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Parallelism, Power, and Practice: Women in 15th-18th Century Mesoamerican Households

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An abstract of
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Abstract

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As Hernán Cortés and his small legion of Spanish conquistadors invaded Mesoamerica (a region that ranges from present-day Mexico to Honduras), they brought with them genocidal violence and the desire to force the Spanish culture on the indigenous people of this area. As the Spanish Conquest continued, the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries were a time of immense change and hardship for the indigenous people of Mesoamerica, especially indigenous women. This thesis contributes to the historiographical understanding of women's power during this difficult period as they made the best of a society that built off gender inequalities in the pre-Hispanic period and enforced a heightened sense of patriarchy as it manifested in Spanish culture. While many previous scholars have focused more singularly on how women were subordinated by the imposition of the Spanish Conquest or actively found ways to exert power, this thesis hopes to contribute to a growing body of work that demonstrates the complexity of indigenous women's experiences in Mesoamerica. In this paper, I suggest that Mesoamerican women created, reinforced, and cultivated places of power within the household whether in the pre-Hispanic or colonial periods. Indeed, even during the substantial changes brought by Spanish colonialism, women continued certain pre-Hispanic practices within domestic work and marriage while adapting to and adopting aspects of the Spanish colonial system as they exerted power and agency to sustain, protect, and serve their communities, families, and selves.

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Introduction and Historiography

While women's roles have varied from society to society, place to place, and time to time, one role has not: childbirth. Among the pre-Hispanic Mexica (also known as the Aztecs), female midwives played a central role in the sacred act of childbirth. These aged experts provided comfort and advice to soon-to-be mothers, treasuring the new baby boy's or girl's life. They called these newly born infants precious necklaces or feathers to celebrate their birth and welcome them into the world. This female figure of the midwife prepared and assisted mothers through labor, holding the knowledge to ensure the continuation of Mexica society. Midwives massaged the mother's stomach to position the baby for birth, drew sweat baths, and administered ciuapatli (an herb) or opossum tail during more challenging labors to hasten the birth and aid with pain. If the mother passed away due to complications, she would be given an exalted place in the afterlife alongside male warriors who died in battle, as both gender-specific roles strengthened the empire and ensured its future. When, as hoped for, the mother gave birth to a healthy baby, the midwife celebrated this victory. The midwife then cut the baby's umbilical cord and followed a tradition that sketched out the child's role for the rest of their life.¹

The following steps of the ritual process of childbirth were highly gendered as midwives presented the baby boy to his mother with a tool that aligned with the work of his father (including objects like weaponry or carpentry materials). His umbilical cord was buried on the battlefield to signify his role in the expansion of the empire and protection of his community against outside enemies. Baby girls were given back to their mothers with implements symbolic

¹ Bernardino de Sahagún, available at *Digital Florentine Codex/Códice Florentino Digital*, eds. Kim N. Richter and Alicia Maria Houtrouw, "Book 6: Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy" (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2023), folio 144r-144v, <https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/book/6/folio/144r?spTexts=&nhTexts=>.

of a woman's work (like a spindle or a broom). Their umbilical cord was buried under the hearth of the home, signifying their central place within the Mexican household and the numerous duties that came with this distinction.² While the gender roles expressed in this ritual may seem to be anticipated by the extreme patriarchy brought to Mesoamerica with the advent of Spanish colonialism, the truth is much more complicated.

Before the Spanish Conquest (and continuing in specific ways throughout the colonial period), indigenous Mesoamericans practiced gender parallelism and complementarity throughout society as seen in an investigation of this thesis' central themes: the household, domestic work, and marriage. Under gender complementarity, men's and women's work was practically divided to create a balanced and thriving society.³ Gender parallelism is the most significant way in which pre-Hispanic gender roles differed from Spanish patriarchy. As historian Susan Kellogg writes, gender parallelism "refers to parallel social structures and cultural configurations for males and females."⁴ These gender ideologies portray an idealized, although not necessarily accurate, world in which an equal ideology became a truly unequal reality. While patriarchal practices can undoubtedly be seen in the pre-Hispanic period in the practice of polygyny, the exploitation of women's labor, and violence against women, indigenous Mesoamerican societies nevertheless intentionally created parallel spaces for women's power and authority. Spanish colonizers believed in an intensified version of the patriarchy that looked to put women under the authoritative control of men, whether conquistadors or colonizers.

² De Sahagún, *Digital Florentine Codex/Códice Florentino Digital*, eds. Kim N. Richter and Alicia Maria Houtrouw, "Book 6: Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy," fol. 146r-148r, <https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/book/6/folio/146r?spTexts=&nhTexts=>.

³ Susan Kellogg, "The Woman's Room: Some Aspects of Gender Relations in Tenochtitlan in the Late Pre-Hispanic Period," *Ethnohistory* 42, no. 4 (1995): 565, <https://doi.org/10.2307/483143>.

⁴ Kellogg, "The Woman's Room," 564.

However, the reality was not what they had expected. In contrast to Mesoamerican gender parallelism that created spaces for women's agency, the Spanish patriarchal society that was imposed throughout the colonial period attempted to foreclose that agency but was not completely successful.

As Hernán Cortés and his small legion of Spanish conquistadors invaded Mesoamerica in 1519, they entered a complex world far different from the one from which they had come. As historian Matthew Restall notes, the region of Mesoamerica that stretches from central Mexico to Honduras and Nicaragua contains a remarkable diversity and richness of human environments and physical landscapes where the Mexica lived.⁵ Long before the beginning of the Conquest, Mesoamerica was not a politically unified region. Conquered altepetl, like the Tlaxcalans, did not willingly submit to Mexica domination. When the opportunity presented itself, they joined the Spaniards in conquering Tenochtitlan, the capital city of the Mexica Empire, in 1521.⁶ While the Spanish certainly brought genocidal violence and the desire to extirpate indigenous ways of being, conquistadors never completed the Conquest as active resistance and intentional adaptation from indigenous Mesoamericans created a society of complex cultural mixture. Therefore, the Spanish Conquest is best classified as a time of adaptation, change, and continuity rather than collapse.

A focus on indigenous women – the group I am referencing whenever I use the word women throughout this thesis - demonstrates this point. Indigenous women made intentional decisions to resist and align with colonizers, doing what they could to create the best lives

⁵ Matthew Restall, "Mesoamericans and Spaniards in the Sixteenth Century," in *Mesoamerican Voices*, eds. Matthew Restall, Lisa Sousa, and Kevin Terraciano (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511811104.003>.

⁶ Restall, "Mesoamericans and Spaniards in the Sixteenth Century," in *Mesoamerican Voices*, eds. Restall, Sousa, and Terraciano, 7.

possible for their families and children. Women were not side characters in this history, often playing key roles in developing a syncretic Mesoamerican-Spanish culture. This thesis aims to contribute to a growing body of work demonstrating the complexity of indigenous women's experiences in Mesoamerica. In this paper, I suggest that Mesoamerican women created, reinforced, and cultivated places of power within the household whether in the pre-Hispanic or colonial periods. Indeed, even during the substantial changes brought by Spanish colonialism, women continued certain pre-Hispanic practices within domestic work and marriage while adapting to and adopting aspects of the Spanish colonial system as they exerted power and agency to sustain, protect, and serve their communities, families, and selves. Women did not simply cave to Spanish pressure. In the face of violence and oppression, indigenous Mesoamerican women acted in the limited ways available to them, continuing to carve out public and private spaces of authority by balancing old and new expectations of gender roles.

As many of the positions of power women held fall outside of popular understandings of formal power, a key part of this thesis is understanding women's power in a more expansive way that allows for the lived experience of women to be better drawn out of the sources before and after the Spanish Conquest. For this project, I rely on Marie A. Kelleher's definition of women's power "*as the ability to take action that has the potential to affect the destiny of others.*"⁷ This definition of women's power emphasizes the importance of women in the daily lives of their families and communities. Therefore, this thesis takes a broader approach to women's expressions of power, showing how women cultivated important avenues of influence whether in a patriarchal yet gender-parallel society or a patriarchal and firmly male-dominated society.

⁷ Marie A Kelleher, "What Do We Mean by "Women and Power"?", *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 51, No. 2 (2016): 110, <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2042&context=mff>.

Rather than looking to find extraordinary women who broke boundaries and directly pushed the limits of the societies in which they lived, this research hopes to provide readers with a better understanding of the historical lives of everyday women who navigated challenging situations in a complex and rapidly changing world.

To accomplish this goal, I rely on a range of primary sources. This thesis engages with several codices, manuscripts created in the colonial period with textual and pictographic writings and often made in collaboration between indigenous and Spanish individuals to document information on Mesoamerican culture, beliefs, and history, including the *Florentine Codex*, *Codex Mendoza*, *Codex Chimalpahin*, *Codex Sierra*, and *Códice Osuna*. Further, I utilize last wills and testaments from elite and commoner indigenous women and a letter from a Spanish priest assigned to conversion efforts in Mesoamerica to the Spanish royal family from the colonial period to help show change over time. Many of these sources were created by indigenous authors albeit often with Spanish influence and oversight. Further, they each explicitly mention women and display their often-hidden positions of power and lives within the household. Therefore, in this paper, I participate in a historiographical movement called the New Philology. In this movement, scholars intentionally and carefully center indigenous language sources (such as sources written in the Nahuatl language) to allow indigenous people and communities to speak for themselves as much as possible centuries later. This thesis looks to build off this historical methodology by primarily using indigenous-language sources, albeit in translation, to analyze what indigenous peoples' writing can tell us about their cultures, societies, and practices.

For all their fascinating narratives, these sources also have significant limitations. Men, not women, created these works. Under the patriarchal societies of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica

and colonial Mexico, women's silence necessitates a change in how these primary sources are read. The context of these sources' creation must be taken into account as modern scholarship looks to break with colonial narratives rather than reinforce them. For instance, potential biases must be considered and read against the grain to expose the spectrum of indigenous women's experiences in pre-Hispanic and colonial Mesoamerica. Additionally, due to a lack of language skills in indigenous languages and only an intermediate ability in Spanish, I read each of these sources in translation. Unfortunately, this lack of language skills means that some of the richness of the sources in their original languages may be lost as I do what I can with the English versions.

This thesis also builds upon the secondary sources of several historians who have contributed to and shaped this field. Much of the early research on the pre-Hispanic and colonial periods in Mesoamerica focused on interpreting the codices, taking their contents at face value rather than reading against the grain to see what these sources tell us about the historical realities of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica and colonial Mexico. These works serve as a springboard on which scholars continue to build.⁸ The feminist movement of the 1970s marked a turning point for this historiography as it pushed for a historical focus on women in colonial Latin America. Activist, and primarily female, historians presented "women as the victims of sexism and patriarchy" and romanticized "that gender created a common 'sisterhood' that trumped race and class."⁹ While beneficial, this scholarship obscured the diversity of women's history and

⁸ These scholars include, but are not limited to, Charles Dibble, Arthur J.O. Anderson, and more recently authors like Frances F. Berdan and Patricia Reiff Anawalt.

⁹ Some authors that set the foundation for this field, although there are many more, include historians like Asunción Lavrin, Irene Silverblatt, and Elinor Burkett. Quotation from: Susan Socolow, "Women in Colonial Latin American History," Oxford Bibliographies, October 2011, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199766581/obo-9780199766581-0037.xml>.

experiences. Another landmark moment occurred in the 1980s as historians broadened their reach by building on the emerging field of subaltern studies. This scholarship used legal documents to position women as active agents who navigated a complex world with a range of experiences.¹⁰

While in conversation with these foundational authors, my research relies upon a combination of more recent scholarship on the roles, culture, and practices of Mesoamerican women in both the pre- and post-Conquest periods. The work of Inga Clendinnen (writing primarily in the 1990s and early 2000s) provides a good starting place. Clendinnen became one of the first to combine indigenous-language sources with Spanish sources, reading both against the grain to investigate what these works can tell readers about the lives of Mesoamerican groups like the Mexica or Maya. In her 1991 book *Aztecs: An Interpretation*, Clendinnen breaks with previous historiography as she intentionally shifts the focus away from the elite to the ordinary person, looking to find out how they understood the ritualistic practice of human sacrifice. However, she also continued the problematic trend of seeing the Spanish Conquest solely as a time of collapse and erasure rather than analyzing the Mexica through the lens of indigenous power, resistance, and action. Clendinnen nevertheless showed future historians that there is so much we can know about non-elite Mesoamericans by investigating what the sources say about the household, ritual life, customs, performances, and more.¹¹

Building off the feminist scholarship of the 1970s and Clendinnen's shift in focus to the everyday people, historians Susan Shroeder, Stephanie Wood, and Robert Haskett's 1997 edited collection, *Indian Women of Early Mexico* looked to challenge previous understandings of

¹⁰ Socolow, "Women in Colonial Latin American History," 2011.

¹¹ Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 10.

indigenous women. In this work, the fourteen contributors use ethnohistory to center the lives of indigenous women and gender attitudes throughout Mesoamerica from the pre-Hispanic period to the late eighteenth century, challenging “the stereotype of indigenous women as being without history.”¹² Even before the turn of the twenty-first century, the historians involved in the writing of this book pushed the field to rethink long-held beliefs that limited historical understandings of indigenous women.

Throughout the 2000s, scholars like Karen Viera Powers created a more extensive literature that deepened readers’ knowledge of indigenous Mesoamerican women in a variety of areas. Powers’ 2005 book, *Women in the Crucible of Conquest: The Gendered Genesis of Spanish American Society, 1500-1600*, investigates women in Mesoamerica and the Andes through the lens of race and class, clarifying the diversity in women’s experiences throughout the colonial period.¹³ Powers presents a particularly interesting contrast between the lives of indigenous and Spanish women as they navigated overlapping systems of oppression. She emphasizes that women were central to the creation of a syncretic Mesoamerican and Spanish society in New Spain as they maintained and created spaces of power for themselves within the Spanish legal system or the Catholic Church. Powers provides a valuable contribution to this historiography as she demonstrates that colonialism is a word that carries various understandings that cannot be singularly understood in the lives of indigenous women.

¹² Susan Schroeder, “Introduction,” in *Indian Women of Early Mexico*, eds. Susan Schroeder, Stephanie Wood, and Robert Haskett (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 3, <https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=15384&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

¹³ Karen Vieira Powers, *Women in the Crucible of Conquest: The Gendered Genesis of Spanish American Society, 1500-1600* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 202.

Susan Kellogg, in works published as early as 1995 to as recently as 2024, has made major contributions to this historiography. My thesis is particularly in conversation with three of her publications: *Law and the Transformation of Aztec Society, 1500-1700* (1995), “The Woman's Room: Some Aspects of Gender Relations in Tenochtitlan in the Late Pre-Hispanic Period” (1995), and *Weaving the Past: A History of Latin America's Indigenous Women from the Prehispanic Period to the Present* (2005).¹⁴ Each of these scholarly works discusses major themes from how law and gender interacted to transform indigenous society during the colonial period to how women across the social spectrum resisted Spanish violence and domination. Within her writings, Kellogg successfully aims to combine firm understandings of both the pre-Hispanic and colonial periods to show that women faced challenges like sexual abuse and labor exploitation and responded to them across space and time.

Patricia Lopes Don, a historian who makes fascinating use of court cases, provides valuable insight into how women exerted power and male attitudes toward women in the Spanish legal system. Her 2008 article, “The 1539 Inquisition and Trial of Don Carlos of Texcoco in Early Mexico,” contributes to the existing scholarship on polygyny to assert that this marital practice served as a tool for indigenous men in the pre-Hispanic period to inscribe a gender hierarchy into daily life in Mesoamerica, putting men above women while maintaining a separate power structure for women in the household and marketplace.¹⁵ Don's article contributes to this

¹⁴ Susan Kellogg, *Law and the Transformation of Aztec Culture, 1500-1700* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995). Susan Kellogg, *Weaving the Past: A History of Latin America's Indigenous Women from the Prehispanic Period to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/emory/reader.action?docID=273371&ppg=1>.

¹⁵ Patricia Lopes Don, “The 1539 Inquisition and Trial of Don Carlos of Texcoco in Early Mexico,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 88, no. 4 (2008): 598-599, <https://web-s-ebscohost-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=89d61760-b906-48c9-8714-9624155987d1%40redis>.

scholarship through a microhistorical lens as she suggests that polygyny served as a tool of exploitation.

Caterina Pizzigoni built on and continued the work of these authors. In her 2013 book, *The Life Within: Local Indigenous Society in Mexico's Toluca Valley, 1650-1800*, Pizzigoni draws on extensive archival research on an under-researched corpus of wills in the Toluca Valley to investigate what these sources can tell us about change and continuity in the indigenous households of colonial Mexico in terms of inheritance practices, gender dynamics, and religion. She finds that, despite Spanish pressures that promoted male domination, indigenous women continued to have familial, economic, and religious power in the household.¹⁶ Pizzigoni's work further challenges narratives of collapse within historical scholarship as she demonstrates to readers that indigenous and Spanish cultures existed alongside and mixed with each other.

Published soon after Pizzigoni's work, Camilla Townsend's 2014 article "Polygyny and the Divided Altepetl: The Tetzcoacan Key to Pre-conquest Nahua Politics" found that polygyny severed social cohesion in pre-Hispanic Tetzcoacan as contested positions of power led to deadly conflict.¹⁷ These conflicts weakened the altepetl in devastating ways leading up to the advent of the Spanish Conquest. Townsend contributes to this historiography by simultaneously demonstrating the power of women's lineage within the household and showing how polygyny impacted individuals far beyond the women subjected to living within polygynous households.

¹⁶ Caterina Pizzigoni, *The Life Within: Local Indigenous Society in Mexico's Toluca Valley, 1650-1800* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2013), 36, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/emory/reader.action?docID=1040654&ppg=1>.

¹⁷ Camilla Townsend, "Polygyny and the Divided Altepetl: The Tetzcoacan Key to Pre-Conquest Nahua Politics," in *Texcoco: Prehispanic and Colonial Perspectives*, ed. Jongsoo Lee and Galen Brokaw (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2014), 96, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wrrdm.9>.

In conversation with Townsend, yet taking a very different approach, historian Ross Hassig's 2016 book, *Polygamy and the Rise and Demise of the Aztec Empire* argues that polygyny primarily benefited women while Catholic marriage heightened women's oppression and the degradation of their status. One of the core elements of this book is Hassig's claim that women were the "dark matter" of Mesoamerican society as their role as pawns within marital diplomacy made the Mexica Empire rise as a powerful force.¹⁸ His argument follows that the Catholic imposition of monogamy stunted the Empire's ability to create kinship networks through the strategic trading of women and eventually led to its demise. The author does not shy away from controversy, providing provocative points and making the questionable argument that polygyny was better than monogamy, in a way that gives readers a different perspective on this marital practice.

In her 2017 book *The Woman Who Turned Into a Jaguar, and other Narratives of Native Women in the Archives of Colonial Mexico*, historian Lisa Sousa looks at women across the social spectrum, focusing on rural areas.¹⁹ Sousa centers the household and focuses on continuity and women's agency across time, as is the goal of this thesis. She also moves outside of the household, demonstrating that some indigenous women were involved in revolts and protests. This secondary source is vital to contextualizing the household and marriage as Sousa makes several important contributions to historical understandings of Mesoamerican women.

¹⁸ Ross Hassig, *Polygamy and the Rise and Demise of the Aztec Empire* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2016), <https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=1258768&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

¹⁹ Lisa Sousa, *The Woman Who Turned Into a Jaguar, and Other Narratives of Native Women in Archives of Colonial Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), <https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=1428848&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

Confronting historical questions around Catholic marriage, historian Ana de Zaballa Beascoechea's 2019 article, "Indian Marriage Before and After the Council of Trent: From pre-Hispanic Marriage to Christian Marriage in New Spain" combines Catholic doctrinal sources with manuals from parish priests to show that indigenous Mesoamericans in the colonial period resisted and adapted to Catholic marital practices based on their personal interests and religious beliefs. Zaballa Beascoechea, therefore, contributes to this historiography by continuing to assert that indigenous people, and women in particular, were active participants and drivers of cultural survival and continuity within their societies, even after conquest.

Throughout the entirety of this historiography, there are common themes that this paper will discuss, including marital practices, roles within the household, societal understandings of gender, and women's economic abilities. Several central disagreements also deserve consideration. A key debate in which this thesis intervenes is the degree to which there is continuity rather than collapse of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican culture during the colonial period. While much of the older scholarship focuses more on cultural destruction and the degradation of the position of women, authors like Susan Kellogg and Caterina Pizzigoni show that the indigenous people of Mesoamerica created a syncretic religion and culture to continue many pre-Hispanic practices. I align with the work of these authors and many others as I emphasize areas of continuity while also providing a nuanced understanding of the undeniable change occurring in Mesoamerica during the Conquest and throughout the colonial period.

A related debate that lies at the center of this thesis is how indigenous women engaged with and navigated the immense negative as well as the positive changes brought by the Spanish colonizers. While scholars generally hold that colonialism brought many negatives for women, there are more specific disagreements about how women interacted with specific Spanish

cultural impositions. As we have seen, the writings on polygyny by Hassig, Don, and Townsend are essentially in direct disagreement with each other. Hassig exalts polygyny as a benefit for women while Don and Townsend assert that polygyny not only exploited women but also created unfixable cracks in the social cohesion of Mesoamerican society as disputes over succession turned deadly.

This thesis builds on these debates, asserting that indigenous women made intentional decisions for themselves and their families in both the pre-Hispanic and colonial periods, making the best they could out of these patriarchal societies. Further, indigenous women were key players in both the change and continuity in the colonial period as they looked to craft a safe and prosperous society for themselves and their families in the face of the violence of Spanish colonialism.

Chapter 1: Women in Pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican Households and Domestic Work

Pre-Hispanic indigenous Mesoamericans practiced gender parallelism and complementarity throughout society, especially in terms of domestic work. While this gender system cannot be understood to be a form of gender equality, it is significantly different from the Spanish patriarchy that colonizers attempted to force on indigenous Mesoamerican peoples in the sixteenth century.²⁰ In primary sources like *The Florentine Codex*, *The Codex Chimalpahin*, and *The Codex Mendoza*, it is clear that women within the pre-Hispanic world were central to every part of life from child rearing to economic production. By looking at domestic work within the household, a fuller picture of women's everyday lives comes to light. In this picture, women

²⁰ Susan Kellogg, "From Parallel and Equivalent to Separate but Unequal Tenochca Mexica Women, 1500-1700," in *Indian Women of Colonial Mexico*, eds. Schroeder, Wood, and Haskett, 123-144.

were not passive actors but rather foundational protectors of culture with specific knowledge and skills vital to their communities' continued success. While women may not have created documents that allow us to directly understand how they felt about the roles they were assigned at birth, the sources we have nevertheless provide crucial information into the centrality women held in helping their communities survive and flourish. While undoubtedly taking up a different space than the men within the society, women had complex lives. Although their work largely occurred within the home, its impact reached far beyond as their families, communities, and entire societies relied on women.

The household functioned as the basic unit of Nahua society, understood as “a relation between buildings and people; it is made up of common spaces, kinship, subsistence, production, consumption, and property. It becomes, in a word, the symbol of a social group in interaction with its physical space.”²¹ The Nahua household was a complex social and economic unit that also determined the individual's potential to hold power as lineages and familial authority often determined the class and type of work that they did throughout their lives. The building itself reflected this different understanding of the household. In the Mexica world, kinship networks often lived in the same household units as the various rooms that constituted the home centered around a patio and hearth that contained three stones believed to be female deities.²² This central patio that connected each living space reinforced the understanding that familial success depended on each member of a household completing their duties, whether economically, domestically, socially, or religiously. These household units organized entire communities to ensure societal stability. Importantly, as seen in the fact that the hearth and the three stones understood as female deities were located at the center of the home, the household was a

²¹ Pizzigoni, *The Life Within*, 8.

²² Kellogg, *Weaving the Past*, 25.

feminine space imbued with transcendent importance, authority, and complexity, holding a central position in the lives of men and women, young and old, and noble and commoner alike.

While interactions within the household are often believed to be outside of what is considered history, authors like Pizzigoni and many others show that focusing only on major events erases important historical actors from history. For instance, even though women did not hold many formal leadership positions and were not accorded valor in the same way as warriors returning from successful military endeavors, they played an instrumental role in maintaining their societies through the act of childbirth, domestic work, and economic production. We cannot truly understand Nahua society without first understanding women's central role within the household.

It is vital to recognize that class played a defining role in the work that women did within their homes. For instance, the *Florentine Codex* makes a clear distinction between noblewomen and commoner women. This source is a twelve-book compendium of Latinized text and pictographic drawings from the latter half of the sixteenth century. The text includes both Nahuatl and a Spanish translation done by Bernardino de Sahagún with the assistance of indigenous students from the Colegio de Santa Cruz in Tlatelolco. This intricate and important work – referred to as an “encyclopedia” of Nahua culture and the “first ethnography” of a non-Western society -- was created under the direction of Sahagún to understand the Nahua culture and support conversion efforts.²³ The *Florentine Codex* contains fascinating information on many aspects of Nahua culture, including on this paper's central themes of women's domestic

²³ Jeanette Favrot Peterson and Kevin Terraciano, eds., *The Florentine Codex: An Encyclopedia of the Nahua World in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019), 2019, 6. https://login.proxy.library.emory.edu/login?url=https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=2243754&site=ehost-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_6

work and marital practices. Within this source, many of the traits of a “good” noblewoman distinguish her idealized characteristics from the characteristics of a commoner. In Figure 1 below, we see the noblewoman in her idealized position. She is not working but sits gracefully and dresses in dignified clothing, embodying and visibly displaying her high status. Indeed, the textual writing of the *Florentine Codex* mirrors this clear divide between noble and commoner women.



Figure 1: In Tetzcuehuallo, Bernardino de Sahagún, *Digital Florentine Codex*, “Book 10: The People,” folio 34r, <https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/book/10/folio/34r?spTexts=&nhTexts=>. Image of a noblewoman.

As it says in the *Florentine Codex*, “The good noblewoman [is] of elegant speech, soft-spoken—a gentle person, peaceful, refined. She speaks with elegance; she acts with refined modesty. The bad noblewoman [is] like a field worker—brutish, a great field worker, a great commoner; a glutton, a drinker, an eater—a glutton, incapable, useless, time-wasting.”²⁴ This passage shows the exaltation of a style of femininity that is markedly different from commoner femininity. The bad noblewoman was too much like a commoner, indulging in work and behavior not fit for her

²⁴ De Sahagún, *Digital Florentine Codex*, edited by Kim N. Richter and Alicia Maria Houtrouw, “Book 10: The People,” folio 34v, <https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/book/10/folio/34v?spTexts=&nhTexts=>.

station. In contrast, good noblewomen were meant to be visibly and completely separated from the work and activities of commoner women who were not considered to be elegant but rather brutish. Noblewomen centered their lives around upper-class activities that may have included weaving within the household, acting as marketplace administrators, serving as priestesses, or even holding political positions. Inside the home, noblewomen completed the domestic and sacred tasks of weaving and childrearing, fulfilling duties considered proper for women in Nahua society.



Figure 2: In *Tlacualchiuhqui*, De Sahagún, *Digital Florentine Codex*, edited by Kim N. Richter and Alicia Maria Houtrouw, "Book 10: The People," folio 38r, <https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/book/10/folio/38r?spTexts=&nhTexts=>. Images of commoner women.

Commoner women lived quite different lives as a class hierarchy coincided with a gender hierarchy. As seen in Figure 2, Nahua society understood commoner women's value as heavily connected to their work. In the picture above, commoner women are pictured bent over their metate, grinding corn. While this work is highly important to the community's success, it also makes class differences visible. The authors of the *Florentine Codex* make this connection between commoner women and work explicit when they describe the commoner robust woman

as a long-suffering, strong, rugged, tough, and willing worker.²⁵ Within the umbrella of work, commoner women filled many roles, including weaver, spinner, seamstress, cook, and physician.²⁶ Essentially, lower-status women were defined by doing their work well. These qualities were quite different from the noblewomen whose lineage, proper behavior, peacefulness, and elegance were what was most sought from them in their lives. Commoner women often completed tasks like cooking or cleaning in the home of a noblewoman. While living such interconnected lives, women's experiences were distinct as the elegance of the noblewoman depended on the labor of the commoner woman. It is challenging to understand women in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican society as they lived diverse lives across classes. However, women shared cultural understandings of the importance of the household and the roles their societies expected them to complete in alignment with gender complementarity and parallelism. While their experiences may have been very different on a daily basis, women of all classes (except for priestesses) were expected to take on the duty of childbirth, a solely female job overseen by a female expert.

Female midwives also provided incredible value in women's domain of childbirth throughout pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica. The image in Figure 3 demonstrates the centrality and intimacy of midwives in this process. These aged specialists were vital assistants in the sacred act of giving birth, using their expertise to ensure a healthy delivery of each new baby and reducing the pain of the mother as much as possible. The authors of the *Florentine Codex*, Bernardino de Sahagún and indigenous students, further detail the midwife's various roles as

²⁵ De Sahagún, *Digital Florentine Codex*, edited by Kim N. Richter and Alicia Maria Houtrouw, "Book 10: The People," folios 35v-36r, <https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/book/10/folio/35v?spTexts=&nhTexts=>.

²⁶ De Sahagún, *Digital Florentine Codex*, edited by Kim N. Richter and Alicia Maria Houtrouw, "Book 10: The People," folios 36v-38v.

they explain the labor process. Midwives first prepared the woman for birth by bathing her and purifying her house by sweeping it. It was within the household that the woman would “perform her office... to give birth.”²⁷ Yet again, this was a space where class played a role in women’s experiences as noblewomen would have two to three midwives while lower-status women had just one to help them through the intensity of childbirth.



Figure 3: The midwife massages the pregnant woman, *Digital Florentine Codex*, edited by Kim N. Richter and Alicia Maria Houtrouw, “Book 6: Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy,” folio 128v, <https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/book/6/folio/128v?spTexts=&nhTexts=l>. Image of a midwife using her expertise to help a woman through labor.

While women across classes gave birth and helped sustain the indigenous population, noblewomen were provided with more care due to their resources and status. Regardless of how many midwives were helping a woman, these aged experts used their knowledge to make the mother as comfortable as possible. They drew sweat baths, hastened the birthing process by using a cooked herb called *ciuapatli*, or even administered opossum tail to help with childbirth in

²⁷ De Sahagún, *Digital Florentine Codex*, edited by Kim N. Richter and Alicia Maria Houtrouw, “Book 6: Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy,” folios 144r-144v. <https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/book/6/folio/144r?spTexts=&nhTexts=>.

more difficult cases.²⁸ Midwives called upon specialized intelligence and training to ensure that the woman in their care healthily delivered a member of the next generation of their community. Indeed, “when the baby had arrived on earth, then the midwife shouted; she gave war cries, which meant that the little woman had fought a good battle, had become a brave warrior, had taken a captive, had captured a baby.”²⁹ Midwives maintained a position between physician and priestess as they prepared the house by performing the purification ritual of sweeping, celebrated the victorious battle the woman waged while giving birth, and remained sensitive to the needs and pains of the mother. In this way, women were essentially at the very center of Mesoamerican society as each great leader, warrior, or laborer had to first come through them with the help of a female specialist.

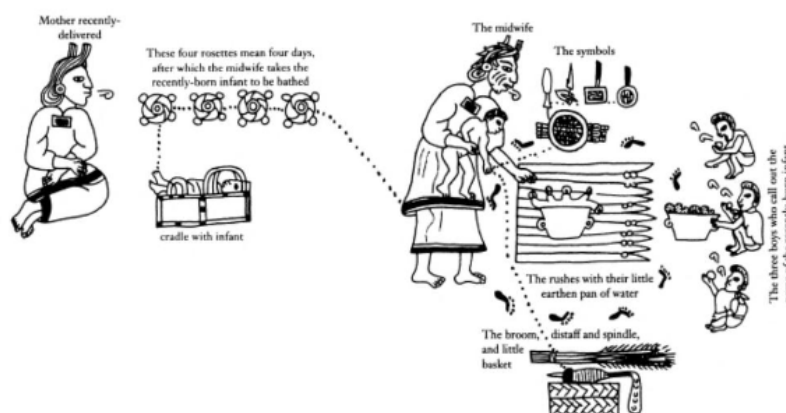


Figure 4: Frances Berdan and Patricia Reiff Anawalt, *The Essential Codex Mendoza*, folio 57r (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). The midwife bathes a new baby girl or boy. The tools on each side of the mat signify the roles that these young children will fill throughout their lives.

²⁸ De Sahagún, *Digital Florentine Codex*, edited by Kim N. Richter and Alicia Maria Houtrouw, “Book 6: Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy,” folios 144r-144v.
<https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/book/6/folio/144r?spTexts=&nhTexts=>.

²⁹ De Sahagún, *Digital Florentine Codex*, edited by Kim N. Richter and Alicia Maria Houtrouw, “Book 6: Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy,” folios 144r-144v.
<https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/book/6/folio/144r?spTexts=&nhTexts=>.

Mesoamerican societies did not passively construct parallelism but actively enacted it from birth. The Nahua entrenched women's place within the home essentially from the day they were born. Images from the *Codex Mendoza* support this narrative. This source, a collaboration between Nahua artists who created the pictographic drawings and Spanish interpreters in the sixteenth century who provided textual glosses, was produced to defend the foundations of Nahua society to the Spanish Crown.³⁰ As seen in Figure 4, following successful childbirths, the midwife blessed and bathed the baby, cutting and drying their umbilical cords before burying it on the battlefield for boys or in the hearth of the home for girls. As touched on in the introduction, these experts then gave them tools that corresponded with the responsibilities their society expected them to fill throughout their lives. Boys were given tools that aligned with the work of their fathers, ranging from carpentry to war, often being placed next to a hammer or bow and arrow.³¹ The civilizations of pre-Hispanic Central Mexico (especially the imperial Mexica) exalted warriors and military might, considering dying in battle to be one of the most honorable deaths. Men who met this fate were given a special place in the heavens. Girl babies were also given tools that aligned with the work of their mothers, including brooms for sweeping and spindles for weaving. The responsibilities attached to these tools occurred within the home, the primary place where women held authority and produced goods for their families and communities.

³⁰ Jorge Gomez Tejada, "Making the 'Codex Mendoza', Constructing the 'Codex Mendoza': A Reconsideration of a 16th Century Mexican Manuscript," Ph.D., Yale University, 2012, 2, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1314461297/abstract/55DCDA02DA54478FPQ/1>.

³¹ De Sahagún, *Digital Florentine Codex*, edited by Kim N. Richter and Alicia Maria Houtrouw, "Book 6: Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy," <https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/en/book/6/folio/170r/images/14a181b3-b2ab-4f6a-afbe-9aa19692b2f5>.

Textual evidence from the *Florentine Codex* further clarifies women's place within the household. Following the birth of a baby girl, the midwife said a blessing and bathed the child. She told the newborn, "Thou wilt be in the heart of the home, thou wilt go nowhere, thou wilt nowhere become a wanderer, thou becomest the banked fire, the hearth stones. Here our lord planteth thee, burieth thee. And thou wilt become fatigued, thou wilt become tired; thou art to provide water, to grind maize to drudge; thou art to sweat by the ashes, by the hearth."³² As these examples demonstrate, women were intrinsically connected to caring for the home from the beginning of their lives. The midwife echoes the expectations of the larger society, shedding light on the exploitative side of domesticity within patriarchal societies that required women to tirelessly fulfill many duties to support their families and the larger society. It is also possible that the context in which the writers of the *Florentine Codex* created this source impacted how they wrote about women's work. As will be discussed in more detail later, with the advent of Spanish colonialism in Mesoamerica, women's work became a place of intense exploitation and forced labor. Therefore, this quotation seems to demonstrate an aspect of the pre-Hispanic past in which women were societally expected to work hard while also mirroring the present moment in which colonizers brutally extracted women's work.

Despite the complex colonial context in which they were written, these passages also demonstrate the significance of women's labor in providing the necessities of life by cooking, providing water, childrearing, and producing economically. The house remained as the woman's domain from childhood through her elderly years. As the midwife decrees, women were the "heart" of the home, and the household could not provide life-sustaining resources without their

³² De Sahagún, *Digital Florentine Codex*, edited by Kim N. Richter and Alicia Maria Houtrouw, "Book 6: Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy," fol. 148r, <https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/book/6/folio/148r?spTexts=&nhTexts=>.

tiring domestic labor. According to this aged expert, women were to be quite literally the “hearth stones” that rested at the center of the home, uniting families while providing heat and warmed food. Women’s work rooted them at the center of the household, the basic unit of Nahua society. Therefore, domestic work was simultaneously a place of exploitation and power as the midwife decreed that only through women’s daily work could the rest of society function. Nahua society, while expecting women to work tirelessly, endowed women’s tasks with a parallel albeit unequal import that fundamentally elevated how women were seen. It was through women’s hands that the rest of a community’s success flowed.

The hearth ashes and the three hearth stones believed to be goddesses also show that women’s work could inspire divine approval. For instance, throughout the *Florentine Codex*, the ashes of the hearth are given a god-like ability to protect, possibly symbolizing that women were protectors of their house, children, and community through their toil within the home. As the native authors of the *Florentine Codex* write, “If a pregnant woman wished to go walking during the night, then she placed a little ash in her bosom. It was said that thereby she protected the child within her, in order that he should not meet [an apparition] somewhere.”³³ Referenced as a “delusion” by the authors, likely because the authors were writing in a post-Conquest context that exalted a Catholic worldview even when describing a pre-Hispanic belief, the inclusion of this belief in this source demonstrates its power in the pre-Conquest period. This detail seems to demonstrate that household work also went beyond what may be considered the mundane parts of life as their duties (that created these ashes in the first place) held powers that could benefit themselves and, in protecting the child, their communities. Fascinatingly, the hearth ashes were

³³ De Sahagún, *Digital Florentine Codex*, edited by Kim N. Richter and Alicia Maria Houtrouw, “Book 5: The Omens,” fol. 17v, <https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/book/5/folio/17v>.

not the only way in which women's work within the household have an importance that extend beyond the domestic sphere.

Women's domestic work also had a religious importance before the Conquest. The polytheistic pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican cosmos included both male and female deities. However, these gods and goddesses did not conform to gender parallelism the same way as Mesoamerican societies on the ground. Instead, they often combined masculine and feminine traits to reflect the parallel importance of warfare and fertility. Indeed, Nahua pictographic writing sometimes depicted female deities in association with a phallus to further emphasize the combination of masculinity and femininity within the divine beings.³⁴ The Mexica goddess, Cihuacoatl excellently reflects this jumble of male and female power in the cosmos.



Figure 5: Cihuacoatl, *De Sahagún, Digital Florentine Codex*, edited by Kim N. Richter and Alicia Maria Houtrouw, "Book 1: The Gods," folio xivv. <https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/book/1/folio/xivv?spTexts=&nhTexts=>. An image of Cihuacoatl with a shield and weaving stick, mixing masculinity and femininity.

³⁴ Pete Sigal, "Imagining Cihuacoatl: Masculine Rituals, Nahua Goddesses and the Texts of the Tlacuilos," *Gender & History* 22, no. 3 (2010): 547-548, https://emory.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01GALI_EMORY/1da8jbm/cdi_proquest_miscellaneous_857119841.

Cihuacoatl, a powerful Nahua goddess known as the woman of the snake and the mother, inspired great fear in the minds of Mesoamericans. In the *Florentine Codex*, she is called “a savage beast and an evil omen.”³⁵ Acting as both a goddess of fertility and war, her appearance in Figure 5 echoes her divine mixture of the feminine and masculine as she carries a shield in one hand and a weaving stick that signaled women’s economic role of producing textiles in the other while wearing a skirt.³⁶ The fact that many fertility deities (including Cihuacoatl) were also warrior deities leads to several insights into women’s idealized parallel power. In his investigation into Nahua ritual, Pete Sigal finds that “As the Nahuas viewed the feminine as necessary for fertility, they also saw femininity as vital for the promotion of warfare, in which they believed that they made the empire fertile.”³⁷ Therefore, just as indigenous Mesoamerican women expanded the empire by creating the next generation, female power in the cosmos ensured a fertile empire that continued to expand through imperial conquest. Women were an essential part of the Nahua cosmos as the militaries depended on both femininity and masculinity to prosper.

The cosmos also entered the household as women’s domestic work provided them a place of power in religious expression. While women certainly held positions outside of the home as priestesses, these roles fall outside the scope of this thesis.³⁸ Sweeping served as a form of ritualistic purification that both men and women completed to promote cosmological and societal

³⁵ De Sahagún, *Digital Florentine Codex*, edited by Kim N. Richter and Alicia Maria Houtrouw, “Book 1: The Gods,” folio 2v, <https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/book/1/folio/2v?spTexts=&nhTexts=>.

³⁶ De Sahagún, *Digital Florentine Codex*, edited by Kim N. Richter and Alicia Maria Houtrouw, “Book 1: The Gods,” folio 3v, <https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/book/1/folio/3v?spTexts=&nhTexts=>.

³⁷ Sigal, “Imagining Cihuacoatl,” 545.

³⁸ For more information on priestesses – look at “The Woman’s Room” by Susan Kellogg cited above and in the bibliography.

balance. Women, in particular, had a responsibility to sweep to stay in the good graces of the gods. As the authors of the *Florentine Codex* write, “And the real woman is just by herself; one is her house... And on it she lieth holding vigil, lieth awaiting the sweeping, the cleaning, the offering of incense. There our lord showeth her mercy, taketh pity upon her. There he granted her things. Perhaps on earth he giveth her valor to be rich on earth; there will be her drink, her food.”³⁹ Through sweeping, women brought prosperity to themselves and their households as the gods looked kindly on a woman who swept in their service. Sweeping also acted as way to ask the gods for a change in fate. However, yet again, women’s work seems to be a place of exploitation as women are expected to sleep only while waiting to wake up and clean in service of the gods. In sweeping, women simultaneously had a kind of religious power as their actions were not only a tiresome duty but also determined the prosperity of their households.

Fascinatingly, gods also literally lived in the homes of women, further necessitating the daily purification ritual of sweeping. The Nahua brought these beings, called private domestic idols by Bernardino de Sahagún, into their households to maintain its prosperity.⁴⁰ As the codex shows, “In honor of the gods that they kept in their houses, they would also be very careful to sweep the house, the patio, and the entranceway every day, first thing in the morning. And the lord or the lady of the house would be in charge of making every member of the household do this every day. And after doing this, they would make offerings to and incense the images that they kept in their homes; and this [would be done] every day.”⁴¹ Therefore, the house served as a

³⁹ De Sahagún, *Digital Florentine Codex*, edited by Kim N. Richter and Alicia Maria Houtrouw, “Book 6: Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy,” fol. 59v, <https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/book/6/folio/59v?spTexts=&nhTexts=>.

⁴⁰ De Sahagún, *Digital Florentine Codex*, edited by Kim N. Richter and Alicia Maria Houtrouw, “Book 2: The Ceremonies,” fol. 73r, <https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/book/2/folio/73r>.

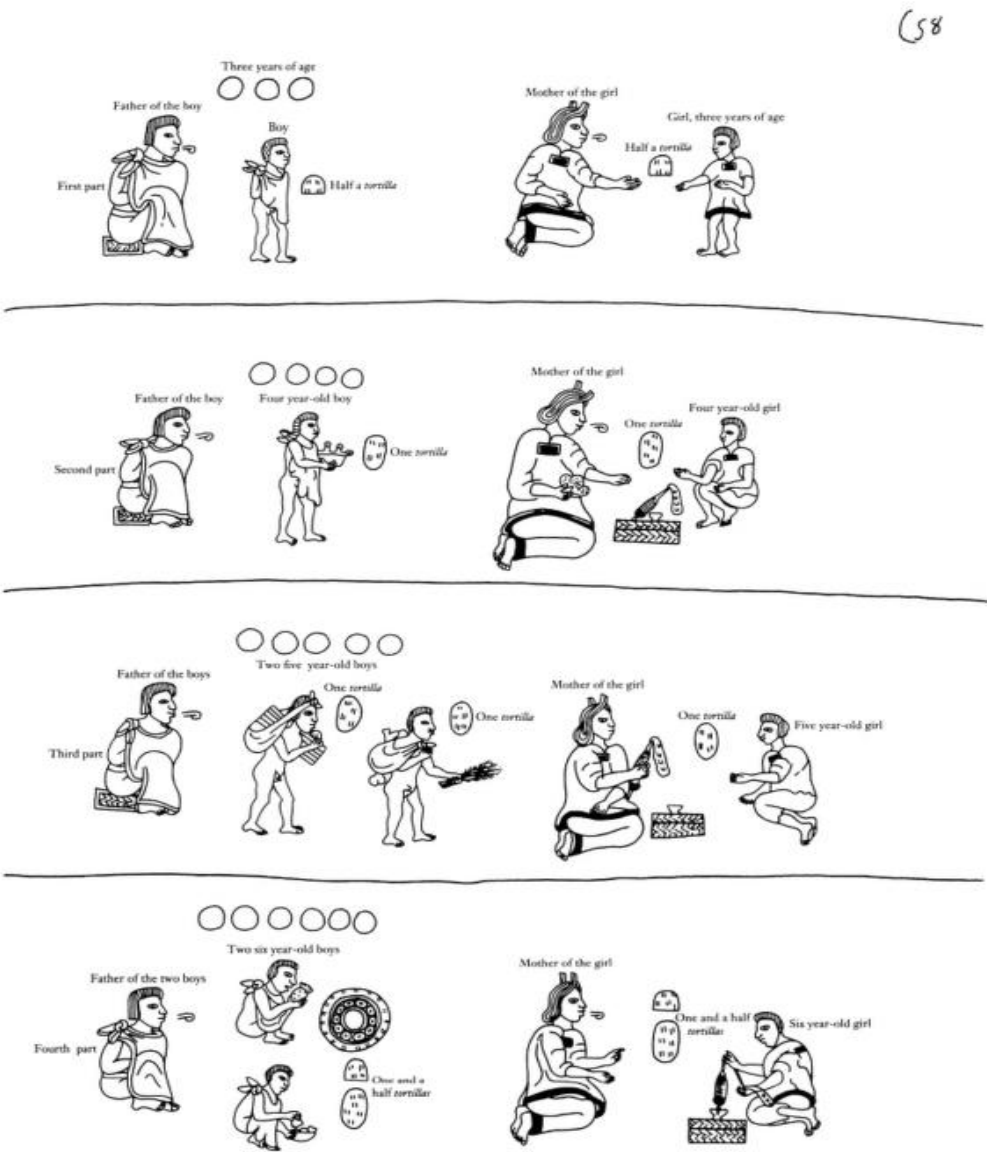
⁴¹ De Sahagún, *Digital Florentine Codex*, edited by Kim N. Richter and Alicia Maria Houtrouw, “Book 2: The Ceremonies,” fol. 123v, <https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/book/2/folio/123v>.

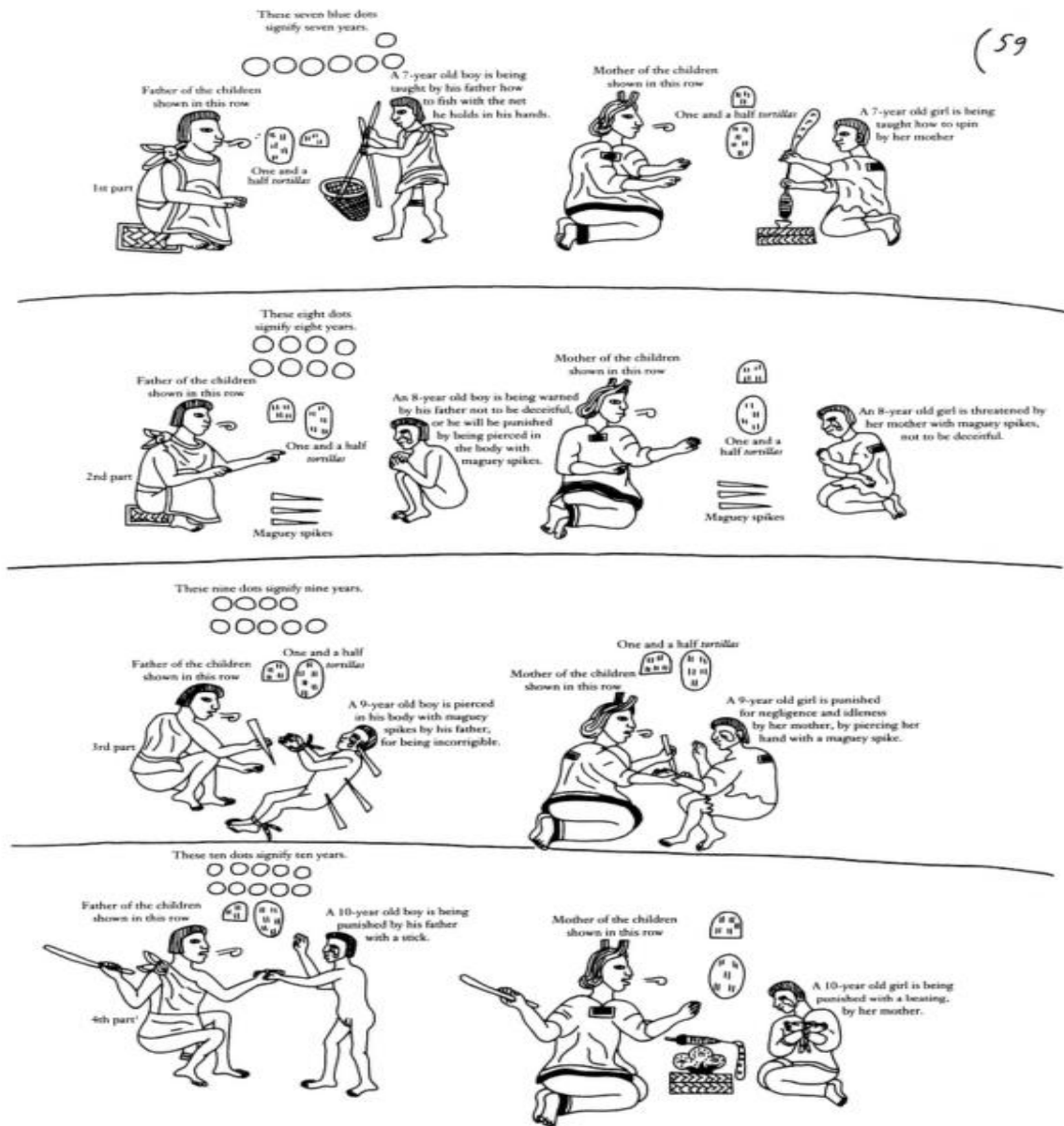
key space of religious expression in addition to being the foundational social unit of Mesoamerican society. Every single action that women took throughout their days within the household also contained a sacred component as weaving, educating daughters, giving birth, cooking, and more helped the household and, therefore, served their domestic idols.

These gender-specific duties that indigenous women fulfilled, whether religious, economic, or familial, were passed down from one generation to the next within the household. Mothers started teaching their young daughters their various duties at the age of five or six. Girls were quickly taught the arts of cooking, cleaning, spinning, and weaving as they were taught by their mother how to best support their families and larger communities.⁴² In this education, men and women looked to maintain the balancing principle of gender parallelism. Fathers taught their sons and mothers taught their daughters. As shown in the images in Figure 6 from the *Codex Mendoza*, this education changed as the child got older to prepare them to fulfill societal needs and demands. Importantly, this education took on a moral aspect as many of the rows show both male and female children being punished with maguey spikes, beatings, and chile smoke for being deceitful, idle, incorrigible, and more. Much of this education served very practical purposes as women were taught to spin, weave, and cook at the age of four in the artisan class the producers of the *Codex Mendoza* were a part of, becoming full weavers at the age of fourteen. This education ensured that by the time the children reached marriage age and created members of the kinship network's next generation, they were prepared to lead their own family and pass along gender-specific duties to their children. Therefore, gender roles were taught in a parallel fashion as women possessed the knowledge necessary to maintain the societal balance

⁴² Kellogg, *Weaving the Past*, 25.

and continued prosperity. Follow the three pictures that make up Figure 6 below to see the parallel education of children based on their age and gender.





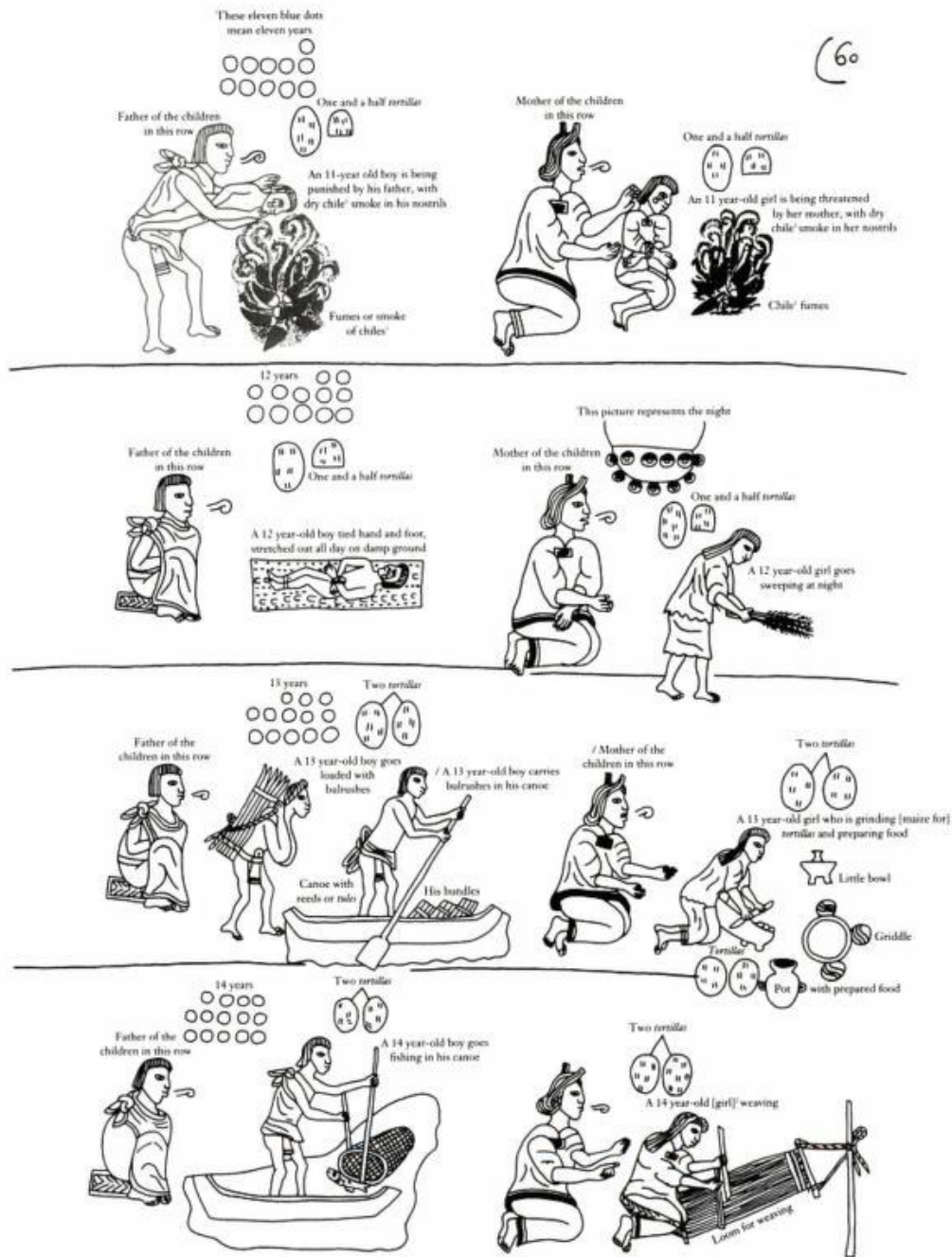


Figure 6: Frances Berdan and Patricia Reiff Anawalt, *The Essential Codex Mendoza*, folio 58r-60r (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). This image shows boys' and girls' parallel education in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica from three years old to fourteen years old. Women's roles primarily occurred within the house.

Women's domestic work ensured the economic prosperity of their families and communities. As Patricia Lopes Don explains, the household's material prosperity depended on women. Don writes:

“women were the source of considerable wealth. Commodities like precious metals and corn were valuable, but woven cloth was the most important product traded in the Valley of Mexico in both pre-Hispanic and colonial times. Texcoco was the virtual center of the weaving trades and women were the primary laborers. Without this income, a patriarchal family could lose its position within a generation.”⁴³

Women's domestic work made them an invaluable asset that ensured the continued prosperity of their families. While centered in the household, work such as weaving necessarily meant that women were active participants in the marketplace. Susan Kellogg concisely expands on this historical truth, explaining that, through household work, Mexica women “gained both respect and access to material goods through their activities in homes, markets, neighborhoods, songhouses, and temples. These material items... afforded Mexica women a degree of independence.”⁴⁴ Mesoamerican women's labor, intelligence, and talent provided them with respect and power from the societies they lived in although still being far from representing gender equality. Women were not beholden to their husbands but rather co-leaders within their communities and especially powerful within the household where they created the products that were turned into economic output. Whether cooking tamales, weaving textiles to trade, giving birth, or ensuring the healthy arrival of a new addition to the community as a midwife, women's duties carried significance. Indigenous Mesoamerican women were not relegated to the periphery

⁴³ Don, “The 1539 Inquisition and Trial of Don Carlos of Texcoco in Early Mexico,” 590.

⁴⁴ Kellogg, *Weaving the Past*, 25-27.

of their patriarchal society. Instead, they understood and actively fulfilled their parallel duties, playing a central role in the success of their families and entire societies that depended on them.

Pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica was undeniably patriarchal as men held the highest positions of power in government and religious spaces, yet this gender hierarchy was structured differently than in the Spanish world. Under the ideology of gender parallelism, domestic duties were endowed with power. Women's work and its byproducts, like women's involvement in the marketplace, were part of parallel organizations of power. Mesoamerican women held authority within the women's domain and men within the men's domain. They were independent actors navigating a society where they had access to positions of power different from, yet not always subjugated to, men. Therefore, women's domestic work acted as an informal position of authority that extended into every aspect of Mesoamerican life. Women's duties down to the act of childbirth, ensured the continuation of their communities and the success of their civilizations. Men and women recognized the importance of women within their society. While men and women undeniably were expected to fill different roles, with men's rightful place being on the battlefield and women's in the home, both were understood to be completing invaluable roles that, together, made for an organized, balanced, and successful society.

Women's duties within the household of cleaning, cooking, spinning, weaving, giving birth, serving as a midwife, and more demonstrate that women were very much active and central parts of the daily life of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican societies. In agreement with the principle of gender parallelism, women performed different roles from men on a daily basis. However, by looking at what may be considered mundane, the history of women comes to life as we can see that their work, even if primarily occurring within the household, extended much further, touching every part of daily life. The supposedly mundane parts of life are, in actuality,

where the richness of history unfolds in the lives of everyday people, moment after moment. In investigating this foundational part of Mesoamerican lives, we can begin to hear the voices of indigenous women who often did not play a part in the creation of formal documentation.

Women were the main players within the household, the very basic unit of Nahua societies. Without their work in the household, society could not thrive in every aspect of life, especially during times of war or chaos. While often out of the public sphere, women's complementary roles in their society ensured that their families and larger communities could have continued success and be able to prosper. Women from every class, although having quite different experiences, filled different roles that, together, made the whole of society. Whether weaving, cooking, working in a field, giving birth, or aiding mothers throughout their pregnancy as midwives, women's work within the home did much more for society than what may initially meet the eye.

Chapter 2: Women and Marital Practice in Pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica

Marriage, a union between men and women that necessarily impacted household dynamics in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, was a site of complexity in terms of power for indigenous women. Their lineages bred the next generation of leadership while they were also used as empire-building tools and had their labor exploited by their husbands. Within 15th-century Nahua society, there were two distinct marital practices largely determined by class: polygyny and monogamy. Commoners overwhelmingly practiced monogamy, allowing them to make the most of limited resources as smaller households also meant less expenses. The more contentious topic within the study of Mesoamerica is polygyny, meaning one man married to multiple women. Elite men primarily practiced polygyny as they had the resources to support large households. Polygyny is not extensively covered in *The Codex Mendoza*, *The Florentine*

Codex, or *The Codex Chimalpahin* as all of these texts were created in the colonial period when Native and Catholic writers reflected a strategic negotiation of post-conquest realities, promoting marriages deemed proper in the eyes of Spanish governmental and religious leaders. Therefore, I will put these biased sources into conversation with secondary literature to discuss indigenous women's nuanced realities in pre-Hispanic marital practices.

The marriage ceremony depicted in the *Codex Mendoza* (Figure 7) stood as an important milestone in a young adult's life as it signified the beginning of adulthood that continued to center the importance of the family. When a young man's parents deemed him ready for marriage, they spoke to the *telpochtlahto* (the person in charge of the young men) to ascertain his approval, holding a banquet to ensure they showed this leader the utmost respect. The man's relatives then decided on the woman he would wed, summoning older women deemed "matchmakers" who expressed his request to the bride-to-be's parents multiple times. After receiving the bride's relatives' approval, the groom's family decided on the day of the wedding and prepared food, drink, smoking tubes, flowers, and more. As seen in Figure 7, on the night of the ceremony, the groom's relatives took the bride and carried her on the back of a matron as lighted torches guided the way to the groom's house. There, the bride's mother-in-law dressed her in a *huipil* (skirt) and the groom's mother-in-law dressed him in a cape. At this point, older women (*titici*) tied the man's cape to the woman's *huipil*, completing the marriage through the action of creating a physical knot. A celebration followed the marriage ritual, complete with drinks, eating, and dancing.⁴⁵ Entire communities and families were involved in the lead up and even in the ritual itself as the pre-Hispanic marriage ritual stood at the intersection of the public

⁴⁵ De Sahagún, *Digital Florentine Codex*, edited by Kim N. Richter and Alicia Maria Houtrouw, "Book 2: The Ceremonies," folios 14v - 15r, <https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/book/2/folio/14v?spTexts=&nhTexts=>.

and the private. The man and woman are tied together in the home, signaling that their actions undertaken in this space, like having children as discussed earlier, also impacted the larger community.



Figure 7: Frances Berdan and Patricia Rieff Anawalt, The Essential Codex Mendoza, folio 61r (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). An image that depicts the pre-Hispanic marriage ceremony.

Families – and respected elders within them - made decisions about marriage in the pre-Hispanic period. Marriage was not a decision but rather a stepping-stone in life that signified an individual's age and maturity. Mesoamerican societies regarded marriage as a religious union that united kinship networks, created alliances, and served political purposes – not unlike the ways marriage functioned in Europe. However, the distinct religious system and cultural norms of indigenous Mesoamerican societies meant that divorce, a strictly forbidden action considered a mortal sin by the Catholic Church, was an accepted practice in cases where a spouse believed that their partner had failed to complete their marital duties.⁴⁶ Therefore, marriage was not necessarily understood as an everlasting bond, although certainly affection and romantic love were involved. Rather, these unions served primarily as partnerships to create and continue families, protect social standings, and form balanced households.

⁴⁶ Hassig, *Polygamy and the Rise and Demise of the Aztec Empire*, 17.

While we cannot know how men or women felt about not having a say in who they married, there are small details that could help us understand how they might have encountered marriage in their complex world. For one, while neither men nor women had consent in whom or when they married, women were put in a particularly precarious position. As touched on before, marriages (especially among the upper class) were often used to create political alliances or motivated by status, wealth, and security. With these goals, men (often relatives) used women as tools in marriages rather than seeing them as agentive human beings. For instance, leaders like those in Tlaxcala gifted women - even their daughters - to cement political alliances.⁴⁷ In these instances, women were sent away from their families and the areas they had known their whole lives to marry a stranger. Indigenous women may have thought about this as a vital duty they were fulfilling for their community's prosperity, but these actions did impact female autonomy as men decided the marital fate of women.

Concerning female autonomy and marriage, scholarly disagreements about women in polygynous marriages persist. Scholars like Ross Hassig claim that polygyny benefited indigenous women and societies generally in the pre-Hispanic world. The author suggests that this marital practice helpfully split up household labor as women were able to share the various duties outlined in the section above on domestic labor.⁴⁸ Polygyny may have given women the ability to have more control over reproduction. While women in monogamous marriages were (at least ideally) the sole sexual partner for their husbands, women in polygynous marriages shared the responsibility of reproduction with their husband's many partners. In fact, Hassig shows that polygyny actually slows population growth. Although men in polygynous relationships individually had more children (driven by the want for an heir to inherit family wealth and social

⁴⁷ Kellogg, *Weaving the Past*, 57.

⁴⁸ Hassig, *Polygamy and the Rise and Demise of the Aztec Empire*, 22.

position), individual women had fewer children than in monogamous relationships, leading to a net slower population growth.⁴⁹ Hassig also details the economic advantages that polygyny held for men as well.⁵⁰ As discussed earlier, women's domestic work, especially weaving, yielded economic gains for entire households, and this held especially true for polygynous households where multiple women's work could be turned into wealth in Mesoamerica's complex system of tribute and trade.

Polygynous marriages served as a tool to form political alliances. Hassig demonstrates that marital diplomacy was central to solidifying the Mexica Empire, often providing wives to subordinate city-states to create Mexica kinship ties with the rulers of powerful *altepeme* (plural of *altepetl*). These Mexica wives produced Mexica offspring with their non-Mexica husbands, essentially creating a network of loyal satellite states.⁵¹ Therefore, women played a key role in the governance of the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican world as their children's ability to rule rested on the alliances that led to their birth.

The *Codex Chimalpahin* illustrates this practice. This work is an indigenous perspective on Nahua history written in Nahuatl by the indigenous historian Chimalpahin Quauhtlehuanitzin in the seventeenth century. Chimalpahin wrote this source in Nahuatl and did not translate his work into Spanish, which demonstrates that he created the *Codex Chimalpahin* with the purpose of inspiring pride in Nahua history and culture.⁵² Within the *Codex Chimalpahin*, Chimalpahin asserts the importance of women in Nahua history through his discussions about Malintzin

⁴⁹ Hassig, *Polygamy and the Rise and Demise of the Aztec Empire*, 66-69.

⁵⁰ Hassig, *Polygamy and the Rise and Demise of the Aztec Empire*, 21-22.

⁵¹ Hassig, *Polygamy and the Rise and Demise of the Aztec Empire*, 101-102.

⁵² Susan Schroeder, "Chimalpahin and Why Women Matter in History," in *Indigenous Intellectuals: Knowledge, Power, and Colonial Culture in Mexico and the Andes*, eds. Gabriela Ramos and Yanna Yannakakis (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 563-565.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11smkdz.10>.

(Cortés' female translator who wielded a significant amount of power as an intermediary), Nahua queens, and, most important for the purpose of this paper, women's role in cognatic kinship - a kinship system that prioritizes both the maternal and paternal lines. He draws attention to the central place of women's status and lineages in producing the next generation of leaders. As Schroeder explains, throughout his annals, Chimalpahin includes pages and pages of lineages that show that mothers served as a determining factor in their offspring's ability to rule. Schroeder analyses Chimalpahin's story of how the Mexica set up their royal lineage after defeating the Colhuaque when she writes: "On this occasion the Mexica started their royal lineage with Atotoztli, a royal noblewoman from Colhuacan as founding wife and mother. She was the daughter of the same King Coxcoxtli, and her stature was such that she could marry a man who was 'only a Mexica Chichimeca,' a quauhpilli, 'a person with status earned by rank and not inherited.'" ⁵³ This lineage, predicated on the prestige of the female line, remained in power for 198 years. ⁵⁴

Women were central actors in marital diplomacy, even if they did not have a say in the negotiations surrounding this aspect of their lives. Chimalpahin demonstrates that without the status of their mother, rulers could not possess a legitimate place of power. Indeed, Chimalpahin's annals "reveal that in many instances women were the founders of those same lineages" that held communal power. ⁵⁵ The patri- and matrilineages were both needed in the creation of powerful families through their role in reproducing the future leaders of the altepetl.

⁵³ Schroeder, "Chimalpahin and Why Women Matter in History," in *Indigenous Intellectuals*, eds. Ramos and Yannakakis, location 2619 - 2628, Kindle Edition.

⁵⁴ Schroeder, "Chimalpahin and Why Women Matter in History," in *Indigenous Intellectuals*, eds. Ramos and Yannakakis, location 2631, Kindle Edition.

⁵⁵ Schroeder, "Chimalpahin and Why Women Matter in History," in *Indigenous Intellectuals*, eds. Ramos and Yannakakis, location 2888, Kindle Edition.

Therefore, women's marital and reproductive abilities provided them with a sort of impersonal power. Only through their lineages could authority be legitimized.

Outside of these elite Mexica women, polygynous marriages may have benefited women through the ability to increase social mobility, both upward and downward.⁵⁶ Commoners often entered monogamous unions with a person of the same class, resulting in a stable socioeconomic hierarchy. However, as Hassig argues, polygynous noblemen necessarily married women of many classes as the pool of noblewomen could not support polygyny. Therefore, commoner women were able to "marry up" as they wed a man from a class higher than their own.⁵⁷

While Hassig certainly makes solid points concerning the ways that women could benefit from polygynous relationships, scholars like Camilla Townsend challenge his position, highlighting the complex nature of this marital practice. Marrying a nobleman may have allowed women to live more comfortable lives, but indigenous women of this time were greatly concerned with the continued wealth of their children. For instance, Townsend details that wives in elite Nahua households were forced to fight for their children's future. The position of every wife of polygynous men was fluid and changed as a woman's home altepetl or family's power rose or fell.⁵⁸ While noblewomen's children could be assured of inheriting a high status from their father, this was not necessarily true for the children of a commoner woman within an elite polygynous household as a woman's lineage could also delegitimize claims to power, status, and inheritance. However, no woman in a polygynous relationship had it easy as higher-ranking wives had more to lose, desperately hanging on to their status to protect the future of their children. Thus, women aimed to find ways to increase their prestige to provide a better

⁵⁶ Hassig, *Polygamy and the Rise and Demise of the Aztec Empire*, 80-81.

⁵⁷ Hassig, *Polygamy and the Rise and Demise of the Aztec Empire*, 80.

⁵⁸ Townsend, "Polygyny and the Divided Altepetl," 94.

placement for their children. Polygynous wives did this by finding ways to please their husband, managing the household, engaging in economic production like weaving, or strengthening the political alliances that they often helped form. The ranking of wives had the potential to create a hostile home environment as women were constantly competing with one another, trying to get ahead. However, these conflicts did not always remain among wives, resulting in deep divides within an altepetl or altepeme.

While polygyny helped ensure that a man had an heir to whom to pass on his land and wealth, it also created an ambiguity around the question of succession that, at times, turned deadly, breaking much-needed social cohesion. Following the passing of a king, the ruling lineage was often in question as there was not a singular apparent heir to the throne. Townsend demonstrates that, in the Nahua society of Tetzaco, “polygyny caused almost a century of warfare prior to the Spanish conquest.”⁵⁹ The third generation of fratricidal conflict was ongoing at the time of the Spanish Conquest when Cacama, a son born to the Tetzaco king from a low-born Tenochca woman, and Cortés Ixtlilxochitl, a son of a noble Tenochca woman and the Tetzaco king both believed that they had the right to rule. Cacama and Ixtlilxochitl engaged in a long and violent war that weakened the altepetl just when they needed their military might at its peak. Following the arrival of the Spanish, Cortés Ixtlilxochitl supported the conquistadors, as he believed that this would help him regain power within Tetzaco.⁶⁰ This sort of battle had been ongoing for generations as brothers, through the lineage of their mothers, had very different experiences from one another. Townsend writes, “In theory, polygyny protected a noble family in multiple ways, and it certainly prevented any possibility of the line’s dying out. It also, however, bred civil wars born of visceral hatred and envy, as Cortés Ixtlilxochitl knew, to his

⁵⁹ Townsend, “Polygyny and the Divided Altepetl,” 95.

⁶⁰ Townsend, “Polygyny and the Divided Altepetl,” 104-110.

pain.”⁶¹ When power is involved, any marital practice can lead to violence as children and relatives fight each other to assert themselves as the sole ruler. Polygyny is a particularly problematic marital practice in this sense. Unless the ruler indicated before their passing, which they often did not, several of their children have a case for their legitimate claim to the throne. Contested thrones could, and often did, lead to violent conflict between brothers that weakened entire communities and damaged trust in the victor who took power. Polygyny created violent conflict while ensuring the continuation of the family line, demanding a nuanced understanding of this marital practice and the complexities it brought to Mesoamerican societies.

Pre-Hispanic marital practices, especially polygyny, cannot be understood as solely positive or negative for indigenous women. Instead, this marital practice served as an exploitative system that, at times, alleviated specific oppressive demands present within monogamous marriages. Polygynous households offered opportunities for women, including material wealth, economic stability, a division of household labor, and a respite from the demands of reproduction. However, polygyny also caused significant difficulties. From fights over the ranking of the various wives to being used as pawns in the creation of empires and alliances, polygyny was a loaded practice for women as men often used it to create competition among their various wives

Polygyny is one of the main ways where we can see the simultaneous existence of gender parallelism and patriarchy, as this is undoubtedly an unequal system that subjugated women in marriages with men while also recognizing the value of women in the promotion of societal harmony and reinforcement of political power. Polygyny must be seen for everything it brought into the lives of women, both positive and negative. Women navigated a complex world that

⁶¹ Townsend, *Polygyny and the Divided Altepetl*, 110.

opened possibilities for them while also bringing with it a range of difficulties that women had to handle daily with the advent of Spanish colonialism in Mesoamerica.

This section provides the foundation to track the immense changes and fascinating continuities that came with the brutality of colonialism and forced conversion. Even as the Spanish patriarchy looked to limit women's ability to express authority and provide for their communities in the way that they had in the pre-Hispanic world, women adapted to Spanish colonialism, creating new ways to sustain their families, carving out positions of continued domestic power, and preserving aspects of Mesoamerican culture.

Chapter 3: Continuity and Change: Indigenous Women in Colonial Mexico

The Spanish Conquest was a period of incredible violence and signaled the beginning of significant changes in Mesoamerican society as the pre-Hispanic and Spanish worlds came into contact. However, contrary to common misconceptions in older scholarship and within K-12 education in the United States today that the Spanish Conquest erased indigenous Mesoamerican society, many pre-Hispanic practices continued. I do not intend to downplay the atrocities of the Spanish Conquest during which conquistadors brutally subjugated Mesoamerican peoples and culture. Instead, I hope to explain how women handled these changes that substantially impacted their daily lives. Indigenous women continued to be powerful forces within their households even as the intensified patriarchal beliefs and practices of Spanish Catholic society shaped and constrained their lives.

The patriarchal structures within pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica and colonial Mexico were quite different. In the pre-Hispanic world, women experienced inequality in the political and religious realms, even as gender parallelism defined the idealized norm. Women's intrinsic value

under this ideology provided protection that was very different than what came with the Spaniards. As the conquistadors carried out their violent conquest, they sought to establish Spanish Catholic patriarchal ideas throughout Mesoamerica. While complex relationships existed between Spaniards and indigenous Mesoamericans, Spanish colonizers often dehumanized indigenous women no matter the value they added to the growth of the Spanish Empire. Instead, colonizers frequently sexualized and exploited indigenous women, seeing them as objects of desire and producers of profit. This created a paradox for women as they had heavy labor burdens forced onto them while living within a society that valued women's enclosure and virginity above all else.⁶² The Spaniards' gender ideology that promoted male supremacy diluted indigenous women's power, autonomy, and safety. Men were to be the heads of lineages, household leaders, and holders of any economic or political power. The Catholic cosmos also reinforced patriarchal ideas as men (God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit) were the sole objects of worship. While saints could be women, these figures often only held their power because of their virginity or submissiveness to the Lord, as evidenced by the Virgin Mary, the most powerful woman in Catholicism. Spanish colonizers (conquistadors, priests, settlers, or administrators) forcibly changed the lives of indigenous people and women more specifically. Despite the horrors of colonialism, indigenous women intentionally maintained several of their pre-Hispanic practices while strategically adapting to Spanish norms. They pushed the boundaries of colonial society to craft places of power for themselves while also using aspects of Spanish Catholicism to protect the safety and prosperity of their children. By looking at the household, domestic work, and marital practices in colonial Mexico, it becomes clear that indigenous women navigated these areas of rapid change by resisting, adapting to, and

⁶² Kellogg, *Weaving the Past*, 71.

incorporating elements of Spanish culture while also continuing pre-Hispanic practices in practical ways for them and their communities

The Colonial Period, The Household, and Domestic Work

Household transformations in colonial Mexico occurred at structural, legal, cultural, and religious levels, demonstrating the breadth of changes during this period. Throughout the sixteenth century, Spanish law and Catholic religious beliefs gradually narrowed who could be included in an individual's inheritance, pushing for an end to the multi-family homes of the pre-Hispanic period and sanctifying the nuclear family. As the historian Susan Kellogg writes in her 1995 publication, *Law and the Transformation of Aztec Culture, 1500-1700*:

“Spanish property laws, especially inheritance laws, introduced a narrower, more lineal range of kin among whom property rights were to be shared. Where the pre-Hispanic Mexica inheritance system had assigned rights to a wide range of kin, Spanish law emphasized relations within the nuclear family and did not subsume it legally or culturally within any larger kinship unit. By the end of the sixteenth century, Spanish judges had proven themselves increasingly unwilling to recognize ownership claims based on extended kinship ties.”⁶³

Colonizers used Spanish law to diminish the place of the household within Mesoamerican society and shift who constituted a family unit. Nuclear households made support systems smaller and disrupted the traditional forms of societal structuring as the narrow understanding of the individual or familial good took precedence over the collectivism of the pre-Hispanic period. Nuclear households also intensified the gender hierarchy as men became solidified as the heads of families, moving away from a gender-parallel society where women had authority over a

⁶³ Kellogg, *Law and the Transformation of Aztec Culture, 1500-1700*, 208-209.

separate power structure. These Spanish impositions resulted in a systematic degradation of women's authority within the household as Spaniards looked to move women to the peripheries of colonial society.

Indigenous Mesoamericans did not simply accept this change that looked to disrupt something so foundational to their society. Instead, indigenous women's wills in colonial Mexico demonstrate resistance to the idea that men were the heads of the household. Similar to pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican inheritance practices, Spanish law allowed men and women to distribute their property and material items to male and female offspring. As the heads of households, however, indigenous male children were often granted the majority of their parent's property. Yet, some indigenous women passed their land holdings, material goods, and other property to set up their female children for success in a way that allowed them a level of power in an increasingly limiting world. From the early colonial period to the eighteenth century, indigenous women's wills demonstrate that they used Spanish law's familiar precedent of allowing women to own property and pass it down to exert familial power.

As early as the mid-sixteenth century, Isabel Moctezuma, the eldest daughter of the final Mexica Emperor, Moctezuma II, resisted patriarchal understandings of male domination. In 1526, Hernán Cortés granted her the extensive *encomienda* of Tacuba, which would become the largest *encomienda* in the Central Valley.⁶⁴ However, this grant represented just a small piece of the land her father had once held. Throughout her life, Isabel called on Spanish inheritance laws and her powerful lineage to expand her wealth and protect the property claims of her female descendants. Historians Nora E. Jaffary and Jane E. Mangan write: "In one *probanza* (petition) that Isabel submitted to the Spanish state in an attempt to expand her claim to those lands she

⁶⁴ Nora E. Jaffary and Jane E. Mangan, eds., *Women in Colonial Latin America, 1526 to 1806: Texts and Contexts* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 2018), 2.

would have inherited from her father, historian Pedro Carrasco uncovered her assertion that ‘if there were no males who were in close relations and most worthy, females could succeed to the rulership.’”⁶⁵ In this passage, it is clear that Isabel understood that Spanish inheritance laws could benefit her ability to regain the land stolen from her as she used her distinguished lineage to assert her rightful ownership of her father’s land.

Indeed, her final will and testament from 1551 also reflected this continuation of female power and landholding, albeit within a Spanish colonial context that privileged male inheritors while leaving space for women to inherit. Isabel Moctezuma left her Tacuba encomienda to Juan de Andrade, her son by her deceased husband Pedro Gallego. She also left several towns to Gonzalo Cano, her eldest son by her present husband Juan Cano, further setting up male descendants to get the land from them if they pass away without an heir. Isabel split the rest of her extensive holdings equally between Juan de Andrade (son), Pedro Cano (son), Gonzalo Cano (son), Juan Cano (husband), doña Isabel (daughter), and doña Catalina (daughter). Notably, even on her deathbed, this testator persisted in fighting for her and her female descendants’ claim to the land once owned by her father. Her testament states:

“I also declare that inasmuch as I have begged his majesty to make me a grant of the lands that remain and were based on and owned by Moctezuma my father, I wish and order and it is my will that if his majesty sees fit to issue me the grant, doña Isabel and doña Catalina, my daughters... will have and inherit them without any of my sons placing any embargo or impediment on them.”⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Jaffary and Mangan, eds., *Women in Colonial Latin America*, 2.

⁶⁶ “Last Will and Testament of Isabel Moctezuma (1551),” reproduced in “Documentos inéditos,” *Boletín del Archivo General de la Nación, México* Cuarta serie (Otoño, 1995), 197-202, in *Women in Colonial Latin America*, eds. Jaffary and Mangan, 12.

While Spanish colonialism limited women's ability to express power, Isabel used her ability to pass down property to female children to provide a sort of economic power for her daughters. As in any capitalist society, money was fundamental to the status and opportunities of individuals in the Spanish colonial world. While Isabel privileges her sons, giving them the *encomienda* and vast landholdings, she provides her daughters with substantial wealth and hopes to grant them lands if approved by the Spanish Crown. Notably, all of this is done without leaving much of anything to her husband, Juan Cano. She goes around him, providing for her children and their future families. In sixteenth-century colonial Mexico, where plague and violence greatly weakened the indigenous population and power, Isabel's will demonstrates a woman navigating the changes by using the tools at her disposal. While Spanish colonizers promoted men as the head of households, this testator positions herself as the head of this *encomienda* and the entirety of the property, protecting and providing for both her male and female children. Isabel's final will and testament shows an early example of women simultaneously working within the colonial system while also finding ways to resist it and continue female authority and wealth independent of men.

This trend of using Spanish law that allowed women to own and inherit property to continue household and familial power continued into the seventeenth century. At this time, Mesoamerican societies had settled into a more organized colonial world with systems for conversion and tribute. However, despite over a century of experience with Spanish colonialism and patriarchy, indigenous women continued to use their personal wealth and household holdings to protect their male and female children. In her 1633 Mixtec testament, Lucía Hernández Ñuquihui's assets show that she continued women's work of producing textiles (discussed further below), operating within the Spanish capitalistic cloth trade to provide for her

family. At the end of her life, she passed down significant property to her children and grandchildren regardless of gender, ensuring that her family continued to have the resources they needed to succeed in the hostile environment of colonial Mexico.⁶⁷ Lucía maintained a network of family and, importantly, female wealth, setting her daughter up for success in a world that left little paths to power or prosperity for women.

Even into the eighteenth century, a time of indigenous population growth and a significant mixture of indigenous and Spanish people and culture, women preserved their wealth and strategically used it to set up their children's futures. *The Testaments of Toluca*, a body of one hundred Nahuatl-language wills collected by historian Caterina Pizzigoni where women make up 37% of the testators, demonstrate this historical phenomenon.⁶⁸ In her 1711 will, the high-ranking businesswoman Elena de la Cruz from San Miguel Atipac did not mention her husband as she split her immense land and property holdings among her children. She gave her daughter, María Hernández, most of her extensive assets. In this action, Elena preserved female power in her family as her daughter's 1737 will shows that she continued to hold many of the assets her mother handed down to her.⁶⁹ Like Isabel and Lucía in earlier centuries, Elena defied colonial structures that privileged male heads of household and inheritors as she asserted herself as the head of this household.⁷⁰ While passing down property, Elena positions her daughter as the primary inheritor, leaving her with an incredibly high status for indigenous women in the colonial world. These women were all part of the nobility, allowing them more opportunities to

⁶⁷ "Mixtec Testament of Lucía Hernández Ñuquihui, Tepsocolula, 1633," the original document is in AJT-Civil 3, 287: 24-26v, trans. from Mixtec by Terraciano, in *Mesoamerican Voices*, eds. Restall, Sousa, and Terraciano, 143-146.

⁶⁸ Caterina Pizzigoni, *Testaments of Toluca* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2006), 7, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/emory/detail.action?docID=3037554>.

⁶⁹ Pizzigoni, *Testaments of Toluca*, 74-75.

⁷⁰ Pizzigoni, *Testaments of Toluca*, 68-73.

maintain familial prosperity than those enjoyed by commoner women who often had little to no property to leave their children. Therefore, class served as a barrier between Isabel, Lucía, and Elena and the harshest elements of colonialism as experienced by members of the lower class. Each of these women used their economic success to set up their children, and particularly their daughters, for sustained prosperity after they passed away. They constructed places of authority for themselves in their household and the broader colonial economy while using their wills to set up future generations to be successful in a world that made it difficult for indigenous people to do so. While the household, the basic unit of Mesoamerican life, transformed during this period to conform to Spanish colonizer's cultural impositions, indigenous women maintained significant power over property and households as they passed down land based on their wants and needs, adapting to colonialism across centuries while preserving traditional places of female authority.

Women's work within the household was another area of substantial continuity amidst brutality. While, at times, cruel treatment led to substantial change in the lives of indigenous women, there were also ways that women adapted to or even resisted Spanish colonialism, retaining elements of the pre-Hispanic household while operating within a distinctly colonial context. For instance, the female position of the midwife continued throughout the colonial period. Midwifery as a profession stood at the intersection of the domestic and public. Those who held this office were necessarily tied to the domestic world as they helped women fulfill their duty of producing the next generation. At the same time, the widespread need for their specific expertise brought them out of the household. Midwifery continued during the colonial period and remained a place of power while becoming the object of suspicion and anxiety. Spanish colonizers and clergy members saw midwifery as a form of female power that continued aspects of heretical rituals from the pre-Hispanic world. Indigenous women serving as midwives

sparked significant concerns among friars and priests because “they were intimately connected to a native domestic world they feared, and because such activities could so easily serve as a basis for idolatry and apostasy.”⁷¹ The Spanish feared what midwives may have been doing beyond delivering babies. For instance, author Susan Kellogg found that Spanish friars were explicitly concerned that midwives might have been giving women a medical abortifacient, showing that they believed “the practice of abortion was relatively common and under women’s control.”⁷² Midwives not only delivered babies but held a wide variety of medical knowledge about childbirth and reproduction that scared colonizers as it placed power in women’s hands.

The substantial medical and communal power held by midwives and their continuation of pre-Hispanic beliefs behind closed doors came to a head during the Inquisition as Catholic religious officials persecuted midwives, often sentenced to punishments like whippings, forced labor, or death. This horrific treatment also occurred within the context of women, in general, becoming increasingly connected with sin and heretical behavior in the eyes of Spanish authorities.⁷³ Colonizers understood the power that indigenous Mesoamerican women held as they provided invaluable goods, held vital medical and cultural knowledge, maintained a necessary societal balance, and contributed to the religious expression of their communities. To counteract this power that challenged Spanish society and patriarchy, colonizers portrayed them as carriers of lust who provided barriers to male conversion. However, colonial desires and creations did not always turn into reality. Instead, indigenous women continued to serve their fellow women as midwives, using their much-needed knowledge to help women manage the immense pain that comes with labor. Beyond midwifery, women’s domestic work present in the

⁷¹ Kellogg, *Weaving the Past*, 80.

⁷² Kellogg, *Weaving the Past*, 80.

⁷³ Kellogg, *Weaving the Past*, 80.

pre-Hispanic period also maintained much of its economic and religious importance in a colonial context.

Weaving and textile production, one of women's main tasks during the pre-Hispanic period, continued to be a place of gender parallelism and economic power for some indigenous women and a place of intense exploitation and brutality for others. Iberians fell in love with Mesoamerican textiles, especially clothing and bedding, causing consumers and sellers to demand higher output. However, the heavier and wider cloth preferred by Spaniards required more intensive labor from indigenous women who were already experiencing an increased workload.⁷⁴ Lucía's 1633 testament, mentioned above, provides invaluable information on how women used Iberian desires to their benefit in the seventeenth century. Like many married couples at the time, Lucía and her husband maintained gender parallelism in their relationship through their participation in the cloth trade. Lucía produced textiles while her husband used mules to transport them to Mexico City and Guatemala.⁷⁵ Lucía utilized a traditional role for women in the pre-Hispanic world and adapted it to the colonial context, selling it in the Spanish capitalistic cloth trade to create significant familial wealth. Without her knowledge and talent, her family could not have prospered in the way they did. Therefore, women continued to use their work within the household for economic benefit just as they did in the pre-Hispanic period while navigating the complexities of Spanish colonialism. This case demonstrates that women continued to find modes of economic power for themselves and their families even as those in power continued to crack down on their ability to do so.

⁷⁴ Kellogg, *Weaving the Past*, 64.

⁷⁵ "Mixtec Testament of Lucía Hernández Nuquihui, Tepicolula, 1633," in *Mesoamerican Voices*, eds. Restall, Sousa, and Terraciano, 143.

While women like Lucía demonstrate an instance of female agency over their economic output, Spaniards found ways to forcibly turn women into tools for colonial profit. Spanish institutions that supposedly helped indigenous peoples served as arenas of exploitation, dehumanization, and violence. The *encomienda* system of the sixteenth century is a compelling example. Following the Conquest, the Spanish Crown provided colonizers with *encomiendas*, such as the one given to Isabel Moctezuma, that gave them land and power over indigenous peoples who were to pay tribute through their labor. In return, *encomenderos* were supposed to provide a Christian education and basic necessities for indigenous people. However, this often did not come to fruition. Many historical studies have shown that women's work increased exponentially during the colonial period.⁷⁶ Iberian tribute demands fell especially hard on women who had to support a family and fulfill tribute demands under threat of harsh punishments. As Karen Viera Powers writes, "when a male head of household had not fulfilled his tribute or labor obligations to the state or had fled, Spanish officials often imprisoned his wife."⁷⁷ Therefore, indigenous women were not only subjected to tribute demands but were also used as tools of societal control as they could be physically captured to coerce indigenous men to follow colonial orders.

Women's reality within this harsh tribute system reflected even uglier truths as *encomenderos* (owners of *encomiendas*) essentially enslaved women through labor and product demands. In Fray Pedro de Gante's 1552 letter to King Charles V of Spain, Gante implores the king to reform the institution of the *encomienda*, expressing that the current labor and tribute system left indigenous people no time to learn the Catholic faith.⁷⁸ While not believing in racial

⁷⁶ Kellogg, *Weaving the Past*, 64.

⁷⁷ Powers, *Women in the Crucible of Conquest*, 148-149.

⁷⁸ "Fray Pedro de Gante's Letter to Charles V, Mexico City (1552)," trans. from *Cartas de Indias (publicadas por primera vez el Ministerio de Fomento)*, editor unknown (Madrid, 1887), pp. 92-

equality, Fray Gante's writing provides insights into the cruelty with which encomenderos and Spanish society as a whole treated indigenous people. Gante writes, "With regard to sustenance and rest, dogs lead a better life than Indians because dogs are fed while Indians are made to work for others without being fed. Considering that the Indians of this city of Mexico are so poor, having no land or resources other than their labor, you will understand how they must suffer."⁷⁹ Indeed, Gante truly believes that under the current system, indigenous people were treated no better than enslaved individuals as the constant need to work for an encomendero acting as their "master" stripped them of their freedom.⁸⁰ This suffering and loss of autonomy was widespread across colonial Mexican society in which officials expected nearly everyone, including widows and older children, to meet tribute demands to avoid violence. Even in the first century of Spanish colonialism, encomendero abuses reached a tipping point as Gante was concerned with the ability of indigenous peoples to survive the severe exploitation of Spaniards.

While indigenous women were expected to continue their work within the household to support their families as in the pre-Hispanic period, the Spanish also forced women out of their homes to extract their labor for selfish gains. In the *Códice Osuna*, a sixteenth-century manuscript that documented indigenous grievances against colonial officials, indigenous individuals express their anger with the Spanish administration's exploitation of women's labor, writing, "y mujeres también diez personas vienen a moler al palacio (que pertenecen) a

102, in *Colonial Latin America: A Documentary History*, eds. Kenneth Mills, William B. Taylor, and Sandra Lauderdale Graham, (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2002), 104-105.

⁷⁹ "Fray Pedro de Gante's Letter to Charles V," in *Colonial Latin America*, eds. Mills, Taylor, and Graham, 110.

⁸⁰ "Fray Pedro de Gante's Letter to Charles V," in *Colonial Latin America*, eds. Mills, Taylor, and Graham, 107.

gobernación, y ahora ya no también (tampoco) todas vienen.”⁸¹ In this quotation, we see that colonial officials forced women to labor outside the home, demanding ten women to grind maize for Spanish profit and use. Spaniards coveted women’s work and the economic value it brought but removed it of any authority or power it had provided in the pre-Hispanic period. At the same time, women’s domestic work continued to be needed within the household as they were forced to take on these full-time jobs outside the household to support and protect themselves and their families against colonial violence. As Fray Gante pleads to the Spanish king, “The woman must seek to feed herself, her husband, and their children, and also to pay the tribute. And what her husband ordinarily would do, she must do.”⁸² Therefore, due to impossibly difficult tribute demands within the colonial world, women had to do “men’s” work in addition to their traditional tasks within the household, laboring seemingly endlessly to ensure the safety and health of themselves and their families. While indigenous women’s place and jobs within the household provided a kind of prestige in the pre-Hispanic period, this changed during the colonial period. Instead, women’s labor became both a tool for their survival and an occasion for Spanish abuses as women were coerced to comply with Spanish labor demands. Many of women’s jobs stayed the same but took on a different meaning under the Spanish patriarchy.

Indigenous women’s religious work in the household also continued from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. While in many ways household religious work maintained its power and communal importance as will be discussed below, it also became a place of abuse and exploitation, as we see in the *Codex Sierra*, a mid-sixteenth-century Spanish-Mesoamerican

⁸¹ *Pintura Del Gobernador, Alcaldes y Regidores de México: Códice Osuna*, transcription by Vicenta Cortes Alonso (Madrid: Servicio de Publicaciones del Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia, 1976), fol. vuelto / 38-500.

⁸² “Fray Pedro de Gante’s Letter to Charles V,” in *Colonial Latin America*, eds. Mills, Taylor, and Graham, 109.

book of accounts (*libros de cuenta*) from Santa Catalina Texupan in the Mixteca Alta region of present-day Oaxaca. The *Codex Sierra* mixed Mixtec pictographic traditions with Spanish writing traditions.⁸³ With the imposition of Spanish Catholicism in the sixteenth century, women aided in the celebration of the mass by using their knowledge of textile production to provide fine cloth, chasubles, and more. Significant amounts of funding went into buying women's handiwork from Mexico City as the community paid 436 pesos in 1555 for a range of religious textiles, including intricate red velvet altar coverings and hangings and a taffeta canopy for the Eucharist to name a few.⁸⁴ While religion looked quite different under Spanish Catholicism, indigenous Mesoamericans continued to honor their God in extravagant ways, and women's products played a central role in continuing this tradition. However, leaders soon realized that they could use the labor of local women to make this process more cost-effective. Six years later, in 1561, the community of Texupan bought twelve varas of red velvet for dalmatics that would be produced locally.⁸⁵ Therefore, women's labor appears to have been exploited by their local communities who established producing grandiose materials for mass as women's responsibility. The production of religious vestments served as a continuity from the pre-Hispanic period as women's domestic work supported their community's religious expression, saving money by locally producing beautiful fabrics amidst intense mistreatment and labor demands.

There were also instances where women's production of textiles helped them shape religious celebrations without serving as a place of exploitation. Into the seventeenth century, women used pre-Hispanic traditions around textile production and religious expression to imbue their domestic work with religious significance. For instance, the Mixteca had an ancient elite

⁸³ Kevin Terraciano, ed., *Codex Sierra: A Nahuatl-Mixed Book of Accounts from Colonial Mexico* (Norman: University of Oklahoma: 2021), 1.

⁸⁴ Terraciano, ed., *Codex Sierra*, 44.

⁸⁵ Terraciano, ed., *Codex Sierra*, 44.

tradition of gift exchange on feast days. For women, this meant they produced cloth to give to others during religious celebrations. Historian Kevin Terraciano tells a story from 1677 in Santo Domingo Yanhuitlan that demonstrates the continuation of this practice. He writes that on the feast day of their patron saint, Santo Domingo, gifts of cotton cloths “were distributed to priests, Spanish officials, native nobles who attended the event, and the bullfighter who entertained them that day.”⁸⁶ This example demonstrates that indigenous women continued ritualistic behavior that maintained the sanctity of their work from the pre-Hispanic period. While colonizers made women’s work a place of profit and abusive extraction of goods and labor, indigenous women fostered practices that provided their work with meaning beyond economic gain. Yet again, women continued pre-Hispanic practices under a Spanish colonial context as, in this case, weaving simultaneously served as a religious observance to honor Santo Domingo and a community-building ritual.

Women also continued to shape their houses as spaces of religious observances in other ways. The worship of Catholic saints within the household, as seen in eighteenth-century final wills and testaments, meant that women’s household labor served these exalted figures just as gods were worshipped in the house in the pre-Hispanic period. Even after centuries of Christianization, indigenous Mesoamericans understood these saints quite differently from Catholic theology. By the 1700s, there seemed to be a more developed understanding of saints as incredibly powerful parts of Catholic cosmos who possessed abilities beyond what they had within Spanish Catholicism. Indigenous Mesoamericans frequently understood the saints to be living beings who resided in their homes. Many testators in the Toluca region specifically left their children or other family members a home called *ichantzinco dios* or “the home of God.”

⁸⁶ Terraciano, ed., *Codex Sierra*, 45.

This building was usually the main house where the saints lived.⁸⁷ As figures of god-like stature continued to reside in the home as they had in the pre-Hispanic period, the purifying ritual of sweeping also remained into the late colonial period. In her 1759 will, Marcela María from San Lucas Evangelista leaves her daughter, Micaela Gerónima, the house, lot, and all the saints. Marcela ordered Micaela to sweep and dispense incense for the saints, urging her to maintain a pure household to please these religious figures.⁸⁸ The Spanish Catholic hierarchy left little room for women to express the religious power they held in the pre-Hispanic world. Yet, across centuries sweeping served as a syncretic way for women to retain religious power in their household and maintain religious purpose in many aspects of their domestic work. Into the late colonial period, indigenous women adopted elements of Catholic belief, in this case - the saints, and adapted it to fit into their traditional worldview. The continuation of ritualistic sweeping to serve these new domestic idols was a way in which indigenous women took the ability to affect lives into their own hands, cultivating a stable relationship with saints who could use their powers to answer the petitions of families and communities. Women melded Catholic and pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican practices together to preserve their religious power within the household while also allowing them to help those most important to them.

Even as Spanish colonizers looked to strip women's work of any power, indigenous women continued to inject their work with a purpose beyond capitalistic production or even survival. Whether intentionally or not, the household acted as a space of resistance as women's domestic work allowed them to maintain economic, religious, and familial power in a colonial context. While much changed in terms of the household structure, indigenous women passed on the property and material goods to their daughters in a way that retained female prosperity and

⁸⁷ Pizzigoni, *Testaments of Toluca*, 22-23.

⁸⁸ Pizzigoni, *Testaments of Toluca*, 160.

economic power even after they were gone. In this way, women used the parts of Spanish law that protected their rights to continue generational female power into the colonial period. Women's domestic work was another way that they maintained economic power. Textile production allowed women to make money under Spanish capitalism. They often worked side-by-side with their husbands to balance, retaining aspects of gender parallelism in their relationship. Women remained vital to the survival and success of their families as they not only fulfilled daily necessities like cleaning and cooking food but completed work inside the household that economically provided for their families. Indigenous women's domestic work also helped them carve out and continue religious power. By producing textiles and sweeping, indigenous women adapted pre-Hispanic rituals to their present moment and made religious observances their own. In the face of immense change, indigenous women found several ways to maintain power in their household work. Colonizers could not control everything that happened within the house, and women took advantage of this reality.

The Colonial Period and Marital Practices

Shifts in gender dynamics within marriage rituals and unions with Spanish colonialism necessarily impacted how women strategically navigated their societies and, importantly, their households. Catholic marital practices in New Spain is a complex subject as women continued to have the power they held in the pre-Hispanic period diluted in certain aspects while sustained in others. Further, Catholic marriage also created new places of power for women. Similarly to the polygyny of the pre-Hispanic period, Catholic monogamy is also a nuanced area where women had a diversity of experiences that were both positive and negative, degrading and empowering, and disgusting and beautiful.

While aspects of Catholic marital practices were familiar to indigenous Mesoamericans, including the importance of the family and religious authorities in this ritual, Mesoamerican societies contended with the areas of significant change this new tradition brought. Women navigated the complexity of Catholic marriage by fighting for continuity and strategically using change to their advantage, understanding this imposition in a range of ways. Within patriarchal societies, marriage brings many challenges, and monogamy carried both positives and negatives for women in colonial Mexico as they made intentional decisions that impacted the future of their children just as they had in the pre-Hispanic period. As the Church and Spanish conquistadors took land that once supported indigenous families and communities, some women supported monogamy as it limited the number of available heirs for their husbands' inheritance. Further, the imposition of Catholic marriage allowed men and women an element of freedom of choice that had not always been present in the pre-Hispanic period. The Catholic Church demanded that both the bride and groom provide their full consent before God for a marriage to be considered valid. Families retained importance, and marriages were still arranged. However, secret marriages, priestly approval, and other techniques could be used by indigenous men and women to take matters into their own hands and make decisions about marriage for themselves. Even as Spanish Catholicism stripped women of many ways that they had expressed power in the pre-Hispanic period, women were still able to exert diminished power over their lives through Catholic marriage.

Under Catholic marital practices, women continued to be used as tools to form and reinforce political alliances as they had in the pre-Hispanic period. Indeed, Hernán Cortés used Isabel Moctezuma, discussed in the section above, in this way. While Cortés fathered a baby with Isabel in 1528, he arranged an array of marriages for her to his political allies, including

Cortés' military follower Alonso de Grado, Spaniard Pedro Gallego de Andrade, and conquistador Juan Cano.⁸⁹ Cortés understood the importance of Isabel's powerful lineage even in this context of male domination. While Catholic marriage supposedly required consent, these colonizers saw no issue with treating indigenous women as objects to be given as gifts to form alliances. Whether under polygyny or monogamy or under indigenous or Spanish control, women were seen as tools to be used for male gain. While women benefitted from certain aspects of Catholic marital practices, in the patriarchal societies of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica and colonial Mexico, marriage frequently served as a place of female subjugation and dehumanization.

As the presence and influence of Spanish friars increased from the mid-1520s and onward, marriage became a primary target in the evangelization of indigenous Mesoamerican peoples. Friars worked to correct marital behaviors that opposed natural law, namely polygyny, incest/consanguinity closeness, repudiation, and lack of consent.⁹⁰ From early on, priests used extensive questioning in mandatory pre-marital interviews and forced polygynous men to establish a monogamous relationship with the first wife they had married. Within the first century of Spanish colonialism in Mesoamerica, the 1563 Council of Trent clarified Catholic doctrine in response to the Protestant Reformation. Notably, the sacramentality of marriage was one of the Catholic Church's main focuses in the Council of Trent, reinforcing the principles of indissolubility and the need for consent.⁹¹ Following Trent, Spaniards looked to standardize marriage, hoping to rid this sacrament of supposedly heretical practices throughout the Catholic world.⁹² As historian Ana de Zaballa Beascochea writes about Trent, "The Council set a rite

⁸⁹ Jaffary and Mangan, eds., *Women in Colonial Latin America*, 2.

⁹⁰ Zaballa Beascochea, "Indian Marriage Before and After the Council of Trent," 93.

⁹¹ Zaballa Beascochea, "Indian Marriage Before and After the Council of Trent," 96.

⁹² Sousa, *The Woman Who Turned Into a Jaguar*, 79-80.

common to the entire Western world for the celebration of this sacrament. There are two important aspects to this: the strengthening of consolidation of jurisdictional powers of the Church, and the importance of the visibility of faith - in this case, by a solemn celebration in the church and a rite, a liturgical form showing the actuality of the sacrament of marriage.”⁹³ This move by the Church shows a definitive shift away from the practice of marriage occurring largely within the household and centered on a civil agreement among families. Instead, marriage became a sacramental union between a man and woman, primarily a commitment before the Christian God that took place in a Catholic church.

This standardization of Catholic marriage brought several negatives for women. While divorce could happen in the pre-Hispanic world, the Catholic Church’s emphasis on the indissolubility of the sacrament of marriage often forced women to stay in dangerous situations.⁹⁴ This change in marital practice greatly diminished women’s relational power. Whether their husband was absent, abusive, or failed to support the family, indigenous women now had no ability to leave. Women became physically and spiritually chained within their marriages as households needed both men’s and women’s labor to meet tribute demands. Catholic marriage also decreased women’s social mobility. Within the pre-Hispanic world, women’s social mobility depended on their ability to “marry up,” as elite men often married women from different parts of the social spectrum. However, under monogamy, men married within their class, significantly decreasing women’s ability to climb the social ladder.⁹⁵ With the imposition of monogamy, women essentially had little to no route to social mobility, often experiencing a diminution in status due to Spanish overlapping racial and gender hierarchies.

⁹³ Zaballa Beascoechea, “Indian Marriage Before and After the Council of Trent,” 97.

⁹⁴ Sousa, *The Woman Who Turned Into a Jaguar*, 300-301.

⁹⁵ Hassig, *Polygamy and the Rise and Demise of the Aztec Empire*, 138-139.

Indigenous communities contested this attempt to replace pre-Hispanic marital rituals with a standardized Catholic ritual and the changes that came with it. Zaballa Beascochea found that indigenous Mesoamericans married in secret to avoid the complexities of Catholic rites.⁹⁶ Evangelizers struggled to institute monogamy and the Church's understanding of natural law as native peoples maintained aspects of their centuries-old traditions. At times, they decided to directly go against Church doctrine to enter a marital union on their own terms. Therefore, indigenous peoples, men and women, continued to make decisions for themselves even while faced with continuous attempts to subordinate them to Spanish culture, religion, and society.

While indigenous men and women resisted Catholic marriage at times, there were also benefits to this marital practice, especially for women. For instance, the change to marriage being a solely public event rather than the hybrid public-private ritual common in the pre-Hispanic period reinforced the Catholic ideal of consent by both parties entering this everlasting union. Friars frequently found that parents, following pre-Hispanic traditions, continued to force their children into marriages. Even as late as the eighteenth century, hundreds of years after the first attempts at Christianization, priests intentionally forbade parents from answering questions for their children in pre-marital interviews.⁹⁷ While parental consent was also a vital step within Catholic beliefs, marriages that occurred without this consent, although considered a mortal sin, were valid if blessed by a priest.⁹⁸ Therefore, although Catholic marriage, in many ways, continued to limit places of power for women, especially within the household, monogamy also held some positive aspects for women. Women took these positives and negatives into account

⁹⁶ Zaballa Beascochea, "Indian Marriage Before and After the Council of Trent," 94.

⁹⁷ Zaballa Beascochea, "Indian Marriage Before and After the Council of Trent," 100.

⁹⁸ Zaballa Beascochea, "Indian Marriage Before and After the Council of Trent," 100.

and made decisions based on what they believed would leave themselves and their children in the best possible position.

Indeed, many scholars have found that women, at times, supported monogamy and believed that it could bring benefits to them as active participants in their societies. Women understood the threat that decreased landholdings posed to their children as colonizers took more and more for themselves. In this context, women saw monogamy as a way to protect any further dilution of a family's landholdings as children did not have to split their inheritance with siblings from other wives.⁹⁹ Between this acceptance of monogamy and their wills that ensured their landholdings remained in the hands of their offsprings, women seemed to express a particular concern with the future of their children in this period of change as they attempted to consolidate all the property they could into their hands. As Kellogg writes, even though we do not know for sure how women felt about polygyny in the pre-Hispanic period it is possible that "Nahua women's enthusiasm for church attendance related, at least in part, to a desire to end this practice."¹⁰⁰ Indigenous Mesoamerican women may have intentionally accepted monogamy to make the best of a world that seemed to be increasingly against them. As historical actors who were fully aware of the time they were living in, they made decisions, like embracing monogamy and Catholic nuclear families. Indigenous women carefully adopted Spanish Catholic belief systems that benefited them and their children while others resisted these practices that threatened their traditional way of life.

Indigenous people did not all navigate the colonial world in the same way as the Church attacked pre-Hispanic marital practices in terms of ending polygyny and ensuring consent. In some cases, women and men chose to continue pre-Hispanic marital rituals, resisting the Church

⁹⁹ Don, "The 1539 Inquisition and Trial of Don Carlos of Texcoco in Early Mexico," 594.

¹⁰⁰ Kellogg, *Weaving the Past*, 73.

and its attempts to completely change the way that marriages had been practiced before the Conquest. However, at other times, women adhered to Catholic marriage as they saw how this change could benefit them and the future of their families. Women were not one-dimensional historical actors. They were individuals who looked to survive and thrive in diverse ways in a frequently hostile world. Notably, the institution of Catholic marriage held several negatives for women, including continuing to be used as tools to create political alliances and being chained into unequal or even dangerously abusive relationships. Within any patriarchal society, marriage often serves as a mechanism to exploit, abuse, or control women. However, indigenous women who experienced particular difficulties and mistreatment under the Spanish patriarchy were not simply victims of their time. They continued to push to create the best lives that they could for themselves, their children, their kin groups, and their communities across centuries.

Conclusion

By looking into the everyday lives of indigenous Mesoamerican women in their homes, it becomes clear that women were not powerless actors or passive victims within their societies throughout the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries as they exerted familial, religious, and economic power within their households. Instead, they were active participants in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica and colonial Mexico. While colonialism brought substantial violence and change, indigenous women did not become peripheral to their societies. Indeed, no matter what patriarchal society they operated under, women made intentional decisions to maintain and carve out places of power for themselves, especially within the household. Further, they were especially concerned with protecting the futures of their children and finding ways to preserve familial wealth and status throughout the pre-Hispanic and colonial periods. This thesis contributes to a body of work that challenges the idea of indigenous women as passive within

their communities in the pre-Hispanic or colonial worlds, demonstrating that they were active participants and leaders. Indeed, the female-dominated space of the household in the pre-Hispanic and colonial periods provides valuable insights into how women relied upon tradition while also pushing its boundaries.

During the pre-Hispanic period, women sustained their communities by providing food, giving birth to the next generation, weaving, creating political alliances, and maintaining a cosmological balance by sweeping. While these figures did not hold the highest places of power or participate in warfare, their rich lives tell us so much about entire societies. Through investigating Mesoamerican codices, we see that women's work in the household became a center for economic gain, religious expression, and the growth of families. They navigated polygynous and monogamous relationships, finding negatives and positives in each in terms of inheritance, labor, and social mobility. Through the pre-Hispanic practice of cognatic kinship, even women's lineage held an impersonal power as it determined their children's status and opportunity to hold public offices. Women were central to every part of life in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica as their domestic duties and marital practices provided invaluable contributions that reached far beyond the domestic realm.

Starting in the sixteenth century, indigenous women faced the challenge of navigating Spanish colonialism, a system that saw them as both racially and sexually inferior. Many of the positions of power they had in the pre-Hispanic period were stripped from them as the Spanish did not believe in gender parallelism but rather an intensified patriarchy marked by extreme male domination. As seen in Fray Pedro de Gante's letter to the Spanish king, indigenous women also increasingly experienced burdensome labor demands and abuse in many forms as they were seen as tools for profit and objects to fulfill colonizer desires. Women often had to work outside of

their households as seen in the *Códice Osuna*, often fulfilling formerly male duties as their husbands were away working for encomenderos or providing labor for colonial officials. However, from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, indigenous Mesoamerican women also found ways to navigate their changing world in ways that benefited them. They used Spanish inheritance practices to their advantage, asserted themselves as household authorities, continued to fill their domestic work, like weaving or sweeping, with religious meaning, and accommodated Catholic marriage to protect their children's wealth. While Spanish colonialism brought an immense amount of change into these women's lives, Spanish power was not nearly as totalizing as colonizers may have wanted. Despite all the violence, abuse, and exploitation they experienced, Mesoamerican women made decisions to benefit themselves, their families, and their societies, playing a significant role in the creation of this syncretic society. They resisted, accommodated, and adapted to Spanish colonial practices and beliefs while carefully continuing beneficial aspects of pre-Hispanic practices.

Indigenous women's history matters. The household, women's domestic work, and women's position in marriages lay at the center of life as these societies had no hope of surviving without the tireless work of women. Indeed, indigenous women shaped entire communities as they exerted a power found in daily life, in the quiet moments of weaving, cooking, praying, and raising their children. Through an investigation of the everyday activities often left out of historical understandings, the rich lives of women come to life as they made decisions that contributed to the survival and safety of their families and communities. Just as the household was the center of Nahua society, history too happens within the home. By investigating this complex site of familial interaction, we can better understand how women navigated their societies and exerted power in ways that may not make it into the historical record.

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