
- 2) The Toltecs (in the early Postclassic, i.e. ± 900 - ± 1200 A.D.)
- 3) The Aztecs (in the late Postclassic, i.e. 1492 - 1592 A.D.)

All three had as their centre a huge capital in the central valley (Altiplano) of Mexico, an area economically integrated by the canoe-traffic over the central Lake of Texoco.

Explicitly linking political reality to cosmovision, the self-legitimizing ideology of the ruling lineages played an important role in the formation of the city-states and left its imprint on sites like Teotihuacan, Monte Albán, Tula, Palenque, Chichén Itzá, etc., where its message was expressed in monuments and other precious works of art and even in the planning of the center itself:

Across Mesoamerica, pyramids and plazas emphasized and made permanent the setting aside of sacred space for their elite use and provided for public participation (at least as spectators) in rituals that constructed and reinforced societal conceptions on the nature of rulership.³

shares his destiny: when the animal dies, the individual dies too. Powerful persons, like traditional healers or authorities, generally have strong and dominant nahuales (see e.g. López Austin, 1980). The shamanistic aspect of the incipient elite is also documented for the chiefdoms in the Caribbean area.

³ See Grove and Gillespie in Arthur A. Demarest and Geoffrey W. Conrad, *Ideology and Pre-Columbian Civilisation*, School of American Research Press, Santa Fe, 1992. p. 35.

Just as religious convictions determined social ethos and the way in which the native Americans behaved towards nature, ideology provided the frame for the recording and interpretation of history. Most clearly this is seen in Maya sites where numerous reliefs eternalise the rulers, engaged in ritual celebrations at key positions in time and space.⁴

Mesoamerica is unique in the Americas because of its writing systems and its richness of image-bearing artefacts. Diversely from their relatives in North and South America, the peoples of Mesoamerica have left us written inscriptions and picture books, in which they registered a huge quantity of data about their history, religion, astronomy, etc.⁵

Due to the Spanish colonisation in the XVI Century, many products of the ancient Mesoamerican civilization were destroyed or lost, among them also an enormous treasure of native books. They were replaced only to a very limited extent by chronicles written in the early colonial period by conquerors and monks (Sahagùn, Duràn, Ruiz de Alacòn and many others), which describe the situation before the Spanish conquest - sometimes with a wealth of details - but are distorted, or at least strongly influenced) by the Spanish bias and value-judgments. The historiography and literary heritage of the Amerindians themselves, therefore, is a crucial primary source of information, which no study of Mesoamerican civilization can ignore. The writing and sign systems, which were in use at the time of the Spanish conquest, go back to the beginning of our era and consist of combinations of figurative scenes with hieroglyphical elements, in varying proportion.⁶

The most important are:

⁴ See Carolyn A. Tate, *Yaxchilan. The Design of a Maya Cerimonial City*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1992.

⁵ The important role of ideology in the process of state formation and the ideological or even magical significance what writing itself can have in context, have been the theme of many studies; see the segment "The Role of Writing and Literacy in the Development of Social and Political Power", in John Gledhill, Barbara Bender and Mogens Trolle Larsen, *State and Society. The Emergence and Development of Social Hierarchy and Political Centralization*, Unwin Hyman, London, 1988. pp. 17. The ideological aspects of the Indian historiography of Mesoamerica have been analysed by many authors; see for a recent synthesis Arthur A. Demarest and Geoffrey W. Conrad, *op.cit.* and also Henri J.M. Clacssen and Jarich G. Oosten, *Ideology and the Formation of Early States*, B.J. Brill, Leiden, 1996.

⁶ These two writing traditions clearly have a different character, but they should not be considered in isolation. Hieroglyphs register the spoken word, while, pictography converts the information directly into figurative images. Still, there are a number of significant conformities as to contents and even way of rendering ideas and representing concrete elements.

- 1) *Hieroglyphic Writing System*, used by the Classic Zapotecs (in Oaxaca) and, in a much more elaborate way, by the Mayas (in Eastern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize and Honduras).
- 2) *Pictography* (Pictorial Writing) used by the Mixtecs, Aztecs and others peoples in Central and South-West Mexico.

The corpus of ancient Mexican pictographic manuscripts – which is to be focused upon here – constitutes a unique literary legacy of the precolonial Mexican civilization, full of inside information about the ancient cacicazgos, given by indigenous authors according to their own vision and in their own terms.

As to form, the pictographic manuscripts can be divided into two main categories:

- *Codices*, i.e. screenfold books, and *Rolls*, made of arge and folded strips of deerskin or indigenous paper, whitened with stucco, later also European books,
- *Lienzos*, large pieces of cloth made of cotton.

Both, generally, contain polychrome paintings or black outline drawings of figurative scenes, in a special system of pictographic conventions, registering stories and ideas. Often these manuscripts are aesthetically impressive works of art and cultural historical sources of the first rank, with complex and fascinating contents.

A distinction can be made between

- a) The so called religious or “prescriptive” manuscripts (used for prognostication and rituals);
- b) The historical or “descriptive” manuscripts, which deal with the history of the precolonial dynasties in Postcalssic Era (ca. 900-1521 A.D.), their sacred origins and ritual activities, marriage-alliances and genealogies, the geographical extension of the kingdom, conquests and tribute-rights, etc.

These are a primary source for our knowledge of the precolonial political structures and their ideology, i.e. the ways in which the rules legitimated

their power by referring to religious concepts and practices (origins-myths, rituals and calendar-symbolism). The ideological dimension is discovered in full depth when we try to apply what we learn from examining the context of the divinatory-ritual manuscripts in deciphering the historical narratives.

The basic conceptual ingredients are similar in the historical manuscripts of Mixtecs, Aztecs and other ancient Mexican civilizations. The Mixtee Codex Vindobonensis Mexicanus I, for example, shows that the Mextec ruling families identified their place of origin with Earth, using the metaphor of the First Ancestors being born from a tree, situated in places of special religious significance like Apoala or Achiutla. Later rulers claimed descent in a direct bloodline from those Founders of the dynasty. This tree-birth took place in the sacred time of creation (*in illo tempore*), described as the primordial darkness. A Mixtec myth, written down in Spanish by the Dominican friar Gregorio García (Libro V, cap.4), describes the time of origin in characteristic *difrasismos*:

En el ano y en el dia
de la oscuridad y tinieblas,
antes que hubiese dias ni anos,
estando el mundo en grand oscuridad,
que todo era un caos y confusion,
estaba la tierra cubierta de agua:
sòlo habìa limo y lama
sobre la faz de la tierra.⁷

Such *difrasismos* can be understood through the Mixtec dictionary of fray Francisco de Alvarado (1593): *quevui, cuiya*, “year, day”, means “time” and *sanaa sayavui* is translated as “escura cosa” (something dark) but also as “mystery”. So, the first phrase “in the year and on the day of obscurity and darkness” is to be understood as “in the mysterious time”. This and the following references to the era before light have their parallel in the Popol Vuh, the sacred book of the Quiché in Guatemala. The first sunrise marks

⁷ “In the year and on the day
of obscurity and darkness,
before there were days nor years,
the world being in great darkness,
so that all was chaos and confusion,
the earth was covered with water:
there was only slime and mud
on the face of the earth.”

the beginning of human history; the era before that moment, the primordial darkness, is the time of sacred history, whose protagonists are Gods and mythical creatures.⁸ In the same way, Codex Vindobonensis Mexicanus I shows that already before the beginning of human history the deified Founders of the dynasties were connected with Earth, with the land: they were born out of trees or directly out of earth or a river. Later they or their descendents gave the land in usufruct to the people, who, in reciprocity, then owed tribute to them.⁹

The tree is an important metaphor in Mesoamerican iconography: it symbolizes strength, continuity, growth, referring to the protecting shadow influence of the ruler, to the genealogy of his family, to the stability of the heavens and the fertility of the earth or to the success of enterprise in general. Primordial trees are raised by the creator God Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca to sustain the heavens.¹⁰ In accordance with the Mesoamerican conceptual organisation of the cosmos in four parts (each associated with deities and segments of the ritual calendar with their divinatory implications), some sources speak of four or five trees, associated with the cardinal points.¹¹ In nahuatl the primordial tree is called *Tonacacuahuitl*, “the tree of our sustenance, i.e. of maize”, adored first by the Toltec divine ruler Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl and later identified with the Christian cross.¹²

⁸ The nahuatl cognate concept *yohuyan*, “in the time of the night”, is used in the same sense in nahuatl chronicles like the Annals of Cuauhtitlan, and is at the core of the story of the first sunrise in Teotihuacan. See my analysis of Mesoamerican religion in the commentary on Codex Laud in Ferdinand Anders and Maarten Jansen, *Pintura de la Muerte y de los Destinos. Libro explicativo del llamado Còdice Laud*, Fondo della Cultura Economica, México, 1994.

⁹ So it is said explicitly about the founder of the dynasty of Tecomaxtlahuaca in the codex of the same name; see Ferdinand Anders and Maarten Jansen, *op.cit.* (1994)

¹⁰ In Angel Ma. Garibay, *Teogonia e Historia de los Mexicanos. Tres opùsculos del siglo XVI*, Editorial Porrù, México, 1979.

¹¹ Ferdinand Anders, Maarten Jansen and Luis Reyes Garcia, *Los Templos del Cielo y de la Ocuridad: Oràculos y Liturgia. Libro explicativo del llamado Codice Borgia (Mus.Borg. P.F. Messicano I)*, Fondo de Cultura Econòmica, Mexico, 1993. p. 49-53

¹² See the references by Gerònimo de Mendieta, *Historia Eclesiàstica Indiana*, Editorial Porrù, México, 1971 p. 309; Ferdinand Anders and Maarten Jansen, *Costumbres e Historia del los Antiguos Mexicanos. Libro explicativo del llamado Codice Vaticano A (Codice Vaticano 3738)*, Fondo della Cultura Econòmica, México, in press. p.3; Berdardino de Sahagùn, *Fiorentine Codex, General History of the things of New Spain*, The School of American Research and University of Utah, Santa Fe, 1950 and 1978. vol. VI, ch.21; Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, *Obras Històricas*, Universidad Nacional Autonoma de México, 1975. Vol. II, p. 8. In the early colonial period several authors identified the Toltec ruler Quetzalcoatl with a christian apostole – see Jacque Lafaye, *Quetzalcoatl y Guadalupe*, Fondo de la Cultura Econòmica, México, 1977 and the valuable additional analysis by Werner Stenzel, *Quetzalcoatl von Tula. Die Mythogenese einer postkortesischen Legende*, Zeitschrift für Lateinamerika, Wien, 1980.

The First Ruler, born from a tree, is compared implicitly to the Maize God born from the earth, represented as an alligator in Central Mexico and as a turtle by the Maya.¹³ Following the examples of the Creator Gods, the later rulers and their vassals in autosacrifice offered blood, extracted from their tongues, ears or penises, to the relics and symbols of this primordial time, generally represented as the Holy Bundle, and so made the cosmic tree of the dynasty grow and flourish.¹⁴

In the beginning of the Mixtec Codex Selden, the tree from which Founder of the dynasty of the Mixtec city-state of Jaltepec is born, is surrounded by snakes of clouds and night, and so qualified as belonging to the mysterious nahual-world. The serpent is also used to represent the vision in which Ancestors manifest themselves to their descendants after they have performed proper autosacrifice.

The rulers related themselves explicitly to this divine origin not only through their blood-line (descendance), but also through rituals: the ancestor-cult, consisting of offering to the Holy Bundle, the drilling of the New Fire, the commemoration of specific holy dates which symbolize the foundation of the cacicazgo, etc. The ruler, gifted with special religious powers (through his tasting and visionary experiences, his transformation in *nahual* animals, and his symbolic identification with patron deities), acts on behalf of the whole community. Not surprisingly, the Mixtec titles for "Lord", *lya*, and "Lady", *lya dzhe*, are applied both to rulers and to Gods.

This is the other aspect of power: not a mere economic or military faculty to control the behaviour of others, to make them obey and pay tributes, but charismatic power, a religious authority, based on the sacred experience of personal contact and identification with the Ancestors, with Earth and Creation.¹⁵

A key example of this legitimating policy we find in the historical figure to whom the Mixtec kings traced the origin of their status and power, Lord 8 Deer Jaguar Claw (1063 – 1115 A.D.), who is portrayed as a great

¹³ See David Freidel, Linda Schele and Joy Parker, *Maya Cosmos. Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path*, New York, 1993. p.66.

¹⁴ See the scene in Borgia, *op.cit.*, p. 53, where Quetzalcoatl and Macuilxochitl offer their blood to the earth deity Ciuacoatl, so that the tree of maize may grow from her. On the sarcophagus-lid of Palenque, Lord Pacal is deposited on a spirited bowl or "god pot" as a *Bauopfer* at the foot of the tree (similar bowls are associated with Ciuacoatl in the temple rituals depicted in Codex Borgia, *op.cit.*, pp.29-31. Like Moctezuma and Tecum Umam, Lord Pacal is transformed into an earth deity, a subterranean ruler, who, in the circle of his ancestors (represented in relief on the four sides of his tomb), controls the fertility of the land and the fortune of his descendants and vassals. This theme will be examined with more detail in the commentary on Codex Selden which Aurora Pérez and I are preparing.

¹⁵ Until today this concept is present in the visionary wisdom of the Mazatec curanderos, cf. Eckart Boege, *Los mazatecos ante la naciòn.*, Siglo XXI Editores, México, 1988. pp.178-179.

conqueror and unifier of the Mixtec region. The intriguing factor is that Lord 8 Deer himself originally was not part of a ruling lineage and did not possess the birth-right to become king. The Mixtec codes Bodley, Nuttall and Colombino-Becker go into a lot of detail in order to explain his road to power. With reason, as most subsequent Mixtec kings based their legitimacy on their descent from Lord 8 Deer. But in this case, the origin of the protagonist is not traced to some holy tree. Instead, a true epic is presented, full of literary elements which enhance the suspense of the story, in which Lord 8 Deer, who had been born as the eldest son of the second marriage of an important High Priest of Tilantongo, travels in a shamanic flight to a frightful cave in Chalcatongo, where he invokes the aid of the powers of death. The detailed description of this cave by Burgoa makes it clear that it was the common burial place of the Mixtec kings, so, we conclude, Lord 8 Deer turned to the dead and deified Ancestors for guidance (and ideological legitimation in the eyes of posterity). Their divine support results in military success. Conquered towns alternate with rituals, like offerings to the Trees of the Four Directions.

Then, Lord 8 Deer added significantly to his prestige by concluding an alliance with a famous Toltec priest-king, Nacxitl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl (represented as Lord 4 Jaguar in Mixtec codices) who ruled in Tula-Choula (represented by the sign Cattail Frieze).¹⁶ This important character bestowed upon him the high status which made it possible for Lord 8 Deer to become ruler of Tilantongo, the central kingdom of the Mixteca Alta. That status – which is the base on which the later Mixtec rulership is founded – is symbolized by a turquoise ornament, which is put in Lord 8 Deer's nose during a nose piercing ceremony. This is a clear example of an honorific insignia or status symbol, which accompanies the protagonist, as a memento of his crucial contact and alliance with a prestigious, superior person.

The central Mexican sources tell us that Nacxitl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl at the end of his reign marched away to Tlillan Tlapallan, i.e. the area of the laguna de Términos and Xicalango.¹⁷ The Mixtec codices Nuttall and Colombino-Becker show that Lord 8 Deer accompanied his Toltec friend Lord 4 Jaguar (= Nacxitl) on a large expedition eastwards,

¹⁶ "The identification of Lord 4 Jaguar as Nacxitl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl is based on his father-crown and the pimple or tumour between his nose and forehead.", in Diego fray Duràn, *Historia de las Indias de la Nueva Espana e Islas de la Tierra Firme*, Porruà, México, 1967. Vol. I. p. 9, 14. Nacxitl is a calendar name, a contraction of *nau ixcitl*, "4 Foot". The day name "Foot", does not belong to the Mixtec or Aztec calendar, but to the earlier calendrical system of Xochicalco; the Mixtecs apparently translated this name as 4 Jaguar.

¹⁷ See Nigel Davies, *The Toltecs until the Fall of Tula*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1977; Stelzen, *op.cit.*; Michel Grulich, *Quetzalcoatl el Espejismo de Tollan*, Istitut Voor Amerikanistiek, Antwerp, 1988.

towards the end of which they conquered an island in front of the coast. The location and description of the places in these codices (there where the heaven rests upon the water and where there are alligators, flying fish, big conchs, etc.) made me suggest that this is precisely that area of the Laguna de Términos, Xicalango and Acalan on the Mexican Gulf coast, the land of the Putùn, which, as we know from ethnohistorical sources and from archaeological data, was under the strong influence of the Toltecs, and which functioned as a gateway to the Yucatan peninsula.¹⁸ The Mixtec version implies that Topiltzin had undertaken his famous voyage to this area – theme of many later legends – already much earlier, when he was still charismatic warlord, based in Cholula. The Popol Vuh illustrates the importance of the link with Nacxitl for the legitimation of the Quiché rulers: he is the one who grants the insignia of rulership and confirms the founders of local dynasties in their royal powers:

And then they came before the Lord named Nacxitl, the great lord and sole judge over a populous domain. And he was the one who gave out the signs of lordship, all the emblems; the signs of the Keeper of the Mat and the Keeper of the Reception House Mat were set forth. And when the signs of the splendour and lordship of the Keeper of the Mat and the Keeper of the Reception House Mat were set fourth, Nacxitl gave a complete set of the emblems of lordship. Here are their names:

Canopy, throne.
Bone flute, bird whistle.
Paint of powdered yellow stone.
Puma's paw, jaguar's paw.
Head and hoof of deer.
Bracelet of rattling snail shells.
Gourd of tobacco.
Nosepiece.
Parrot feathers, heron feathers.

¹⁸ See Eric J.S. Thompson, *Maya History and Religion*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1970.

They brought all of these when they came away. From across the sea, they bought back the writings about Tulan.¹⁹

After his alliance with the Toltecs and the blessings of Quetzalcoatl, which made him king in Tilantongo, Lord 8 Deer confirmed his legitimacy through marrying a princess of the prestigious “central” lineage of that town, on the specific holy day used by members of this lineage for marriage. In fact, he married several wives creating distinct lineages, who, after his death, distributed the inheritance. Although the Mixtec region never was united again under one ruler, the idea of real or fictitious kinship bonds between the ruling elite, “one great family of kings and queens”, subsisted as the conceptual base for a well calculated marital alliance policy, aimed at enhancing the prestige of each lineage and keeping in cacicazgo (and the corresponding tribute rights) united.

Where the metaphor of the birth out of trees, rivers, caves or earth may be interpreted in terms of the direct bond between the dynasty or people and nature, the fact that the dynastic Mesoamerican historiography tends to focus on that one charismatic personality of Nacxitl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl as the ultimate provider of royal status, may be interpreted as the influence of a centralistic ideology, according to which many distinct aristocracies (all with their own circumstances and privileges) were connected with the overall imperial reign of the Toltecs, and, therefore, with the concept of a supreme “cacique of caciques”.

It was this ideology that Hernan Cortés used to take and to legitimate his power. The Spanish replaced the top of the Aztec empire with their own colonial administration and mostly left the lower authorities and local nobles in charge. So, the later Indian documents throw light on this transformation of the “mat and throne” into the colonial cacicazgo, of the precolonial noble, closely related to the gods, to the accultured cacique, and on the relations between the indigenous communities, the indigenous nobility and the Spanish colonial administration in general.²⁰

¹⁹ Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh, The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1985. p.203-204.

²⁰ The consequences of the colonizing process for the indigenous worldview and for the production of the pictorial manuscripts and other literary works has been investigated by Serge Gruzinsky, *La colonización de lo imaginario. Sociedades indígenas y occidentalización en el México español. Siglos XVI-XVIII*, Fondo de la Cultura Económica, México, 1991. Apart from the pictographic sources, there are many Indian documents written in Spanish or in Amerindian languages (using the introduced alphabet). An interesting colonial product are the so called *titulos primordiales*: “The documents were created in the context of the official Spanish land surveys and confirmation of community land rights, but they reflected Indian

Where the scenes from Codices Bodley, Nuttall and Colombino-Becker give a uniquely clear view of the ideological concepts and mechanisms of the precolonial *iya*, other pictographic manuscripts, stemming from the period immediately after the conquest, in combination with the colonial documents, give insights into the early-colonial social structure of Mexico. Their main objective was to defend the ancient rights of the communities and the ruling families within the new context.²¹

Native society, thus, was not decapitated nor killed, but entered a new era. The interplay of the native aristocracy and their tributary communities took on a new dimension. Already in precolonial historiography a distinction had been presented: the Aztec ruler Moctezuma traced his dynastic rights back to Quetzacoatl, but his people, organized in *calpulli*'s (cult and family groups), situated their origin in Aztlan, a kind of projection of their capital Tenochtitlan back into the past, on a mythic level. But in the colonial situation this distinction deepened. The indigenous nobility was not exterminated but integrated into the colonial system of "indirect rule". The social and mental changes demanded a renewed legitimation of the power and privileges, the control of the land, population and tributes. This is clearly reflected in pictography: the cacique wears Spanish clothes (instead of the pre-hispanic insignia), identifying with the new, dominant culture, and he sits on a Spanish chair (instead of the "throne and mat"), indicating that his cacicazgo is part of the Spanish administration. The main ideological reference of the cacique is to the meeting with Cortés (instead of Quetzalcoatl), during which he or his ancestor manifested himself as a loyal vassal. Just like the beginning of Mesoamerican history was marked by the first sunrise, now *la luz del evangelio* meant the birth of a new sun or era, with its own rituals (baptism, mass, etc.). Patron Saints were the new forms and names of the age old Patron Deities of the villages, of the days of the calendar and of the people themselves.

The indigenous community (*república de indios*) was recognized as such under colonial rule, but had to rely on social cohesion (collaboration, reciprocity and other communal mechanisms) to defend itself against abuses and exploitation. The concepts introduced from Europe about the possession

criteria rather than those which would be asserted directly to the Spanish adjudicators. They include a substantial amount of pre-conquest legendary material, which serves as a symbolic framework for assimilating the communities, defence of their territory from expansionist haciendas to their defence against Aztec dominance. The apparent carryover of pre-conquest ritual elements – such as feasting, trumpets and mock-battles – suggest that the genre itself was aboriginal.", in John Gledhill, Barbara Bender and Morgens Trolle Larsen, *op.cit.*, p. 314; James Lockhart, *The Nahuas after the Conquest*, Stanford University Press, 1992.

²¹ See Ronald Spores, *The Mistec Kings and Their People*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1967.

of land as a commodity, as a *territorium* that was circumscribed and could be owned and sold, made it necessary to define the frontiers of the communities. This not only created many conflicts between communities but also implied a new relationship with the cacique. The pre- and early-colonial data generally refer to the tribute obligations and to subjects that worked dispersed lands of the noble lords (“Personenverband”), but in the later colonial documents the owned land itself - and especially the circumscribed *territorium* of a community (“Territorialverband”) -, occupies a central place. Land titles were created as a new form of communal inspired indigenous historiography. There are quite a few interesting cases of dynastic precolonial histories being reused as such land-titles: the names of the toponyms that mark the border line were inscribed on them and ultimately they passed from the hands of the cacique to the municipal archive.²² A series of juridical process-acts accompanies this fascinating transformation, which is at base of the complex present day political structure of Mexico.²³

The further exploration of the details of this historical development of the precolonial and early colonial cacicazgos and their ideological referents is the aim of ongoing research on Mexican codices and lienzos. As our understanding of the corpus increases, a better, more coherent and more eloquent image of the historiography of the Mesoamerican city states will emerge.

²² Maarten Jansen, *La Gran Familia de los Reyes Mixtecos. Libro explicativo de los códices llamado Egerton y Beker II*, Fondo de la Cultura Económica, México, 1994.

²³ For more details, see the interesting publications by Arij Ouweneel and Simon Miller, “The Indian Community of Colonial Mexico. Fifteen Essays on Land Tenure, Corporate Organizations, Ideology and village Politics”, in *Latin American Studies*, 58. CEDIA, Amsterdam, 1990 and Lockhart, *op.cit.*