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Translating the Nahuas: Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's Parallel Texts in the Construction of *Universal History of the Things of New Spain*

VICTORIA RÍOS CASTAÑO

The Franciscan missionary, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún (1499–1590), arrived in Mexico-Tenochtitlan in 1529 to engage in the zealous indoctrination of the Nahuas or Aztecs. Yet, unlike the majority of his fellow missionaries, he spent over 50 of his 60 years of evangelical mission in three further proselytising-related objectives: firstly, the education of an élite of Nahua neophytes, aimed at governing and controlling a new Christianised indigenous society; secondly, the composition of doctrinal works in their language, Nahuatl, crucial for efficient indoctrination and orthodox celebration of Catholic rituals; and thirdly, an investigation of the Nahuas' culture designed to document religious practices the Spaniards considered idolatrous, with the specific aim of providing means for their eradication.

Regarding the latter aim, in 1558 the Franciscan Order commissioned Sahagún to compile a text on the world of the Nahuas, which he completed in Nahuatl around 1569 and translated into Spanish, this time under royal request, until 1577. The resulting work, *Historia universal de las cosas de Nueva España* (*Universal History of the Things of New Spain*), was divided into twelve books: I Gods, II Ceremonies, III the Origin of the Gods, IV Soothsayers, V Omens, VI Rhetoric, VII Astronomy, VIII Kings and Lords, IX Merchants and Craftsmen, X The People, XI Earthly Things (Fauna and Flora), and XII The Conquest of Mexico.[1]

1 Sahagún's title 'Historia universal de las cosas de Nueva España' has been incorrectly superseded by 'historia general'. For further discussion, see Browne (2000). In this chapter, I will refer to Sahagún's work as *Historia universal*. The titles of the twelve books are those suggested by Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, translators of the Nahuatl text and Sahagún's prologues (originally written in Spanish) into English, in *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of*

Of particular interest for this study is Sahagún's own statement that he set off to conduct research by designing

> en lengua castellana, vna minuta, o memoria, de todas las materias, de las que auja de tratar: que fue lo que esta escripto en los doze libros. (*Florentine Codex*, 'Prologues': 53)
>
> an outline or summary in Spanish of all the topics to be considered. This is that which is written in the twelve Books.

Several Sahagún scholars like Alfredo López Austin (1974) and Miguel León Portilla (1999a) have viewed his outline or summary, which is unfortunately lost, as a series of questionnaires created by a pioneer anthropologist with the purpose of data collection. Focusing on this perception, López Austin reconstructed the questions that Sahagún may have posed by analysing parallel contents in all the chapters of the twelve books.[2] Here, however, I regard López Austin's rewriting of the hypothetical questions as insufficient to understand the nature of Sahagún's summary. An examination of the material gathered in *Historia universal*, by establishing links with reference texts that Sahagún could have known, proves an omnipresent Western categorisation of the world, and helps uncover his summary as a manifestation of how he began a cultural translation process: the relocation of the world of the Nahuas into a European target-text. He applied a Spanish classification of knowledge, for he wrote that he made his outline in Spanish, and aimed at gathering the indigenous material that he considered most adequate and representative in Nahuatl.

In this chapter, I am concerned with the identification of two of the Western reference texts that Sahagún could have used to categorise the world of the Nahuas. I name these models, which reflect the cultural conventions and textual norms inherent in Sahagún's Old World, *parallel texts*. In translation studies this term has two definitions. It refers both to the source-language text and its translated version, as well as the target-language text imitated in translation training and in the translation process, which provides information on the patterns of target texts into which the source text is to be most effectively accommodated (Baker, 1995: 230). Adopting the second meaning of the term, I seek to demonstrate that in the construction of *Historia universal*, and particularly in the creation of his outline, Sahagún deployed two types of parallel texts: encyclopaedias like the

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New Spain vols. 1–13 (Sahagún, 1950–1982). This edition is hereafter referred to as *Florentine Codex*.

2 See López Austin 'The Research Method of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún: The Questionnaires' (1974).

English Franciscan Bartholomaeus Anglicus's *De proprietatibus rerum*, composed between 1240 and 1260, and religious texts such as treatises on vices and virtues.

Starting with *De proprietatibus rerum*, this magnum opus was strongly influenced by the arrangements and contents of Pliny's *Historia naturalis* and Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*, from which Anglicus quoted on many occasions. *De proprietatibus rerum* circulated widely during the early Renaissance in both Latin and vernacular languages; the Spanish translation, for example, was written by Fray Vicente de Burgos around 1470 in the Basque town of Tolosa. Donald Robertson (1966) and León Portilla (1999b) hold the view that this is probably the work on which Sahagún relied most when planning his *Historia universal*. For Robertson, the fact that Anglicus and Sahagún were Franciscans implies that the latter knew about his fellow brother's work. He could have consulted Anglicus's encyclopaedia either in the library of the friary of San Francisco in Salamanca, where he took his vows and studied Arts and Theology, or in the library of the Imperial College of Santa Cruz of Tlatelolco in New Spain. Here Sahagún spent long periods of his life teaching Latin and medicine, for the purposes of which he could have resorted to this text.

To sustain his argument, Robertson also pinpointed striking correlations in both the arrangement and the contents of the two works, as this chart he created shows (1966: 627):

Historia universal	*De proprietatibus rerum*
Book I, The Gods	Book I, The Trinity; Book II, The Angels
Book II, The Calendar	Book IX, The Divisions of Time
Book III, The Gods	Book I, The Trinity; Book II, The Angels
Book IV, Astrology	Book VIII, Zodiac
Book V, Divination	
Book VII, Astronomy	Book VIII, Astronomy
Book VIII, Ch. 8–21, Rulers	Book VI, Virtues and Vices of Man
Book IX, Merchants and the Arts and Crafts	
Book X, Ch. 1–26, Virtues and Vices of the Indigenous People	
Book X, Ch. 28, Illnesses and Medicines	Book V, Parts of Human Body; Book VIII, Illnesses and Medicine
Book XI, Ch. 1, Animals	Book XVIII, Animals
Book XI, Ch. 2, Birds	Book XII, Birds
Book XI, Ch. 3, Animals of the Water	Book XIII, Fish
Book XI, Ch. 6, Trees	Book XVII, Trees and Herbs
Book XI, Ch. 7, Other Herbs	
Book XI, Ch. 8, Precious Stones	Book XVI, Stones, Minerals and Metals
Book XI, Ch. 11, Colours	Book XIX, Colours, Odours, Tastes
Book XI, Ch. 12, Waters and Land	Book XVIII, Waters; Book XIV, Earth and Hills

De proprietatibus rerum and *Historia universal* begin with the Divine (Sahagún's Books I, III, Anglicus's Books I, II), proceed to the Human (Sahagún's Books VIII, IX, X, Anglicus's Books III–VII) and subsequently to the Mundane. This final section contains information on nature, namely herbs, animals and geological/geographical material (Sahagún's Book XI, Anglicus's Books VIII–XIX). Moreover, within each of these divisions, readers proceed from the superior to the inferior: trinity to angels, man to his illnesses, the heavenly bodies to the earth, and the animal and vegetable kingdoms to the mineral world (Robertson, 1966: 622–623).

Robertson indicated that the most enlightening coincidence in Anglicus's and Sahagún's texts is found in Anglicus's Book VI 'the ages of man and his properties', and in Sahagún's Book X 'in which are told the different virtues and vices which were of the body and of the soul, whomsoever practised them' (1966: 625). In Anglicus's Chapters VI, VII, X, XI, and XV to XIX, people are described as sinful and virtuous according to age, status and profession. The following is a passage from Chapters XVI and XVII on the properties of bad and good servants. I quote here the translation into Spanish by Fray Vicente de Burgos:[3]

> Del sieruo malo, capitulo xvj. Cosa co[n]teniente es co[n] las cosas q[ue] dicho hauemos d[e]l sieruo digamos algo de sus miserables propiedades por las quales assi & a los otros haze mucho mal. El mal sieruo comunme[n]te es borracho & negligente enlos seruiçios de q[ue] deue seruir a su señor/ y es ladron q[ue] le hurta los bienes. E destos dize salamon enlos .xxx. capitulos delos proverbios q[ue] seruidor neglige[n]te y borracho no sera jamas rico. El es comunme[n]te oçioso qua[n]do deue ser diligente [...]. Del buen seruidor, capitulo xvij. Ha el buen seruidor muchas buenas co[n]diçiones dignas de nos sser oluidades. Ca es de buen ygenio y entendimie[n]to. E de tal dezia salomon a los .xvij. capitulos d[e] sus proverbios. El sabio sieruo avra señoria sobre los hijos locos. (Anglicus, [1494] 1992)
>
> On the bad servant, Chapter xvi. Concerning what we have already said about the servant, let's say something about his bad properties, which lead him to act sinfully. A bad servant is commonly a drunkard, negligent in his chores for his lord, and a thief who steals his goods. In

3 For further references see John of Trevisa's translation into English (ca. 1398), *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus 'De Proprietatibus Rerum', a Critical Text* (Anglicus, 1975–1988); and the Spanish translation of Vicente de Burgos *De las propriedades de las cosas* (Anglicus, [1494] 1992).

> Chapter xxx of his proverbs Solomon says that a drunken and negligent servant will never become rich. He is commonly lazy when he should be diligent. On the good servant, Chapter xvii. The good servant has many qualities which are worth remembering, for he is wise and intelligent. Thus said Solomon in Chapter xvii of his proverbs. The wise servant will govern over fool sons. (My translation)

The passage lists the qualities of the servant, which vary from 'drunkard', 'negligent', 'thief', 'lazy' to 'witty', 'intelligent', 'respectable', 'bold' and 'faithful to his lord'. The maxims borrowed from the *Book of Proverbs* of the Old Testament authorised the description; that is, they validated the reliability of the human properties chosen.

Similarly, in Chapters I–XXVI of Sahagún's Book X in *Historia universal* there is a series of virtues and vices portraying a wide spectrum of people: from family members (good and bad fathers) to rulers (good and bad lords), and professions such as craftsmen (good and bad carpenters). For instance, in Chapter I an account of the virtuous and the sinful daughter is provided in Nahuatl:

> yn tecuneuh yn ichpuchtli, quiztica, macitica vel nelli ichpuchtli in iectli in qualli, in qualli ichpuchtli, tecacqui, mimati, tlacaqui, mozcalia, iollo timalli, yxtilli imacaxtli, tlanonotzalli, tlazcaltilli, tlauapaualli, tlamachtilli tlanemachtilli, chipauacanemilice, mimattinzli. Tecuneuh in amo qualli in amo iectli, in tlaueliloc, teuhio tlaçollo, cuecuech, cuecuel, ciuatlaueliloc, mihimati, moquequecimmati, moieiecquetza, muchichiua, apan vpan nemi, auilnemi, auilquiztinemi, mahauiltia, ahauiltzoncaloa, cuecuenocini, iuinti. (*Florentine Codex*, X: 2–3)
>
> One's daughter: the daughter [is] untouched, pure, a virgin. The good daughter [is] obedient, honest, intelligent, discreet, of good memory, modest, respectful, well reared, well taught, well trained, well instructed, prudent, chaste, circumspect. One's daughter [who is] bad, evil, perverse [is] full of vice, dissolute, proud; a whore, she is showy, pompous, gaudy of dress, garish; she is a loiterer, given to pleasure; a courtesan, given to amusement, always vicious, crazed, besotted.

Like the aforementioned description of the bad and the good servant, this passage supplies a copious list of adjectives so as to describe a daughter or a woman in general: discreet and modest *versus* proud and showy; prudent *versus* crazed. Although this coincidence of contents and classification of human characteristics according to sins and virtues prompted Robertson to underscore the influence of *De proprietatibus rerum* on *Historia universal*, he did not explain the reason why and the way in which Sahagún included these

depictions. In the Spanish version of Book X (The People), Sahagún himself offered some clues when addressing his reader:

> No se debe ofender el lector prudente en que se ponen solamente vocablos y no sentencias en lo arriba puesto, y en otras partes adelante, porque principalmente se pretende en este tratado aplicar el lenguaje castellano al lenguaje indígena para que se sepan hablar los vocablos propios desta materia, de *viciis et virtutibus*. (*Historia general*, 2: 860)
>
> The wise reader must not get tired or offended while reading only words and sentences, as written above and in subsequent pages. The main aspiration of this book is to apply the Spanish language to the indigenous language so that vocabulary on this matter, of *viciis et virtutibus*, can be spoken. (My translation)

Sahagún expressed his wish to gather words and sentences in an attempt to conform to a religious textual tradition: the treatises on vices and virtues. These treatises, which he mentions as inspirational reference texts, probably when outlining the topics of what eventually became Book X in *Historia universal*, could be branded as another parallel text or intellectual model.

The compilation of vices or sins and virtues dates back to Aristotle's treatise *De virtutibus et vitiis*. In his eighth chapter he examined virtues such as prudence, humility, soberness, magnanimity, and their opposites; stupidity, wrath, cowardice and vileness. Medieval scholasticism, following the philosopher's example, gave rise to the appearance of further texts akin. In the thirteenth century the Italian rhetorician Guido Faba (ca. 1190–1245) wrote *Summa de vitiis et virtutibus*; and the Dominican preacher Guillaume Perrault (d. 1271) wrote *Summa de viciis et virtutibus*. In the same vein, in his *Summa theologiae* (1265–1272), volume *Secunda secundae*, Thomas Aquinas, fervent admirer of Aristotle, devoted 170 chapters to virtues and sins in light of what classical and religious authorities had discussed. Aquinas divided virtues into theological (faith, hope and charity) and cardinal (prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance). In his analysis of the virtue of temperance, he wrote: 'Macrobius holds that temperance produces modesty, sensitiveness of shame, chastity, honourableness, moderation, sparseness, soreness and purity. Andronicus also lists gravity, continence, humility, simplicity, refinement, discipline, and contentment with one's lot' (Aquinas, 1963–1981: 49). As this passage shows, treatises on vices and virtues were rich in vocabulary. In fact, they provided rhetorical training in the sense that their readers could learn a wide range of synonyms and antonyms. More importantly for this chapter, these treatises constituted a valuable proselytising aid. Priests, who aspired to inculcate Christian values and moral perfection *versus* sin in the minds of their audiences, used these texts in their speeches, homilies and

in the administering of the sacrament of penance. In England, for instance, several ordinances decreed in Councils and Synods from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries compelled every priest to secure for themselves a *summula* or compilation on vices and virtues. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, these treatises still flourished throughout Europe, and were translated from Latin into the vernacular languages. For example, the *Somme le roi* of Lorens d'Orléans was translated into Spanish around 1450, and the international best-seller *Fiori di virtù* into *Flor de virtudes y vicios* around 1470 (Francis, 1942: ix–xxx).

In the friary of San Francisco in Salamanca, Sahagún would have deployed some of these treatises in order to improve his fluency in Latin to become more eloquent in Spanish, and to write inspiring and effective sermons. Once in New Spain he could have consulted the editions of Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* and the *Summa uirtutum* under the name of Guillaume Perrault, which were available in the library of Tlatelolco (Mathes, 1982: 63). After reconsidering the study and use he probably made of these works either in Spain or New Spain, it is very likely that in his outline or summary he incorporated a section on vices and virtues, which involved gathering terminology in Nahuatl and information about the Nahuas. Linguistic and cultural data could be utilised for the creation of sermons or in the auricular confession of his Nahua neophytes. In an attempt to develop this argument, the following pages illustrate how data within *Historia universal* was drawn on to the administering of this sacrament.

The Franciscans introduced aural confession in New Spain in 1526. Sahagún voiced concerns regarding this arduous task in the first prologue of *Historia universal* when urging his fellow missionaries to learn how to

> preguntar lo que conuiene y entender lo que dixeren tocante a su officio [porque] los peccados de la idolatria [...] no son aun perdid[os] del todo. Y los confesores ni se [los] preguntan ni piensan que ay tal cossa: ni sauen lenguaje para se lo preguntar ni aun lo entenderan aunque se lo digan. (*Florentine Codex*, 'Prologues': 45–46)

> ask what is proper and understand what they may say pertaining to his work [because] the sins of idolatry [...] are not yet completely lost. [...] And the confessors neither ask about them, nor think such thing exists, nor understand the language to inquire about it, nor would even understand them, even though they told them of it.

In this revealing paragraph, Sahagún's experiences as a confessor resonate strongly. When attempting to administer the sacrament he would have wrestled to understand what his penitents articulated, whether they had

performed idolatry, and if so, of which type, in order to absolve or urge them to do penance. Confessors, as he argued, did not know how to ask and interpret what they heard. Unaware of the existence of idolatry they consequently contributed to its perpetuation.

Historia universal in Nahuatl was written with the intention of supplying the linguistic and cultural information that according to Sahagún missionaries needed to convert the Nahuas. Book X (The People) is one of the texts that best exemplify Sahagún's evangelical mission, in this case, the achievement of appropriate confessions. Bearing in mind the different types of Nahua penitents, Sahagún included a depiction of people depending on their virtues or vices; in other words, their good or bad properties. The people contained in this list ranged from family members to professionals, which coincided with Spanish ones, as in the case of the physician, or attested to a new reality. An interesting example is the cacao seller:

> In tlaueliloc cacaoanamacac: cacaoananauhqui, teixcuepani, cacaoachichiuh [.] In quinamaca cacaoatl tlanexquetzalli, tlâcectli, tlatletomaoalli, quiticeoacatlapiquia, in xoxouhqui, quinexuia, quinexpopoxoa, quitiçauia, quitlaltiçauia, quitlaluia, quitlalpopoxoa, tzooalli, xicocuitlatl, aoacaiollotli, quicacaoatlapiquia, cacaoaxipeoallotl ic quiquimiloa, cacaoacacalotl conaaquia, in ticeoac in xoxouhqui, in patzaoac, in chilacachtic, in xamanqui, in cacaltic, in quimichnacaztic, quicenneloa, quicepanneloa, quimotlaltia, itlan caquia, quicepanmictia, nel quappatlachtli itlã quitlaça quimotlaltia, inic teca mocaiaoa. (*Florentine Codex*, X: 65)
>
> The bad cacao seller, [the bad] cacao dealer, the deluder counterfeits cacao. He sells cacao beans which are placed in [hot] ashes, toasted, made full in the fire; he counterfeits by making the fresh cacao beans whitish; he places them in [hot] ashes – stirs them into the [hot] ashes; [then] he treats them with chalk, with chalky earth, with [wet] earth; he stirs them into [wet] earth. [With] amaranth seed dough, wax, avocado pits he counterfeits cacao; he covers this over with cacao bean hulls; he places this in the cacao bean shells. The whitish, the fresh cacao beans he intermixes, mingles, throws in, introduces, ruins with the shrunken, the chilli-seed-like, the broken, the hollow, the tiny. Indeed he casts, he throws in with them wild cacao beans to deceive the people.

In this passage a confessor who had to administer the sacrament to a cacao seller could grasp the variety of techniques a bad or sinful one adopted when mixing his merchandise with spurious substances. The confessor could also reproduce specific Nahuatl terminology and collocations related to the cacao

seller's activity, such as to make 'toasted, whitish, shrunken, chilli-seed-like beans' and 'to treat and mix cacaobeans' either 'with chalk' or 'chalky earth'. All in all, confessors were able to figure out what kind of questions they could pose, and were more likely to understand their penitents' answers.

Fray Alonso de Molina was one of Sahagún's fellow missionaries who turned to the material collected in Book X of *Historia universal* to compose his bilingual confession manual *Confessionario mayor en lengua mexicana y castellana* ([1569] 1984).[4] Both Franciscans maintained a peer-reviewed relationship in their creation of lexical and doctrinal texts in Nahuatl. Sahagún ([1579] 1993) approved Molina's first dictionary of Nahuatl *Vocabulario en lengua castellana y mexicana* ([1555] 1571) and Molina probably proof-read Sahagún's biblical translations of Latin into Nahuatl included in Sahagún's doctrinal work *Postilla* (Bustamante García, 1989: 488).

An example to demonstrate that Molina copied material from Book X is found in Molina's questions tailored to the cacao-seller penitent:

> Y tú que vendes cacao ¿revolviste el buen cacao con el malo, para que todo se emplease y vendiese, engañando a las gentes? ¿Encenizaste el cacao verde o revolvístelo con tierra blanda para que pareciese bueno o pones masa de tzovalli dentro del hollejo del mismo cacao o masa de cuescos de aguacate, falseando el dicho cacao? ¿Y los cacaos pequeños y delgados tuéstaslos para los hacer parecer grandes y gruesos? (de Molina, [1569] 1984: Folio 37, 19–20)

> And you cacao seller, did you mix good cacao beans with bad ones so that everything was sold? Did you deceive your customers? Did you mix green cacao beans with ashes or with soft earth so that the cacao looked good? Did you add amaranth seed dough or that of avocado pits to counterfeit the cacao bean? Do you roast small and thin cacao beans to make them look big and thick? (My translation)

Molina seems to have transformed the description included in *Historia universal* into questions for his confession manual. In Sahagún's text a bad cacao seller 'counterfeits cacao' in general, whereas Molina urged confessors to ask the cacao seller whether he mixed good and bad cacao beans to cheat his customers. The information on the bad cacao seller as someone who 'places them [the cacao beans] in [hot] ashes – stirs them into the [hot] ashes; [...] stirs them into [wet] earth' (*Florentine Codex*, X: 65) is changed by Molina

4 The confession manual is divided into two columns, the Nahuatl version on the left and Molina's translation into Spanish on the right.

into the question: 'Did you mix green cacao beans with ashes or with soft earth so that the cacao looked good?'. As we have seen, Sahagún also wrote that the bad cacao seller '[with] amaranth seed dough, wax, avocado pits he counterfeits cacao' (*Florentine Codex*, X: 65). In relation to this idea Molina suggested the following question: 'Did you add amaranth seed dough [masa de tzovalli] or that of avocado pits?'.

Molina's queries evidence that Sahagún's intention of passing on to a missionary audience a work that best aided them in their proselytising endeavours was somehow fulfilled. Molina adapted relevant passages that Sahagún had codified by applying a classical and Christian dichotomy to his gathering of information on the Nahuas.

Sahagún's usage of this binary characterisation of people in treatises on vices and virtues stresses the predicament that in the composition of *Historia universal* he behaved as a cultural translator at the service of the Spanish Empire, for he transferred Nahua source data into his European categories with the aim of evangelisation. The first translation decision that he took was to outline a list of topics on which he would extract information to eventually complete *Historia universal*. He chose western models or parallel texts that contained the material he wished to cover. Medieval encyclopaedias and religious and liturgical texts offered him a template to classify the world of the Nahuas, and the Nahuas themselves. Book X (The People) clearly illustrates how Sahagún proceeded. Instead of portraying their personal physical appearance or behaviour, he classified them into a rigid Christian categorisation of sinful versus virtuous in order to guarantee a more effective administration of the sacrament of penance to Nahua neophytes. It is this relocation of the Nahuas into Sahagún's religious worldview that leads us to question to what extent labelling him a pioneer anthropologist has limited discussion on his proselytising motivation, which ultimately triggered and shaped both his linguistic and cultural interests when composing *Historia universal*. To label Sahagún a cultural translator invites us instead to explore how he understood and interpreted the Nahuas at the service of the empire.